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## Transgressing Territories: Depiction of Lesbianism in Literature

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Literature has been rather conservative in exploring lesbianism. No doubt Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* (1941) set the trend but it was written long back and should have set the trend for writing and bringing into the open more lesbian novels, stories or drama but it did not happen. Why? That perhaps can be explored as due to societal pressures, patriarchal construction of society and the general milieu of the nation which was against depiction of such stories and by and large such stories remained sensational news items to be read, discussed and then forgotten. Kamla Das autobiography *My Story* (1976), perhaps was a bold attempt at discussing lesbianism at a time when it was furtively hidden as it led to public shame. She talks of her desire for her friend at boarding school and her attraction to other women in her life and consequently one of the episodes discussed in the autobiography became the subject matter of the story "*The Sandal Trees*"(1988).

Another autobiographical work that dealt with lesbianism is *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* (2000) written by Suniti Namjoshi a lesbian feminist. She used autobiography, fantasy and myth in her work. The book is written to two dead women Goja, her childhood friend and Goldie, her grandmother. It is the confession that she could not make in her life time that she is making now and one can feel the agony that she experienced as a result of her sexual choice which her heterosexual family saw as wrong and a sin.

The book is important as it deals with various issues, how the writer left India because the sexual climate here would have stifled and suppressed and never allowed freedom of choice in sexual behaviour and yet her difficulties in a foreign land were no less as there too she suffered from triple jeopardy being a non-native, a woman and that too a lesbian.

She says, "I should like to point out to all the queens and princesses that ever there were that no woman is a first-class human being. She's second-class. And anyway I was a lesbian so presumably, I would have been a third-class human being in any society, wherever it was in the wide world."(Namjoshi: 2000, 110)

*Babyji* (2005), is a Bildungsroman by U.S. based Indian writer Abha Dawesar, where Dawesar's girl protagonist is in a relationship with a lower-caste woman; heteronormativity is dismantled through lesbian love. Anamika Sharma the protagonist is a young sixteen year old teenager who is involved with three women and she enjoys her lesbian relationship in quick succession with all three of different age groups and belonging to a definite social strata. Attack on patriarchal structure of society, male domination and India's rigid social structure are woven into the matrix of this lesbian story.

In Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*,(2001) Marikolanthu is of a different class, from the other women. She is a maidservant who learns about lesbian love from two foreign mistresses.

Every night, I watched Missy K leave her room and walk past me...and go into Missy V's room. In the early hours, she crept back to bed. Why this secrecy, I wondered. If Missy K was afraid to sleep alone, the sensible thing to do would be for them to share a bed. I would have thought nothing of two women sharing a bed. It was the most obvious thing to when men weren't around. For the women to stick together (Nair: 2001, 232).

Having returned home, she uses the lessons in caresses for her local mistress Sujata, the daughter-in-law of the aristocratic household. The acceptability of women "sticking together" is what Marikolanthu uses to forge her relationship with Sujata, where desire, however intense, remains unspoken. To protect the mistress from her husband's unwanted lovemaking, she selflessly makes love to the man instead, believing all the time that she is doing her mistress a favour by keeping the husband from going off to another woman. It is an act of love on her part which unfortunately alienates her from the women. The reaction of the mistress however after some time is as if she has woken up from a stupor and accuses the protagonist of using black magic on her and making her indulge in unnatural acts. This reaction however is not new and lesbianism is always seen as unnatural and vile. This book by stating the obvious forces us to think about lesbianism as a natural act of love, love as natural and committing as between a man and woman. In Nair's *Ladies Coupe*, although same-sex desire does not ultimately survive the fracturing effect of the discourses of class and caste yet Lesbianism is an illustration of feminine freedom of choice though she remains ignorant, of course, of the actual word.

Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* (2002) openly brought lesbianism into the open and even into the classrooms as Manju Kapur is taught in almost all the universities, so lesbianism reached a larger audience. The novel is about a married woman with two children who is unhappy and dissatisfied with her marital life and feels trapped by her circumstances. Astha the protagonist considers marriage as a spiritual union of the two rather than mere physical. Although her husband fulfills her physical desires but she feels emptiness in her life. It is because of this empty space in her life, that she turns towards Pipeelika with whom she forms a bond that takes a physical turn.

There follows a torrid affair between Astha and Pipeelika Khan: two women crossing social boundaries to find solace and understanding in each other's arms. Kapur writes about sexual encounters without any literary inhibitions. Her descriptions are unnerving and passionate at the same time (Youth Ki Awaz).

The physicality of their relationship is satisfying because it is based on care love and mutual respect for each other. Astha starts enjoying her company. "given certain circumstances, there was no aphrodisiac more powerful than talking, no seduction more effective than curiosity" are so realistically true are reflective of Astha and Peeplika's relationship. With this relationship Astha finds herself torn between two halves-her desire for love and affection and her duty towards her family. "Afterwards Astha felt, strange, making love to a woman took getting used to. And it also felt strange, making love to a friend instead of an adversary" (Kapur: 2000, 231).

Dr. Ram Sharma in his "A Married Woman: A Woman's Quest for a New," observes,

Kapur shows Astha's growing and evolving at various stages through various relationships and she becomes the first Indian novelist who highlights woman's desire for homosexuality. The roots of tradition, living up to the benchmark of the Ideal Indian Woman, sacrificing for the

family, putting self behind, devaluing herself, being content to live in the safety and security of the husband, home and family continually come in conflict with her post modern sensibilities that lend her wings to question established norms, to search for her identity, to long for a soul mate, to develop, to enter socially forbidden relationships.

Astha involves herself so deeply in Pipeelika that no longer she finds any interest in having sex with her husband. She phones her at least five times daily. Astha begins to lack in her family duties and consequently her children suffer from her negligence. Many times her conscience haunts her for having an extra-marital affair with a woman. For this reason she wishes she was to be like Pipeelika, alone and free. Astha understands a married woman's place in the family to be that of an 'unpaid servant' or a slave and the thought of divorce brings social and economic death to her status as an Indian wife. She feels for herself, "A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth," (Kapur: 2000, 231) are the prerequisites of a married woman like her.

"There are hollows in my life, and I wanted them filled" (Kapur: 2000, 202).

Traditions in Indian society are so strong that a woman cannot break them and get out of it to make a separate identity. Astha's morals force her to think that in lying to her husband she is committing a sin. Since her childhood, she is taught never to tell a lie. Every time in the past whenever she had lied for anything, she had been punished by God. It had happened with her before marriage when she lied to her mother for the boys with whom she had friendship. And now she can't restrain herself for telling lies for the sake of Pipeelika as she feels every touch of Pipeelika gives her heaven's joy and she doesn't want to lose her. "She thanked God Again for this love in her life, when she had thought all chances of love was over" (Kapur: 2000, 235). "My whole life is a fabric of lies, 'said Astha sadly, 'you are the one true thing I have" (Kapur: 2000, 242).

She attempts, tries to go out and find herself individually in the outer world but ultimately she returns back to the four walls of her house. Astha's mind is also set according to the patriarchal way. While in the company of Pipeelika she never forgets that she has children at home. "A large part of her belonged to her children" (Kapur :2000, 231)

Every time she runs back it is because of her children. Although she is progressive and conscious of her rights, she quickly compromises to the fact that a woman's real position lies within the family. Astha wants to live with Pipeelika and it is very difficult for her to bear when Pipeelika goes to US to complete her Ph.D. Astha feels, "I live my life in fragments, she is the one fragment that makes the rest bearable" (Kapur: 2000, 264). Astha cries when she has to part from Pipeelika

Ashok Kumar says:

Manju Kapur has exposed a woman's passion with love and lesbianism, an incompatible marriage and ensuing annoyance. With passion to revolutionize the Indian male sensitivity, she describes the traumas of her female protagonists from which they suffer, and perish in for their triumph.

Through the character of Astha and Pipeelika, Manju Kapur has reflected on the present day Indian woman. Astha is Kapur's new woman "conscious, introspective, educated, wants to carve

a life for herself, to some extent she even conveys a personal vision of woman hood by violating current social codes (Malik 171).

All these books make attempt to normalize lesbian desire and relationships and see it no different than heterosexual love but at the same time there is a profound awareness that this kind of love would require great sacrifices to be socially acceptable. Maya Sharma in her extraordinary book *Loving Women – Being Lesbian and Unprivileged in India* interviews a factory worker Vimlesh who says,

“You ask me if I have heard the word “lesbian”. No, I have not heard it, I am attracted to women. Why create these categories, such deep differences between male and female? We are all human beings, aren’t we?”

Lesbianism thus is reflected in all these works but it is still a far cry from actual representation and somehow the works are an apology at describing these relationships in all their complexities like hetro sexual relationships .Shall I end by saying that a few honest writers and more welcoming readers would result in more lesbian literature that would not skirt around the issue but present it as ordinary stories of love and desire.

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