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Book Review: Cultural Notions on Same-Sex Marriages with Reference to the Paths of Marriage by Mala Kumar

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INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a cultural phenomenon, but its meaning varies from customs, places and over the course of time. In general, it is often regarded as a beautiful and auspicious event in which two families come together to unite and create a more valuable relationship between individuals called spouses. On the other hand, while approaching the marriage of same-sex people, the views and opinions become quite different and defensive. Dealing with a similar issue, a novel called 'The Paths of Marriage'¹. It was written by Mala Kumar, a worldwide development practitioner, and was published in 2014. This book consists of three generations of Indian and Indian-American women who navigate the merciless slums of Chennai from 1950s India to the scurry of present-day New York City to strike a balance between their character voice and what the rest of their very own family has to say.

Same-sex marriage is the institution of marriage involving two men or two women. Although law, religion, and tradition have governed same-sex marriage in most countries of the world, legal and social responses have ranged from praise to crime. The Netherlands became the

¹ Mala Kumar, *The Paths of Marriage* (Bedazzled Ink Publishing Company 2014)

first country to legalise same-sex marriage in 2000, quickly followed by over a dozen countries in Western Europe, North and South America, and South Africa.²

The book '**Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society**' by Ruth Vanita stands as the first scholarly work to analyse same-sex marriages alongside same-sex couple suicide incidences in India through international and historical Indian and Euro-American perspectives. The author looks at the history of the ideologies of same-sex marriage in both Western and Indian cultures. She also gives a few historical and textual examples of same-sex in India to counter the myth that homosexuality is a Western import.³

Speaking of the term intersectionality, one minority against another or the intersection of one minority and another, it is really hard to say that there is a definitive way of approaching a problem. However, there is a definitive conversation that needs to take place to overcome a problem, as one cannot simply put a blanket solution across the board, but rather write a compelling story which acts as a toolbox for opening various conversations. The study aims to have an examination of the prospects towards the same-sex community in New York City and India, two cultures with distinctions in perceptions of gender and sex, treatment of homosexual individuals in law, society and religion.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

The Paths of Marriage novel is an exploration of identity, culture, and generational transformation. It entails the story of three generations of women regarding their choices about marriage and love. The first generation is born into abject poverty and is of a lower caste. The second generation is forced into an arranged marriage, and the third generation includes a lesbian relationship. The novel is divided into four parts, dealing with each woman and their story respectively, as well as an epilogue towards the end.

PART I - LAKSHMI

This part traces the life of Lakshmi, a brilliant Dalit youngster in 1950s Chennai. She is challenged by the burdens of caste and poverty, but her desire for knowledge makes her different. When a tragedy strikes in Lakshmi's family, she meets Shankar in an alternate local

² James D. Wright, *International Encyclopaedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (2nd edn, Elsevier 2015)

³ Ruth Vanita, *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society* (Routledge 2002)

area, who is a compassionate and progressive man who appreciates her resilience. Against social pressures, they get married and later migrate to the United States. The story then picks up on their early struggles as Indian immigrants who are coping with cultural alienation, reconciling traditional Indian values in a strange new land, and raising a daughter, named Pooja, in a country that possesses completely different expectations than their roots. Lakshmi struggles to keep her cultural identity alive while balancing American life, generating internal conflict regarding how she should raise her daughter. This portion of the novel sets the emotional and ideological foundation for the subsequent generations.⁴

PART II – POOJA

The second part of the novel focuses on Pooja, Lakshmi's daughter, who is born and raised in America. Intelligent and artistically inclined, Pooja dreams of studying architecture. However, her parents, especially Lakshmi, want her to follow a more traditional path. At the age of 20, Pooja is married off to Anand, an older, emotionally distant man, to ensure family prestige and stability. Pooja moves to Houston, where she is suffocated in this arranged marriage and cut off from her interests. Pooja's increasing dissatisfaction results in an affair with her female architecture professor, and later, she becomes pregnant. When the affair becomes known to her family, Pooja's world falls apart. Subsequently, her marriage collapses, she quits college, and she moves back to West Virginia as a single mother to raise Deepa. This part examines the burden of cultural demands on second-generation immigrants and the individual expense of silence, shame and unfulfilled aspirations.

PART III – DEEPA

Deepa, who is now an adult, resides in New York and is a civil rights attorney. She is openly lesbian to everyone other than her own family. Her girlfriend, Audrey, pushes her to come out of the closet to her grandmother, Lakshmi and her mother, Pooja, but Deepa holds back as she is aware of the family's conservative roots. This part delves into Deepa's inner turmoil, wanting to be herself against the fear of rejection by her family, especially her grandmother. As tensions escalate, Deepa finally decides to speak her truth. The further conversations are confrontational and emotional as Lakshmi reacts in pain and confusion at first, but the intergenerational conversations open up old wounds of caste, gender and personal identity

⁴ Kumar (n 1)

that break to the surface and are faced. Pooja, although emotionally detached, also starts becoming aware of the depth of her own unfulfilled life and finds a mirror in her daughter's struggle for self-definition. This section is concerned with asserting identity and truth within a realm in which cultural silence has long dominated.

PART IV – NARRATOR

This part serves as a quiet yet powerful conclusion, which reconciles the individual journeys of Lakshmi, Pooja and Deepa. It moves from an intensely personal narrative point of view to a more reflective and omniscient tone. It not only preserves individual feelings but also the changing family dynamic as well. The tone has become more thoughtful and expansive, as if time has elapsed and healing has begun. It appears less like the voice of any one woman and more like the shared voice of remembrance, reconciliation and transformation.⁵

EPILOGUE

Lakshmi: A woman who once struggled to even understand her granddaughter's sexuality has started attending LGBTQIA+ support and awareness sessions. There is not much that she says at first, but being there is a huge emotional turnaround. Her willingness to listen is an indication of change beyond her generational and cultural programming.

Pooja: Remaining emotionally withdrawn and influenced by her own traumatic experiences, she starts to warm up. She quietly starts rebuilding her relationship with Deepa through tiny acts of acceptance. Her journey is complete as she starts realising that love for one's child does not equate to control but rather, equates to freedom.

Deepa: She achieves a cautious peace. Despite the arduous process of coming out, having chosen to live her life honestly has sent shockwaves throughout her family. She no longer feels the need to hide herself, and for the first time in her life, she beholds her truth being greeted with gradual comprehension and not with silence.

ANALYSIS

Human sexuality is intricate and diverse. Every individual's sexual orientation and identity results from the combination of various behaviours along with personality traits, biological

⁵ *Ibid*

and environmental factors. In the landmark judgement of *Navtej Singh Johar v Union of India*,⁶ the Supreme Court decriminalised consensual homosexual intercourse by striking off parts of Section 377⁷, which was held violative of Fundamental Rights such as the right to privacy and equality of the LGBTQIA+ community. Yet, the majority of the Indian society disapproves of homosexuality by considering it as an unlawful act, even when adults indulge in private, and this leads to a system of institutionalised prejudice against the community as a whole.⁸

The novel can be used as a perfect example for displaying all the right reasons for people to have a certain level of basic awareness to begin with about the homosexual people and a deep-rooted understanding of the constant struggles, judgments, and mental health problems faced by the individuals who are part of the LGBTQIA+ community. In the course of this book, a conversation takes place between Lakshmi, the first-generation woman and her granddaughter, Deepa, where Lakshmi tells Deepa about the confrontation Alpa, Lakshmi's younger daughter, forced her into by talking about whether Lakshmi wants to make a similar mistake she made with Pooja, her older daughter. Alpa makes Lakshmi realise that she never took the initiative to understand that her path to marriage should not be the same for Pooja and her granddaughter. After the intense and grilling intervention, Lakshmi tells Deepa that she will be going to sessions about LGBTQIA+ minorities and would like to know about the challenges in the workplace, at home and as to why stereotypes are hurtful. Lakshmi goes on to add that many people in India say that educating a girl is unnatural and unworthy, but just because there are too many people, it does not make them right, and I will not be a part of the many against you.⁹ Hearing those words, Deepa was ecstatic as her family was taking the initiative to acknowledge her community through the right resources.

In New York, a predominantly positive outlook was found in comparison to India's moderately negative outlook due to the difference in upbringing, education, disapproval based on religion and lack of understanding and expertise of the umbrella term LGBTQIA+. In many parts of the country, people still do not have a clear understanding of homosexual people and their struggles. Although there were steps taken to achieve greater equality for

⁶ *Navtej Singh Johar v Union of India* (2018) 1 SCC 791

⁷ Indian Penal Code 1860, s 377

⁸ Prithwiraj Laha, 'Legal and Social Perspective of Same-Sex Marriage in India' (2020) 7(4) JETIR <<https://www.jetir.org/papers/JETIR2004043.pdf>> accessed 06 July 2025

⁹ Kumar (n 1)

sexual minorities in many countries, individuals who indulge in same-sex marriage continue to face different forms of prejudice and discrimination across the globe.¹⁰ It is understood that political ideologies and religious beliefs play an important role in shaping culture, but it also depends on people to what extent they wish to adopt the pre-set ideas of customs, traditions and the society's way of life.

It is a violation of the Right to Equality,¹¹ under the Constitution, same-sex marriages are not accepted, and no legal space is created to protect homosexual couples. In the case of *Shafin Jahan v Asokan K.M. and Ors*, the Supreme Court of India opined that marriage intimacies are within a private zone and that society has no role to play in influencing our choice of spouses.¹² According to this judgement, the conclusion would be that any legislative or statutory prohibition on same-sex marriages must be considered unconstitutional and violative of Articles 14¹³, 15,¹⁴ and 21¹⁵.

It further highlights the fact that even though there is one element in someone's life that's different from others, it still means that there is so much resemblance because talking about an issue as enormous as sexual orientation reveals that it isn't one opinion, it is a discourse, a set of opinions. Consequently, if there's a multitude of content that expresses these different opinions and experiences, people tend to realise it's not just one spot of light, but this is an entire representation of that entire community. Hence, the book will help in building empathy and compassion as there are stories that are so insightful and powerful, which serve as a vehicle for social change.

CONCLUSION

The Paths of Marriage is more than a generational tale; it is an engaging exploration of identity, tradition and acceptance among three generations of Indian and Indian-American women. The novel compellingly probes the intersections of caste, culture and sexuality

¹⁰ Anuradha Parasar, 'Homosexuality in India - The Invisible Conflict' (2008) SSRN <https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4689576> accessed 06 July 2025

¹¹ Constitution of India 1950, art 14

¹² Saurav Kumar, 'A Spectrum of Pride: Recognising Same Sex Marriage in India' *The Leaflet* (23 June 2021) <<https://theleaflet.in/analysis/a-spectrum-of-pride-recognising-same-sex-marriage-in-india>> accessed 06 July 2025

¹³ Constitution of India 1950, art 14

¹⁴ Constitution of India 1950, art 15

¹⁵ Constitution of India 1950, art 21

within the institution of marriage and defies strict norms and societal expectations. By following the lives of Lakshmi, Pooja, and Deepa, the book brings to the fore the emotional cost of silence and the strength needed to be oneself. This paper has critically examined how the novel reflects and contrasts the societal, legal and religious responses to same-sex relationships.

Further, it is seen that through open dialogue and gradual comprehension, the characters demonstrate that love and compassion can revolutionise even the most deeply held beliefs. It not only captures the social chasm between tradition and progress but also highlights the need for legal acknowledgement and individual dignity. In the end, it is a tale of reconciliation, redemption and the strength of compassion to overcome the cultural and generational divides. In conclusion, the novel advocates for authenticity, acceptance, and intergenerational understanding, encouraging readers to question ingrained prejudices and envision a more inclusive and compassionate society that welcomes all with open arms and allows people to lead their lives without the fear of judgment.