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The Transgressive Rumbblings in Tanuja Desai Hidier's *Born Confused*

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Abstract:

The research paper deals with the problem of transgressive rumbblings in women's writings outlining the theme sexual transgression as an independent critical discourse with a special focus on femininity. It reveals the implications of the confirmed heterosexuality and its rejection through the fictional characters. This most complicated sexual phenomenon reflecting the crossing of the gender bar is revealed in the breakthrough novel *Born Confused* (2002) by Tanuja Desai Hider who is an America based Indian diasporic writer. This narrative represents a radical departure from the conventional depiction of the feminine sexuality and morals of middle-class urban twenty-first century Indian women in a foreign country. All quoted features are very pertinent in framing a new form of femininity that in turn is becoming the part of the global occurrence rapidly. The text under study has been probed deeply to highlight the gender associated consciousness and constructions followed by their resistances and crossings. This transgressive approach in the reconstruction of gender performances is also instrumental in the rupturing of the fixed centre of normative sexuality.

Keywords: Binary, Deconstruction, Lesbian, Patriarchy, Transvestite , Transgression.

During 20th century, the word heterosexuality was used to refer to perverted and morbid sexual practices between men and women such as oral and anal intercourse opposed to normal procreative sex. While the other binary term homosexuality came into being only in the late 19th century Europe when debates on the prohibited expressions of sex and sexuality became acceptable in academic circles. The term was used to describe perverted sexual passion between members of the same sex. It was declared unnatural by colonial laws and these laws prohibiting unnatural sex were imposed across the world through imperial might. Though this ideology exerted a powerful influence on subsequent European definitions, laws, theories and attitudes regarding sexuality yet this concept of homosexuality as transgressive sexual activity were perceived differently in other cultures.

There is a tide running contrary to the accepted norms of sexuality and prototypical femininity, a new breed of women protagonists that become the target study for research. They are single and working; transgressive and deviant ; no longer are prepared to be good girls. The behaviour of these female characters may have been seen as inexplicable by reviewers and readers at the time but the characters themselves are certainly not incomprehensible. Their deviancy and vileness can also be seen as instances of transgression in the sense that their femininity is ahead of their time. These women knowingly, thoughtfully and successfully defy societal conventions and tread on the unconventional path of extramarital affairs, divorces and even lesbianism without shame, guilt, dire consequences or even societal condemnation on their part. Postmodern literature is equated with the development of these transgressive feminine writings.

Language, literature and art help to deconstruct the accepted notions of gender and imbibe the deeper understanding of existing social and cultural practices. The modern age is generating new and bold compositions in women's literature encapsulating the myriad manifestations of present day generation as a result the emergence of the new discourses on woman is also a common phenomenon. These new discourses break the myth of the accepted modes of gender featuring and behaviour by deconstructing the gender constructions. Catering to the need of the upcoming times, this research paper offers a different critical perspective that is transgressive rumblings found in Indian diasporic writer Tanuja Desai Hidier's *Born Confused* (2002). The paper is an endeavour to outline the changing paradigms of gender discourse where binary identities are blurring out giving birth to a new concept of plural, fluid and neutral identity. This fresh critical insight can create many debatable issues as the upcoming models of women's behaviour in fiction can no longer be judged by the obsolete critical norms any more.

The focal point is when a literary character violates the gender rules of a gender contract , she is seen as monstrous and evil. In the words of Toril Moi, "The monster woman is the woman who refuses to be selfless, acts on her own initiative, who has a story to tell—in short, a woman who rejects the submissive role patriarchy has reserved for her" (Moi 58). The text that is being analyzed is not labeled as lesbian text but the absence of the acknowledgement of this label has significant impact on how this silent space is imagined or represented in literature. The lesbian affair goes silently and secretly, though this mode of adopted silence does not intervene with the political and dominant heterosexual discourse yet this closet culture of homosexuality needs to be acknowledged. This novel has been juxtaposed with a new concept of literary discourse i.e. the transgressive mode of behaviour which is assumed as derogatory but when it is applied in women's life it comes forth with new avenues, multiple opportunities, and significant growth and not to exaggerate a chance to develop. This concept of feminine transgression is a path breaking trend yet unpopular among the cultural gallery of the whole world. According to a social thinker, "A theory of transgression . . . draws attention to popular culture's role in struggles over meaning. It argues that the popular text is successful because it operates at the borders of what is socially acceptable; and, in order to provoke a widespread interest, the text must, at some level, breach the bounds of that acceptability. It must, in other words, challenge social standards and

norms (McCracken 158). In recent literary theory, the term Transgression has been given new dimensions by literary theorists as the question of transgression can be addressed only in terms of limitation and restrictions. These limitation and restrictions are constructed within the ambit of culture, politics, language, economy and society. These cultural locations and social surroundings construct an area of limitations for woman. Transgression is not a clarion call to break down boundaries or tear away limits always. In fact, the limits are assumed as necessary and reciprocal element in this theory. Transgression and limits cannot exist without one another rather complement each other. These cultural locations and social surroundings construct an area of limitations for women. As Chris Jenks defines transgressive behavior that it does not deny limits or boundaries, rather it exceeds them and thus completes them. Every rule, limit, boundary or edge carries with it its own fracture, penetration or impulse to disobey. The transgression is a component of the rule (Jenks 7).

Keeping this contemporary focus, a close study of the post millennial breakthrough novel *Born Confused* (2002) is being conducted. This narrative depicts the interplay of various female characters who wield female bonding as a weapon to contest the skewed power relations in the teenage American scale. While one of the bonding explicates itself as close girl and girl friendship other is an out and out sexual relation between girl and girl. There is another contravention, a transvestite character, whose willful shifting sexual paradigm from male to female and vice-versa is yet another kind of attempt to resist and transgress the collective essentialism of the social and sexual relations. The novel can be termed as queer novel dealing with non-heteronormative issues and using non-heteronormative characters. The main characters in *Born Confused* expose the performative side of gender by playing with their gender masks. By changing in and out of gender identities these characters become a fine specimen of study to expose the extent to which gender is constructed and unconnected to the biological body, the idea will be discussed in greater detail in due course. In this paper the radical representation of feminine erotic desire and deviant sexuality will be analyzed.

The novel is focused on the cultural and sexual dilemmas, the problems and perspectives of the confused young generations born and bred in foreign land. It is a tell-tale account of an identity in shambles springing from the pressures and turmoil which a dual existence can be subjected to. The heroine of the novel, Dimple Lala purports to be a misfit everywhere, too heavy for her own culture and too light for the adopted culture. She refuses to be an object and transgresses the set gender identity by creating a new pluralistic image for the young generation to emulate. She is a true ABCD - American Born Confused Desi ('Desi' is a Hindi word meaning 'of one's own country'), a term used for the breed of second generation Indians born in America who constantly perturb the otherwise placid definition of being an NRI. Taking the title from this South-Asian slang, Tanuja Desai's book tackles the issues of inter-generational conflicts between parents and offspring (the first and second generation immigrants), cultural uprooting and most significantly the breakdown of compulsory heterosexuality.

Through the in depth reading of this postcolonial diasporic lesbian text the idea that alternative modes of queer (lesbian) expression modify the configuration of queer space comes out; same-sex desire is represented not through repudiating the closet culture but through reconfiguring, is demonstrated by restructuring the heterosexual space as a space of queer desire. The context specifically here is the context of postcolonial India and America, where female same sex desire has been erased by a simultaneous use of silence and violence. There is close relationship between Dimple and Gywn which forms the mainstay of the novel. Such a unique woman and woman bond between them has palpable reasons. Dimple is enamored of and enchanted with Gywn due to her own doubly marginalized status of being a woman and an ethnic group member of an exotic culture. Lesbian behavior or fixation with another woman stems basically from a feeling of being a subaltern in the male dominated discourse of the patriarchy. The union of two women is an escape from the culture nurtured notions and codes of morality and piety. Staying close and confiding guarded secrets of womanhood in the other woman in the relationship are an important aspect of this behavior. There are no narrated overt sexual encounters between Dimple and Gwyn in the novel but their intimate girl-girl talks concerning their sexual fantasies and the way they long for each other's companionship after having been snubbed and unheard by the parental authority hints at the 'woman identified woman' factor suggested by Adrienne Rich. Rich foresees that female bonding is gaining ground since childhood in the form of sisters, daughter-mother relationships, friends where the sameness is more needed as personal preference rather than difference. This sharing of ideas and experiences cement a bond of intimacy and love between them and lesbianism is a culmination of this gradual process though bereft of sexual connotations.

Dimple's close relationship with Gywn gives the novel its unique character of transgression and becomes a playing field for woman-woman relationships minus sex in the American cultural setting. Though this relationship goes through many ups and downs to finally get reconciled being unable to stay separated from each other. Their intimate friendly bond becomes a tool to counter their own subdued subjectivities in the face of many checks and prohibitions imposed by the cultural milieu around them. These modes of sexual and behavioural transgression to escape the Indian mould are her ways to posit the defence of her confused identity and paranoia over her oriental existence. Through her Tanuja Desai vitally highlights the difference in attitude towards sex in Indian and American society and how this difference confounds the second generation of diaspora and awes the first generation. The sexual disciplining, typical trait of Indian tradition, is juxtaposed with the sexual freedom that characterizes the American society.

While Dimple seems to envy Gywn's concrete identity and beauty, Gywn is envious of Dimple's stability and a perfect family home picture. Gywn and Dimple are inseparable as both are like the two pulls of magnet, a beautiful swan and an ugly duckling, and the novel heads on with their deficiencies, incompleteness, self-discovery and a better comprehension of each other. The novelist's other graphic details of the bodies of both of the girls suggest the two girls' rejection of the world that had betrayed them and their allegiance

towards the homosexuality as their resort to escape from the oppression. The realization that heterosexuality or the companionship of a male friend is just not the only option open for a girl to vent out her hidden frustrations prompts both Dimple and Gywn to deconstruct the stable signifier of female sexuality and essentialism. The same sex friendship relieves Dimple from the rigid sexual codes of Indian family system which is a biological construct in India and favours heterosexuality as the only mode of production. Whenever Dimple is compelled to conform to the sexual norms of fidelity towards husband or just one man, it is the sexually liberal and innovative Gywn who comforts her muddled and puzzled sexuality.

Bonnie Zimmerman, a western thinker, is a lesbian feminist literary critic who frequently analyzes the language used by writers dealing with lesbianism and draws conclusions on autobiographical narratives and usage of personal testimony. According to her lesbian feminist texts tend to be non-linear, poetic and most obscure. She characterizes a 'lesbian narrative' as one which has a central lesbian character, placing love and sexual passion between women at the centre of the story and being read by lesbians to 'affirm lesbian existence'(Zimmerman 451). The novel contains not one but many strokes of this different behavior.

The analysis traces another visible transgression of sexual codes in the novel in favor of lesbianism in a sub-plot comprising Kavita, a cousin of Dimple and Sabina, a regular American youth and their 'queer' relationship. Kavita comes to America from India for higher studies on Dimple's family's representation out of a pretty orthodox background as is apparent in her conservative outlook and ghettoisation despite being in America. Such restrictive antecedents are bound to give way to hedonism and self-assertion once the lid is taken off. The homophobic Indian setting suppressed her sexual preferences and she is able to disclose it with authority only in America.

Kavita is bold enough to ignore the rules of heteronormativity and disrupts the notion of binary construction of gender. She refuses to take her place on the binary gender scale, refuses to stick to erotic desire only for men although her body is biologically female and chooses a sexual partner who is a woman. With Kavita's sexuality being androgynous, her gender cannot be defined this way. She becomes confusion for the hetero normative demarcations of sexuality. In this way she undermines the main discourse of hetero normativity. In this context Judith Butler comments, "The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire" (Butler 31). While one of the bonds explicates itself as close female friendship, other is out and out sexual or lesbian relation. This new bonding releases Dimple from the fixed coastlines to the ever widening saga of possibilities. This willful shifting of sexual paradigm is an attempt to resist the collective essentialism of sexuality.

Kavita's bold decision to embrace homosexuality can also be studied in the light of resistance. Hailing from a conservative Gujarati family, Kavita is denied all she had desired and all which was rejected as her being avant-garde. In order to reverse her unprivileged status,

Kavita decides to declare her queer tendencies to become someone who is distinct from the suppressed lot of females of her family. She starts what has been called the 'lesbian continuum' by Adrienne Rich which critiques the single dimensional feminism of neglecting the intrinsic and intimate women and women experiences. In the words of Rich, "I mean the term lesbian continuum to include a range - through each woman's life and throughout history - of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman"(Rich 648).

Kavita forges this continuum to make her choice of homosexuality politically correct discarding and morally condemning the culturally corroborated heterosexuality which according to her is a betrayal of women and their interests. In her attempts to make her lesbianism socially legitimate in her diasporic circles she, in a way, de-sexualizes it, makes it a political act, rather than sexual orientation and in her own way sanitizes it transforming it into something new. Even after the end of relationship with her girlfriend Sabina, Kavita keeps a bold face to let her continuum go on while searching for a new unconventional companion like herself which evinces her commitment towards her concerted movement to resist the heterosexual oppression upon her homosexual territory and sexuality in general which are just hers.

The third visible transgressive rumblings of regulatory regimes of heterosexuality or homosexuality in the novel are by Zara, a transvestite or drag queen who changes clothes and personality. The concept of cross dressing can be taken literally to contaminate one gender with the other as if the traits of other gender can be worn through clothes. Hidier interprets Zara's delight in cross-dressing as a manifestation of her homosexuality and an attempt to demasculinize himself. The idea of cross dressing may be dealt as a continuation of the deconstruction of gender in the novel. Zara's obviously successful dressing-up as an actress demonstrates how fragile gender is as it is here performed successfully by Zara. In this context, Butler's theory of gender performance provides more authentic explanation revealing the interrelated elements of dressing and performance. The apparel put on by its 'wearer' many a times creates and determines gender. The ambiguous character of Zara demonstrates how gender is 'appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done' (Butler 21).

Zara is an Indian man living in America as a woman due to his queer tastes in the matters of sexuality. His/Her persona is symbolic of the immigrant identity embodying two selves. He also symbolizes the post modernistic fluidity of identity (sexual) and gender as merely a structure of differences without fixed signifiers. Transvestitism is defined as an abnormality in the essentialist dictionary whereby transvestite is a person who derives sexual pleasure in wearing the clothes of the opposite sex and acting it out in a queer way. The performance act of gender again undermines the concept of a stable sexuality as Zara's erotic desire follows both as a man and as a woman (dressed up).

The cross-dressing in the novel exposes the instability of the characters identities, muddling the concept of stability with regard to both subjectivity and gender/sexuality. Not only can Zara switch gender as he pleases, but also he switches between sexual orientations no matter

which gender he performs. Thus the novel undermines the notion that sexual orientation is naturally dependent on gender very effectively. Zara becomes the most complete and most powerful symbol of masculine transgression. He does not even bother to convince the reader of the ideal of heterosexual identity rather allows it to fall apart in front of the eyes of readers by refusing to take part in the endless repetition of one correct gender performance. The gay and lesbian critics study the position of transvestitism in the light of gay and lesbian choices whereby a transvestite purports to be belonging to the rejected section of the society. A transvestite jumps from one gender identity to another, theorizing the gender hybrid, in order to escape the authoritarian sexual straightness of the culture. The text explicitly invokes the idea how the centrality of gender and heteronormativity is broken.

There are some other categories of gender such as bisexual, gay, lesbian and heterosexual in which gender does not necessarily follow the set patterns. The Swedish gender theoretician Yvonne Hirdman claims that two genders male and female do not seem enough to cover the plural saga of existing gender identities. Two major strategies have been pointed out by Hirdman that are used in an effort to deal with the problem:

- a) A 'nervous, rebuking chatter', mainly within science (philosophy, biology, medicine and psychology) to persuade the masculine and the feminine to get back to order.
- b) Discussions and legal measures about women's work. Within the new professions it was important to decide what was to be feminine and what masculine, and to divide the technical inventions between the genders (Who got the sewing machine? The camera? The typewriter?) (Hirdman 20-21).

According to Hirdman, the stronger the dichotomising between the genders, the less masculine superiority is questioned (27). Hypothetically this may be taken as a solid reason behind the intense interest in conventional patriarchal nineteenth-century society in sustaining and reinforcing such a dichotomy. The intensified efforts by patriarchy to maintain the dichotomy at the end of century were done, when women were struggling to emancipate, rejecting the boundaries of the gender contract by opposing men's superiority.

Tanuja Desai also points out at this enigmatic sexual orientation that often confounds. Dimple sees Zara for the first time at conference at NYU where Zara presents herself as a Bollywood heroine. Dimple is impressed by Zara's elegance and is thrilled to meet her again when she is startled at the revelation that Zara is actually a man. Zara offers Dimple the most valuable of lessons citing his own example:

-Believe it or not Dimple-and I would believe it-I am just a regular person who has decided to be who I am in life. That's all. That's how you make your life magical – you take yourself into your hands and rub a little. You activate your identity. And that's the only way to make, as they say, the world a better place; after all, good are you to anyone without yourself (Hidier 442).

Zara's candid views about maintaining identity at your own will is a lesson in reinvention for Dimple. She learns that it is the attitude of the person which shapes one's identity not the external factors. In an indirect manner Zara teaches Dimple how to explore the possibilities of one's identity. The transformation of Zara from him to her and then vice-versa shows how the age old binary patterns and logic of same/different, male/female can be shaken and transcended by adopting new routes out of the old roots (McLeod 23). Zara releases himself from the binary pattern of he/she, male/female or him/her to revel and explore the infinite potential of the human body and existence. This mode of identity crisis opens the Pandora box of possibilities for the upcoming generations.

Zara also typifies the poststructuralist argument in the gay-lesbian theory which actually deconstructs binary opposition showing that the distinction between paired opposites is not absolute since each term in the pairing can only be understood and defined in terms of other. His positioning is a concrete proof of the subversion of the gender hierarchy that it is possible to reverse the hierarchy within such pairs and so privilege the second term rather than the first (Barry 143). The terms here are heterosexuality and homosexuality and the dichotomy is deconstructed by Zara in the same way. Zara makes the binary opposition of hetero/ homo as inherently unstable and a vulnerable centre. Zara also stands for the postmodern identity fluidity, as discussed earlier, calling into question the distinction between the naturally given normative self of heterosexuality and the rejected other of homosexuality. The nausea of suppression drives him to explore the other, he transcends the binaries of his/ her and finally comes out of the closet.

The narrative ends with Dimple's self-actualization reached through the experiences and interplay with these characters that motivate her to relish the exploration of possibilities enshrined in this rainbow existence. These modes of sexual and behavioural transgression to escape the moulds of compulsory heterosexuality are the ways to posit the defense of the confused protagonists. Through the pluralism of sexual orientation, Desai vitally highlights the difference in attitude towards sex in Indian and American society : the sexual disciplining, typical trait of Indian tradition, is juxtaposed to the sexual freedom that characterizes the American society. This rebellious narrative not only creates awareness to alternative models of femininity, but also fosters a resistance towards current limiting definitions of the feminine. It brings about a radical difference in the society by rejecting the centre of normative sexuality and creating pluralistic choices.

Transgression in the matter of sexual orientation is a subversion of rigid sexual gender identities and it also inverts the mandates of gendered behavior. Transgression can take place in the matter of sexuality where it is not mandatory for woman to follow the beaten track of compulsive heterosexuality and woman can follow the homo and bisexual modes of sexuality. The gay and lesbian critics actually focus upon the textual representations of the issues of homo- (and hetero-) sexuality (Murfin and Ray 137). It also breaks away from the 'essentialist' notions of feminism which views sexuality of a person – male and female – as inborn and intrinsic, a natural occurrence. On the other hand, lesbian and gay criticism gives the outline of the 'constructionist' philosophy terming sexuality as a cultural construct. This issue got the first

treatment in *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* by Bell Hooks where, as it was accused that feminism flawed when it universalized the experiences of white, middle-class, urban heterosexual women creating a patriarchal structure of inequality in itself by ignoring the voices and experiences of Black women (Hooks 45).

Lesbian and gay criticism and lesbianism in particular challenge the practices of heterosexuality as the only and mandatory norm; it is an oppression, suppression and limitation of the female identity in the matters of sexual contentment. Lesbianism and its depiction in literary works, thus, becomes a threat to the sexual code of any society. It is taken as an object of breach or transgression of the sexual codes and norms of the society and interpreted as a concerted movement to contest and subvert the patriarchal hegemony and moral codes. The lesbian feminist position makes lesbianism central to feminism, constitute a form of resistance to, and a radical transgression of existing forms of social relations. Hence the lesbian and gay criticism seeks to unearth in the narratives the veiled politics of resistance through the relationships between the same sexes subdued by the existing power structures.

Thus in *Born Confused* readers come across various characters that attain integration in life after getting disintegrated from the societal patterns of sexual relations and institutions like marriage by deliberately subverting them. Their intentional acts of iconoclasm are daring steps since the path leads to alienation after the declaration or coming out of the closet. The step is considered a breach or indiscretion but soon buys the due recognition to the characters through their queer ways. Kavita and Zara are both tortured souls who get released from the asphyxiation of patriarchy and fundamentalism of the society respectively only after crossing the rubicon of gender divides. The deconstruction of the codes as well as deliberate interplay of the gender identities instill the bravado in these characters which in turn shatters the mold in which Dimple, the pivot of the novel, had cast herself. Hence lesbian and gay criticism come up with a new standpoint to critique the text evaluated on the tenets of transgressive mode within the framework of gender studies. Thus the advent of transgression has lent new dimension to the feminist domain of the gender related critiques.

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