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Texting Liminality: Reading the Nation and its Construction of Gender, Disability and Sexuality in the Major Works of Firdaus Kanga

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Abstract:

In terms of its socio-cultural and religious traditions, ancient India was liberal and accommodative of diverse sexualities other than the dominant hetero-sexuality. The existence of numerous historical artefacts, texts like Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra* and the temple sculptures of Konarak and Khajuraho are some few testimonies to this fact of India's past. However, contemporary India has transformed into a hetero-normative society that views divergent sexualities as non-normative and a threat to the dominant Patriarchal social order. This has brought about tremendous social upheaval, especially in its gender relations (which seems to be deteriorating with each passing day). There is an undercurrent of 'homogenization' and 'hegemonization' of a dominant social order and worldview of the majority and the powerful.

Ironically, the pluralism of the Postmodern world is being increasingly seen as a threat to the aspirations and rise of an emerging/ developing nation like India. The paper attempts to explore the issues of 'gender', 'sexuality', and 'disability' as an identity category in the major works of Firdaus Kanga. Within the limited scope of this paper it seeks to examine the major works of Firdaus Kanga as an attempt to 'text Liminality' of the *Other* minorities viz. Gender, Disability and Queer Sexuality in India.

Keywords: nation, cultural nationalism, gender, sexuality, disability, homogenization, liminal/ liminality, exteriority

As a nation, India currently stands at the cross-roads of change with the rise in power of an overtly political right at the Centre (and in the hinterlands) that prides in hyper nationalism. Proudly terming it 'cultural nationalism' there is a concerted attempt to redefine the concept of the nation in a politico-religious and cultural context so as to fit into the monolithic "Hindu" identity that abhors diversity and pluralism as the *Other* and considers it a threat. The bewildering diversity of socio-cultural practices that make up the tapestry of Indian *rashtra* or nation whose socio-cultural and religious heritage throws up new elements almost every two hundred metres are now being argued by the politico-religious circles in power as a threat to the nation; which is in sharp contrast to the fact that since ages the existence of diverse languages and socio-cultural practices have been a hall-mark and a strength of the nation called India. The existence of a composite culture since time immemorial, inspite of

the humongous geographical spatiality and often contradictory voices in India is a testimony to this statement. History, literature and folklore makes it abundantly clear that ancient India was tolerant and accommodative of diversity and pluralism in other areas of social order as well like gender, disability and sexuality who have presently become the quintessential *Other* minorities in the Indian Patriarchal social structure. R. K. Dasgupta observes:

Temple sculptures from Konarak and Khajuraho to the *Kamasutra* and other ancient literary materials contain enough references to evidence that ancient India accommodated a whole range of sexual behaviours. This contradicts the Hindu nationalist belief that monogamous heterosexual marriage is the only form of permissible sex and all other forms of sex were introduced through the Westerners. (2011: 666)

Presently, the modern nation-state of India with all its rhetoric of development harps on an exclusivist 'national' agenda that seeks to 'homogenize' its vast diversity, it is on the path of imposing a monolithic "Hindu" worldview on its traditional minorities, i.e. women, the disabled and the queer 'non-normative' sexualities. They have come under strain to find a voice and a space in the 'Idea of India.'¹ There is an anxiety and overreach to control and regulate gender roles and identities of various groups/ communities like women, the disabled and the queer 'non-normative' sexualities in the cultural narratives who are denied spatiality and identity. The imposition of a monolithic "Hindu" identity, a Patriarchal social order, has squeezed the space of these traditional minorities. In the cultural imagination of the nation their existences are not acknowledged, not even in the marginal or peripheral spaces although they are ubiquitous in the society just because they do not fit within the frame of certain politico-religious and cultural ideologies. The banishment of the disabled and queer people from the narratives and discourses of the nation is a rejection of their 'presence' relegating them into a state of liminality.² Liminality is a fluid category which belongs to neither extremes of the polarity in the centre-margin binary. It belongs to the 'in-between' spaces, the threshold which is in transition and is fluid. As it involves a web of shifting relations, the concept of exteriority³ throws much light on the existence and nature of this category, liberating it from the straitjacket of the 'centre' or 'presence' discourse that normally shape our ways of thinking.

As the discourse of the nation rapidly gravitates towards 'homogenization' and 'hegemonization' gender equity, disability and homosexuality are seen as direct existential threat to the ideas and beliefs of the Brahmanical "Hindu" *rashtra* (nation) as it unsettles the centre-margin binary where the monolithic patriarchal "Hindu" socio-religious and cultural practices are seen as the 'centre', the 'mainstream society' in the deeply entrenched patriarchal 'hetero-normative' social order. This aspect has been mixed with a nationalist agenda as it suits the politico-religious and cultural discourses of the time that is hell-bent on imposing a dominant majoritarian worldview on the *Others*. At this juncture it needs to be recalled that — "[a] nation is a spiritual principle, the outcome of the profound complications of history, it is a spiritual family not a group determined by the shape of the earth."⁴ It is to be noted that the narrative of the Indian nation has been historically defined by these tenets.

Shared history and common spaces that entertain a host of ‘heterogeneous’ cultural practices has accommodated people with diverse tongues and beliefs, divergent bodily traits, gender and sexualities. In the current political and cultural scenario, the muscular display of power and hyper nationalist discourse is a deviation from its past and displays a form of cultural chauvinism or jingoism which promotes and propagates an exclusivist narrative of the nation, undermining its own history. Ironically, this form of nationalism deconstructs the concept of the nation. As the country witnesses a windfall of jingoist ‘cultural nationalism’ it has become imperative to revisit the history of the country.

In *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (1993), Judith Butler elaborated the concept of “performativity”. She argues that gender is not only a question of the construction of distinctive social roles by different sexes but involves “performativity” of the same throughout life, which is classified as ‘normal’. Here, I must add that this “performativity” is further dependent on the type of body; bodies that belong and which do not belong to the “norm” are segregated and stigmatised thereby, socially constructing the phenomena of the disabled, a category of people who are not given equal space in the ‘normal’ society. It emerges that women and the disabled are traditionally and historically regarded as ‘mutilated’/ ‘deformed’ bodies (Garland-Thompson 1997) and so does not belong to the ‘norm’. Likewise, the Queer or ‘non-normative’ sexualities are considered to be of the same ilk, abnormal. Infact, the fact of the matter is that this discourse of ‘norms’ and ‘normality’ is in a way a systematic exercise of power to ‘homogenise’ the diversity and plurality of gender roles, different forms of the body or abilities and sexualities. Any divergence from this ‘norm’ is often met with violent hostility as it threatens the existing social order which is basically designed to serve a dominant majoritarian social system. This aspect goes against the spirit of ancient Indian history as it has always been a ‘spiritual principle’ based on diversity and pluralism. History is witness to this fact. Diverse forms and expressions of sexuality were accepted through ‘social sanction’ in ancient India. Further, people with different forms of the body and abilities found a sympathetic treatment in the society and were not treated as the quintessential *Other* as they are today.

Today, in stark contrast to its ancient history gender, sexuality and disability has become a subject of intense politico-juridical and cultural regulation in India. Particularly, women’s sexuality has been a subject of intense political and cultural control; consequently this has brought about violence and suppression of women. Similarly, this extends to the disabled and the queer who are seen as abnormal and delinquents. It is a commonly held belief in the narrative of the mainstream society that the disabled are ‘asexuals’ which dehumanizes them. These narratives prioritize male supremacy, able-bodiedness or ability and hetero-normativity as normal and any form of deviation is subjected to intense scrutiny and regulation pushing them to the margins. Beyond this, the regulation of gender, body and sexuality interferes in the personal spaces of individuals and plays a pivotal role in the social construction of artificial categories like gender, disability and queer ‘non-normative’ sexualities.

Literature and cultural expressions like cinema which attempts to bring to the fore ancient India's liberal outlook in terms of gender, bodily dimensions and diverse forms of sexualities continues to encounter stiff and virulent resistances in the present day Indian society. For example, Ismat Chughtai's "Lihaaf" (The Quilt) published in 1942 became a target of attack on the charge of obscenity and was dismissed from the mainstream cultural and academic discourses as inferior pulp literature. In cinema, Deepa Metha's lesbian themed film *Fire* and Karan Razdan's *Girlfriend* received violent hostility by the right wing political and cultural organisations that labelled it as an attempt at "ushering in a wretched culture" (sawnet.org) of the West. As such, literatures and cultural expressions like cinema that give vent to these facts of history are seen as an encouragement to contravene the established mores of "performativity" which has the potential to lead towards the 'renunciation of roles, the demolishing of structures' (Turner, in Back 1996: 244) of the established Patriarchal "hetero-normative" social structure. Any sign of emergence of deviation is seen as a threat to the *rashtra* (nation).

Under the circumstances Firdaus Kanga's major works (writings & cinema), his semi-autobiographical novel *Trying to Grow* (1990), [adapted into a critically acclaimed movie titled 'Sixth Happiness'] and the travelogue *Heaven on Wheels* (1991), a firsthand account of his lived experiences as a disabled homosexual reminds the reader of India's ancient pluralism and acceptance of diversity. It contradicts the current discourses and narratives of the nation.

Firdaus Kanga, a critically disabled person who suffers from *osteogenesis imperfecta*, also known as 'brittle bones disease', hails from the Parsi community, an orthodox and culturally conservative community who are ill at ease with their own culture in a rapidly changing modern India. In the semi-autobiographical novel *Trying to Grow* (1990) and the travelogue, *Heaven on Wheels* (1991) he articulates his personal experiences as a disabled and as a homosexual. His writings challenge many of the established norms in the society like gender, sexuality and disability presenting a site for exploring the intersection of gender, sexuality and disability where these issues are inextricably inter-related in the socio-cultural continuum. It can be read as an attempt towards 'renunciation of roles, the demolishing of structures' imposed by the patriarchal hetero-normative ableist society.

But, the question arises as to when and why such a diverse and pluralistic society began to view its diversity and pluralism as a threat. The germ of the problem can be traced in its Colonial experience as the diversity and plurality of the Indian nation, which had been its strength, became its biggest weakness in the "divide and rule" policy of the British. Communities were divided and discriminated by the British on the basis of faith and political allegiance to the people in power and authority for self interest, i.e. — the perpetuation of power of the ruling class (colonialists). This aspect of Colonialism have been internalised by the ruling classes in India post-Independence, gradually wrecking havoc in the 'spiritual family' as history repeats itself in a different way and form today through the game of political one-upmanship unleashed by forces that seek to impose its ideology by dividing people on the basis of caste, creed, colour, looks, sexuality, etc. The rise of a militant

‘cultural nationalism’ in the country is an attempt to impose a parochial view and exclude the *Others* for access to political power based on screwed interpretation of the nation. R.K. Dasgupta in his study of the intersection of politics, culture and sexuality has stated that — “[t]hrough internalising colonialism, the new elites of post-Independence India attacked non-normative sexuality as nationalist critique” (2011: 664).

It is to be noted that since ages, India as a nation has been more of a ‘spiritual’ and ‘cultural’ amalgamation an — “outcome of the profound complications of history”. The current discourses of the nation that is being practised and propagated in the country with the tacit support and understanding of the ruling dominant majority and the complicity of the state does not adhere to its historical past; its strong and vibrant inclusiveness and pluralism. The common parlance of the nation has always been Eurocentric, giving the impression that the concepts of ‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’ are typical European ‘creations’ of the late 18th and 19th centuries (which reached the shores of Africa and Asia by the turn of the 20th century). Ancient India, better known as *Bharath Varsha* lived by the tenets of the ‘nation’ much before the West came to experience it. Nation as a ‘spiritual principle’ is not a new phenomenon in the traditional cultural milieu of India.

While *Trying to Grow* (1990) is a semi-autobiographical novel, *Heaven on Wheels* (1991) is a travelogue in which he presents the cultural contrasts, between the Indian and the Western (British) conduct towards the disabled individual in the society. In *Heaven on Wheels* he states as a matter of fact:

Religion, in India, seemed to me an admission of defeat, a renunciation of reality. I was not speaking out of snobbery, for I had been religious, once. Living with brittle bones, I had sought a world in which bones did not exist, or, if they did, then only as shadows of the soul. For Hindu philosophy never tires of repeating that the body is but the apparel of *atma*, which changes clothes innumerable times in the course of its millennium-long life. (1992: 8)

In a painfully evocative line in *Trying to Grow* Brit/ Daryus Kotwal [Firdaus Kanga] says, “I guess a lot of my problems come from the way I think people look at me.” People look at him not only as “ugly and evil” but even beyond, what was more painful for him to accept was that people who are disabled are considered as those without the need of love, kindness and relationships. The materiality of his crippled body does not bother him as much as the failure of the society to recognise his masculinity and accept his preference for non-normative sexuality does. He muses — “I wasn’t male. Not to them. The magic mirror of their minds had invented a formula: Osteo = sexlessness”. (2008: 40)

There is no denying of the reality that Brit (Kanga) has limitations, he cannot walk and is confined to a wheel chair but the other side of the reality is also equally true; it does not necessarily foreclose his place and space in the society, a fact that the Indian philosophy does exactly its opposite, the ‘admission of defeat’.

Through his writings Firdaus Kanga attempts to nullify these assumptions and so his writings do not remain a passive representation of ideas/ experiences but something that effectively puts forth the state of those whose condition are determined by social constructionism challenging the entrenched social structures. *Trying to Grow* (1990) and *Heaven on Wheels* (1991) move beyond the conventional writings in Indian writings in English as it brings into the fore the prevalence of not just “Compulsory Heterosexuality” (Rich) but compulsory able-bodied heterosexuality as well that displaces these traditional minorities into a state of liminal existence. Considering the fact that social institutions, cultural systems and physical infrastructures are mainly geared and tuned for the able-bodied, Robert McRuer taking a cue from Rich’s theory “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” dwelt with the issue of “Compulsory Able-bodiedness”⁵ (2006A, 2006b[2002]) in the society. The same idea has been expanded here to elaborate on fact that society is also indifferent to the sexuality of the disabled. People with different bodily dimensions and abilities are denied and deprived of their basic human attributes as there is a notion that sexuality is the prerogative of the able-bodied. Like Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality” and McRuer’s “Compulsory Able-bodiedness” there exists, what can be called, compulsory able-bodied heterosexuality that renders people with disabilities as ‘asexuals’. In *Heaven on Wheels* Kanga says, “[f]or twenty-nine years I had been told, day after day, in the street and the cinema, at weddings and at exams, in shops and at restaurants, that I was not a person.” (1992: 36)

Butler’s concept of “performativity” elaborates that ‘gender’ is basically a question of “performativity” where a particular sex is assigned roles that need to be performed throughout life depending on the sex and physicality of the body. It emerges that the inferior status assigned to women is essentially a case of ‘social constructionism’ as the society have traditionally and historically regarded them as ‘mutilated’/ ‘deformed’ bodies (Garland-Thompson 1997) compared to men. Likewise, it can be deduced that disability as well is a case of ‘social constructionism’ (Davis:2006, Siebers:2008, et al) as different dimensions of the body become deviant/ deformed bodies due to cultural narratives and are seen as grotesques/ or worse as non-human *Others*. Assuming that they are an exception and not *the* [emphasis added] norm they are regarded as individuals beyond the ‘normal’ category and the sphere of “performativity”. Here, “performativity” of the body becomes a benchmark of social acceptance and recognition and thereby, the constitution of gender and the normal/ normates category. The ambiguity of deviant/ deformed bodies presents a challenge in assigning the ‘normal’ either/ or male-female gender binary because of which the disable-bodied are assumed to be ‘asexual’, in other words devoid of sexuality. In a way, both women and disable-bodied/ disability are clubbed together under the same rubric as mutilated/ deviant/ deformed bodies whose ‘ability’ is in question and whose sexuality needs to be regulated for a proper and healthy pro-creation for the sustenance of mankind through the tried and tested Patriarchal hetero-normativity.

It is interesting to note that in the European and the Oriental discourses of the nation there exists a dichotomy that hinges on two important factors, i.e. — politics and religion. While it is based on a ‘spiritual principle’ for both the Europeans as well as the Orientals, the

dichotomy lies in the fact that for the Europeans, in addition to this, it was a political weapon, moulded and designed for, and as a means for political ends. But, for the Orient, it was purely a religious and spiritual experience. Nationalism as a political weapon was a radical and an alien idea for the cultural ethos of the Orient. The second important factor hinges on — religion, a term which is used as an equivalent of *dharma* that essentially denotes a way of life and a spiritual bonding as opposed to the term ‘religion’ which implies personal faith and belief. For the Orient, *dharma* is a way of life and a spiritual principle in a sea of social, class, caste and occupational differences, uniting the people from myriad groups or divisions of class, caste, etc. In contrast, the European history is replete with examples where religion was and still is at the centre of major disputes and wars between nations.

As the struggle for freedom from colonial yoke necessitated the transformation of the Oriental version of the ‘nation’ into a political weapon, which meant the adoption of the European model, the emergent discourses of the ‘nation’ out of political exigencies struck at the core roots of the ‘Idea of India’ as it contained the elements of its own deconstruction. The need to distinguish between ‘them’ (British colonialists) on the one hand and ‘us’ (the natives) on the other in the freedom struggle brought about a chasm in the discourses of the nation as a ‘spiritual principle’, a fact which continues to this day long after Independence as one community or the other have sought to fill the void left wide open by the departure of the Colonialists. This change in the narrative post-Independence brought about a totalizing discourse which gradually eroded the age-old ‘spiritual family’ that had so far defined the social fabric and structure of *Bharath Varsha*. This totalizing discourse brought about the tendency of ‘homogenization’ and one-upmanship or ‘hegemonization’ creating the dominant and the sub-ordinate (marginal) categories and classes, differentiating the people rather than uniting, pitting one against the other for the control of power and resources.

The emergence of right-wing militant ‘cultural nationalism’ in the political discourses of the nation-state of India, at present, that advocates a move towards ‘homogenization’ of its bewildering diversity and plurality strikes deep at the root of the traditional cultural milieu of India as it abandons the traditional Indian concept of *rashtra* (nation) and adopts the Western concept and ideals of ‘nation’. Pluralism and diversity are seen as a hindrance as there is an attempt to create homogeneity, a monolithic “Hindu” Brahmanical Patriarchal social order. The rhetoric of development is simply a means to camouflage a larger political design to create hegemony of the dominant majority. With the weight of the establishment firmly behind, it undermines institutions that promote an inclusive nation with diversity and pluralism at its core. Conveniently denying its own history it selectively erases from cultural memory those discourses and facts of history that contradict the current majoritarian worldview. The question of the dominant and the marginal has become a polarising issue as the space of the marginal are being eroded in the current narrative of ‘cultural nationalism’ that views the marginal as the *Other*.

Brit (Kanga) realises that not only is he set apart as ‘different’ by the society but, is categorised and discriminated as the *Other* where he is denied the privilege to establish meaningful relationships with other human beings. He recalls the remarks directed towards

him, “‘Who will marry you also — you cannot have children?’ ‘But you can pray — some girl might take pity on you.’” (*Heaven on Wheels*, 1992: 36-37) The assumed ‘asexuality’ of Brit dehumanises his existence alienating him from the mainstream society. Firdaus Kanga although constrained by the physicality of his body and the orthodox conservativeness of his society, through his writings attempts to break the entrenched socio-cultural norms and taboo of the Indian society so as to deconstruct the myth of ‘asexuality’ of the disable-bodied. As feminists have argued all along that masculinity is all about jingoist construction of power, disability and hetero-normativity are similarly based on the same premise. Kanga exemplifies the fact that gender, disability and hetero-normativity are social constructs and a myth perpetuated by the Patriarchal and ableist society. He explores that the ‘in-between’ spaces occupied by the *Other* in binaries like abled-disabled, and straight-gay/lesbian for texting liminality. Bringing disability and sexuality into the forefront of mainstream literary representation, expression and discourses are Kanga’s way of proposing an alternative framework from the usual polarities of binary narratives.

Binary system is a crude form of social constructionism. Society summarily, as the first step towards cognition, almost instinctively tries to understand animate as well as inanimate objects, ideas, etc. by differentiating them in relation to one another. In other words there is an active process of categorization that involves binaries, two poles at the opposite ends of the spectrum. This process of categorization is such that it often resorts to ‘violence’ in order to bring under its umbrella, very often it rejects those elements it fails to categorise. Between the two extremes of the opposite ends, between the centre-margin binaries there exists ‘in-between’ or liminal spaces. Kanga in his writings explores this liminal spaces rejecting the concept of ‘centre-margin’ in favour of a nuanced re/reading and exploration of reason and meaning that goes beyond a simplistic categorization, which is the primary reason of *Othering*. And *Othering* is responsible for creating antagonism and hostilities. Kanga is not so much uncomfortable with his disability as much as he is with the way he is treated as different and the *Other*. In both his major works, *Trying to Grow* (1990) and *Heaven on Wheels* (1991) he is arguing and pleading for the restoration of the dignity of disabled individuals and freedom of choice of sexuality, allowing them to be as they are and what they want to be with minimum or no interference from the ableist and hetero-normative society. He shows that there is a space and enough possibilities beyond the either or narrative of binary opposition, the centre-margin dialectic for the existence of categories that do not fall in the ‘normal’ category. His humorous, incisive and argumentative literary representation of his own disability and choice of non-normative sexuality shows that individuals like him are a realm of their own, living in liminality that belongs to neither ends of the polar opposites nor to the *Other*.

Endnotes:

¹ Term and concept borrowed from Sunil Khilnani *The Idea of India* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997 & 1999).

² Term coined by Arnold Van Gennep (1960) and Victor Turner (1969). Liminality refers to a state or stage of transition.

³ From Michel Foucault's usage. Rejecting the search for a hidden, inner, CENTRE or PRESENCE and instead seek to explain the object of study in terms of the possibilities engendered by its existence in a complex of shifting relations.

⁴ Quoted from Ernest Renan "What is a Nation?" in Homi K. Bhaba (ed.) *Nation and Narration*, (London; Routledge; 1990).

⁵ Robert McRuer (2006A, 2006b [2002]) introduced the concept "compulsory able-bodiedness". According to McRuer compulsory able-bodiedness describes a cultural understanding which posits disability in terms of lack or imperfection. On the other hand able-bodiedness is seen as robustness and normalcy.

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