

The Diasporic Rainbow: An Intersectional Study of Queerness and Diaspora

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As nationalities and sexualities intersect, the leeway to establish a stable identity vis-à-vis both space and orientation becomes problematic. If one is to talk from a highly pluralistic point of view, in today's scenario of the growing intolerance making the very air people breathe choked with opaqueness, it becomes imperative for a nation with its citizens enjoying equality, to not just be tolerant of the heterogeneity, but more importantly, know how to respect its diversity. The debates over nationality and what constitutes national or the antithesis of it, have been at the forefront, contemporarily. This paper seeks to delve into the multiple levels at which nationalities and sexualities intersect and how we understand this intersection in the context of the Indian subcontinent. This particular section seeks to draw on the concept of Queer Diasporas and calls into question the umbrella terms of sexuality and nationality that challenge the very premise of such a unique space of junction. Meg Wesling substantiates on the position of a queer subject in conjunction with Nation and the Diasporic population using the following analogy:

Queerness constitutes a mobile resistance to the boundaries and limits imposed by gender, and that resistance is the same as the migrant's movement through national and cultural borders. Put simply, the analogy is this: queerness disrupts gender normativity like globalization disrupts national sovereignty (31).

The question that arises is whether the deviation in sexuality and ethnicity and that of global integration is central to the understanding of a hybridised identity? In the discourse on queerness and diasporic identity, there is an overarching understanding on the concept of hybridity. To arrive at the obvious end of a "displaced identity" of the diasporic queer, the tear that these dissidents face further complicates the intermixing of identities. The interstice then, the 'in-betweenness' is not the feeling of 'best of both the worlds' but is restricting when it hampers a sense of belongingness, referring back to a glorious past, the history, memory, heritage, culture, ethnicity; but above all an individuality wrought with obscurities.

The kernel of any diasporic study is the concept of dispersal or scattering from the native to the host or the push factors like migration or displacement. In the context of the diasporic queer, one can see the dislocation resulting from migration for the queer communities in their diasporic dispersal as not always

one of enforced enslavement or transportation, but a voluntary means of occupying the urban queer domains in expectation of greater freedom and less stringent sodomy and other laws. A further extension to the concept of the space of queer diasporic identity is ushered by Anne-Marie Fortier in her work, where she talks about the two broad levels of the relationship between diaspora and queerness, the first “[that of] the creation of queer spaces within ethnically defined diasporas” and/or “the transnational and multicultural network of connections of queer cultures and ‘communities’” (183)

The gay/lesbian subcultures of the Third World in their conjunction with ethnicity and dispersion have expanded and added to the granular details of the Queer theory, especially in the context of the Indian subcontinent. The distinction, likewise, occurs on multiple levels: the queer diasporas across the globe are vastly different and are stratified on the grounds of race, gender, class, ethnicity. There is marginalisation further when the first world notions of a Queer space render the “brown” and/or Third world dispersed queers invisible.

To arrive exclusively at a South Asian context, writer and gay rights activist R. Raja Rao, expressed the decidedly complex problems of the South Asian in the West, particularly North America. In his essay, “Dangling Men; Nowhere Women: The Identity Crisis of South Asian Queers” he talks about how majority of South Asian queers identify as “less and less as Asian- Americans, and more and more as gay” (352). The stigmatisation with the gay identity leads them to ensconce in their diasporic identity which has the semblance of more acceptance than the native identity with its orthodoxy and non-acceptance. Furthermore, Rao talks about the inconveniences of South Asian queers to have an identity with reference to space, sex, desire and identity as being doubly marginalised; unlike the queers all over the world. The South Asian queer partners are not only ostracised by the heterosexism’s prevalence deeming them “strange” at the macrocosmic level, but also by their families at the microcosmic one (354). Furthermore, in the essay he puts forth an important point “South Asian immigrant family, with the father as head, is hetero patriarchal”, he sites examples from movies like *Purab or Paschim* (1970), *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jaengey* (2000), *Pardes* (1997) amongst that exemplify the immigrant families their pseudo notions of clinging back and retaining their roots that ultimately asphyxiates the possibility of any queer individuation on the celluloid. It becomes practically impossible for the LGBTQ communities to lead openly gay lives, to openly be accepted by their kith and kin, to openly be displaying the eroticised side of their relationship much like a heterosexual couple overtly. The inherent patriarchal bent of these households and its obsession with upholding these ‘morals’, ‘cultures’ etc is evident even after a displacement to a more urban space. The veneer of accustoming oneself to the newness makes them more susceptible to an

instability in identity. The heteropatriarchy is so deeply entrenched in the value systems of the society, that any deviation to these rigidified structures destabilises the entire foundation on which it rests. The “Third sex” (a term coined by Magnus Hirschfeld) is subjugated by the structures of patriarchy, and heterosexuality only to maintain and reinforce these structures of power. Hence, it becomes a circuitous loop and the marginalisation only empowers the heteronormativity of patriarchy and heterosexuality.

II

This section deals with the anxieties and transformations of the South Asian queer, their sense of dispersal from the origins, the crisis in identity ensuing from language crisis problematised further by desire and sexuality through some of their works. In the 1990s, for the first time the predicament of such writers was compiled in a book, *A Lotus of Another Colour: An Unfolding of the South Asian Gay and Lesbian Experience* (1993). The lines from Ian Iqbal Rashid’s poem “Another Country” encapsulates the essence of the entire collection as a case against the mainstream White dominant queer culture:

My Beauty is branded into the colour of my skin,
my strands of hair thick as snakes, damp with the lushness of all the
tropics.
My humble penis cheated by the imperial wealth yours.
Hari’s corporal punishment, mine corporeal:
Yet this is also a part of my desire.
Even stroking myself against your absence
I must close my eyes and think of England. (lines 27-34)

Taken from Rashid’s first collection, *Black Market White Boyfriends and Other Acts of Elision* (1991), this piece of poetry is intricately woven around the poet persona mirroring the characters from the television series of the *Jewel in the Crown* (1984). The metaphor so deployed of the skin colour tanned by the tropics, replete with sexual imagery, this poem on dual levels both colonial and sexual - is about exploitation. The non-Euro-American queer communities, their quandary as expressed by the “humble penis” – not just highlights a sense of the subjugated desire of Hari, quintessentially the ‘brown/tanned’ queer as against the White, but at another level the phrase symbolises the highly masculine notion of a queer identity. It is not just the inherent masculinity of the “patri-lineal” descent of sexuality at large but in a country like India where it is a taboo for heterosexual women to express their sexuality in public domains, it is virtually impossible for lesbian women to do so.

Customs being as they are in India, it is not unusual to have a same sex friend, a *yaar* or a *saheli*, who becomes your soul mate, at least platonically.

So, our parents did not suspect that we had any sort of romantic involvement. Because of our budding adolescence and the usual context for adolescence being a heterosexual one, it was passed about that we must be whoring with boys (qtd. in Naheed Islam 79).

In “Finding Community”, the contributor, Meera and her lesbian relationship with her partner, Bijli results in their relocation from Pune to San Francisco via London. Migration became a vehicle to transport oneself to a different sexual context. Meera, having migrated to an urban sphere is appalled by the “cultural differences” and overawed by Kate, the epitome of the White, selfish, ultra-capitalist, she dumps Meera. Is the distinction between race and ethnicity blurred by their lesbianism? It is a serious blow to what the introduction to the collection itself says, by Rakesh Ratti speaks on behalf of all the compilers stating, “once some of us (South Asians) entered the lesbian and gay subculture of the West, our feeling of isolation did not fade as we had assumed it would, it only changed face...In our burgeoning gay and lesbian world, we were still anomalies” (8).

The compilation poses forth a strong case against the hegemony of the White queer in the subcultures of queer communities worldwide. It debunks the purely nascent claims of the West claiming that homosexuality or “queerness” was a colonial import by the non-Euro-American countries. In their book *Same Sex Love* (2000), Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai trace through the ancient Indian architecture, sculpture and literature that how texts like Kamasutra with chapters on homosexual positions and homoerotic sculptures at Konark are a glaring testimony to the homosexual tolerance that the West dismisses.

Suniti Namjoshi’s *Conversations of Cow* (1985)

Unlike the writers of *A Lotus of Another Colour*, Suniti Namjoshi, is a role model of the larger queer immigrant writing. For her, South Asianness has taken a backseat in making her writing to take the front one. Namjoshi is the first South Asian Indian writer to talk about her lesbian sexuality quite openly, challenging not only patriarchy but also inherent heterosexuality, racial discrimination within the elitist, First World dominant western feminist and lesbian discourses. Born and brought up in India, Suniti Namjoshi lived in America, Canada, and finally settled in England. Her feminist parodic idiom, “the situatedness of a marginalized Indian Hindu in the racist social set up” is to be found in her fictional as well as poetic works (Singh).

Her most important exegesis of identity occurs in *Conversations of Cow* (1985), here like other works she is making an alternate universe with fables and animal protagonists anthropomorphically bringing to light how natural homoeroticism becomes when tales are woven and depicted via animals.

Namjoshi claims that sexual identity is not an Indian cultural phenomenon: “In India I was inescapably my grandfather’s granddaughter, one member of a particular family located for hundreds of years in a particular region, with a particular place in a particular system” (Namjoshi 14). She alludes to the ‘openness’ of the Western cultural theories (owing) to help shape her lesbian identity. Thus, it is not the Indian cultural experience but her migration to the West which has fostered her sense of an openly lesbian erudite identity.

“It’s all right... identity is fluid. Haven’t you heard of transmigration?” (32). This statement in a nutshell brings forth the idea of Namjoshi’s idea of the fluidity or the flux in identity. Through the creation of a mythical universe, she deconstructs the fixity of the stereotypical representations of women. In her *Conversations of Cow*, Namjoshi uniquely visualises the myth of the sacred cow, Kamdhenu, to effectively combine eastern as well as western points of view in arriving at a cultural hybridity, akin to an Indian diaspora living in west, alongside a subtle examination of a pervasively compelling heterosexuality as a lesbian writer. The central character of *Conversations of Cow* is Bhadravati, a Brahmin cow, described as a ‘goddess of a thousand faces’ and with ‘a thousand manifestations’ who develops a friendship with Suniti, a lesbian separatist who teaches English Literature in Canada and is the narrator of the novel.

Both of them are ‘non-white’, ‘lesbian’, ‘woman’ immigrants in Canada, together sharing the torn of multiple marginalities. Bhadravati, makes Suniti visit her friends, a self-sustained community of the lesbian cows in the countryside much like the subculture communities of the gay/lesbians or to take the larger term under the awning of the LGBTQ. In the words of critic Bindu Singh,

The novella is an account of Suniti setting out for a voyage of quest to come to terms with her own identity as a lesbian in a heteronormative patriarchal society and the ‘Cow’ Bhadravati, at sometimes ‘baddy’ and at other times an anonymous B becomes her guide or Guru to help her, assist her and together they explore the multiple identities that Suniti is forced to adopt or live with. (6)

Bindu Singh’s positioning of the novella as a quest for a lesbian in a hetero-patriarchal set up and an unnamed B as the guide or Guru can be seen at one level as a “western allegorical quest narrative” and at another, in the context of an Indian spiritual narrative. The cow in Namjoshi’s fable then has a Goddess, a woman and an animal, which is normal in the Indian context not just because the cow is a scared animal, is the mother-figure, but also the concept of re-births where one may be reborn in a different yoni (different lifespan) as a bird, brute or beast. Further, many Gods have an animal vehicle, some Gods take an

animal form and most animals are worshipped, but it appears outrageously ludicrous in a Western context. While Namjoshi, with her Western education, is disconcerted by identities that fluctuate, the cow is comfortable both as an Indian lesbian and a White heterosexual man. Namjoshi, by evoking the Hindu idea that all living beings are manifestations of the divine makes the cow a symbol for disbanding cultural differences, like those of gender, race, nationality and sexuality. She uses the mother-figure of the cow then to subvert the mythical categories assigned to a cow, by this she “de-mythologizes the cow to an ordinary level to speak of lesbian identity in a fabulist mode” (8). The cow for her becomes a sort of metaphor for lesbian identity which is neither male nor female. Hence, by using cows in a displaced lesbian community in Canada she makes a parallel of her own sense of identity crisis as a lesbian writer of Indian origin.

Furthermore, Namjoshi’s ability to deploy Magical realism in this narrative takes its masterstroke with the metamorphosis of Bhadravati into a white male ‘Bud’ to let a choice open for Suniti to choose either male or female role. However, Suniti shuns both of them expressing her contempt for both gender and sexual role playing. Evidently this is core to Namjoshi’s style of writing- her works often articulate that ‘gender’ must not be confused with biological sex, leading to Judith Butler’s notion of “performance/performativity”. Butler argues in *Gender Trouble* that the ostensibly natural categories of sex, gender, and sexuality, are in fact, culturally constructed and gender, along with sex and sexuality is essentially performative in nature. Like Butler, for Namjoshi too, sex and gender are performative. She shows this through Bhadravati’s transformation into a ‘large white man’ and a complete change in her behaviour and body—performances symbolising the merely performative aspects of both gender and sex as not being essentially or naturally occurring. Namjoshi through her fabulist work explicates on the fluidity of not only sex and gender, but the fluidity of transmigration. She skilfully combines both the aspects of transmigration and deviant sexualities to arrive at the conclusion that rigidities at the spatial and the sexual level in the society are a schema for the larger operation of heteropatriarchy.

The paper talked about the need for understanding the vicissitudes of the Third Sex at transnational, cultural and ethical levels. The contemporary discourses and awareness of Queer sexuality makes one question how the ability and the lack thereof, to respect human beings for who they are essentially. There is a compelling need, therefore, to dispel the ascriptions that the accident of birth obtrudes on an individual. Especially, in a country like India which works on the principle of ‘Unity in Diversity’, we need to be a salad bowl of diversity not a melting pot of homogeneity.

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