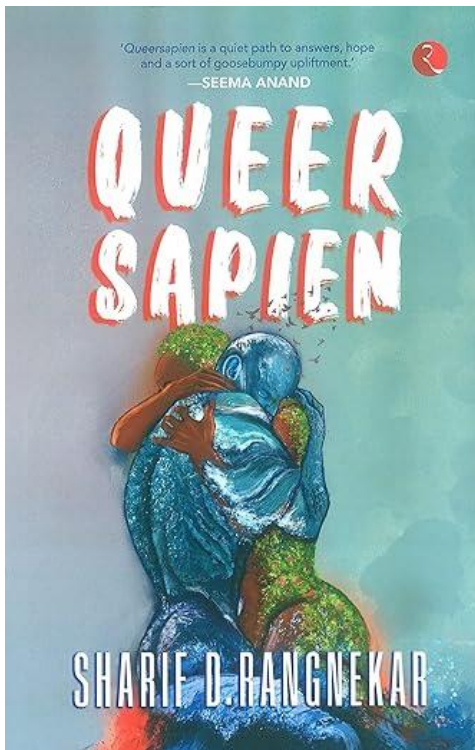




Book Review

Book Review: *Queersapien* by Sharif D. Rangnekar



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Queersapien by Sharif D. Rangnekar is an intimate exploration into the multifaceted journey of a queer person, encapsulating the myriad instances of "coming out" that extend beyond the conventional narrative. In this poignant narrative, Rangnekar delves into the complexities of self-discovery, family disclosure, and the broader societal acceptance that marks the queer experience. The book skillfully navigates through the non-linear nature of the coming-out process, shedding light on the constant evaluation of risks and the perpetual quest for safe spaces in a world that does not always embrace queerness.

Building upon the groundwork laid by Rangnekar's earlier work, *Straight to Normal*, which focused on self-discovery and the initial steps of coming out, *Queersapien* takes a broader perspective. Here, the author confronts his fears and insecurities post-coming out and grapples with societal complexities. Rangnekar addresses his own class, caste, and gender privileges, examining how these privileges can be wielded to either challenge societal norms or normalize queerness within the broader spectrum.

The narrative unfolds as a candid tale of the author's personal odyssey, navigating the landscape where, despite the decriminalization of 'gay sex' by the Supreme Court in 2018, acceptance remains elusive for the LGBTQIA+ community. Rangnekar courageously confronts the hostilities and challenges that persist, all in the pursuit of love and the ability to live authentically.

In the preface, titled 'The Queersapien I am, We Can Be,' Rangnekar extends the scope of the term 'queer.' He envisions it as a symbol of an expanded mindscape where diversity is celebrated, akin to a garden where each flower blooms in freedom. He emphasizes the profound belief in camaraderie across differences, challenging the conventional notion that order is the opposite of disorder. Instead, Rangnekar asserts that diversity is the true antithesis of order.

The author, identifying as gay, portrays a profound commitment to inculcating a culture of acceptance and understanding. He recognizes the burgeoning queer culture in India, acknowledging organizations, cafes, bars, music bands, film festivals, pride marches, support groups, and academic initiatives that contribute to the community's visibility and conversations. Works like "Queersapien" add to this growing literature, providing a platform for the LGBTQIA+ community to reclaim its history and share stories that resonate with authenticity.

The essence of Rangnekar's perspective is succinctly captured in the quote: "...if you think it is natural to question, to seek change, to work towards it and to add to a debate, a perspective of unseen and unheard lenses that aren't of the typical heterosexual males, then you are queering the world too" (p.7). This quote encapsulates the book's overarching message, encouraging readers to embrace diverse perspectives and actively participate in reshaping the discourse

around queerness. *Queersapien* stands as a testament to the power of personal narratives in fostering understanding, acceptance, and the celebration of diversity in the face of societal norms.

The account of Sharif's life in the book is described as messy and sprawling, covering a range of topics. For instance, the opening chapter, titled "Judgement," navigates through the nuances of the Supreme Court's order that read down Section 377. It begins with Judge Indu Malhotra's comments about history owing an apology to the LGBTQIA+ community, setting the tone for the exploration of legal and personal dimensions. The inclusion of a pertinent quote from Judge Indu Malhotra, "History owes an apology to the members of this community and their families, for the delay in providing redressal for the ignominy and ostracism that they have suffered through the centuries..."(p.9) further underlines the depth of the narrative.

As a personal account, the book serves as a mode of reaching out to inflate the circle of understanding. The idea that the personal is political is well-captured, highlighting the potential for storytelling to touch human chords, build solidarity, and foster an appreciation for diverse realities. Rangnekar acknowledges the vulnerability of such openness, reflecting on shedding the trappings of his past life to embrace a state of uninhibited honesty.

Queersapien, while commendable in its exploration of the queer journey, does not escape criticism in certain aspects. The book has drawn criticism for making uninformed comments, employing unnecessary comparisons, and arguably doing a disservice to the diverse and intersectional queer movement in India. One notable critique is the portrayal of women who hold traditional views on sex as products of arranged marriages. "(T)hese women appeared to be products of arranged marriages, where sex is a duty, a service to the husband and a means to procreate." (p.41). This characterization oversimplifies the complex reality of women's lives in India, where societal norms and systemic issues often coerce women into marriage, deny them access to education and career opportunities, and perpetuate gender-based discrimination. By reducing these women to mere products of arranged marriages, the book overlooks the broader social structures that contribute to their circumstances.

Rangnekar's comparison between picking up a partner for massage and sex based on looks to the challenges faced by females in the arranged marriage market is problematic. This juxtaposition oversimplifies and potentially trivializes the profound societal issues and systemic pressures that women encounter in traditional marriage setups—drawing parallels between these vastly different experiences risks diminishing the gravity of gender-related challenges faced by women, perpetuating stereotypes, and undermining the complexity of issues inherent in arranged marriages. Rather than fostering understanding, the comparison may inadvertently contribute to a superficial and flawed analysis of women's struggles with societal norms.

In Chapter 6, titled 'Sex, Lust, Love and A Masseur called 'Non', Rangnekar grapples with his inhibitions and the struggle to overcome societal judgments ingrained in him. The narrative exposes the internalized homophobia that persists, even in a more accepting environment like Thailand. "Quite obviously, I still thought I would be judged or was judging myself, as it couldn't have been the Thais or anyone on that street" (p.68)

Despite the book's overarching theme of self-acceptance and yearning for freedom, Sharif Rangnekar sometimes falls short. His decision to lie about how he met his then-boyfriend Non to friends in India raises questions about his own respect for Non's profession and the honesty in portraying their relationship. This discrepancy raises concerns about the author's expectations of acceptance from those around him while not fully embracing and being transparent about his own experiences.

Chapter 7, 'Non in Delhi' of the book, can be singled out for its seemingly unnecessary commentary on India, including negative remarks about Delhi's traffic, infrastructure, and poverty. While the book is an account of Sharif's personal experiences as a gay man, the critical commentary on these aspects may be perceived as a manifestation of his personal disdain. This sometimes detracts the reader from the book's primary focus on the queer experience, introducing unrelated elements that might even alienate readers and distract from the central narrative.

A notable disappointment in the books is the limited attention given to the experiences of transgender individuals and lesbians. In the last chapter, which ostensibly touches on these topics, the book allocates only a few paragraphs to discuss their experiences. This limited representation is perceived as a missed opportunity to delve into the diverse stories within the queer community, potentially leaving readers unsatisfied with the overall inclusivity of the narrative.

In the profoundly impactful Chapter 8, 'To Love is a Battle', the author lays bare the raw emotions of heartbreak and self-doubt, grappling with the complexities of relationships that fell short. His candid exploration delves into the societal prejudices that created formidable barriers in his quest for love, as many individuals hesitated to emerge from the confines of the closet. The decision to seek refuge in a foreign land to secure freedom and safety underscores the harsh reality that LGBTQIA+ individuals, even in the wake of legal advancements, still confront significant challenges and barriers to acceptance in their home countries.

The narrative skillfully captures the collective pain experienced by Rangnekar and the LGBTQIA+ community as a whole when the Supreme Court of India recriminalized homosexuality in December 2013, dismissing them as a "minuscule minority" (p.95) undeserving of legal

recognition. This pivotal moment serves as a stark reminder of the uphill battle for recognition and acceptance that the queer community continues to face.

A striking aspect of the book is its consistent engagement with issues of women's oppression and crimes against women, interwoven with the injustices endured by the queer community. Rangnekar demonstrates a keen understanding of intersectionality, recognizing the parallel struggles these marginalised groups face. The author's self-awareness shines through as he acknowledges his own privilege, understanding the impact of his class, caste, and familial support. The narrative explores Rangnekar's privileges, particularly within a family that accepts and celebrates individuality, rejecting rigid gender roles. The heartfelt account of his mother's unwavering support further enriches the narrative, portraying a family environment that fosters love, acceptance, and the freedom for every member to embrace their authentic selves. This chapter, therefore, becomes a poignant and multifaceted exploration of love, societal challenges, and the resilient spirit of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Due to its freestyle approach, Mr Rangnekar's writing style in "Queersapien" may be perceived as discomfiting by some. The book seamlessly transitions from delving into the intricacies of the Indian legal system and presenting data and expert opinions to weaving in personal reflections and raunchy anecdotes from the sin cities of Thailand. While this eclectic style may initially unsettle the unwary reader, it becomes immersive and effective if one surrenders to the flow and embraces the spirit of the narrative.

In the comprehensive examination of Sharif D. Rangnekar's *Queersapien*, our journey traversed the nuanced tapestry of the author's narrative. The book, encapsulates the author's personal odyssey through self-discovery, love, and societal challenges, and explores the LGBTQIA+ experience in India. Rangnekar's freestyle narrative, though discomfiting for some, adeptly intertwined legal intricacies, personal reflections, and societal critiques. The work's strengths lie in its candid portrayal of heartbreak, the collective pain of the LGBTQIA+ community, and Rangnekar's acknowledgement of privilege and familial support. However, it faced critique for uninformed comments, unnecessary comparisons, and limited focus on the experiences of transgenders and lesbians. Despite these shortcomings, *Queersapien* contributes significantly to the growing literature on queer experiences in India, fostering visibility, inviting conversation, and challenging societal norms. It emerges as a valuable addition to the ongoing discourse on LGBTQIA+ narratives, urging readers to reflect on the complex intersections of identity, love, and societal expectations.