Deciphering Lesbian Relationships, Marriage and Homophobia in Abha Dawesar's *Babyji*

K. Rupa shree[1] & Dr. N. Gayathri[2]

[1] Ph.D. Scholar in English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, India

[2] Assistant Professor (Senior) in English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, India

Correspondence: Dr. N. Gayathri, Assistant Professor (Senior) in English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, India. Email: ngayathri@vit.ac.in

Received: March 10, 2023 Accepted: April 11, 2023 Online Published: April 24, 2023

doi:10.5430/wjel.v13n5p443 URL: https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v13n5p443

Abstract

Abha Dawesar's famous novel *Babyji* is a real kaleidoscope of themes that touch on political tensions, caste and class issues, school atmosphere, urban life, abuse, marriage, and Indianness, all interlaced with a lesbian story of a sixteen-year-old girl. Published in 2005, the period where in India, homosexuality was still under the veils of criminalization. This essay will analyse the representation of the main character, her early lesbian relationships in adolescence, the experiences of other characters in marriage, and how straight people feel about non-heterosexuality in relation to the chosen literary stance. This article is an effort to critically examine the portrayal of lesbian identity by Dawesar which is far from the theoretical and fictional implications of other Indian as well as Indian diasporic writers. It tries to shed light on the author's intention to re-examine the societal norms, stratification, class distinction and other factors that press women's independence, especially their sexual autonomy.

Keywords: lesbianism, relationships, India, heterosexuality, dominance and homophobia

1. Introduction

The repository of Indian heritage is manifold and incredibly diverse in terims of its ethnicity, rituals, culture, religion, language and art forms. Customs and beliefs regarding a marriage that must embody a proper family unit composed of a man as husband, a woman as wife, and children are predominantly rigid. Lesbian and gay people who prefer their own sex people are contemplated as synonyms of bizarre for their impossibility to articulate an expected traditional family circle. Therefore, discrimination against them is excessive in the Indian context, given that they were always forced to dwell on the margins. In this sense, the status of homophobia reflected in the legal system itself, as Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code survived until 2018 in India compared to other western countries. Albeit, this law was enacted in 1860 during the colonial rule, it states that any consensual intercourse against the order of nature is an offense and will be litigated to imprisonment (Mondal, 2021). This law turned largely unfavourable for Indian queers, who do not espouse opposite-sex bonding or conform to their assigned gender at birth. Consequently, in light of the law, police officers even after decolonization, increasingly took the authority to condemn non-conforming individuals by arresting, and subjecting them to physical, and sexual harassment.

"Many of the codes' provisions were used by postcolonial Indian police to trap and punish or blackmail gay men looking for partners, as well as to browbeat lesbian women" says Chatterjee (2012). The insidious effect of IPC Section 377 is largely unknown to the general public but sexual minorities are aware of it. Coming out as homosexual is typically accompanied by family and peer rejection or coercion into psychological institutions, unemployment issues and denial of fundamental rights added with acute police treatments. These consequences led them to commit suicide, or the only choice left is to flee Indian soil to live as per their feelings. Facing many forms of unexpressed violence, public bullying, and exhibiting a hostile attitude towards LGBTQ individuals is an actual scenario in India that utterly delayed the process of decriminalization. In parallel with some social activists and volunteers conducting awareness programs against the brutal activities, other helping organisations developed ways to save the community. In that vein, as a voice of protest, some Indian writers too began to incorporate queer themes into their writings to bring to light the bleak realities behind the lives of those who do identify as homosexual or transgender in India.

1.1 Lesbianism, India and Literature

Globally, lesbianism takes on different labels like sin, mental illness, crime and is mainly viewed as a menace for women choosing a life partner of their own sex. The choice of a lesbian theme is always overlooked by Indian writers due to multiple problems with accepting the style of non-procreative marriage or kinship between women is non-native to the culture. One popular first Indian reflection on lesbianism harks back to Ismat Chugtai's 1942 Urdu short story *Lihaaf.* Published before independence through an Urdu literary journal and later its English translation known as, *The Quilt.* Dealing with female sexuality and lesbianism subtly at that time stirred up enormous uproar owing to social pressures, as a result the writer was called to the Lahore court to defend her work (Sengupta, 2018). This short

story in particular affected her life personally and was shared in her memoir, "I am still labelled as the writer of *Lihaaf.* The story brought me so much notoriety that I got sick of life. It became the proverbial stick to beat me with and whatever I wrote afterward got crushed under its weight." (Chugtai, 2013). Pointing out her work as obscenity recalls British novelist Radclyffe Hall, who herself is a lesbian and underwent the same situation for publishing *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928, today celebrated as the mother of the lesbian novel. Once after the publication, her work was addressed as a novel of "obscene libel," (Smith, 2005) and strictly banned from circulation for depicting lesbian love through an "inverted" protagonist named Stephen Gordon, and even Hall was asked to attend the court trial. In India, the theme of lesbianism came of age only after the release of Deepa Mehta's *Fire* in 1998, the first Bollywood movie to picturise deep desire arising between two married women in accordance with a middle-class family of New Delhi. This film's release sparked widespread outrage on both public and political platforms, with critics accusing the director of sullying Indian culture. For the first time, the depiction of love commitment and overt sexual encounters between the wives of two brothers raged the audiences and questioned the purity of wedlock. Indian nationalists played an important role in the post-colonial period in repressing any homosexual acts and perpetuating an inimical approach towards same-sex alliances. As proof, a statement aired from Shiv Sena's women's wing proposing on the movie *fire* that, "If women's physical needs get fulfilled through lesbian acts, the institution of marriage will collapse, reproduction of human being will stop." (Moorti, 2000). Maya Sharma, in her introduction to her book *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Unprivileged India,* highlights that the Indian society nullifies the presence of lesbian women, since those cultural regimes view women's bodies and sexual experiences inextricably in relation to reproduction and heterosexual archetypes alone (Sharma, 2006). Therefore, any field fore fronting lesbian content into mainstream Indian society underwent a great deal of controversy out of societal opposition and another reason same-sex love was a criminal act at those times.

In Indian literature, female homosexuality is an unwelcome subject matter. Nonetheless, postmodern writers progressively introduced it to the literary world. At the close of the twentieth century, Kamala Das and Sunita Namjoshi reclaim the lesbian theme despite restrictions. This period also spotted a pathbreaking anthology by Ruth Vanita in collaboration with Saleem Kidwai, published a literary history entitled, *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* (2000). The primary aim of their archival espionage is to recoup both lesbian and gay history from the Indian written tradition of fifteen languages, spanning from the pre-colonial era (1500 BC) to the twentieth century, in order to distort the homophobic myth that same-sex desire is not a foreign import yet rooted in ancient Indian culture itself. Following, in the wake of the twenty-first century, a few note-worthy novelists who helped to boom the trend of Indian lesbian novels include Shobha De, Manju Kapur, Rita Garg, Anita Nair, Mala Kumar, Amruta Patil and Abha Dawesar.

1.2 Abha Dawesar

Abha Dawesar (1974) is an award-winning novelist and visual artist who was born in India and lives in the United States. She currently resides in New York City and has been a prominent speaker, attending seminars, conferences organised in locations across the United Staes, India, Australia, and Europe. She was an awardee of fiction fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts in 2000. After the publication of the second novel *Babyji*, her literary fame expanded with this groundbreaking novel gained her two prestigious awards, the Lambda Literary Award (2005) and the Stonewall Book Award (2006) for best lesbian fiction. Despite this, Famina magazine identifies her as one of "India's 12 remarkable women," and India Today Magazine placed her within the list of "One of India's 25 young achievers." (Abha Dawesar Biography, n.d.). As a writer of international renown, her works are well received by both Indian and foreign audiences, have been translated into many languages, and even her books have been shortlisted for two French honors. Her diasporic status although distinguishes her from the other Indian diasporic writers for the sake of claiming that "Those looking for a constant South Asian theme or Diaspora theme or immigrant theme will just be disappointed in the long run from my work." (Dawesar, n.d.) Accordingly, all of her novels address sexuality, interpersonal relationships, and social values (Minj, 2019). Being a Delhi-born author or based on the analysis of *Babyji*, it would be incorrect to assert that her other works are confined to Indian settings, lesbianism, or juvenile protagonists. She has seasoned American/European settings, male and older protagonists, gay desires, and bisexuality also in her other works. Six novels with distinct themes have been published by her to date: *Madison Square Park* (2016), *Sensorium* (2012), *Family Values* (2009), *That Summer in Paris* (2006), *Babyji* (2005) *and* her debut novel *Three of Us* (2000). Contemporary Dawesar like Chugtai and Mehta once again explicitly deal with the so-called "burning issue" (lesbianism) through fiction set against an Indian backdrop. *Babyji* is best described as "a rebel yell against the moralising forces that would prefer people with "unconventional" sexualities to just disappear and a critique of India's caste and class divisions" (Sahgal, 2005). Her book is an ardent critique of the heteronormative presumption that lesbianism is a deviant behaviour and heterosexuality is the only natural form of sexual orientation.

2. Lesbian Relationships, Emancipation and Equality

The selected lesbian novel is a portrait of a Brahmin heroine, Anamika Sharma, also known as Babyji, as she pursues her twelfth-grade education in 1980's Delhi. She is the only child of a middle-class comfortable family. Her father is employed by the Ministry of Water, while her mother is a clerk. The book includes 27 chapters narrated from the perspective of the titular character, who earns an excellent grade, and is proficient in physics and mathematics. She possesses the academic distinction of "Head perfect" in school and aspires to become a scientist in the future. Excluding childhood life, the novel covers the sole year life of the protagonist, during which she come to terms with herself as a lesbian amidst the typical Indian setting and forges secret relationships with three different women, namely with two adult women and with a girl peer mate of her age are the novel's overwhelming focus. In her words, "I would avenge myself by holding hands and flirting with girls since Indian society was so holier-than-thou about having boyfriends. I had never wanted a boyfriend anyway" (Dawesar, 2005, p .10). Here she openly acknowledges and accepts her sexual orientation without any shame or self- doubt

despite knowing that her parents will never accept her lesbian identity, which is contrary to societal norms. Emotionally and physically, she explores her three partners with a considerable dynamism for the most part. Using metaphorical references and gestures, Chugtai initially concealed the depiction of erotic encounters between women beneath the quilt. In contrast, Dawesar establishes a transparency in the sexual adventures of the main character with her lovers.

The novel's opening scene opens with Anamika's deep attraction for a beautiful, stylish woman named Tripta Adhikari, who visits her school looking for her son's admission. She bynames her "India" for her physical elegance and as a token of respect because "she was of another generation" (Dawesar, p.02). Tripta is nevertheless an independent upper-class woman but leads a lonely life separated from her husband and only child. She and her husband take turns in watching their young son. Anamika often escapes from home, even at night, to spend time with India, who lingers in the same neighborhoods. Rich divorcee is an educated freelancer, layout designer who does not engage in any relationship even though legally parted from her man but begins to, once the teen girl gives her both physical love and a mutual solace to her solitary life. Secondly, Anamika was distracted by a thin, pretty, dark-skinned woman, whose real name is Basanti, who caught her eye at the roadside. To her surprise, the same woman got appointed as their new maid accidentally and was thereafter dubbed as "Rani" by her mother. She is an illiterate, five years older than Anamika, and belongs to a poorer class. She lives in a nearby slum. She comes regularly in the evenings to do the household chores, and since babyji's parents have yet to reach home from the office, this is a great time to begin her lovemaking with the servant. Indian literature is unnew to master-servant lesbian love which already mirrored through *Lihaaf's* Begam Jan and Raboo, Geethanjali Shree's 2001 *Tirohit's* Chhacho and Lalana (Chanana, 2010), including Anita Nair's 2001 *Ladies Coupe's* Sujata Akka and Marikolanthu, (Saravanakumar, 2014). Anamika's cross-class relationship demonstrates that a woman will only redeem another woman. Once she comes to know that Rani has been beaten regularly by her husband and finds severe lesions in her body. She pampers the sober maid well, sensing that, "I liked the fact that our roles were reversed, that I was suddenly no longer a brat." (Dawesar, p. 60). For this reason, she wishes to hold Rani protectively in her home instead of sending her to the same abusive man. Even if her parents do not allow her to stay, she plans to route her to India's home. At first, her mother opposed hiring Rani as their full-time maidservant but later concurred. Due to the limited space in their home, Rani was allowed to sleep on the floor of Babyji's room that added extra merriment for the little mistress. From the beginning, Anamika never viewed her second love as a servant or felt inferior for being close with a maid. She privately treats Rani as if she were her name (queen) in the absence of Mr. and Mrs. Sharma. It is obvious that Anamika's first love is irrespective of age and her second love is irrespective of class and caste differences but strongly corresponding to her gender itself. She proudly continues. "It was too late for the government to separate me from Rani just by listing her on some schedule. My brahmin fluids had already mixed with her low caste ones. Mandal could stuff his list of schedules up his nose." (Dawesar, p.164).

Over time, Tripta and Rani almost turn out to be lovers, soulmates, and second mothers to Anamika. She feels comfortable telling them about the sexual assault that she and Sheela experienced on the overfilled local bus as well as other incidents happened in the school that she hesitates to open with either of her parents. She realises "India had more in common with my mother than with me" (Dawesar, p.159) and she even assists Anamika with chemistry lessons. In the middle of the book, the Mandal Commission comes to light and a student sets himself on fire to protest the government's plan to give education and job reservation on the basis of caste. During that time, Tripta introduces Anamika to her close friend Deepak and his wife Arni (a young couple) on the Kasauli trip. Hereby, this introduction enabled Anamika a good opportunity to take several suggestions regarding academic career as well as about various facets of life from Deepak, who had completed his MBA in the States. Traveling to a different spot without her parents from her routine life is possible only due to Tripta, and this breakthrough gets reflected in the novel's ending. She feels, "The intimacy with India had made me feel older. The conversation with Deepak had given me a concrete idea of all the things I wanted for my future: Florence, Rio, and the pay of a senior bureaucrat when I was still in my twenties" (Dawesar, p. 292). Moreover, Rani to her, "I lay in her arms. She felt familiar, like my house and my mother's embrace." (Dawesar, p. 294). Her feelings for her mother and two other women are intertwined and travel in a straight line. The mother- daughter relationship is also notable in this novel, from very childhood, Anamika is fond of her mother, who always feels proud, motivating and supportive of her daughter rather than her father. In her words, "Mother, you are the queen of my heart" (Dawesar, p. 73). Her development of deep love for two elderly women in her adolescence further helps her get closer to her own mother because Mrs. Sharma is the one to convince her husband regarding her daughter's urge to temporarily shelter Rani, ""Thank you, Mom." I leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. I was not physically affectionate with my parents at all, but now after India and Rani it seemed natural to touch and kiss. My mother surprised me by kissing me back." (Dawesar, p. 73). Undoubtedly, Anamika respectively and her mother, irrespective of sexual orientation begin to cling towards the two same women are visible markers. For example, "I really liked that friend of yours, Mrs. Adhikari." (Dawesar, p. 69). Mrs. Sharma openly expresses her keenness for her daughter's elderly friend who is nearly her age, twice addresses her as "Sexy" (p.122) and enquires more about her. Without her daughter's insistence She even arranges a dinner party at their home specially for Tripta in her husband's absence. She wishes, "I just thought it would be more fun to be all women. It is possible to be genuinely good friends only with a woman. Real friendship with men is difficult. Moreover, tongues wag if a man and woman are friends." (Dawesar, p. 69). Anamika was completely happy to find her two lovers alongside her mother all in one place, which represents a woman-only space that allows them to share and talk through many things. At that time, Mrs. Sharma is the first to sympathise with Rani for being uneducated and struggling to understand their English conversation. This motivated her daughter to "educate Rani," even though it was encouraged by Tripta. and later babyji trains the maid to read and write in English. All three felt education would improve her life and help her become economically independent which it did. In Anamika's imagination, "I went dizzy with the image ten years into the future of us all sitting on a couch and Rani talking to us as an equal" (Dawesar, p. 163). She describes

the unexpected gathering and situation as, "Much the same as India herself, her sacred geography intersecting many states… it was an entirely new feeling of belonging, adventure, sharing, and being something greater than one small person. Instead of paranoia about the connecting lines that joined India to my mother and Rani, I felt all the more enriched by their connections. In the end they were all connected to me" (Dawesar, p. 165)

Tripta quickly won Mrs. Sharma's trust, and she was happy to send her daughter to Kasauli with her for a few days to be with someone who cared as much as she did and would give Anamika a break from the irksome political climate that closed all Delhi schools and made her worry about the future. Another instance is when Mrs. Sharma too replicates the idea of helping a lower status woman from her brutal husband, who is just a maid for her, unknowingly, her daughter's lover is also in the progress to accept the maid gradually as one of the family members. Both the main protagonist and her mother are inspired by the beauty and charm of Tripta and strive to support the poor woman, Rani, which primarily invokes the concept of the lesbian continuum introduced by Adrienne Rich (lesbian feminist and a popular American poet) in her 1980's essay in an attempt to widen the meaning of lesbian, so long limited to the understanding as a matter of sexuality or a homosexual woman. Here in the name of the lesbian continuum, along with lesbian love, she counts all other relationships in the company of women, discounting sexual connections, ranging from motherly, sisterly, and friendship. Through this portal, "sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support." happens among women (Rich, 1980). She invites readers to recognise that every woman is lesbian in her life and that all four female characters, namely, Anamika, Mrs. Sharma, Tripta, and Rani, are nearly identical, allied in sharing and aiding each other.

Thirdly, Anamika falls and tries her best to capture the attention of Sheela, one of the popular classmates who is well-liked by many boys. She thinks, "After I decided to add Sheela to my list of lovers… I decided to offer her help in mathematics and physics. It would be easy for me to make an excuse to my parents, since they knew that sometimes seniors stayed back after classes for extracurricular activities." (Dawesar, p. 54-55). In school, Anamika is the one to help her with studies and secures the more voluptuous, innocent Sheela after she falls in love. For example, one day, both took the DTC bus from school due to the late evening, where they were molested sexually by two unknown men. Unable to fight them back, Anamika grabs Sheela at the next stop, not wanting to leave her as prey for further abusive acts. She even shields her from the giant classmate Chakra Dev, who often disturbs her in the classroom. He further pesters her with blank calls while at Mandal curfew, and after the reopening of school, one day he intentionally places a condom on Sheela's desk. The main character's lesbian concurrent relationships ultimately lead to the rejection of mandatory heterosexuality which is a foregrounded social norm. Also, there is no certain pattern of lesbian relationships that might acquire any shape naturally akin to the way Anamika's lesbian liaisons with a divorcee, a home maid, and a fellow classmate developed. This is apropos to Cheryl Clarke's assertion that "However, there is no one kind of lesbian, no one kind of lesbian behaviour and no one kind of lesbian relationship."

In the analysis of the novel, many misinterpret the text as simply recounting the sexual experiments of Anamika with her different lovers. In *Constructing Lesbian Sexualities*, Richardson (1996) affirms that there is an aspect to viewing lesbian relationships as essentially emotional rather than sexual. In this context, her lesbian love is emotional, which does justice to all her lovers, though many failed to notice what she did to them before departing abroad for studies. To begin, near the end of the novel, Tripta organises a *Dawat* at which all of the characters meet through Anamika's invitation. Besides, the lonely divorcee gets exposed to many new people in and around her with the young girl's effort, even from the school where her son is about to begin his studies. Secondly, Rani will continue her life at Babyji's home under her mother's care, and thirdly, at the novel's ending, along with Deepak, Anamika was accompanied by Sheela and Vidur for her interview about pursuing higher studies in America. Thus, it is assumed that Sheela is left under the shadow of Vidur, the sweetest soul and best friend of the heroine. Here, Dawesar celebrated the theme of lesbian love through the young protagonist and desexualised lesbianism from the clutches of eroticism. In connection to modern homophobia, the word homosexuality in India always features only "sex rather than love" (Vanita, 2004). Lesbian love is not about romantic interactions between women, it is a site of comfort, peace, longing, and protection that Anamika's lovers feel in bonding with their own sexes rather than a man. This notion is strongly buttressed by lesbian feminists, who claim that lesbian bonding is the solution that thwarts the continuing pattern of male dominance and patriarchy if a woman ties up with another woman instead of a man.

3. Heterosexuality, Domination and Inequality

The period of the 1960s and 1970s marks the beginning of second wave feminism, where different kinds of feminist ideas began to unfold simultaneously. To achieve their requisite, each subset accuses the same order of gender inequalities, further highlighting the doubly marginalised status of women based on race, class, sexuality, and ethnic differences. According to Judith Lorber's classification, radical feminism, lesbian feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, and standpoint feminism are placed under gender resistant feminism. Because, these theories combat the universal establishment of gender order grounded in psychological and sociological strictures, namely patriarchy, sexuality, cultural yielding, and scientific ideas of all times benefiting men alone but ultimately subordinating women (Lorber, 1997). Theorists under these categories ignored the viewpoint of class, racial differences and thereby initiated their analysis on the paradigms of gender, sex, and sexuality. The main catalyst for the oppression of women as per radical feminism is patriarchy, which is claimed to be too hard to expunge from the social pattern. It chiefly toiled to raise consciousness about how women easily become victims of rape, physical harassment, and murder. On the other hand, lesbian feminism radically asserts that heterosexuality is the root tenet of patriarchy itself and women's exploitation. Heterosexual marriage is finite to the sexual realm and further continues injustice and immorality towards women (Becker, 1998). Patriarchy, men as patriarch, and domestic dominance conveniently function inside a heterosexual relationship, a demanded way of life for every human, especially for women, that curbs her freedom, says Rich, using the

term "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich, 1980). This term indicates a falsely global premise that every woman must be attracted to a man and vice versa at a certain stage and then legalizing their relationship, i.e., marriage, is society's ingrained expectation but not a natural preference. By this route, men ingress into women's lives and overpowering begins in various forms.

Aside from the main character, with the other minor characters in this novel has vehemently criticised the man-woman alliances. In Anamika's vision, people who in heterosexual amalgamation illustrate a loveless couple, materialistic, hegemonic masculinity, mostly maintained for the sake of society, and are not natural. She suspects, "Was it possible that my parents longed for each other? I had never noticed any indication of this before. After my life had taken off a few weeks ago I had assumed that my lovers and I were the only people in the world who felt the way we did." (Dawesar, p. 66). All these years, she did not witness any loving moments shared between her mother and father. Further, she notices that her own mother, as a wife, endures oppression in silence and rightless creature, always taking permission from her husband, obeying his orders, and hindering her own rights in any decision-making. She discerns, "I had never thought of my mother as a person in her own right. As someone more than a woman who had given birth to me and catered to my needs.' (Dawesar, p.73). Mr. Sharma also expects the same submissive nature from his daughter as from his wife. Once, he forces Anamika to attend his friend Mr. Dhingra's daughter's engagement function, though she refuses because she has exams the next day. She senses, "I was a slave in my own home, a caged animal. A monkey being forced to perform on the street." (Dawesar, p.114). In *Sagai*, she realises how Indian parents socialise their daughters to get married to an Indian guy who has settled down in America with a green card and feels it as a badge of pride. They believe marriage is the only passport through which their daughters get the opportunity to move to a foreign country. She calls it as an "arranged marriage market" (Dawesar, p. 118). Moreover, her first lover, Tripta, like Rani, was also a victim of domestic torture while at matrimonial life that forced her to claim divorce from her violent husband. India uttering ""All men are alike," India said in English, then added, "Mine was supereducated. He went to Doon School and St. Stephen's, and he still beat me. I left him." (Dawesar, p. 67). Her second lover, Rani, however, lives with her husband, abiding all his physical and sexual abuses. She describes, "He's an animal. Don't pollute yourself mentioning him. Women are not meant to enjoy." (Dawesar, p. 48). Since marriage, she has been utilised only as a sexual slave and object of desire, and has been violently beaten if she denies fulfilling his physical needs. As a wife, she is unable to lead a tranquil life in her marital bond and is devoid of emotional love and care from her man. On the contrary, Anamika and her home are a new sanctuary of love and asylum for Rani. Marriage is a camouflage of heterosexuality that succours men's empire, which treats women as they like and makes her selfless. Heterosexual associations include only inequality, sexism (women as inferior beings), imbalance, physical violence, and women's subjugation, which always prevails regardless of class or an educated man.

4. Homophobia and Attitude Towards Same Sex Love

Typically, men hold the authority over women, considering themselves as superior beings and mainly not willing to partake in equal power with their opposite sex. The same behaviour applies to heterosexuality which does not give room for alternative sexualities by signalling it as deviance. This novel all through nowhere adds in the word lesbian, but only gay and homosexuality. Dawesar showcases how heterosexist society responds to same-sex love as follows, as the novel progresses, two elderly lovers embark on a journey to feel more content and comfortable with the teenage girl'ns arrival in their lives and share abundant love for each other. Despite immature Sheela, at one-point Tripta and Rani think it is their duty to make young Anamika understand that her lesbianism is amiss to the society to which they belong and attempt to manipulate her mind even though they both are annoyed and abused by submitting themselves to the obligatory heterosexual lifestyle. The former, as a mature woman mostly conscious of her age difference with Anamika, informs her that their love is a forbidden one and merely feels guilt-ridden for romancing a girl of her daughter's age, which is a legally mandated rape that might spoil the girl's future. She implies that "You're young, you should be with someone who can be with you. I have a son, I have duties. I can already see that this will go nowhere. We can't be together openly. In fact, you should get involved with a boy." (Dawesar, p.129) but Anamika is vivid with her view that marriage is nothing but a trap after attending *Sagai*. On the other hand, the latter advises Babyji to get connected with a boy rather than her. Rani utters from her knowledge that "It's wrong. You should marry a boy like Vidur baba. You have your life ahead of you. I'm unlucky to have a brute for a husband," (Dawesar, p.204). Before her lover's urge of pointing, it out, Anamika already knew that her nature of love also belongs to Indian culture, primarily after referencing the Indian classic text *Kamasutra* hiddenly without her parent's sight at the scooter garage in the novel's beginning. She later learns that same-sex love in connection to her is an unaccepted one within the walls of Indian society through sex education at her school. In the session, the doctor says, "There is some homosexuality in India, but since it's not easily accepted, we do not see a lot of it." (Dawesar, p. 109) and one of her teachers, Mrs. Shah, grumbles that "Homosexuality and incest are perversions.' (p.109).

Later, again, Tripta emphasises, a woman never becomes gay and that gayness is a western pattern of behaviour. But Tripta's points trigger Anamika to seek help from her close friend, Vidur's father, who is a colonel named Adit, regarding the actual truth. Instead of clarifying her doubt, he is very interested in forming a secret bond with a young girl because he seems to be discontent with his loquacious wife, Mrs. American Express. Even so, married and elderly, he frequently makes efforts to drive Anamika's attention towards him, who is merely like his daughter and his son's best friend. But she does not bother him much and responds him by sharing the secret that she is already engaging in three love affairs with women. To her disclosure, he replies,

"This is just a phase. It will pass," he said…

"What the hell do you know?" I said, ready to explode.

"I think everyone goes through this experimental phase," he said patronizingly.

"Oh yeah? So how many orderlies have you slept with?"

"I'm not attracted to men,' he said peacefully, not willing to pick a quarrel.

"Me neither,' I said harshly.

"You'll eventually want the real stuff" (Dawesar, p. 229). Here, Adit believes that intimacy between women is just a temporary episode for every girl at a young age that is not equivalent to satisfaction that a man could afford a woman. Also, perceiving a lesbian as abnormal always prevails, which is clear in Vidur's words. The one who seeks help from Anamika to get closer to Sheela, and in turn, once she tells him her wish that,

"I wanted her to be my mistress. I wanted a house with her," I blurted out…

"I thought you were a sweet girl," he said …

"I thought you were normal," he said." (Dawesar, 2005, p. 305).

The norm of being a normal girl once after puberty depends on the trajectory of expressing feminine aspects through dress code, certain behaviours or love feelings that are provocative towards boys at that age is common. But Anamika runs several steps ahead, is not stereotypical in gender because she is a lesbian with a tomboyish appearance, muddles people for her gender, wishes to play the masculine part, her choice of lovers, polygamous affairs, and sexual escapades are entirely against the sexually conservative Indian culture. Anamika, the only lesbian character in the novel, admits to readers that she could never think seriously of any boys in the place of her women's lovers, for her, "Only the soul matters," (Dawesar, p.43). She receives different responses for her lesbianism, and these are the pieces of evidence from the novel that displays an Indian homophobic society. It perpetuates either a negative attitude towards homosexuality that is vivid in a teacher's expression or attempts to disappear a lesbian by making her affix with a man through marriage as the only correct and natural order of life for any budding Indian woman. Because of powerful straightness within Indian society, it fails to recognise the existence of alternative sexualities within and around them because cultural boundaries in India is distant from the consideration of a woman's sexual autonomy and fluidity.

It is truly immature to accept the same-sex association that gave rise to the joint suicides of many young women in the state. For instance, in many parts of India around the 1980s and in later decades, newspapers and press floated with the news of Indian lesbian couple committing suicide for society not letting them to live together. So, they felt their union possible, at least in death. One such suicidal attempt by two Kerala girls is a significant reason that evoked Ruth Vanita to produce her 2005 book titled *Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West*. (Vanita, 2009). Throughout the novel, Anamika prefers to continue all her relationships in secret and carefully hides them from her parents as well as from public eyes. Further, she uncloaks herself as a lesbian only in selective home spaces, namely, her own room, Tripta's room, and Sheela's room. Claire O'Callaghan specifies that "Through the 'lesbians in the attic' then, Waters shows that such spaces are not limited as spaces of confinement on heteropatriarchal terms, but can be reworked as spaces of sexual freedom and female power." (Callaghan, 2014). Correspondingly, for Anamika, the three attic bedrooms alone act as a haven for her sexuality and provide a great deal of independence to express her non-normative desires. She navigates clandestinely, for example; at times, her to-and-fro move from her home to India's home, passing through the slum area and back to her home at night, is unnoticed by anyone, and nobody finds out that she is a lesbian all over the novel. Hence, Dawesar has clued into her protagonist's invisible nature with the name itself: Anamika, which, in Sanskrit, means an anonymous or face not to be known. This representation of a lesbian figure recalls Terry Castle's "ghosting of lesbians." Her concept of "self-ghosting" is an apt echo of Anamika, in lieu of being a lesbian openly, she disguises herself as a heterosexual to pass through the homophobic milieu for fear of rejection. So, in the end, she decides to pack herself off to the country that attracted her most after a conversation with Deepak during the trip, to achieve her future destination as a scientist and liberty for her identity because she ultimately longs for a society free of order that must accept her kind of love too.

5. Conclusion

This paper successfully deciphered the two contrasting relationships and traced out their differences showing on how Anamika's lesbian bonding is a camouflage for an egalitarian window free of domination, violence, conflict, and unselfishness. Anamika's ultimate motif is not the sexual encounters with each of her beautiful lovers. Rather, she tries and successfully empower them with their respective needs and push them to attain self-confidence and safety which is impossible in heterosexual unions. Since it is a venue of objectivity, oppression, inequality, and power dynamics. Moreover, straight people can admit their love without any burden, like Vidur telling his father that he loves Sheela. Whereas the heroine is unable to reveal her love for women to her parents, which marks her repressed state. With no doubt she dares to have affairs with women with whom she has fallen in love but does not openly admit that she is a lesbian. Unlike straight people, many young lesbian adolescents like Babyji are deprived of their own right to express their sexual orientation outwardly. This is the way homophobia and the hetero-patriarchal perspective of India thrust many lesbians and homosexuals so far as aliens to other alien nations.

Acknowledgements

Both authors have contributed regularly to the concept and objectives of the study. This study received no exclusive financial assistance.

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