



Dimensions of Themes in Gender Studies of the Post-colonial Era

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ABSTRACT:

Research in social sciences has analyzed the status of women in societies, especially their social, economic, political and literary empowerment and how it has enhanced to the condition of women in India, the Caribbean, African and the Arab world. It dealt with the themes of dowry in Hindu marriages and rape and the legislative rights of women in custody respectively.

Postcolonial women writers foreground issues of female identity and its structures. It also brought forth social and political problems through the psychological explorations of the 'woman's condition.' According to Mary John and Janaki Nair the question of modernity is framed on the middle class women. Her morality and her spirituality matters, as she embodies the custodian of the nation's morality and symbolizes 'Shakti.' Thus her sexuality is virtually annihilated because of this pure idealism. Contemporary thinkers regarded gender identity to be fluid and never fixed. Queer writing and Queer theory perceived such concepts of identity as trans-gendering, Transvestitism, drag and camp, and other sexual identities. Homosexuals have been known as 'Other' of 'normal' heterosexual identities, thus they are reduced to the status of being gays.

KEY WORDS: Literary Empowerment, Structuralization, Readdressing, Transgender, Gay-Lesbian, Homosexuality, Queer Theory, Symbolism, Culture, Stereotypes.

INTRODUCTION:

Research in social sciences has analyzed the status of women in societies, especially their social, economic, political and literary empowerment and how it has enhanced to the condition of women in India, the Caribbean, African and the Arab world. It has also focused on the impact of

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the ‘Third World’ writers through which the possibilities of ‘Third World’ feminism were analyzed. The reclamation of women literary writers from the margin has enhanced the women’s role in the structuralization of the society and nation. During the postcolonial period literary traditions focused on writings by males; a male bastion whereby women’s texts and narratives were ignored or regarded as ‘domestic fiction.’ Elleke Boehmer opines gender has been “intrinsic to national imagining” (2005b:5). The major themes dealt by post-colonial women writers were political equality and social emancipation. Writers like Assia Djebar and Anita Desai questioned the role of the family in governing women, an eventuality of egalitarian society. While Women’s fiction illuminates issues of female identity, it also propounded social and political problems. Public genres such as street theatre women’s organizations especially raised social awareness through plays like *Dafa180* and *Om Swaha*. It dealt with the themes of dowry in Hindu marriages and rape and the legislative rights of women in custody respectively. Postcolonial women writers foregrounds issues of female identity and its structures, it also brought forth social and political problems through the psychological explorations of the ‘woman’s condition.’

Much of the literary works dealt with abused and the abandoned women in oppressive situations. Nayantara Sahgal a prominent Indian novelist foregrounds the exploitation and oppression of women workers in *Rich like Us* (1986). Meena Alexander’s *Nampally Road* (1991) is one of the few novels that speaks of Naxalism in India. Writers like Bankimchandra Chatterjee and Rabindarnath Tagore epitomized women as an icon of Indian tradition, while Imtiaz Dharker believed that woman are fit only as subordinate creatures. She describes women as ‘freaks’ in the poem ‘She must be from Another Country’. The *Innocence of the Devil*, by El Saadawi, treats women as a depository of man’s honour or family honour. According to Mary John and Janaki Nair the question of modernity is framed on the middle class women. Her

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morality and her spirituality matters, as she embodies the custodian of the nation's morality and symbolizes 'Shakti.' Thus her sexuality is virtually annihilated because of this pure idealism.

C. S. Lakshmi states; "The 'notion' of an unbroken tradition is constant and attempts are made to write this notion of tradition on the body of the woman to dictate its movement, needs, aspirations and spheres of existence even while the body is moving along time, space, and history"(1999:55). In contemporary India there have been deliberations on dress codes for Indian women and ideas of 'suitable dress for Indian women or appropriateness' of dresses are contemplated. Even socially or politically powerful women in the society are conceptualized within 'good mother or bad mother' thereby fixing them in a stereotype role of fixed womanhood.

DISCUSSION:

In Anita Desai's, *Clear high of Day* (1980), she makes the connection between gender roles and the traditional and conventional symbol of nationalism. Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Feasting, Fasting* (2000) and Bharati Mukerjee's *Wife* (1975) project self-sacrificing women. Some of the sites of identity which are generally focused on are the home, community and tradition are seen in the novels of Desai and Keri Hulme. The Completeness of the womanhood is generally identified with marriage and family. Many women writers in India portray that marriage is pernicious to the women's identity .The notion of motherhood and the image of chaste submissive wife in the family governs the average Indian women and thus becomes a central theme for many writers. Rukmani in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* is proud of the fact that she has never addressed her husband by his name (10). So also in Bharathi Mukerjee's *Wife*(1975).

The character Dimple ascertains that her life had been devoted to pleasing others not herself (1975:211). Adriene Rich comments that the "Woman has always known herself both as

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daughter and as potential mother” (1986[1976]):118). For women, marriage indicates the end of self-reliance, and that by itself a question whether they were independent in their fathers’ house. Motherhood as a theme addresses the problems associated with it. The stress on delivering or producing heir to the family is unimaginable. Female infanticide is the result of this stress, problem which still persists in many parts of India; Sahgal in her *Mistaken Identity* describes this as ‘Custom-ritual’ because the Hindus prefer a boy-child

The 1990s - the oncoming of Queer writing:

Contemporary thinkers regarded gender identity to be fluid and never fixed. Queer writing and Queer theory perceived such concepts of identity as trans-gendering, Transvestitism, drag and camp, and other sexual identities. Homosexuals have been known as ‘Other’ of ‘normal’ heterosexual identities, thus they are reduced to the status of being gays. And yet within homosexuality there are various dimensions. The themes that are presented in queer writing are race, ethnicity, sexuality, family relationships and the queer diaspora and globalizations. Kamala Das was one of the first daring writers to discuss sexuality. In a conservative and patriarchal society her autobiographical work, *My story* (1988) exhibits the conditions a girl grows up, her bold expression of sexuality and the presupposition of sexual behavior before marriage. At a period of time when bodily functions, body diseases, sexual pleasures and attractions are forbidden subjects especially for women, Kamala Das was one of the writers to move towards a feminist way to discuss sexuality.

Her poem ‘*The Stone Age*’ describes the conditions in which women live after marriage. Women writers of 1980s and 1990s exposed the literary silence on women’s desires. Intiaz Dharker, independent of marital relationship expresses:

Desire can be a delicate thing,

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.....
Who needs as much as the naked

breast? lust is aroused by a wrist

revealed

the hollow at the neck,

the ankle-bone,

half –concealed. (Object, 2001:108)

Shashi Deshpande showcases bold themes and characters such as individual morality and social morality. In *Small Remedies (2001)* and *Moving On (2004)*, Deshpande has discussed extra marital affairs, women leaving ‘their’ home and women who pursue their professional interest. Discourses of morality were another important way of regulating sexuality. Professing sexual desire or preferences on being promiscuous was labelled as ‘immoral’.

Autobiographical writing /life writing, memoirs, diaries –personal accounts, underlines both individual and communal experiences in the author’s own voice. Such writings by women present a challenge as they resist blending into the larger category of ‘Third World Women.’ Most of these writing are available as translations. In India Dalit writings by women were a lived experience of poverty, violence, rejection and suffering. It functions as a collective document from individual to community through a re-telling of trauma. Bama describes her caste –based trauma in *Karukku*. Relationships are invariably transient and unstable. In *The Boyfriend* by Raja Rao homosexuality is passable between a heterosexual relationship between a mother and a respectable professional. In Kamal Das’s poem ‘Composition’ her protagonist expresses doubts about herself:

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I asked my husband,

Am I hetero

Am I Lesbian

Or am I Just plain frigid? (1967:46)

Suniti Namjoshi expounds in *Because of India* (1989b): “As a creature, a lesbian creature how do I deal with all other creatures who have their own identity” (84) Modern Indian women symbolized a dual identity, a westernized education and an Indian ingrained tradition. This woman can be seen in Anita Desai’s *Clear Light of day* (1980). ‘Bimala’ trapped between her ideological sentiments of education and the Hindu system of upbringing. Queer literature often raises questions of identity demanded by families. Dattani’s plays (*Do the needful on a Muggy Night in Bombay*) critiques gays who accept the generality of family and sexual preferences. Ruth Vanita opines in an important essay ‘*Gender and sexuality to liberate both women and men into developing different kinds of family on collective living*’(1997:16).

Readdressing the systems of family and Kinship is the nexus to a queer narrative:

Migration has shaped the gay and lesbian communities; many move to the USA working there, away from their family- this has liberated them from the limits of heterosexual family. Amitava Kumar comments on Kureishi’s writing as creating a “Whole new world of migration and that race and sexual freedom” (2001:117). Many writers argue that race and sexual identities overlap at a certain point. Sexuality is as much domain of discrimination of race and the close alignment of the two causes an oppression with miscegenation. Although gay-lesbian alliance globally moved towards to a better politics alliance, it may erase cultural specificity for a uniform gay-lesbian identity. The Indian lesbian poet Anu, in her poem ‘Who am I’ depicts the racial imaginary of sexual identity, thus:

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WHO AM I?

I am Uncivilised, Barbaric, Heathen,

Primitive, Oriental

I am PASSIVE, Submissive, Self-Sacrificing,

Obedient Sati-Savitri

I am Dyke, Deviant, Queer, Assimilated

Bitch-from-Hell

.....

WHO AM I? (1994: 19_21, *Emphasis in Original*)

CONCLUSION:

The ‘Third World’ Gay and lesbian writers who have migrated to the ‘First World’ cities have tough time of identity formation. Urvashi vaid relates her experiences of growing up into a lesbian-Asian woman in the USA:

I lived in two worlds – American outside the home and Indian with family and Friends... In college, my life struggles revolved around my growing awareness Of sexism, racism and my own sexual orientation. Because I had no Indian Community outside of family...the place where I defined my identity was in-side grassroots political organizations. After I came out as a lesbian, my worlds

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Became even further splintered-I had a queer life, a mainstream American life

And an identity within my Indian family and community. (1997:8)

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