



Disrupting The Binary: Gender Diversity In Educational Settings

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ABSTRACT: In recent decades, the call for inclusive education has grown louder navigating issues of gender variations in the curriculum of higher education. As institutions struggle hard to epitomize the complexities of contemporary societies, the incorporation of LGBTQ studies has become both a pedagogical obligation and a matter of social concern. The inclusion of sexual variants in contemporary novels challenges the outdated notions on gender identity and at the same time expands the purview of critical thinking, cultural outlook, and empathy among students. This paper will try to explore the significance of gender diversity in higher education curricula and how these texts uphold strategies to create inclusive, transformative learning experiences for the students. South Asian fiction has undergone a radical and substantial transformation in recent years reflecting developing societal attitudes towards heterosexuality. Authors are continuously trying to explore the diverse LGBTQ narratives to challenge the traditional norms. This shift contributes to a greater cultural discourse giving rise to comprehensive understanding and inclusivity within the ambit of South Asian literature. This ‘othering of the other’ is difficult, challenging, and it takes a deeper understanding of the complex societal matrix we are part of. Queer spaces – both literal and figurative, play an important role in the fiction offering sites of resistance, belonging and negotiation. These spaces may manifest in physical settings or in the personal realm of self-exploration and desire. Sexually variant is a greater threat to the society which still adheres to men-women relationship and idolizes the same. Becoming the other is a challenge requiring the individuals to navigate unfamiliar thoughts, culture, and identities. This transformative journey often involves confronting biases, nurturing empathies, and reestablishing one’s understanding of self and others. Though challenging, it can lead to individual growth, broadened world views and a more inclusive society.

Keywords: Curriculum, Inclusive Education, Gender Diversity, LGBTQ, Queer Identity, Queer Spaces, Queer Politics, Heterosexuality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Queer representation in South Asian novels exhibits uniqueness through a combination of cultural, social, and individual factors. The cultural specificity in South Asian novels adds depth to the portrayal of queer characters putting emphasis on the intersectionality of their identities leading to a transformative learning experience. Queer identities are intersected with other aspects of race, religion, and caste differences. The word “queer,” as found in the dictionary, has a primary meaning of “odd,” “peculiar,” “out of the ordinary.” Queer theory extends its study to all sorts of behaviour, including gender-bending and non-normative forms of sexuality which include “queer.” A queer is someone who does not conform to the established concepts of sexuality and gender and represents the non-normative forms of sexuality. The struggle for LGBTQ rights, privileges, legal recognition,

social acceptance is a greater theme to reflect upon considering the society's socio-political dynamics. Power dynamics of the patriarchal society rejects the existence of non-binary gender identities. Gender is a societal construct, and it is time that it manifests into a more pluralistic and inclusive structure. People belonging to the third gender are oppressed and subjugated by all forms of power. The trauma caused due to this systemic oppression triggers an unparalleled sense of dejection in the transgender community. Their shared experiences are not given any voice, nor considered important. They are stereotyped as individuals who are to be kept away and scorned upon. The characters which stand on the edges struggle a lot to make others understand their biological orientation and grapple with societal expectations and individual desires. This tension between tradition and modernity becomes a distinctive backdrop for queer narratives. Moreover, contemporary novels incorporated in the curricula of higher education often include global perspectives acknowledging the interconnectedness of the world and this shows the influence of Western discourse on queer rights in local colour.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES

This study wants to identify the gaps, trends and theoretical frameworks used in previous studies and how contemporary novels stand out in the crowd with greater understanding of intersectionality and specificity, political context, and diverse literary styles. Qualitative research using content and discourse analysis will show how queer studies are included in higher education curricula and they bring about critical thinking among students. If we browse through the syllabi of different colleges and universities we will see representation of gender diversified topics, intersectionality, and marginalization.

The main objective would be to analyze the thematic content and framing of queer related courses to understand how queer politics, histories and theories are portrayed. It also tries to understand the perceptions of the faculty members and students regarding the value, relevance, and impact of queer studies in academic settings. It also shows the evolvement of portrayal of queer in contemporary novels over time and also tries to understand reader's response and interpretation in such representations. A close textual analysis will unfold the multiple layers which cover the complex matrix of conventional societal pattern and reveal the crux of the crisis embedded in it.

3. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness by Arundhati Roy portrays the queer identities in a way which contributes to a rich tapestry of variant identities. Anjum who is born Aftab, faces discrimination of all sorts based on her gender throughout her life. The first chapter of the novel introduces us to one of the major themes of gender and its binary classification into two distinct categories 'male' and 'female.' This binary opposition is nullified as Anjum points out that she is a "gathering of everybody and nobody and of everything and nothing." Her mother Jehanara Begum and father have been waiting for six years through three daughters for a boy child. The night he was born was the happiest of Jahanara Begum's life. However, the following day she comes face to face with the harsh fact. "She unswaddled little Aftab. She explored his tiny body – eyes nose head neck armpits fingers toes – with sated, unhurried delight. That was when she discovered, nestling underneath his boy-parts, a small, unformed, but undoubtedly girl-part" (7). As Aftab's feminine characteristics becomes more predominant, his parents consult a sexologist Dr. Nabi who after examining Aftab terms him "a rare kind of hermaphrodite" a "female trapped in a male body." Dr. Nabi suggested them to see a surgeon who would

prescribe pills and seal the girl part in Aftab but he was not sure about the transgender tendencies because such tendencies do not go away naturally or through invasive procedures. Mulaqat Ali, Anjum's father strongly retorted that "Tendencies are no problem. Everybody has some tendency or the other... tendencies can always be managed" (17). He made money in every possible way, as well as borrowed money from relatives for Aftab's medical surgery. Aftab constantly struggles with anxiety, tension, and depression preferring the sex of his identification over the boy's uniform, sports, and so on. He could not justify his stance, the body he is having and the role he is assigned to. Again and again, he identifies himself to be 'her,' a feminine self and craves for a hero like Changez Khan who would fight with the world for her. Finally, he enters Khwabgah - the House of Dreams, attracted by Bombay Silk's dress code, haute couture, and discreet purchasing style, and discovers seven more women, Razia, Bulbul, Baby, Nimmo, Jeers, Gudiya and Mary, and also their Ustad, Kulsoom Bi, a guru. He eventually permeates into the Khwabagh and feels as though he is passing through the gates of heaven. Anjum, the central character is a transgender woman who owns a unique community in a graveyard and hopes to transform the graveyard into a garden which holds a symbolic significance. This setting reflects the themes of life, death and rebirth underscoring Anjum's resilience and conventional approach to society's expectations. Anjum's role in creating the Khwabgah, a house for the marginalized other reflects her leadership qualities. Anjum tries to provide a support system to others who are like Anjum and establishes a connection of mutual trust and kinship above all relations in nature. Cross-dressing is the act of wearing dresses and other accessories in association with the opposite sex within a particular society. Razia, one of the inhabitants of the Khwabgah is a cross-dresser. Razia is not a Hijra. She is a man who desires to appear before the world as a woman by wearing women's clothes. However, she detests being referred to as a woman, but prefers to be known as a man who strongly yearns to be a woman. Her relationship with her family is complex quite natural to deviant sexual orientations. She interacts with spiritual gurus and finally her quest for the true meaning of life receives a different height. Tilo, another character from the novel engages in fluid and normative relationships challenging conventional notions of love and intimacy, for her love was a movement, a torrent. She feels a society is free in its loneliness, isolated state. Her character intersects with various aspects of identity, including her political activism and personal commitment. Her character expresses ambiguity in relationships and identity. Life is not just life. It is life and death. It is both. It is a journey. A road. And the road has stops and stations and bridges and places to rest. Her love beyond the conventional norms expresses life itself and for her it is a fresh breath of air above all societal restrictions and apprehensions. Thus, queer characters are not isolated, they intersect with broader social and political issues offering a nuanced understanding of one's own self within a complex societal fabric.

Another novel which shows becoming the other is the funny boy of the novel *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai. Arjie, the central character undergoes a coming-of-age journey that includes the excavation of his queerness. In his interactions with Shehan, he reflects that they were like two people from different cultures, two people whose love was, without doubt, stronger than any bond that could hold them. The first chapter "Pigs Can't Fly" deals with Arjie in his early days in which he shows his disinterest in playing with boys. He prefers dressing up like a girl and playing together with girls in a game called "Bride-Bride" which he has invented himself. While the other boys are busy at cricket, Arjie revels in playing games with girls. He says:

For me, the primary attraction of the girls' territory was the potential for the free play of fantasy. Because of the force of my imagination, I was selected as leader.... The reward for my leadership was that I always got to play the main part in the fantasy. If it was cooking- cooking we were playing, I was the chef; if it was Cinderella or Thumbelina, I was the much-beleaguered heroine of the tales. (3-4)

The novel navigates the societal expectations of a conservative Tamil community and Arjie's deviant sexuality makes him 'the other' among his kith and kin building tensions within family and outside it. He claimed: "Love and desire were things that came with the assurance of normality. My desire, my love, had no such assurances" (37). Shehan, Arjie's love interest plays a crucial role in the queer narrative. Their relationship blooms amidst familial tensions and ethnic clashes in and outside the society. Arjie finds a sense of disgust and uneasiness when his father utters the word "funny." When her mother does not allow Arjie to the dressing room and mocks at his keen interest, he recognizes that he belongs to the other world, "I would be caught between the boys' and the girls' worlds, not belonging or wanted in either" (39). The chapter "The Best School of All" shows Arjie's gender conflicts in detail. To cure Arjie's funny behaviour, his father sends him to the Victoria Academy, an English style boy's school. Here Arjie meets Shehan Soyza who defends him from Salgado's racist criticism about Tamils. Despite his brother Diggy's warning that Shehan is a homosexual; Arjie fell for Shehan despite his homosexual tendency and could not control having a physical relationship with Shehan at the garage when they played hide and seek in Arjie's house. One can stretch the Freudian idea of heterosexuality to homosexuality and claim that homosexuality is also a love drive that is brought to the forefront as a binary opposite of heterosexuality, and perhaps its appearance is directly connected to the middle-class morality. Challenging this middle-class morality for the sake of same sex love has been one of the agenda of Selvadurai's novel. This love can be so self-immolating and destructive as manifested in Arjie's anger when he mangled two poems and "reduced them to disjointed nonsense" (281) to take revenge on the Principal who made his lover suffer. Later, when asked by his lover Shehan: "What made you do it?" (284). Arjie responded to Shehan's query by saying: "I did it for you...I couldn't bear to see you suffer any more" (284).

Arjie's conservative and rigid uncle and aunt could not accept his otherness and epitomizes the clash between tradition and individuality. Arjie's mother at one point of time blurts out that her children are what they are. The novel also delves into the cultural and political clash prevalent in Sri Lanka at that time. Sri Lanka, which means "the splendid country" in Sinhalese, found itself embroiled in queer and war crimes. Despite their depravity, Selvadurai brings forth a new attitude towards homosexual desires and thus underlines contested spaces. Selvadurai uses two significant narrative strategies - placing an innocent first person protagonist-narrator and a thoughtful merging of the political and personal to underline the diversity in the queer discourse. Arjie's queer identity is portrayed within the greater context of societal tensions reflecting the contingency of the situation. Despite societal pressures and a greater agony outside boundaries, Arjie maintains his own self, his resilience and strength. He claims that it was then that he realized he had already lost his family and his culture, he had lost them because he was determined to be himself. The novel's narrative style shows Arjie's introspective voice providing readers with an intimate understanding of his struggles and victory. Through Arjie's character, the novelist draws a grim picture of the society which is deep rooted in conventional understanding of heterosexual system and denies something which goes above and beyond this. Within a queer diasporic imagination, the lost space is represented not by a sacrificing mother and a chaste wife but rather by a

queer boy in a sari. Again and again, we are brought to the ultimate realization of the emerging truth which gets manifested as an inner conflict between what we are and what we want to be, between 'being' and 'becoming.'

4. CONCLUSION

The portrayal of queer studies within higher education curricula is both a reflection of the attitudes of the society and a prominent tool for cultural and intellectual transformations. This queer representation in the global south brings a new dimension to Indian English fiction unfolding layers of meaning hidden within. Arjie or Anjum are not 'the other' as seen by the heterosexual society but their otherness as depicted by the novelists has added a different colour and dimension to the coming-of-age novel writing tradition because our differences make us unique and different in the crowd. One needs to acknowledge this difference. The lines from Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory* aptly justifies this otherness: "...here is the distinction between the naturally-given, normative 'self' of heterosexuality and the rejected 'Other' of homosexuality.... As basic psychology shows, what is identified as the external 'Other' is usually part of the self which is rejected and hence projected outwards" (145). While progress has been made in recognising queer voices in academia, significant gaps still remain, outside the humanities and in spheres limited by conservative and heteronormative frameworks.

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