

Surviving Homophobia, Resisting Heteronormativity: India and Himanjali Sankar's *Talking of Muskaan*

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Abstract This paper critically engages in exploring the normalising mechanisms of heteronormativity and the impending homophobia that recurs in Himanjali Sankar's *Talking of Muskaan* (2014). Sex, sexuality and gender have always been a subject of much debate. Homosexuality, as a possible form of sexuality, has never been accepted rather individuals who indulged in such "nefarious" acts were ostracised, shamed, and even killed. The dominant heteronormative culture and assertion of heterosexuality in spaces—both geographic and social space exclude as well as negate the presence of alternative sexualities. From being a sin to a pathological abnormality, homosexuality or any other queer expression remain under the watchful eyes of society. As a result, queer individuals reside in the extreme edge of marginalisation cobwebbed with fear, panic, anxiety, identity crisis and self-alienation. However, with recent critical approaches and advancements in the field of gender, sexuality and study of identity, the fluidity of our being has gained new insights and paved new doors for further discussion. Worthy of being mentioned, Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity and Michel Foucault's linking of sexuality to power and knowledge, notably, revolutionised the field of Gender and Sexuality Studies. Following Butler and Foucault, the paper will study the construction of the homophobic discourse and the psychological affects of normalising heterosexuality and gender roles. Apart from this, the paper examines how bullying and shame serve as passive yet penetrating weapons of the heterosexual society towards non-conforming individuals. Therefore, the paper endeavours to shed light on the survival strategies, as evident in the novel, while offering critical insights into the plight of queer individuals in India today.

Keywords heteronormativity; homophobia; homosexuality; queer; *Talking of*

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Introduction

While India, as a land of diversity and remarkable histories, has come a long way along with recent scientific and technological advancements yet the status of homosexuality, also keeping in mind the case of marginalized alternative sexualities, remains a matter of concern and immediate attention. The major problem regarding homosexuality and its unacceptability, in the Indian context, lies in the shifts of narratives, influenced largely by religion and politics, that inevitably fail to uncover India’s homosexual history and undeniable presence. In this context, *Same-Sex Love in India: A Literary History* (2000) by two notable scholars, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, trace the uncharted history of alternative sexualities in ancient, medieval and modern times, depicting and uncovering its presence. Nevertheless with the coming of new critical approaches, understanding and recognition in the field of gender and sexualities along with resisting voices from homosexuals resulted in the proliferation of discourses about homosexuality, and literatures that openly dealt with homosexuality. However, it is pertinent to note that literature dealing with homosexuality and more precisely with lesbian issues in India are marginal as compared to the larger domain of English literature. Following this line of argument, the present paper attempts a queer reading of Himanjali Sankar’s *Talking of Muskaan* (2014) and endeavors to portray both the rigid homophobic as well as changing societal attitude towards people of same-sex in the novel as well as in the present times. The ongoing meta-narrative which situates heterosexuality as the natural while discarding other forms of sexualities demand critical intervention in

understanding the mechanisms and agencies of such heteronormative construct. The following paper seeks to identifying the heterosexual agencies and reading critically the penetrative functioning of heterosexuality which further establishes itself as the standard form, also, norm of sexuality. One of the purposes of the paper is also to bring forth the argument of sexuality as being a fluid entity and not something which is given as the essentialists argue. It is a truth which most Indians would agree that they are homophobic, yet the paper tends to show homophobia, largely, as a result of the ever-present, thriving heterosexuality. In addition, the paper attempts to fill in the misunderstanding gap towards homosexuality as a disease or an import of the Western civilization while emphasizing on the much needed support and recognition to alternative sexualities. Before delving further into the argument, the paper, no doubt, is a case for homosexuality, its cause and recognition yet “queer” as an all-inclusive umbrella term will be used interchangeably for both homosexuality and lesbianism.

Undoing Norms

In any given society, “norms” have always worked to build and shape subjects accordingly, adhering to a certain set of fixed functions. The “norms” predominate our lives, dictate us and construct ourselves as human beings. To state further, normalising norms and situating ourselves within the cobweb of norms make us, what Louis Althusser propounded, “interpellated” creatures. While norms have become an intrinsic part of our lives, its overarching seriousness has devastating effects on our understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality. The twentieth century marked a significant upsurge in negotiating and deconstructing such construction of norms. In this regard, Michel Foucault may be considered as a pioneer whose groundbreaking works such as *History of Sexuality*, *Madness and Civilisation*, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, et cetera have made consequential and critical interventions to explore how “norms” and institutional mechanisms function to constitute and construct subjects.

Traditionally, sexuality is viewed as a natural feature of human life, an innate mechanism or system. On the contrary, Foucault is of the view that sexuality does not merely mean the natural expression of some inner desire or drive. Foucault argues that our perception or belief of sexuality as a natural feature or phenomenon and a fact of our human lives are nothing but a formulation; a constructed category of experience which has less to do with our biological roots but more with our historical, social and cultural origins (Spargo 12). Though he did not rule out the biological dimension to sexuality, his focus was more on the active and crucial role

of institutions and how an idea of sexuality was formed or constructed through discourses. The same was echoed by Judith Butler, who was heavily influenced by the works of Foucault. Her views on the man/woman binary and the construction of gender norms through incessant performances of gender roles is a critical and insightful revelation. Judith Butler accentuates this in *Undoing Gender* (2004) by saying,

If gender is a kind of a doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint. Moreover, one does not "do" one's gender alone. One is always "doing" with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary. What I call my "own" gender appears perhaps at times as something that I author or, indeed, own. But the terms that make up one's own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author (and that radically contests the notion of authorship itself). (1)

Taking cues from deconstruction, she rejects and questions the essentialist approach of defining gender and sexuality based on specific acts and performances. In another essay titled "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" (1993), Butler discusses at length to what it means to be a "homosexual," the politics around this term, and the loopholes of categorising ourselves in an identity. Butler finds it problematic to identify oneself as a lesbian. The affirmation of such identity categories, she believes, "tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes" (308), which proliferates the continuation of heterosexuality discourse and homophobia. Such categorisation encloses one's sexuality within a very limited circle of expression and negates the fluidity of a being. While talking about sexual identity, she argues that heterosexual identity, which is considered as "natural" and "authentic," signifies nothing but a string of performances repeatedly performed, thereby making one heterosexual. Butler further opines that sexual categories like gender categories are agents/mechanisms of repressive discourse that validates heterosexuality as the norm (309). One of the most striking claims of Butler is her take on gender as well as sexuality of being a performative constituent, and which can be repeatedly enacted to make it authentic; the norm.

Therefore, this is where queer intervenes—the breaker of norms. As a fluid and uncategorised entity, queer challenges the natural/norm concept and questions the ever-penetrative heterosexuality/heteronormativity. However, strikingly, in an essay

titled “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities” (1991), Teresa de Lauretis provides three significant critical insights to queer. To paraphrase de Lauretis, queer is the denial of the benchmark of heterosexuality as the norm for all sexuality; it is also an awareness or attentiveness to gender, capable of interrogating all the said assumptions that homosexuality, gay and lesbian studies are a single, homogenous object, and queer is also a determined force to show how race crucially shapes and forms sexual subjectivities in not one but multiple ways. These threefold critiques under the umbrella of queer theory identify ways “to recast or reinvent the terms of our sexualities, to construct another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual” (4).

Talking of Muskaan and Internalised Homophobia/Heteronormativity

Talking of Muskaan (2014) by Himanjali Sankar depicts the story of a teenage girl named Muskaan, who happens to be a “misfit,” a “non-conforming” individual. As a homosexual, she struggles to cope with the inevitable heterosexual/heteronormative surroundings. She finds herself amidst the “Sisyphean” task of asserting her “self.” While the novel highlights the homophobic attitude towards Muskaan and her survival strategy, yet fluidity of sexuality and “naturalisation” of the hetero-patriarchal mindset are also explored through the other characters in the novel. Talking about heterosexuality, human society has always validated heterosexual relations as an “innate” and “natural” phenomenon. Any deviation from this standard form of sexuality is taken as a sin; an abnormal creature who needs to be punished and “straightened.” As Jimmie Manning in *Heterosexuality* (2009), rightly points out, “Heterosexuality is so successfully established as normal and natural in everyday communication that the notion of homosexuality does not really exist in the minds of most people, especially as a sexual orientation for oneself” (3).

The story unfolds as a “normal” beginning with the news of Muskaan being hospitalised for her unsuccessful attempt to suicide. Her school friends seem worried and had no idea about what evil spirit has caught hold of Muskaan. However, every one of them, all these hetero-patriarchal institutions—friends, school, family, society were against Muskaan and her non-conforming behavior. A society where heteronormativity is the norm, any form of deviance is seen as “unnatural.” Noted critics Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner reiterates the same,

Heteronormativity is more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce;

medicine; and education; as well as in the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture. (“Sex in Public” 554-555)

Therefore, Muskaan’s attempt to suicide reflects the failure of her friends, the school, and society in accepting Muskaan and her choices. It is crucial to note that only if her school and her friends have been accepting, Muskaan would be a “normal” girl like others. This failure on their side is best revealed when Mrs. Jagganathan, the Principal, says to her friends, “I’m waiting for her parents to call me. You are her best friends. We need to understand what was bothering Muskaan. And help her” (Sankar 5).

As the novel proceeds, the first section, “Five Months Earlier,” shuffles back in time to the moment where Muskaan and her friends were hanging out together. This section begins with the gang of girls doing “normal” girly things. The group is keen to perform waxing on the bodies of Muskaan and her friend Srinjini; those who have never removed their body hairs. The normalising of waxing as a necessary element for girls, along with the idea of gender performativity and Muskaan’s struggle as a non-conforming individual, reflect the hetero-patriarchal mindset as well as the lurking heteronormativity. The “straightening” of the “misfit” Muskaan was about to begin, and Aaliya, her close friend, says, “Stop being macho girl, Muskaan. Give up. Today the makeover begins” (Sankar 14). These instances reveal how several acts are meant for one gender, and performances of those acts make one a man/woman. In this regard, Simone de Beauvoir, in her magnum opus *The Second Sex* (1997) rightly pointed out, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (283). While everyone in the group was excited about this “sacred event,” Muskaan felt uncomfortable. At one point, Muskaan confesses, “Don’t expect me to act all excited. I’m here because of you guys. I’m not all gung ho about this” (Sankar 15). For all her friends, waxing their body makes them attractive. This is best highlighted when Divya compliments Srinjini’s waxing and reckons how her boyfriend Imran would be amazed to see her. Such constructed “norms” act as agents of gender and sexuality roles in society. Muskaan struggles to survive with her own choice within her friends and society. When she decides to leave without waxing, her friends gang up on her, trying their best to “normalise” Muskaan. Finally, Muskaan leaves this “role assigning” ritual, and Srinjini declares, “Something is seriously wrong with her” (Sankar 19).

In a heteronormative society, family plays a crucial role in validating heterosexuality, labeling non-conforming individuals and homosexuals as

“abnormal” and a severe threat to the heterosexual institution. During the waxing incident, Divya reveals that it was Muskaan’s mother who wanted Muskaan waxed. Her mother has always been insisting her to “wax your legs, wear a bra, check out that cute guy” (Sankar 18). According to Butler, such impulses construct our gender and sexual identity. She argues that heterosexual identity, which is considered as “natural” and “authentic,” is nothing but a string of performances repeatedly performed, thereby making one heterosexual (Abelove et al. 314-316). Talking about family and heteronormativity, Prateek and his family is the prototype for the heteropatriarchal system that lies buried deep inside us. Several instances in the novel highlight how Prateek’s “Tauji” and his dad are the ever-lurking patriarch that does not want any deviant individual/act to threaten the proud structure of hetero-patriarchy. This homophobic attitude is very much reflected in Prateek’s actions and his views regarding Muskaan. He finds her weird, out of sorts, and an embarrassment to the society. In *The Trouble With Normal* (1999), Michael Warner critically situates the family in initiating heteronormative world views to a certain extent:

Almost all children grow up in families that think of themselves and all their members as heterosexual, and for some children this produces a profound and nameless estrangement, a sense of inner secrets and hidden shame. No amount of adult “acceptance” or progress in civil rights is likely to eliminate this experience of queerness for many children and adolescents. Later in life, they will be told that they are “closeted,” as though they have been telling lies. They bear a special burden of disclosure. (8)

One of the prominent inclusions in the novel is the Supreme Court’s verdict on homosexuality as an offense and unlawful act in the year 2013. It is to be noted that Section 377 of the IPC had already been decriminalised in the year 2009 by the Delhi High Court. The novel captures the 2013 verdict and portrays the attitude of the society regarding homosexuality. The homophobic culture is clearly mirrored through the celebration of the coming back of Section 377. Prateek is “glad about the Supreme Court ruling,” and his parents feel that “in spite of the rogue elements our country was still on the right track” (Sankar 121). As homosexuals, Section 377 was a curse, whereas, for the society (heterosexuals), it was a celebration of “normality.” A society, which is largely heterosexual and believes in man/woman binary, is not at all concerned with such laws. Subhojoy’s sister exposes the heterosexual hypocrisy and attitude towards such law and homosexuals only for

their personal gains. According to him, his sister wanted to know more about the news only because she had a debate about Section 377. It is revealed that even his father was disinterested in watching the news. Subhojoy reckons,

Tonight my sister wanted to watch the news. She explained about Section 377 to my father. Since she is doing sociology in college she said the debate around 377 was relevant for her. My father laughed and said all these things do not touch our lives, homosexuality and the laws on it. But he watched with my sister, and I joined them after finishing my homework. I thought about Muskaan. I hoped she was not watching this. (Sankar 126)

However, Aaliya's mother felt terrible and considered this judgement as "a black day for Indian democracy" (Sankar 131). While being a part of the society, she accepted the homosexuals as equal beings who had every right to decide whom they love. This attitude of sympathy is later interrogated by Aaliya, which brings forth several questions about being straight and living in an elevated space as compared to the tormented non-conforming individuals. Aaliya retorts,

Ma belonged. So did Dad. They were so entrenched in it all. And it is elegant and nice to ask interesting questions when you belonged. But if you didn't? Then did you rave and rant at society? Or did you just wish you belonged? (Sankar 135)

On a serious note, the institutions of heterosexuality and heteronormativity have already caught minds in the cobweb of the homophobic discourse. The immortal claim that man-woman relationship is the norm and any other deviance from sexual, as well as gender roles, is a crime that has been cemented deep into the societal structure. Family, society, and laws validate this argument to a more considerable extent, whereby non-conforming individuals are always shamed. All these mechanisms result in Aaliya calling Muskaan a criminal blatantly, which eventually leads to Muskaan attempting suicide.

In the present scenario, on September 6, 2018, in the Navtej Singh Johar Judgement, Section 377 has been decriminalized by a five-judge bench of the Supreme Court of India. However, the much enduring question of whether the decriminalization has done any good or if the societal attitude towards homosexuality or queer individuals has changed remains. While the answer to this question varies yet most of the queer individuals emphasize on the sense of

unbelongingness they experience in the society till date. Numerous reports of suicides, even after the historic decriminalization, of such queer individuals provide a clear picture of the deeply buried homophobia and detestment towards queer community. In the novel, Muskaan's attempt to suicide is not caused by a single event but the life-long incessant bullying, public shaming and unacceptability of her "being." Anirudh G, a notable social worker and human rights activist claims:

One of the things that the Section 377 judgement has done unfortunately, is that it has fragmented the queer movement. Because it was something that the various identities within the queer community could rally behind. Now that the law has been read down, people, who are on the more privileged end, don't want to engage in any of the fights on gender and sexuality. (Narain 2019)

Therefore, the striking down of Section 377, as the authors would argue, does not open up ways to liberate one's sexuality or gender expressions but entangles it in a more heteronormative structure that allows regulation and confinement.

Coming Out

In "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" (1993) Judith Butler situates the idea of "coming out" in a critical position. It is crucial to understand that "coming out" remains, for the so-called deviant individuals, a significant political as well as social step or achievement. On the contrary, Butler is critical of this very concept and notes that there are risks involved in it. She questions whether those individuals who have come out are free of any subjection or oppression and finally in the clear. Butler opines,

Conventionally, one comes out of the closet (and yet, how often it is the case that we are "outed" when we are young and without resources?); so we are out of the closet, but into what? What new unbounded spatiality? The room, the den, the attic, the basement, the house, the bar, the university, some new enclosure whose door, like Kafka's door, produces the expectation of fresh air and a light of illumination that never arrives? (309)

Section II, "An Attempt at Understanding," unfolds the "coming out" of Muskaan's homosexuality to her best friend, Aaliya. While Muskaan has always been seen as a weird, strange, and odd girl by her friends, Aaliya seems the only friend who happens to understand her. As an "unnatural" being, Muskaan appears to be

struggling hard to survive in this heteronormative society. She is seen continuously trying to make her close ones understand how one may not like waxing or a person from the opposite sex. According to Muskaan, her friends and family were the heteronormative agents, and they went after her “like a pack of howling hyenas.” (Sankar 40)

The “treehouse kiss” between Muskaan and Aaliya is one of the most defining moments in the novel. After they had shared the kiss, both Muskaan and Aaliya were happily sitting together, holding hands. While moments later, Aaliya was shocked that they had kissed and panicked. However, this moment of romance elated Muskaan’s feelings, and she declares to a puzzled Aaliya, “But I’ve known forever that I’m gay, if that’s what you’re referring to” (Sankar 38). The aftermath of the “treehouse kiss” also brings out serious and critical aspects regarding the “naturalisation” of heterosexuality as the “norm.” Aaliya seems to be the quintessential heterosexual mind, declaring after the “treehouse” incident—“I’m not gay. I shut my eyes and tried to think of all the good looking boys I knew. I slowly untangled my fingers from Muskaan’s” (Sankar 38). Having said this, Aaliya seems to be in an ambivalent point. In this in-between space, she continuously makes herself aware of her heterosexual identity, yet she likes Muskaan and the kiss. *Talking of Muskaan* (2014) is more about talking of Aaliya and her coming to terms with recognising her sexuality. If one looks closely at Aaliya, she seems to be in a state of denial. Her feelings and attraction towards Muskaan is something that she unconsciously talks about while trying to assert her heterosexuality. It is to be noted that many non-identified homosexual individuals live in this state of denial about their own sexuality because society has never accepted any other “norm” other than heterosexuality. The dominant heteronormative culture and assertion of heterosexuality in spaces—both geographic and social space exclude as well as negate the presence of alternative sexualities. Also, there have been a large number of homosexual individuals who have to lead double lives in the form of a heterosexual relationship. The “ever-penetrating heteronormativity” has forced homosexual individuals to live with heterosexual partners to escape societal disgust and shame.

Muskaan’s “coming out” does not place herself in a better position but drags her deep into the center of the “homosexual panic.” As a result of the societal disgust and shame, she experiences existential angst and suffering while continually living in suffocation. She reiterates, “It’s like I’m...underwater all the time... without my oxygen tank. And all of you are on the boat having a party” (Sankar 40). No sooner had her news of being a homosexual is known to everyone, Muskaan becomes the scapegoat for the heterosexual society. Of “coming out,” Butler in

“Imitation and Gender Insubordination” (1993) posits some critically interesting takeaways. According to Butler, the very essence of this “coming out” is unclear to her and further questions if this act solidifies their sexuality and make them known to the unknown. What Butler asserts is how the “coming out” of Muskaan as a lesbian, binds her sexuality into that fixed understanding of that term, thereby making the society more divided into homo/heterosexual binary. Butler critically points out that individuals who “come out” become the locus of a new identity, closeted again by the set of new definitions labeled on them. “Being out” invites more stereotypes of that identity and also act as mechanisms/agents to maintain this fixed concept of the closet. Butler claims that to be a “lesbian” and to “come out” is “simply catastrophic” (311). However, Butler does not legislate against the use of the term “lesbian” or “gay” but the authoritative and “regulatory regimes” associated with the term (309). Nevertheless, despite the limitations, these category errors, she believes, may be used as political imperatives to rally and represent their plight, and the oppressed political constituency.

Same-sex relations or individuals who are non-conforming, as the society labels, have always been an ever-present subject of discussion in a “heteronormative” society. However, their life, fate, and freedom have never been a free space but for bullying and lynching. In the whole course of the story, Muskaan seems to be incessantly resisting all the normalising mechanisms which heteronormative institutions have to offer. What compelled Muskaan to attempt suicide is the same heteronormative society, and their stifling behavior and bullying ways toward non-conforming individuals. It is to be noted that suicides seem to be the last and an easy way out to all their psychological affects, emotional traumas, and shame that the society thrust upon them due to their non-conforming behaviours. The last section, “Afterwards,” brings out mixed reactions from individuals who have been close to Muskaan. Subhojoy and Aaliya are the only ones who stay and care for Muskaan. On the other hand, Prateek and his family, the hetero-patriarchal construct, bring out the heterosexual hypocrisy in society. With the fear of being under the scanner as a possible reason for Muskaan’s suicide attempt, Prateek and his parents decide to come with a bouquet. It is pertinent to note that queer individuals reside in the extreme edge of marginalisation cobwebbed with fear, panic, anxiety, identity crisis and self-alienation. Prateek narrates their dishonest intentions with great delight and pride. He says,

Tauji told Papa we should go to the hospital with flowers. In case something happened to Muskaan, god forbid, there might be problems later. You never

knew what sort of people her parents were. They could slap a case on us. Papa told Mummy and me to get ready. We bought this really big bouquet of flowers from the hospital flower shop. Mummy was trying to select a smaller bouquet. (Sankar 149)

All these instances reveal their lack of empathy or any sign of remorse. Prateek was the one who bullied Muskaan in front of the whole class and one of the primary reasons for her anxiety and self-hate. No doubt, he had come to the hospital with flowers to see Muskaan, yet his hetero-patriarchal mindset remained unaltered. When it was declared that Muskaan had come out of danger, Aaliya, Subhojoy, and Prateek were the ones who went to see Muskaan. Aaliya was the happiest one to see Muskaan come to her senses, who did not bother to do anything but kiss Muskaan again. Prateek accentuates,

The three of us stood inside the dimly lit room, staring at Muskaan lying in the hospital bed. And then that weirdo, Aaliya, did the strangest thing. She went up to Muskaan and what did she do? She kissed her on the lips. Yes, really. Right on the lips. I quickly looked away but I had seen. What was wrong with her? Is she homo too or what? (Sankar 151)

Prateek's questioning of the kiss and the overall tone in his statement reveals the heterosexual preference and the homophobic panic. In a heteronormative world view, any gender or sexual deviance is seen as a threat to society and its heterosexual hierarchy.

Moreover, *Talking of Muskaan* (2014) may be said as the story of Aaliya's "coming of age." Aaliya seems to be the resurrected individual who realises her "self" and rejects the societal thrust of identity. As a heterosexual, she has always tried to assert her heterosexual behavior in her surroundings consciously. In the end, Aaliya reveals her love and affection for Muskaan with a kiss. If we look closely, Aaliya has always liked Muskaan, the first "treehouse kiss" that they shared was very much present in her mind. She enjoyed it, yet she frowned, realising that the two of them had kissed; a societal taboo. After their first kiss, when everything was settled, they shared a beautiful moment, free from any shame or disgust. Aaliya recalls,

I was glad Muskaan was sounding happy again, not all angsty and angry and railing against us. I leaned my head on her shoulder. Muskaan and I had always been special—since kindergarten...Muskaan put her arm around my shoulders.

I wondered if she would try to kiss me again. It was weird. I felt wicked and wonderful all of a sudden. Like, really, who cared. I loved Muskaan more than any other friend. Always have. It was all right. Love is strange. It just happened. And it was something awesome. It couldn't be wrong. Ever. By definition, love meant everything that was right with our world. I felt sure of that and I felt good. So did Muskaan, for sure. (Sankar 41)

This revelation reflects Aaliya's love and feelings for Muskaan, which goes beyond the heterosexual "norms." She felt the same relief and happiness while kissing Muskaan in the hospital. Aaliya says,

I did fouetté turns in the corridor. Doing four to five together is tough. But I did it easily. I was feeling giddy and hysterical with relief. Perhaps that's how one should feel while doing fouetté turns. (Sankar 153)

Aaliya's personal development and her refusal to adhere to heteronormativity, allows herself to uncover the constructed "norms" and heterosexuality. Towards the end of the novel, we encounter Aaliya instilled with a new spirit full of life, and for the very first time, she remains sure of what she is doing and how she feels.

Conclusion

As evidently exemplified in the novel, heterosexuality, heteronormativity and the resultant homophobia runs deep in all institutions of society, be it school, family, religion, government or legal affairs, and therefore, alternative sexualities suffer terribly. No doubt the decriminalization of laws such as Section 377 is a landmark and historic judgement yet social and civil union of same-sex couples or same-sex marriage in India continues to remain in a chaotic and undeniable situation as the Indian Government fail to recognise such marriages. The Government in this regard argues that decriminalization of same-sex do not imply or give the "right of being recognised in a marriage under Indian personal laws" (Rangnekar 2021). Taking all these into consideration, the recurring question, therefore, persists as to what equality and fundamental rights to everyone, as mentioned in the Indian Constitution, justify and mean, and what holds in the fate of individuals like Muskaan and Aaliya in the future.

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