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Lesbian Consciousness and the Subaltern's Voice: Reading Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land*

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Abstract:

The gay, lesbian, or the LGBTQI communities, have been subjected to discrimination, domination, subordination, and hegemonic suppression by a society essentially driven by 'homophobia', 'heterocentrism' and 'heteronormativity'. Marginalized and subalternised, these aforementioned communities are viewed as transgressors of culturally imposed norms of heterosexuality and gender traditionalism.

However, Janice Pariat, an author from Meghalaya, takes a fresh look at the issue of lesbianism in a couple of her stories without being affected by the stigma associated with it. This paper seeks to critically examine two stories by Pariat that explores the lesbian consciousness in an unprejudiced, unbiased, and non-judgmental manner.

Keywords: Lesbianism, subalternity, homophobia, heteronormativity

I

The term 'subaltern' gained wide currency in scholarly circles after the publication of works by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist and Communist leader. He used the term to refer to individuals who are oppressed, marginalized, or who has been subjected to subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language, sexuality, culture or any other way. Conversely, as David Ludden points out, the word has a long history:

The word (subaltern) has a long past. In the late-medieval English, it applied to the vassals and peasants. By 1700, it denoted lower ranks in military, suggesting peasant origins. By 1800, authors writing 'from a subaltern perspective' published novels and histories about military campaigns in India and America; ... The Great War provoked popular accounts of subaltern life in published memoirs and diaries; and soon after the Russian Revolution, Antonio Gramsci (189-1937) began to weave

ideas about subaltern identity into theories of class struggle ... By 1982 Gramsci's ideas were in wide circulation. (4-5)

In due course of time, any manner of domination, subordination, hegemony, resistance, and revolt came to be subalternised. Amrita Biswas observes:

Subordination in its various forms has always been the central focus of the Subaltern Studies ... It (Subaltern Studies) is an effort to see and rethink history from the perspectives of the subalterns and to give them their due in the historical process. (202)

If subordination, domination, discrimination of a particular section of people and their resistance to such oppression is seen as attributes of subalternity, one may also view the gays, lesbians or the LGBTQI communities (as they are called today), who transgresses culturally imposed norms of heterosexuality and gender traditionalism, as 'subalterns'. Societies all around the world have been intolerant and even violent towards this section of people, whose sexual identities deviated from acceptable norms, resulting in their marginalization. Their voice(s) have been systematically suppressed by a society informed by 'homophobia' (fear and prejudice against homosexuality), 'heterocentrism' (the belief that only the works of heterosexuals are valuable and relevant), and 'heteronormativity' – an attitude which seeks to privilege heterosexual behavior. Heteronormativity denotes a set of norms that conditions people to develop stock, rigid notions of what it means to be a man or a woman, in addition to thinking that men and women have distinct, complimentary gender roles. The term also means having fixed notions regarding the ways in which these groups (man and woman) should relate to one another as well as how the family unit should develop from such a relationship. A heteronormative view is one that promotes alignment of biological sex (female/male), gender identity (feminine-female/ masculine-male), and sexual orientation/behavior (heterosexual). It is the assumption that heterosexuality and heterosexual norms are universal or at least the only acceptable conditions. A society informed by heteronormativity typically has been intolerant to these 'deviant' communities (LGBTQI) and as a result such communities have been marginalized and are bracketed into the category of the 'other'.

Previously homosexuality or same-sex love was an accepted cultural phenomenon during the Greco-Roman civilization. Sappho, a Greek poet and teacher of arts, who lived in the city-state of Lesbos between 630 BC and 612 BC was known for her preference for women; yet, was highly respected for her artistic sensibility. It was the advent of Christianity and its metanarratives which demonized and stigmatized homosexuality. Even in the early twentieth century, sexological discourses sought to pathologize

homosexuality and categorize it as an inversion. Gays and lesbians have been discriminated against, persecuted, scorned, and victimized all over the world. In India, Right Wing forces, informed by colonial thinking, denounce non-hetero-normative sexuality in the society. They believe that such sexual orientations or identities are not part of 'Indian culture' notwithstanding the fact that the sculptural carvings in Khajuraho caves and some temples in Orissa bear testimony that homosexuality was accepted in ancient India. The British colonizers had criminalized homosexuality in India, in 1868, and it is still a criminal offence in this country, although many countries have now decriminalized it and even legalized same- sex marriages.

Since, society has been hostile to gays and lesbians, there is not much literature addressing issues associated with same-sex lovers. One reason why such literature has not been able to find a place in the canons, as Greta Gaard points out, can be attributed to the phenomenon of 'heterocentrism' in the academia. Heterocentrism implies a belief that only the works of heterosexuals are relevant or valuable (30). Literature addressing the non-hetero-normative sexualities is understandably scant and the little that is available often seeks to look at the issue of gay and lesbian sexualities from the perspective of heterosexism and gender traditionalism. Hence, characters with different sexual orientations portrayed in mainstream literature are often (mis)represented as deviants, criminals, or mentally impaired.

The short stories, selected for this paper from the collection titled *Boats on Land* by Janice Pariat, present a bold, honest and sensitive treatment of the issue of lesbianism. The paper seeks to critically examine the treatment and exploration of the lesbian consciousness as evident in two narratives from this collection of short stories - "Secret Corridors" and the title story, "Boats on Land". Critical ideas from Lesbian Feminist criticism and Gay/Lesbian Studies along with the discourse revolving around the notion of subalternity will be employed to examine the aforementioned stories.

Subaltern history in particular underlined the importance of documenting the lives of all oppressed people, like the peasants and workers, tribal, lower caste women, and Dalits, whose voices are seldom heard in history. In the narratives selected for this paper, Janice Pariat endeavors to 'recover' the voices of the lesbian which has been suppressed for years. Like efforts made by the scholars in the Subaltern Studies group led by Ranajit Guha, Pariat also tries to present the story of the lesbian 'from below' by seeking to foreground the subaltern's perspective.

One of the primary concerns of Gay/Lesbian Studies is that it challenges the notion of normative sexualities. It is a theory that seeks to assess the factors and politics behind the construction of the categories of 'normal' and 'deviant' sexualities, how they

operate, how they are enforced, with a solution to change such attitudes. As Peter Barry points out, the defining feature of lesbian/gay criticism is to make sexual orientation “a fundamental category of analysis and understanding.” He suggests that lesbian/gay criticism has “social and political aims, in particular ‘an oppositional design’ upon society for it is ‘informed by resistance to homophobia ... and heterosexism... [and to] the ideological and institutional practices of heterosexual privilege’.” (140)

II

The stories this paper analyzes dwells on the theme of lesbianism. The term ‘lesbian’ has been defined in multiple ways. Adrienne Rich gives an expansive meaning of the term when she speaks about the concept of ‘lesbian continuum’ in her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”. According to her lesbianism does not necessarily mean a woman’s sexual experience with another women, but includes a range of ‘woman-identified experience’ and embraces ‘many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life...’. (Barry 141-2). On the other hand, Lillian Faderman proposes a more precise definition of the term:

“Lesbian” describes a relationship in which two women’s strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other. Sexual contact may be a part of the relationship to a greater or lesser degree, or it may be entirely absent. By preference the two women spend most of their time together and share most aspects of their lives with each other. (qtd in Zimmerman 457)

Pariat’s “Secret Corridors” is a story in which the author foregrounds the lesbian consciousness of the protagonist. The story traces the female protagonist’s desperate attempts to forge a relationship with her fellow classmate(s) in a convent school. The narrative examines how the protagonist’s sexuality profoundly influences her consciousness and how she eventually succeeds in establishing a powerful bond with another woman.

The story revolves around a young girl named Natalie, studying in a convent school, in Shillong, whose strong desire for female companionship (propelled by her sexuality), as well as her irresistible urge to seek approval and friendship from her female peers are brilliantly discussed. The title of the story is suggestive and symbolic, in the sense that the narrative dwells in the ‘secret corridors’ of Natalie’s psyche and her sexuality which urges her to constantly crave fulfillment. The strange and forbidden sensations that she feels for her classmate named Iba cannot be revealed or shared with anyone else and hence, has to be tucked away in the secret recesses of her mind.

Natalie's attraction to Iba does not stem from a mere admiration for a fellow student who seems to be smarter and superior than everyone else in the classroom. The reason she is attracted and drawn towards Iba and the irresistible desire to be close to her goes deeper than mere fascination and is undeniably linked to Natalie's sexuality. That her attraction towards Iba is sexual (lesbian) in nature and is made amply clear in the very beginning of the narrative:

That morning the world had shrunk to the size of a mole. A small, chestnut-coloured spot to the left of a cupid's bow that dropped elegantly away from a soft and full middle. It was a mouth that made Natalie think of forbidden things... That morning, the intricacies of chemistry didn't interest her as much as Iba's mouth; and the face to which it belonged, she thought was just as attractive. (Pariat 80)

The manner in which Natalie's fascination with Iba's mole and her mouth as described above has clear homo-erotic undertones. Natalie, we are told, is very much aware of the 'forbidden' nature of her attraction towards another female classmate.

The lesbian urge that is latent in Natalie is again demonstrated later in the narrative when it is violently stirred, as Iba, the girl to whom she is enamored, 'licks' her playfully in a particular moment in the narrative. Her reactions to this act are explained in the following manner:

She (Natalie) longed to wipe the streaks of dirt from Iba's cheek, to tuck a stray curl behind her ear. Iba was exuberant, her hair wild and undone, her eyes shining with delight...She pretended to nip at Miranda's hand, then stopped in front of Natalie and brushed the tip of her tongue against Natalie's cheek. It was an electric shock; Natalie's stomach fluttered, something inside her constricted like a coiled snake. (Pariat 91)

It is pertinent to note here that Natalie, being a student of the eighth standard, is in that stage of her life where she is only beginning to realize and discover her own sexuality which is clearly lesbian in its orientation. She tries to come to terms with her own sexuality and desperately seeks to establish a relationship with Iba. However, she fails miserably when Iba, unaware of her feelings, forsakes her. Pariat brilliantly brings out the pangs and the longing that Natalie feels due to her unrequited desire for Iba's companionship. Nevertheless, her suffering is short-lived as she finds a better mate in the figure of Carmel – a girl from her same class and who too, like Natalie, has gone through the pain and humiliation of being ostracized by her classmates. They strike an immediate

friendship and feel naturally pulled towards each other. The 'contact' or bonding that Natalie eventually makes with Carmel is not only an emotional one, but also physical. This is poignantly brought out in the following lines:

Carmel put her hand on Natalie's knee. Her fingers felt hot against her skin. She leaned in closer, her hair undone, framing her face. Natalie closed her eyes before their lips met. It was nothing like she'd ever felt before. A low roar filled her ears, as though she was listening to a shell and could hear the sea. Something inside her unraveled, it uncoiled to the floor, and filled the room, every inch of its dusty corners. The world, with its scorn and derision, receded, and she was left with Carmel's mouth, which was soft and warm and tasted of tears. For a moment, the ghosts around them, and within, fell silent. (Pariat 94)

The lines quoted above do not seem different from any other love-making scene – the only difference is that both the partners are female. The 'friendship' that takes place between Natalie and Carmel is mutually enriching and in that intense moment the two girls strike a strong bond between them. Bonnie Zimmerman observes that the lesbian feminist critics believe in the idea that:

... a woman's identity is not defined only by her relation to a male world and male literary tradition ... that powerful bonds between women are a crucial factor in women's lives, and that the sexual and emotional orientation of a woman profoundly affects her consciousness and thus her creativity. (452)

The lesbian encounter described above is shown as an experience of fulfillment for Natalie whereby she is able to forge a "powerful bond" that Zimmerman mentions above. It is an experience which is rewarding and empowering. It empowers her to confront and defeat the 'scorn' and 'derision' of the world. It can also assist one to come to terms with the 'ghosts' of rejection, stigmatization and self-hatred that one may be subjected to because of a society which is hetero-normative and which is informed by homophobia.

"Secret Corridors" is a story narrated in the third person; but it is told from the female protagonist point of view. The author's position with regard to Natalie's 'secret' desire is empathetic. By telling the story from Natalie's perspective, the writer provides an insight into the feelings, emotions and responses of a character whose sexual orientation is not hetero-normative. There is thus an attempt on the part of the author to provide an honest and faithful representation of the lesbian consciousness. The narrative

reinforces the idea held by lesbian feminist scholars that women have not always searched for emotional and sexual fulfillment only through men and that bonding between women can also be healthy and fulfilling. The stance of the author is therefore, to delve into the nature of lesbian sexuality, not with prejudice or bias that is common in a society informed by heteronormativity and homophobia but by a method that is more inclusive and that which lends a voice to the subalterns – the lesbians in this case.

The second story - “Boats on Land” - is in the first person. In this story, Pariat endeavors to represent the unique experience of female bonding that takes place between two young girls – one from Shillong and the other from Chandbari, a tea estate in Assam. The female narrator from Shillong brings out her experience of having a lesbian encounter with the girl in Chandbari whose family she visits with her parents during the winter holidays. The story focuses on the theme of a young girl’s discovering her sexual identity and the effect it has on her psyche.

The fact that Janice Pariat does not give a name to the two female characters in the narrative may also be read as the author’s way of expressing the reservation that many people whose sexual orientation is different from the so called ‘normal’ may still feel about openly admitting their sexual identities.

In the beginning of the story, the female narrator appears to be ‘straight’ and there is nothing in her character that may be termed as ‘lesbian’ in nature. She tells us at the very beginning that she was not very keen to accompany her parents on a holiday trip to Assam as she had something more interesting to do in Shillong. She says:

...it was the chance to meet boys, walk past them as though we didn’t care they were watching, be approached and asked if we’d like to go to Ward’s Lake for a boat ride, or to Udipi Hotel for a coffee. There was a whole world waiting to be explored... One boy in particular filled my waking hours with lucid daydreams. His name I’d recently discovered was Jason; ... This love affair, of secret smiles and glances, however, would have to wait. (Pariat 182)

Her interest in the ‘boys’ and her ‘love affair’ with Jason in particular are clear indicators of her sexuality and amply prove that she is definitely not a lesbian. However, it is the encounter and unique experience with the girl in Chandbari (who is referred as ‘you’ in the text) that brings about a complete change in her nature and the whole way of perceiving the world. The physical contact with another woman has a transformational effect on her and she begins to see the world from a new and a completely different perspective. The narrative, hence is a testimony to recent assertions made by the scholars

of queer studies that one's sexual identity is not fixed and given, but is fluid and liable to change at any given moment. The female narrator's 'transformation' upholds the view in lesbian/gay studies where sexuality is not seen as something merely 'natural' and unchanging, but rather as a construct which is subject to change.

The physical communion of the unnamed female narrator and the girl opens up new vistas for both of them. The lesbian experience is described as fulfilling not merely in a physical and emotional way, but also in the sense that it establishes a whole new world of experience which, on the other hand, brings about a complete change in attitude and manners in the narrator-protagonist. The physical experience and its effect on her are brilliantly portrayed in the following lines:

You stood behind me and started unbuttoning my nightdress. I began to protest...Held by a stare, by your hands, quick and cold through the fabric. When it dropped to the ground you asked me to step into the tub. I did...In a moment you were out of your T-shirt and jeans. We fit snugly, like twins. Then you soaped my back, my shoulders, my hair. I did the same for you... We lay there perfectly still, until the water cooled. The next day, the world was washed anew. (Pariat 195-6)

The last line is significant as it states that the experience of the narrator, which is evidently sexual, has been a transformational one and from the very next day onwards she begins to see the world in a new light – it has been 'washed anew' and is no longer the same again. The effect of the lesbian encounter on the girl from Chandbari (who is just referred as 'you') is also shown to be a positive one as she recovers from the depression she has been suffering from due to her traumatic past. So far as the female narrator protagonist is concerned, the Shillong to which she returns after the holiday in Assam, is no longer the same again and "she felt a great sense of emptiness." She says, "Nothing, and everything, has changed." (Pariat 199)

It is important to mention that the relationship between the narrator and the 'you' in the story was initially not a smooth one. It finds a new dimension after their encounter in the bathtub explained above. This facilitates a dialogue between the two women and they begin to communicate with each other more freely and meaningfully. In a way, the lesbian encounter 'breaks the ice' and cements the bond between them. The female narrator describes the experience as something transcendental whereby the invisible boundaries that existed between the two women suddenly crumbles and the communion that ensues is an enriching one for both of them. Their experience is an example of

“woman relating to woman” and thereby developing a “new consciousness of and with each other.” (Zimmerman 455)

III

It is pertinent to note Bonnie Zimmerman’s observation on the assumptions of the lesbian feminist criticism:

... most, if not all, Lesbian feminists assume that lesbianism is a healthy lifestyle chosen by women in virtually all eras and all cultures, and thus strive to eliminate the stigma historically attached to lesbianism. One way to remove the stigma is to associate lesbianism with positive and desirable attributes, to divert women’s attention away from male values and towards an exclusively female communitas. (455)

Pariat’s treatment of the issue of lesbianism in both the narratives studied above is sincerely an unprejudiced and unbiased one. In both the narratives the author does not try to stigmatize lesbianism or try to portray it as a deviant or a vile form of sexuality. Like Zimmerman states above, Pariat represents the lesbian experience as a ‘healthy lifestyle’ and also seeks to associate it with ‘positive and desirable attributes’. The narratives are non-judgmental. Her exploration of lesbian sexuality and experience is largely informed by empathy for this segment of people who have been subjugated and victimized for ages. They have been the subalterns whose voice has been stifled by the society for a long time. By foregrounding the lesbian consciousness from the perspectives of the characters in the selected narratives, she gives a voice to the subalterns.

Ratna Kapur uses the term ‘sexual subaltern’ to denote the people with non-heterosexual orientations. She observes:

The term sexual subaltern is at one level intended to capture the extraordinary range and diversity of the counter-heteronormative movement. In India, these counter-heteronormative movements have included a vast array of sexual identities: gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, *kush*, queer, *hijra*, *kothis*, *panthis* and many more ... The subaltern subject is not simply a member of a minority group. While they are minorities insofar as they seek to claim formal equal rights, at a more radical level, this subject also brings about a conscious challenge to the dominant normative assumptions about the subject ... The subaltern is a peripheral subject, deployed by post-colonial theory to unmask and challenge the dominant sexual, cultural, gendered and religious assumptions about the ‘Other’ ... In the context of the sexual subaltern

subject, the dominant sexual, cultural and familial arrangements that are imbricated in law are exposed and disrupted. In the process, new possibilities are produced for excluded subjects... (39)

“New possibilities” is what Pariat attempts to explore for the ‘sexual subaltern’. Gayatri Spivak had expressed her skepticism about this project of lending a voice to the subalterns in her famous essay, “Can the before Subaltern Speak?”. “The Subaltern cannot speak”, she declared. (1988:308) Spivak talks about the difficulty of recovering the voice of the oppressed. However, Ania Loomba explains:

Spivak’s point here is also to challenge the easy assumption that the postcolonial historian can recover the standpoint of the subaltern. At the same time, she takes seriously the desire, on the part of postcolonial intellectuals, to highlight oppression and to provide the perspective of the oppressed people. (195)

The author’s attempt, therefore, is ‘to provide the perspective of the oppressed people’ as stated above. She does this by trying to understand the lesbian mind, not to dismiss it as ‘deviant’. Hence, Pariat’s bid at representing lesbian sexuality in the narratives can be read as a kind of resistance to heterosexism. Her narratives are an interrogation of ‘heteronormativity’ - challenging the assumption that heterosexuality and heterosexual norms are universal or the only acceptable conditions.

Commenting on the central objective of subaltern studies, Leela Gandhi remarks, “... Subaltern studies defined itself as an attempt to allow people finally to speak within the jealous pages of elitist historiography and in so doing, to speak for, or to sound the muted voices of, the truly oppressed.” (2)

Pariat’s narratives discussed in this paper follow the above stated dictum of subaltern studies by foregrounding the muted voice of the sexual subaltern. It is remarkable for a writer from the Northeast, which itself is in the margins and which is only beginning to find a voice for itself, to represent the experience of another segment of people - the lesbians - who have been equally marginalized, although in a different way.

Note: Janice Pariat is a poet and fiction writer who was born in Assam and grew up in Shillong, Meghalaya. *Boats on Land* (Random House India, 2012) is her debut collection of short stories which won the 2013 Sahitya Akademi Young Writer Award for English language.

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