

Empowering Queer Identities through Financial Independence in Mita Balani's *Breaking Norms*

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Abstract

Financial Independence often empowers marginalized communities by making them more economically reliant. Economic stability makes queer characters more strong to fight their battle in the heteronormative society. Mita Balani's *Breaking Norms* (2017) focuses on the journey of two young lesbian characters of Mumbai, Sonia and Esha. Balani's narrative highlights the conflict between societal norms and individual aspirations with the help of both characters, especially Esha. As a lesbian, when Esha starts earning, the plot of *Breaking Norms* suddenly shifts, and her identity is groomed better with financial security. This paper examines the relationship between financial stability and LGBT identity. The study investigates the correlation between economic reliance and marginalization and explores the potential for individuals to gain empowerment through obtaining financial independence. The research methodology employed in this study is textual analysis with the theoretical framework of Queer theory. This paper examines the economic dimensions of queer lives of *Breaking Norms*, which contributes to the current discussions on the connection between finance, identity, and social justice.

Keywords: *Breaking Norms*, Economic stability, Financial independence, Queer identity

INTRODUCTION

The history of Article 377 of the Indian constitution showcases the journey of one of the marginalized communities of India. In September 2018, six years ago, the Supreme Court of India finally decriminalized same-sex relations. But while speculating and analyzing the history of this decriminalization, one can observe how much LGBT communities suffer and wait just to make themselves and their relationship crime and criminal-free. However, the Supreme Court of India has not yet approved the legality of their relationship. This battle over Article 377 challenges and summons the hetero-patriarchal society in its own way.

In her debut novel *Breaking Norms* (2017), Author Mita Balani narrates the story of two young girls, Esha and Sonia, who live in the urban metropolis of Mumbai. Despite class differences, both girls inevitably develop romantic feelings for one another during their college times. However, Mita Balani herself has a rural background. She belongs to a rural town in India. Balani has been living in the United States for several years. Because Balani's work draws inspiration from actual experiences, she consciously incorporated a semi-autobiographical aspect into this written piece. The experiences of a lesbian acquaintance living in the United States served as the inspiration for her work. Mita Balani's *Breaking Norms* explores the intricacies of non-heterosexual love that intertwines individual longings with the challenging truths of financial reliance.

Breaking Norms emphasizes the economic hardships and successes of queer individuals, demonstrating how having control over their own finances enables them to defy society's expectations and assert their true selves. This paper examines the crucial significance of financial autonomy in empowering queer identities. It utilizes the case study of *Breaking Norms* to gain insights into the broader consequences of economic liberty for marginalized communities.

Two major lesbian characters, Sonia and Esha, of *Breaking Norms*, have their fate and tale started in Mumbai but gradually shift to the United States. This shifting of two prime locations between different countries reflects the condition of gay and lesbian relationships. The story of the novel is set in 2017, and the scenario of 2017 was quite

different from the current situation in India. But in the United States, laws already acknowledge gay and lesbian relationships, as well as marriage, before that.

Theoretical Framework

Textual analysis is the research technique used in this study; the analysis uses the theoretical framework of Queer theory as its primary prism. Queer theory is a theoretical framework that originated in the latter half of the 20th century, predominantly within the realms of gender studies and cultural studies. This work critically examines and dismantles prevailing notions of gender, sexuality, and identity. The paper will closely examine lesbianism, identity, and desire of queer characters with a correlation to financial stability to analyze the challenges they face. Queer theory, along with socio-economic theories, offer valuable insights into how financial position affects individual autonomy and social mobility. Queer theory, conversely, provides insight into the distinct obstacles encountered by LGBT individuals within a culture that adheres to heteronormativity.

Financial Struggles of Queer Characters

Significant works of Judith Butler convey about feminism and queer theories. Butler, in her prominent work *Gender Trouble* (1990), mentions that any individual's identity is neither "fixed" nor essential but somewhat contingent and fluid. In *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler focuses on the "performative" aspects of gender and sexual identity. She posits that due to the iterative nature of these performances, these identities possess an intrinsic fluidity. The presence of 'fluidity' in major domains challenges the notion that sex, gender, and desire can be categorized as set and stable (Butler, 1993). On the contrary, individuals possess the capacity to express and embody their identities in manners that may deviate from conventional societal norms. The need for fluidity is opposed or challenged by "Radical Dualism" (Capper, Giorcelli, and Little, 2007).

Breaking Norms begins with Sonia's disjointed relationship with her husband, Rajeev, who lives in New Jersey, United States. The couple is about to complete one year of their marriage, but the love and happiness around them are still not visible. Sonia tries to adjust to her husband every other time. Since Rajeev works for a reputed company, Sonia came to New Jersey after marrying him. Being a 'workaholic geek,' Rajeev spends most of his time in the office or at home on the computer. He doesn't like to shop (1). On the other hand, Sonia has no job and depends mainly on Rajeev. Sonia loves shopping and enjoys being at the mall (2). Sonia mentions she likes 'expensive' things, and what is not expensive doesn't appeal to her. When they go to the mall, she sees many stores whenever they go shopping, and each store grabs her attention and tempts her to buy something. But she doesn't stop because she is 'scared that he might get mad.'

'His loud shriek still echoes in my ears every time we go out.' (2). This behavior of Rajeev within one year of their marriage directly shows his harsh attitude and Sonia's submissive nature. Comparing and analyzing this statement with renowned French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir's statement that One is not born but becomes a woman (Beauvoir, 1949). Beauvoir states with this line that society constructs the terms 'man' and 'woman.' Heterosexual society calls humans 'social beings' because society influences heterosexist attitudes and behavior, shaping their thinking and actions. Society's ideas and behaviors significantly impact individuals, particularly women. As time passes, a person's desires grow and increase enormously, and they have an increased need to validate their identity. For the identity of an individual, financial security is equally essential. The heterosexist idea of heteronormative society has contributed to the construction of the genders.

Sonia often tries to fulfill her husband's expectations daily, but he consistently lets her down. Rajeev frequently preoccupies himself with his work, neglecting to give her time or care for her. The construction of this heterosexual society is majorly by the influence and terms of so-called heterosexual people who always have their

beliefs and traditions; whosoever tries to change and go against their tradition and norms will be treated as ‘abnormal,’ and sometimes they have to face the death for going against this society (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1994).

In one of the shopping instances in the mall, Sonia sees Esha and visualizes all her past meetings and relations with Esha. Sonia and Esha loved each other and lived in a hetero-patriarchal society that considered their relationship illegal. When their relationship abruptly came in front of their parents, they were young and in college only. Esha belongs to a wealthy family, and to save Sonia’s career, Esha married her parent’s choice and moved to the United States. After many years, when Sonia saw Esha, her past life started ‘haunting’ her. How Esha left her in between, many questions she left behind. The answers to those questions Sonia still has not found. So she is unable to forget her face. She creates one more trauma in her mind for her (159).

In *Breaking Norms*, the novel shows the financial challenges faced by the queer characters Esha and Sonia, apart from the mental challenges. Sonia has no job, and neither is the place where she lives with her husband, who is known to her. Sonia’s mental state breaks again when she realizes she is pregnant, but Rajeev doesn’t want a child so soon. Due to being dependent on Rajeev, Sonia takes no stand for her. And this nature of submissiveness led to the abortion of her child (177).

Sonia’s experiences demonstrate how financial instability intensifies the susceptibility of queer identities, trapping individuals in patterns of reliance that impede self-expression. Judith Butler posits that cultural norms governing economic and social power restrict the ‘performativity’ of gender identification, as mentioned in her *Gender Trouble*. Sonia’s dependence on her husband shows heterosexual norms that restrict her capacity to examine and validate her own identity. It also mirrors the broader societal obstacles encountered by numerous queer individuals.

Meanwhile, Esha’s financial difficulties highlight the structural obstacles that hinder the ability of LGBT individuals to attain economic self-sufficiency. Esha’s husband cheated on her after two years of her marriage. She stands for her identity and starts her painting gallery in New York. Her endeavors to obtain employment in a discriminatory environment expose the widespread prejudices that limit access to resources and opportunities. The manifestation of Michel Foucault’s concept of “biopower,” which elucidates how societal rules govern individuals’ lives, is discernible in the economic marginalization experienced by both Esha and Sonia (as discussed in *The History of Sexuality*, 1990). Sonia’s vulnerability to external influences due to her lack of economic independence exemplifies how financial difficulties can contribute to the continued marginalization of gay individuals.

Sara Ahmed argues in her book *Queer Phenomenology* that the establishment of queer communities necessitates the availability of both financial and emotional support. The economic difficulties Esha and Sonia face impede their capacity to engage in and contribute to these communities, thus isolating them from potential avenues of assistance and empowerment. The current state of isolation underscores the significance of achieving economic self-sufficiency for LGBT individuals, as it allows them to establish strong groups that validate their identities and challenge systemic discrimination (Ahmed 2006).

The financial difficulties faced by Esha and Sonia in *Breaking Norms* serve as a powerful reminder of the intricate relationship between economic self-sufficiency and the empowerment of queer individuals. Their stories demonstrate how a lack of financial stability limits the development of personal identity and the establishment of communities, emphasizing the crucial importance of economic resources in attaining freedom. The novel emphasizes these difficulties, urging a reassessment of the societal frameworks that marginalize gay identities. It advocates for increased economic prospects and support networks that empower LGBT individuals to flourish.

Economic Independence as a Catalyst for Empowerment

Mita Balani's *Breaking Norms* explores how economic independence potentially empowers LGBT individuals by defying conventional societal limitations and nurturing a solid feeling of self-esteem and independence. Queer theory, with its focus on the malleability of identities and the rejection of societal norms, offers a conceptual framework for comprehending how financial independence enables queer individuals to navigate their identities with greater freedom.

When Sonia's husband forcefully about her child, she regrets her decision to marry him. Her stomach cramps and physical pain that she goes through seem minuscule compared to her heartache. She cried over this every other day. She blamed herself for whatever happened.

"One year ago, I took a big step to rejuvenate my life by marrying a guy. And here I revitalize my life by killing an unborn baby. I regret my choice to marry him." (177).

These lines explain her situation and how she has become emotionally weak. One of the primary reasons for not deciding on her own life is that she was utterly dependent on her husband. Being financially weaker somehow influenced and made her mentally weaker as well. Even after days of mourning for her unborn child, her husband started giving her scars by burning her leg.

"He first abuses me, giving scars that will last a lifetime..... I am still scared" (194). Sonia's burnt leg symbolizes how her husband tried to control her. He did this so that she could not take a stand for herself, neither physically nor mentally. And financially, she has no other option than living with him, as he wants.

In the novel, economic independence serves as a practical method of ensuring survival and a representation of liberation from repressive societal conventions. Michel Foucault argues that power is ever-present in social interactions and can suppress and empower individuals in *The History of Sexuality*. Financial independence in *Breaking Norms* serves as a platform for queer characters to challenge conventional power structures, enabling them to express authority over their life and relationships. This argument of Foucault also supports John D'Emilio's assertion that capitalism, despite its imperfections, fosters opportunities for personal independence by dismantling reliance on the family unit (*Capitalism and Gay Identity*, 2019). The protagonists' financial independence frees them from the need to comply with societal norms, allowing them to express their LGBT identities more genuinely.

In the middle of their college, when the secret of their lesbian relationship came out, everyone screamed out, and their 'love' soon changed into 'shame' or 'embarrassment' (126). Shortly after publicly revealing their true identities, they completely lost communication with each other. This disgraceful event was a complete surprise to their parents and other relatives. Esha's father experienced a cardiac arrest, which conveniently served as a pretext for arranging her marriage amidst social and emotional turmoil. Since both girls were so young, they had no financial security or support from family or anyone else. This economic challenge resulted in her marriage. But the same girl, when she found out about her husband's secret affair with another girl, started her passion for painting into a full-time job. She opened an art gallery and began working with her tutor's help. She even starts supporting Sonia as well. Her economic stability led her to take courage against the whole world. She even named her art gallery Soniksha, combining her and Sonia's names. Later on, Sonia started working on her peer-support group named *Madadgar* Group to support the LGBT community virtually in India.

Sara Ahmed highlights that the establishment of these LGBT groups enables individuals to "realign their aspirations and behaviors" (*Queer Phenomenology*, 2006), fostering an environment where queer identities can thrive. The characters' financial independence in *Breaking Norms* promotes a sense of unity, enabling them to establish connections that validate and honor various identities. The collective assistance provided by the community strengthens the characters' ability to assert their own actions and allows them to traverse and question established social conventions more successfully.

A shift from getting trapped in a forceful marriage to taking a stand for each other, both the queer characters has developed enormously. Even after several years of their relationship, Esha and Sonia joined. It all has been possible

due to economic stability, demonstrating that economic empowerment facilitates establishing inclusive LGBT groups. It is also essential for affirming one's identity and fostering resilience. Moreover, the story portrays financial independence as a protective barrier against the negative societal perception and discrimination faced by queer individuals. By living and working independently, LGBT individuals are less susceptible to bigotry and prejudice, which enables them to proclaim their identities with confidence.

Even The concept of "queer performativity" by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, as discussed in her work "*Epistemology of the Closet*," emphasizes the transformational power of non-normative displays of identity. The protagonists in *Breaking Norms* can redefine their societal positions and challenge the existing norms by attaining economic stability, enabling them to engage in acts of queer performativity.

Thus, *Breaking Norms* highlights the importance of economic self-sufficiency in empowering LGBT individuals. It catalyzes them to traverse societal restrictions, assert their identities, and cultivate supportive communities. By achieving financial liberty, the characters go beyond customary constraints and exemplify the transformational force of economic freedom in their quest for genuine and emancipated LGBT identities.

Conclusion

Breaking Norms by Mita Balani deeply analyzes the connection between economic autonomy and queer identity. The novel demonstrates how achieving financial independence can enable persons who identify as queer to question and defy prevailing societal conventions, enabling them to live following their true selves. Balani thoroughly presents the financial reliance of her lesbian characters as an obstacle to their genuine self-expression. The persistent temptation to adhere to cultural norms, frequently driven by the desire for economic stability, limits their capacity to accept their true selves and live authentically wholeheartedly. This reliance can compel individuals into circumstances that undermine their overall welfare, impeding their quest for authentic affection and contentment. The story promotes the attainment of financial autonomy as a powerful force that ignites personal exploration and emancipation. As individuals attain a certain level of economic independence, they acquire the ability to liberate themselves from the constraints imposed by society. By having newfound autonomy, individuals can freely explore their identities without worrying about negative financial consequences. It promotes a feeling of empowerment and self-acceptance.

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