

Normativity and Suppressed Queer Yearnings in Literature and Cultural perspectives: An Analysis of Sandip Roy's *Don't Let Him Know*

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Abstract

Primarily the story of a family knitted in secrets, Sandip Roy's *Don't Let Him Know* (2015) gives a multi-coloured frame of narratives. This paper explores that how dominant institutions and normative social relationships leads to suppressed intimate longings, because 'queer'[1] has taken up in public discourse as an indicative of non-normativity. It further attempts to examine gender norms in its different shades and manifestations. Suppressed queer desires, in this context, can be studied by analysing characters who have closeted sexual interests, characters who have same sex attractions and are in heterosexual marriage, characters whose sexual identity is ambiguous.

Key Words: Normativity, Queer, Homogenizing Sexual orientations, Sexual Identity, Literature, Society.

Sexual Orientation- Varied Cultural Perspectives

Sexual orientations involves diversity of human experiences together condemned in conservative boundaries. It expresses sexuality as not limited to male- female dichotomy but exists beyond diverse unique ways of expressions. 21st century literature is showing more alterations than expansion. Everything new and experimental is often initially criticised by the society. But it varies cultures around the world. Some acknowledging and learning others quite unwelcoming. Accordingly narratives varies from early Vedic Indian literature to modern western writings.

As *Kamashastra* "Tritiya-prakriti", or third party sexual relations, which included descriptions of sexual orientations. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, portrays homosexual relationship traits between protagonist Huck Finn and slave Jim.

The list of sexual identity theme works in Indian and western culture is long enough with acknowledgement and rejections. R. Raj Rao, is known as pioneer of gay literature addressing in his works like "*The Boyfriend*" and "*Hostel Room 131*". Some Marathi plays as Suniti Namjoshi's

"*Feminist Fables*" and Vijay Tendulkar's writings delving into similar themes. From classical

Indian Literature, *Mahabharata* to Devdutt Pattanaik's *Ramayana versus*

Mahabharata examining the theme of sexual identity and homosexual relations hence they all constitutes sexual queerness.

SEXUAL OVERTONE IN INDIAN LITERATURE

In identity politics, legal support is one step forward, but many combats are still remaining, especially in the field of literature. E. M. Forster, in his famous quotation from *Maurice* states, "I was determined that in fiction anyway two men should fall in love and remain in it for the ever and ever that fiction allows."

In *Don't Let Him Know* (2015), writer Sandip Roy, has knitted many stories together. Avinash, a closeted gay protagonist, marries Romola by sacrificing his longtime boyfriend, Sumit. Both Sumit and Avinash keep their sexual advances towards each other as a secret, throughout the novel, which is symptomatic of shame, knitted around homosexuality in India. The author has conveyed in a very sophisticated way about homosexual desires and behaviours of his gay characters. This can be understood through one of the lines "he'd lift his hand to his face and smell Avinash still clinging to him, his fingers, his lips, his neck, and he would start to sing as well." (37) Sexual orientation of two minor characters has also been described. Ramen Babu, father of Romola, who remains overfriendly with school boys and even after his marriage is

involved with them and dies of an unnamed disease. Other character is Abhijeet, member of a boy's club includes Avinash and Sumit, commits suicide after a very short period of his marriage with a woman.

Lihaff (The Quilt), a short story written by Ismat Chughtai, shows the importance of popular modern culture which presents acceptance of diversity. *Lihaff* is a mysterious story of sexual politics built around the quilt. All meanings are left to readers to derive from the text because there are no open sexual activities or intercourse shown by Chughtai. The story is told from the point of view of a small girl who sees movements under quilt and get curious to know the reason behind that, but is afraid of sounds coming. The Girl represents the crowd and her aunt under the quilt is of a woman who struggles for her sexual identity in a patriarchal, heteronormative society. The quilt is a curtain between society and unacceptable sexuality or desires. The story hints lesbian relations between Begum Jaan and her maid Rabbu. The sexual overtone describes the homoerotic desires and sexuality. The story was banned in India, and Chughtai was sent to trial for the obscenity the story contained. Chughtai shared her thoughts with writer M Aslam "[N]o one ever told me that writing on the subject I deal with in 'Lihaf' is a sin, nor did I ever read anywhere that I shouldn't write about this ...disease... or tendency." Chughtai fought long her legal battle to keep her spirit of writer in her work as she wrote in the essay entitled "The Lihaf Trial", "My mind tempts my pen and I'm unable to interfere in the matter of my mind and pen." (Bhattacharya)

As expected, after repeal of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, it has set out new avenues for the LGBT themes in literature on the landscape, and now writings can be more direct and open, instead of mysterious and incidental. In current publishing, we find limited assigned themes, faint representations, and no power to queer protagonists. A very suitable illustration can be found in the two works, Saikat Majumdar's *The Scent of God*, and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *My Father's Garden*. As Saikat has told in an interview with *The Hindu*, "The powerful indeterminacy of sexual orientation in early puberty is the genesis of this story." It is a gay fiction knitted around two boys Anirvan and Kajol, living in a boarding school, homoerotic desires are introduced in the first chapter between the boys. Opposing to the expectations, exploration of homosexuality or the desires of both the boys they have for each other are left very superficial by the narrator and very little is hinted in various confines.

Shekhar's *My Father's Garden* is a novel, divided into three parts. The narrator of the story is a doctor, who is aware of his sexuality, and falls in love with his colleague. His colleague is happy to sleep with him but not to commit with his feelings. The lover shows heterosexual attitude towards homosexual relationship and the narrator's love story comes out as a tragedy. Homosexual characters are not portrayed as proud and self-accepted but rather diminished, hated, frustrated, complex and the portrayal is made to show attitude of heterosexuals towards them.

Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, in their book *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*, have illustrated the long deep connection of India with homosexuality, but have given no thought to its legal and psychological aspects. This book is a collection of dozens of translations from Indian historical readings which shows the treatment of modern society towards them and detangle many discourses of Indian queer. Devdutt Pattanaik, Indian mythologist, in his book, *I Am Divine, So Are You*, examines what sacred texts of Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and Hinduism have in store of karmic faiths about human sexuality. Pattanaik's *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata*, is a comparison of two great Indian epics using an analogy. Pattanaik has discussed the main points of the epics here, without having to read the epics themselves. It is a belief that the *Ramayana* is idealistic and the *Mahabharata* is realistic. In his work, Devdutt Pattanaik explores the similarities and dissimilarities, whether it is family structure, forest exile, or war, the comparison proves a startling point that *Mahabharata* is in fact a reaction to the events in the *Ramayana*. The work enlists all sexually ambiguous characters, terms, crossdressing scenes from both these epics. How Arjuna, the main hero of Mahabharata, is cursed to live a year of his life as a eunuch and he converts in Brihannala, the woman. The concept of Ardhanarishwar and cross-dressing.

Though the cruel old law ceases to exist in the country, colonial hangover still can be seen in regular life which queer people face. Indian society decides heterosexual marriage as only choice and any marriage, relation which falls outside this boundary is a taboo in India.

Sandip Roy's novel though not mainly about anti-sodomy law but it gives insight into how society constructs ideal standards of masculinity and femininity and how social taboo and dogmas about same-sex desire can affect the life of gay men and their families. Some of the stories in the novel are about Avinash, closeted gay protagonist, who marries Romola by sacrificing his longtime boyfriend Sumit. Some of the stories are about Romola's childhood experiences and puberty, married life when she has known that her husband was secretly a gay, young Avinash's crush on Sultan, Gay club and

secretive parks where only men came out at nights, middle aged Avinash sexually harassed by a thief who fake it to be gay, Romola revisiting US where earlier she discovered about her husband's homosexual orientations.

The work under discussion is filled with many secrets and silences which are manifestations of maintaining social and cultural norms on the grave of desires. Avinash and Sumit, two principal characters of the novel, hide their sexual orientation and love for each other and Romola, kept it as a secret for whole life. This silence is a sign of shame around 'queer' in public. Michael Warner argued that public and political discourse uses shame two-faced, to define some specific kind of sexual behaviors as unbearable, when in private morals generally distinguishes the compatibility of sex with dignity. (p.40, 1999)

REPRESSION OF EXPRESSION

Romola, wife of Avinash, keeps her brief romance with actor Suber Kumar hidden even she makes painful efforts to have a last look at his dead body. Because it was supposedly illicit to date an actor in Romola's society. As Romola said to Amit "It just wasn't possible, that was a different time. We had to listen to our parents." (Roy, 2015) In that case, silence brings in comfort whereas speech brings chaos. The confrontation between Romola and Amit regarding mysterious letter, which she stashed away like a secret pain, is not confessing but Romola either choose silence or excuses. As Romola let his words sink in. The letter is addressed to Avinash, Amit's closeted gay father, by his long-lost boyfriend Sumit. Sumit complains about his cheating on him and marriage with a woman in the letter. But the second page of the letter just spells out everything so vaguely that Amit thought it was sent to his mother. "Romola sits their speechless wondering what to say." (Roy, 2015)

Here Romola paints and repaints Avinash and herself in expected colors which fits them in their society and its standard accounts. As if break of silence will open the floodgates for them.

MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS CHARACTERIZED BY APATHY

When Romola and Avinash go out together before their arranged marriage, they don't create any spark together. After their marriage when they travelling together "..... She wanted to speak but it seems as if he had drawn curtains around himself." (Roy, 2015) Avinash himself struggles with the thought of acceptance to this marriage, because he was a gay, which result out as fulfilling his duties towards his mother being a son. Here he provides basics as if he needs wife but not to interrupt her. Even after knowing the thing that her husband was secretly indulged in a gay romance before his marriage, Romola keeps it secret not for it doesn't hurt her anymore but she finds it shameful and something which shouldn't reveal. Instead of confronting him she embraces silence forever. Their marital life is entirely free from any romance and as based on mutual agreement of playing the socially expected roles of husband and wife. One of the reasons Romola lived in marriage is "societal pressure and stigma attached to a Bengali middle-class divorced woman." (Singh, 2013)

ST JOHN AND ST TERESA'S SCHOOL

When Avinash shows unwillingness for a haircut his mother rebukes him saying "You are a boy and boys have short hair or we will put a ribbon in it and enroll you in St Teresa's School." (Roy, 2015) Here Boys are one way and girls are another and if someone keeps long hair than people find him a girl. Father Rozario, St John's School, distinguishes the standard of a boy's family by measuring the gap between his hairline and his collar. Fellows who keep their hair long and pouffed, buttons open on shirt are no good loafer boys. They all grow into louts who can't hold a job for two days because they have no discipline and that entirely comes from their looks. In the course of a person's life, the interests, activities, clothing and professions there are considered domains for one gender or another. These societal ideas affect every aspect of lives in the novel, from education to career, finances, and relationships.

THE GAMES BOYS PLAY

Club room, a dingy storage room on the roof where as young boys Avinash and Sumit have secret meetings. In summer, late nights they stay together and enjoy songs of Tagore. Here author gives a vivid description of gay romance that how they enjoy presence of each other in shadowing sleeping streets "he'd lift his hand to his face and smell Avinash still clinging to him, his fingers, his lips, his neck, and he would start to sing as well." (Roy, 2015) Amit asks his father that why you stopped playing here he says "Because we grew up." (Roy, 2015) Their relation comes out all different than their

hopes as Avinash married to a woman under weight of family circumstances and his excepted duties attached to them. There is implicit helplessness in lines and constant tension of navigating between poles of family, society and sexuality.

QUEER SIGNS: FINE MENTION OF SAME-SEX DESIRES AND BEHAVIOR

It seems author have conveyed subtly different homosexual orientation of two characters. First is

Romola's father, Ramen babu, who dies of a mysterious disease when Romola is still a child. Author details his character as one who even after his marriage is always remains involved with children in forming a cricket team and always to offer unsolicited help to them in neighborhood. Second character is Abhijit, Sumit and Avinash's college friend and member of their gay club, who commits suicide after one month of his marriage with rumors that he had a love affair. As Eve Sedgwick has argued and challenged lexical alternatives by asserting that hetero-, bi- and homosexual men could not easily be differentiated from one another since the idea of "erotic" depended on an "unpredictable, ever-changing array of local factors." (Sedgwick, 1985) Mostly the queer characters description in their actions, presence is dipped in fear, guilt, and silence. Avinash's character has portrayed as if suppression of his same sex desires have left him mute and inactive. Romola often complains that her husband doesn't speak and indulge in talks much at usual days with her but he chatters like a child when his cousin and a friend is around.

When Sumit visits Avinash after many years of the latter's marriage to a woman, their conversation shows how gay men are obliged to their families and succumb to pressure.

Some chapters are not queer themed but giving snapshots of intersecting lives of family members fighting their own demons over several decades, set against contrasting cultural backdrops but one certainly realizes that melancholy of one chapter spells over other chapters. There are description of too many deaths, death rituals, women getting widowed and woe in the novel.

CONCLUSION

Delineating concealed yearnings and how conventional wisdom leads them to dissatisfaction, the characterization of Avinash, Romola and Sumit portrays intersections of oppression. Societies and different institutions designate some actions or outcomes of behavior as good or desirable or permissible and others as bad or undesirable or impermissible and connects them with different standards. These social standards and values thus act to enforce some social activity and outcomes that ought to occur, while preventing social activities that ought not to occur and anomalies are described as anti-social and unacceptable. Roy has narrated that how homogenizing of diverse population is not justified.

This literary text thus can be interpreted as how queer separates a positionality vis-à-vis the normative. Homosexuality is not silenced in these narratives rather formulated and therefore manages to make, though obliquely, its call for acceptance.

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28. The word here stands for individual's sexuality which may vary at different points during one's life.