

**K. Vaishali, *Homeless: Growing up Lesbian and Dyslexic in India.* Hyderabad: Yoda Press. 2023. ISBN 978-93-92099-51-9.**

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What does it mean to be dyslexic and lesbian at the same time in a dysfunctional, unsupportive family in India? How does one confront both ableism and homophobia in a complex heteronormative society that always dismisses any “unconventional” traits and behaviors as deviant? Indian-born author and LGBTQ activist K. Vaishali’s narrative reveals the dark, cruel, and repressive side of society by delving deeply into these issues, without worrying about adhering to political correctness. Using life-narrative as a tool, she exposes several myths, misconceptions, and also limitations of knowledge about children with dyslexia. When people in India talk about dyslexia, she says, the image of the stereotyped child from the highly acclaimed 2007 Bollywood film *Taare Zameen Par* pops into their heads, since what little we know about dyslexia comes from this one cult classic, which indicates our limited understanding of the phenomenon. Moreover, she reveals how she was kicked out of her own house due to her “unnatural” sexual preference: “I told my mother about my sexuality and from a wicked curse I lost the house, job, and girlfriend - I lost my Bombay life. Since then, I’ve been living out of my suitcase, like I am a fugitive on the run” (Vaishali 5).

As per the Dyslexia Association of India's 2016 data, roughly 15% of students in India, equivalent to about 35 million children, are impacted by dyslexia (Paul). In fact, in India, notably, a significant proportion of children enter into adulthood and higher education without being cognizant of their potential learning disabilities, such as dyslexia or other co-occurring learning disabilities. Despite the substantial prevalence of dyslexia among many children, there has been a notable dearth of research and little effort to enhance public awareness on this matter in the Indian context. In recent years, although there has been a discernible rise in acknowledgment of and emphasis on learning disabilities, both within scholarly spheres and in the domain of policy-making, it still seems to be insufficient. As a result, people with dyslexia continue to face a great number of myths and misconceptions in our society, many of which are diametrically opposed to one another. One common misconception is that those with dyslexia are inherently more creative than the general population, whereas research suggests that there is no intricate connection between dyslexia and creativity "when considering creativity as a whole" (Gutiérrez-Ortega et al. 62). Furthermore, some even believe that dyslexics are "unworthy" or even "bad" (Riddick 229) and "thick", "stupid", "lazy" or "careless" (231). Nonetheless, children who have dyslexia may be negatively impacted by both preconceptions. Correspondingly, these prevalent myths seem to reinforce society's negligence or indifference to accept them as "normal". Due to her poor performance in academia, Vaishali's family often judges her as "stupid and lazy" and accuses her of playing with her career by wasting her "potential" (110). On a separate occasion, she visits a doctor to find out if she has dyslexia. To her dismay, the doctor finds out that she is "intellectually gifted," a finding that challenges the doctor's long-held belief that "dyslexics can't be intelligent" and that, these two-intelligence and dyslexia- are "mutually exclusive things" (Vaishali 52). When Vaishali tells her mother about the symptoms of dyslexia that the doctor discovered, even her mother has a hard time believing it, as she is not "dumb," according to her mother, hence she

cannot have dyslexia (Vaishali 46). Additionally, researchers have found that people with invisible disorders, such as dyslexia, are believed to be “faking it” by others in order to obtain unfair advantages or special privileges (Alexander-Passe 208). After receiving a terrible grade in the Macroeconomics exam during the first semester of the course, Vaishali herself begins to accept as true that she is making excuses for her bad performance in the examinations. Despite this, she gathers up the courage to visit the professor to inform them about her condition; they in response, do not want to believe her, saying, “How can we believe you now?”, and thus, in a way, giving her the impression that they think she is “faking it” to gain unfair advantages (Vaishali 59). Thus, this encounter not only stretches the notion that the most significant challenges that children with dyslexia face in school, whether in elementary or secondary school, are because of the indifference and lack of knowledge shown by teachers toward students with special needs; this also shows how ignorant society can be and even those entrusted with children's education from an early age are.

The narrative also recounts how she discovered her sexuality, her happiest times with her partner Bhavya whom she met when she was pursuing a Bachelor's in Commerce at Mithibai College, and then how she tackled her break-up phase. Vaishali unapologetically exposes society's imposition of what Rich termed as “compulsory heterosexuality” upon her. When Vaishali discloses her sexuality to her mother, the instant reaction of her mother is, “You should have told me earlier so I could have gotten you psychiatric treatment” (Vaishali 8). Her non-heterosexuality worries her mother, who believes she is disobeying societal norms. Instead of facing and learning something deeply personal and unique about her daughter, her mother's first concerns reflect how she is more pressured by society to conform to the heterosexual standard. Vaishali writes, “I am lesbian, which to my mother means I am not conventional. She will use every opportunity to punish me into becoming straight and conventional so I can be as

successful as her peers” (Vaishali 19). According to Weinberg, homophobia is “the irrational fear, hatred, and intolerance of homosexual men and women” (Ciocca et al. 1954). Over time, though, the definition of homophobia has been expanded and used to explain how negative images of lesbian and gay men are promoted and reinforced in our culture and society. Many theorists and scholars, in fact, argue that the monopoly of compulsory heterosexuality perpetuates, fosters, and sustains homophobia. ssWhen she tells her childhood friend Preeti about her sexual preference—that she likes girls and has a girlfriend—even her friend, just like Vaishali’s mother, cannot believe Vaishali, thinking that she is joking. In reaction to this revelation, Preeti develops a kind of homophobic attitude against Vaishali, which is reflected in their tour to Connaught Place the next day. Preeti did not come closer to Vaishali while they were posing for a picture together. Vaishali writes, “Touching me was something that she had to think about and consider. I was no longer a friend, or a person” (77). Vaishali never shies away from revealing the prejudice, bigotry, and ignorance towards homosexuals that permeate our culture. She learns about these misunderstandings in her chat with the psychiatrist she encounters at a Mumbai public hospital. When over the course of her life the psychiatrist, whom she was forced to meet, comes to know that Vaishali is a lesbian, he starts asking her irrelevant questions like “Who is the man in your relationship?”, “Who acts like the man?”, “Who initiates the sex?” etc. (Vaishali 75). He begins to build his own opinions about homosexuality and homosexuals after being dissatisfied with her responses; he goes so far as to assume that Vaishali is a lesbian because of her animosity towards her father. Modern society's enduring misconceptions and biases keep lesbian women like Vaishali at a social disadvantage.

The memoir, unquestionably, is a significant contribution to the expanding corpus of Indian life-writing tradition. Moreover, it would be an act of injustice to just view the memoir

as a spontaneous act of self-expression, since it presents several significant but unrecognised concerns that resonate with those who have dyslexia and belong to the lesbian community in India. In fact, *Homeless* is probably the first memoir by an Indian to speak about dyslexics and their silent sufferings which are often unheard or ignored by normative society. This lack of awareness can be attributed to the invisible nature of dyslexia, as well as the limited availability of comprehensive research on the subject. Consequently, the scarcity of research done on dyslexia can be partially attributed to the aforementioned invisibility of the condition. Apart from this, the text also records Vaishali's struggle to survive as a lesbian in a heteronormative, homophobic environment that views women like Vaishali as transgressors of norms. The book then would be a valuable source for researchers, educators and also common readers for a nuanced understanding of subjects like dyslexia and homosexuality.

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