

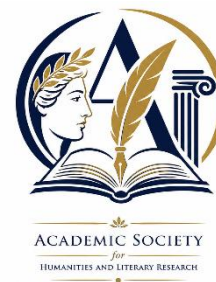
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Silence, Identity, and Stigma: A Study of Sanjay Johari's The Invisible Conflicts

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Abstract

The Invisible Conflicts' is a contemporary social drama that explores the invisible psychological, emotional, and social struggles experienced by homosexual individuals within a heteronormative society. The play presents the lives of Urvesh and Lolitha, whose arranged marriage becomes a symbol of the conflict between personal identity and social expectations. Through realistic dialogue and emotionally charged situations, the playwright challenges traditional assumptions about marriage, sexuality, and family honour while advocating acceptance, dignity, and equality for LGBTQ+ individuals. The dramatic narrative exposes the pain of living behind socially constructed identities and reveals how compulsory heterosexual marriage often results in emotional isolation rather than companionship. By portraying homosexuality not as a moral deviation but as a natural human identity, the play contributes to contemporary discussions on gender, sexuality, and human rights. This paper critically examines the artistic, psychological, and social dimensions of the play while analysing its relevance in the context of modern Indian society.

Keywords: Homosexuality, Identity, Social Stigma, Assumptions, Gender, Contemporary Dimensions, Relevance.

The Invisible Conflicts occupies a significant position in contemporary dramatic literature because it raises one of the most neglected issues of modern society: the struggle between individual identity and social conformity. Rather than presenting homosexuality as an extraordinary phenomenon, the play humanizes its characters and depicts their emotional conflicts with remarkable sensitivity. The dramatic tension emerges not from external violence but from the invisible battles that individuals fight within themselves while attempting to satisfy social expectations. The title itself symbolizes these hidden psychological struggles that remain unnoticed by society but deeply influence human lives.

The central narrative revolves around Urvesh and Lolitha, two individuals who are compelled by family expectations to enter into an arranged marriage despite their different sexual orientations. Their marriage immediately becomes an ironic representation of social success that conceals personal tragedy. On the wedding night, Urvesh honestly confesses, "I have a charm but not for girls, only for boys," while Lolitha replies with equal honesty, "I'm lesbian." These two statements immediately dismantle the conventional image of marriage and establish the central conflict of the play. The playwright demonstrates that honesty between individuals becomes more meaningful than the social institution that has united them. The dramatic irony lies in the fact that both partners understand each other's suffering more deeply than society understands either of them.

The play challenges the long-established assumption that marriage is the universal solution to every personal problem. Instead, it reveals that compulsory heterosexual marriage may become an instrument of psychological suffering when it ignores the reality of human identity. Urvesh openly declares, "I believe in homosexuality," a statement that functions not merely as self-identification but also as a rejection of social hypocrisy. His confession is neither dramatic nor sensational; rather, it reflects the emotional exhaustion of an individual who has lived under constant pressure to conform. Similarly, Lolitha refuses to hide her identity because she recognizes that silence only strengthens social prejudice. Their mutual honesty transforms the marriage into a relationship based on understanding rather than physical intimacy.

Dr Johari carefully avoids presenting homosexuality as a social problem. Instead, society itself becomes the problem because it refuses to recognize diversity in human sexuality. Throughout the play, family honour, social prestige, and cultural expectations repeatedly appear as invisible forces that control individual lives. The parents arrange the marriage, believing that it will ensure respectability, but their decision ultimately intensifies the emotional conflict experienced by both Urvesh and Lolitha. The play, therefore, suggests that social institutions become oppressive whenever they deny individual freedom and personal identity. The tragedy does not arise because the protagonists are homosexual; it arises because society refuses to accept them as they are.

The emotional relationship between Urvesh and Mickey further develops the play's exploration of identity and affection. Their bond is portrayed with dignity and emotional depth rather than sensationalism. Similarly, Lolitha's relationship with Nandini reflects the universal human desire for love, companionship, and acceptance. By presenting same-sex relationships through ordinary conversations and emotional honesty, the playwright normalizes experiences that have traditionally been marginalized in literature. The characters seek neither sympathy nor rebellion; they seek only the freedom to live truthfully.

The play also exposes the psychological consequences of concealment. Every lie told for social approval gradually destroys emotional stability. The invisible conflicts referred to in the title are therefore internal conflicts between truth and pretence, identity and expectation, desire and obligation. The playwright emphasizes that a society that forces individuals to deny their authentic selves ultimately creates emotional suffering not only for homosexual individuals but also for their families and partners.

The play further demonstrates that prejudice is sustained not only through legal or institutional restrictions but also through everyday conversations, assumptions, and expectations. Every character is influenced by the invisible authority of society, where marriage is considered compulsory, and heterosexuality is accepted as the only legitimate form of intimacy. The playwright questions this assumption by presenting characters whose emotional truth contradicts the roles imposed upon them. Instead of condemning the protagonists, the drama encourages the audience to question the social structures that force individuals into lives of secrecy and compromise.

Urvesh's emotional struggle represents the experience of countless individuals who suppress their identities to protect the honour of their families. His silence before marriage reflects fear rather than dishonesty. When he finally admits, "I have a charm but not for girls, only for boys," the statement functions as an act of liberation. The confession destroys the illusion upon which the marriage has been constructed, yet it also creates the possibility of an honest relationship between two individuals who understand each other's suffering. Likewise, Lolitha's declaration, "I'm lesbian," is not merely a revelation of sexual identity but an assertion of personal dignity. She refuses to continue living behind a socially acceptable mask simply to satisfy cultural expectations.

The dialogue between Urvesh and Lolitha reveals one of the greatest strengths of the play. The conversations remain natural, realistic, and emotionally restrained. The playwright avoids melodrama and instead relies upon sincerity to communicate psychological tension. Silence, hesitation, and confession become dramatic techniques through which hidden emotions gradually emerge. Rather than creating heroes and villains, the play presents ordinary human beings trapped within extraordinary emotional circumstances. This realism makes the drama socially relevant and intellectually persuasive.

Another important achievement of *The Invisible Conflicts* is its rejection of stereotypes associated with homosexuality. Urvesh and Lolitha are educated, thoughtful, compassionate, and morally responsible individuals. Their sexual orientation does not define their entire personality. Instead, they are presented as complete human beings whose aspirations, fears, relationships, and emotional needs resemble those of every other individual. This balanced characterization challenges traditional literary representations in which LGBTQ+ characters frequently appear as comic figures, tragic victims, or moral outsiders. Here, the real conflict exists between authenticity and conformity rather than between virtue and vice.

The play also raises important questions regarding the meaning of marriage. Marriage has traditionally been regarded as a sacred institution based upon love, companionship, and mutual respect. However, the playwright argues that these ideals lose their significance when marriage is reduced to a social obligation. Urvesh observes, "We are married, but we have never had any desire to live as a married couple," exposing the emptiness of a relationship founded solely upon social approval. Their marriage becomes symbolic of countless relationships in which personal happiness is sacrificed to preserve social respectability. The drama therefore, encourages readers to reconsider whether marriage should serve society or the individuals who enter into it.

Equally significant is the play's portrayal of family relationships. The parents are not represented as cruel or malicious. Instead, they are products of the same social values that deny diversity in human identity. They genuinely believe that marriage will solve every difficulty because they have inherited cultural beliefs that equate conformity with happiness. The tragedy emerges from ignorance rather than hatred. By portraying family members with empathy, the playwright avoids simplistic moral judgments and instead demonstrates how prejudice can be unconsciously transmitted from one generation to another.

The emotional relationships between Urvesh and Mickey, and between Lolitha and Nandini, reinforce the central argument that love is based upon mutual understanding rather than gender alone. These relationships are depicted with emotional maturity and psychological realism. They are neither sensationalized nor romanticized. Instead, they illustrate the universal human desire for affection, acceptance, and companionship. Through these relationships, the play argues that emotional fulfilment cannot be achieved by denying one's authentic identity. Love flourishes only where honesty exists.

Dr Johari also introduces contemporary scientific perspectives to challenge long-standing misconceptions regarding homosexuality. At one point, the play refers to the understanding that homosexuality is a natural variation of human sexuality rather than a disease or moral failing. This perspective aligns the drama with modern psychological research and strengthens its social

message. Literature, therefore, becomes an instrument of education as well as artistic expression, encouraging readers to replace prejudice with knowledge and compassion.

The enduring significance of *The Invisible Conflicts* lies in its insistence that identity cannot be erased by social customs or cultural expectations. Throughout the play, the invisible conflicts remain psychological rather than physical, demonstrating that the greatest suffering often originates within the human mind. The protagonists continuously negotiate between the desire to fulfil familial responsibilities and the need to remain truthful to themselves. Their emotional struggle symbolizes the experience of many LGBTQ+ individuals whose identities are ignored or denied by society. By transforming this private pain into dramatic expression, the playwright gives voice to those who have historically remained unheard.

The language of the play contributes significantly to its emotional impact. The dialogues are simple, conversational, and realistic, allowing the characters to speak with authenticity rather than rhetorical exaggeration. Statements such as “I believe in homosexuality,” “I have a charm but not for girls, only for boys,” and “I’m lesbian” become powerful dramatic moments because they emerge naturally from the characters’ lived experiences. These brief confessions possess greater emotional force than lengthy speeches because they express truths that have been suppressed for years. Their simplicity enables audiences from different social and educational backgrounds to engage with the central issues of the play. The title *The Invisible Conflicts* possesses profound symbolic significance. The conflicts are invisible because they cannot be observed through external appearances. Society witnesses a wedding ceremony, a respectable family, and apparently successful social relationships, yet it remains unaware of the emotional pain concealed beneath these outward forms. The title therefore suggests that the deepest human struggles often remain hidden behind socially accepted performances. This symbolism extends beyond the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals and becomes a universal commentary on the distance between public identity and private reality. Every society constructs expectations regarding gender, marriage, and morality, but individuals frequently experience emotional realities that cannot easily conform to those expectations.

Another notable feature of the play is its refusal to offer simplistic solutions. The playwright does not portray social acceptance as immediate or effortless. Instead, the drama acknowledges that meaningful change necessitates education, empathy, and genuine dialogue. The characters achieve emotional clarity by acknowledging their identities rather than denying them, yet the broader social transformation remains an ongoing process. This realistic conclusion strengthens the artistic credibility of the play because it reflects the complexity of contemporary social life. Rather than presenting an idealised ending, the playwright encourages audiences to continue questioning inherited prejudices and discriminatory assumptions.

From a literary perspective, *The Invisible Conflicts* represents a significant contribution to contemporary Indian English drama, as it expands the thematic boundaries of modern theatre.

For many years, issues concerning homosexuality remained largely absent from mainstream dramatic literature or were represented through stereotypes. This play challenges that tradition by presenting LGBTQ+ characters with dignity, intelligence, and emotional complexity. The drama demonstrates that literature possesses the power not merely to entertain but also to transform social consciousness. By encouraging audiences to empathise with marginalised individuals, the playwright fulfils one of the highest functions of literature: the cultivation of humanity through imagination and understanding.

The dramatic structure effectively combines realism with psychological exploration. Every conversation advances both the narrative and the thematic argument, allowing personal experiences to illuminate broader social questions. The conflicts remain internal yet produce significant external consequences, illustrating the intimate relationship between individual psychology and social institutions. Marriage, family, gender, and identity are therefore presented not as isolated themes but as interconnected aspects of human existence. The play successfully reveals that when society values conformity above authenticity, both individuals and institutions suffer.

Ultimately, *The Invisible Conflicts* argues that respect for human dignity must become the foundation of every civilised society. Sexual orientation should never determine an individual's worth, morality, or right to happiness. Urvesh and Lolitha emerge not as tragic victims but as courageous individuals who choose honesty over deception. Their willingness to reveal their true identities transforms personal confession into social resistance. The play, therefore, replaces silence with dialogue, prejudice with understanding, and fear with hope. Its enduring message is that genuine relationships can only flourish where truth is respected and diversity is accepted. Through its realistic characterisation, sensitive treatment of homosexuality, and profound psychological insight, *The Invisible Conflicts* establishes itself as an important contemporary drama that challenges social orthodoxy while affirming the universal values of compassion, authenticity, and human freedom.

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