



MYTHS AND MARGINS: SOCIAL INVISIBILITY IN SELECT MALAYALAM LESBIAN SHORT FICTION

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Abstract: The term *Queer* which used to be a slang word for a person with homosexual orientation is now an umbrella term that is used to designate people with sexual orientations (LGBTQI) other than the dominant heterosexual one. The sexual minorities, though present since the origin of mankind has made their presence visible only since a few years. It has taken the supreme court of India almost hundred years to scrap section 377 which makes homosexual acts an offence. But even after that, the prejudice against sexual minorities continues.

In this paper I try to discuss how certain short stories (Sithara's *Sparsham*, Sreekemari Ramachandran's *Swapnadanathinidayil*, V R Sudheesh's *Vellathandu* and *Pinanjaval*) about lesbian relationship reinforce certain myths associated with same sex love. These myths when reinforced through writing will only deepen the prejudice and homophobia of the society. The authors, when they decide to cater to the interests of the larger society forget to focus on the real plight of the sexual minorities and only add to their trouble and ostracism. The study focus on how the writers fail to arouse a social consciousness or social visibility while trying to please the larger audience.

Index Terms- LGBTQI- queer- lesbianism- myths- homophobia-social invisibility-prejudice

The history of lesbian, gay and bisexual people is as old as the history of mankind itself. The book of Hindu Code of Conduct, *Manusmriti*, *The Arthashastra*, Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra* have mentions about homosexuality. The *Bible* and The *Quran* carry references about the punishment received by the people of Sodom and Gomora for their homosexual practices. But it made its presence in the recorded history only in the late nineteenth century as a new wave of cultural freedom. Today Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) history is a well documented research topic in the West and the subject is being taught in colleges and universities. The term 'Queer' which used to be a slang word for a person with homosexual orientation, is now an umbrella term that is used to designate people with sexual orientations other than the dominant heterosexual one. Queer theory is often used to designate the combined area of gay and lesbian studies together with the theoretical and critical writings about all modes of deviance such as cross dressing, bisexuality and transsexuality from society's normative model of sexual identity, orientation and activities.

Lesbian and gay literary theory became prominent only in the 1990's though it began earlier in 1960's and 1970's as liberation movements. The defining feature of lesbian or gay criticism is to make sexual orientation a fundamental category of analysis and understanding. It is formed as a resistance to homophobia and heterosexism. Gay/lesbian studies do for sex and sexuality what women studies do for gender. While lesbian/gay studies focused largely on questions of homosexuality, queer theory expands its realm of investigation. It resists the allegedly stable relation between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. The two main tasks of queer theorists are:

1. To deconstruct the binary unstable opposites heterosexual /homosexual where the first is given privilege and the second is marginalized.

2. Challenge the essentialist assumption that heterosexual and homosexual are universal and independent of cultural difference by proposing they are social constructs subject to change.

But even after the efforts of queer theorists and the people, who work for the sexual minorities, the horror and prejudice against homosexuality still lingers on and talks concerning sexuality are a taboo. Kerala, celebrated for its high levels of social development, be it education, sex ratio, mortality rates, sanitation, health, it is very much conservative in matters concerning sexuality except for a very few open minded people. Since queer and marginalized sexualities are a new area of study the society has no idea still of these kind of orientations and therefore the Kerala society is very much homophobic. Even the highly educated people find it difficult to digest these hitherto obscure people who have found the courage to 'come out' in the wake of decriminalization of section 377 which was inserted in the Indian Penal Code by Lord Macaulay in 1860. It reads:

Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine (Vanitha 15).

In this paper titled *Lesbianism and myths: Lack of Social Consciousness in Select Malayalam Lesbian Short fiction*, I try to discuss how certain works in Malayalam literature reinforces a few myths associated with non-heteronormative orientation and their contribution

to nourishing the deeply ingrained prejudices of the Kerala society about all the sexual orientations other than the dominant heterosexual one, finally leading to homophobia.

Some of the myths associated with same sex love are that

1. Same sex love is a mental disorder.
2. Homosexuals have a tendency to rape children
3. It is a relation that destroys a family relationship.
4. It is resorted to by people who have a failed marital life or the people who want to fight against male chauvinism or break the traditional family set up.
5. Homosexuals cannot engage in any permanent relationship.

According to Foucault, homosexuality is modern formation because while there were previously same sex acts, there was no corresponding category of identification. He writes:

We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized...The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species (Foucault,43).

Sigmund Freud, in a famous letter to the mother of a young homosexual asserted that *homosexuality was no vice or degradation nor was it an illness. It was nothing to be ashamed of.* Though the exact cause of sexual orientation is not known, scientists theorize that it is caused by a complex interplay of genetic, hormonal and environmental influences. There is no substantive evidence which suggests that parenting, early childhood experiences or sexual abuse or troubled relationships play a role with regard to it.

Literature, music and cinema play a good role in influencing the cultural growth of a society. But when it comes to sensitive matters filmmakers or writers are more concerned with satisfying the notions of the larger public. Films about the sexual minorities focus on the libidinous aspect, gay people are most often shown as being satisfied with a single touch. In the Malayalam film *Rockstar*, a gay man after getting the opportunity to take a selfie with the protagonist is shown as murmuring *padom kitty pidim kitty*. In the film *Two countries*, a gay man is shown as craving for a touch. In some of the films the homosexual elements are not explicitly shown but subtle hints are given like in *Sufi paranja kadha*, *Deshadanakili karayarilla*, *Aami*, *Rithu etc.*

In the Malayalam literature it was the short story genre which acquired the courage to write about lesbianism and the first story came from the writer who is known for the centrality of sexuality in her writings, Kamala Das. Her story *Sthree* was published in *mathruboomi* on June 22, 1947. In this paper I have taken four short stories that are about lesbian relationships and that cater to the interests of the homophobic Kerala society. Instead of portraying same-sex love in its true essence, these stories carry forward the myths associated with homosexuality from the very beginning.

Sithara's story *Sparsham* portrays the relationship between Mariya who is on the verge of divorce and Maadhri living with her husband Nandan and little daughter. An unsatisfied family life is shown as the driving force behind the homosexual relationship. Nandan and daughter are shown as being frustrated by Maadhri's negligence of the family life. Homosexual relationship in this story is depicted as the one that breaks the marital structure and family structure.

Sreekumari Ramachandran's story *Swapnaadanathinidayil* is about a 45 years old widow, hostel warden who suffers from utter loneliness and unquenched sexual desire after the death of her loving husband. After she happens to see the love making between Shalini and Dayana, two

of her students, she desires a sexual relationship with shalini. The next day when the warden approaches shalini she succumbs to her. This story depicts homosexuals in such a way that the readers get a feel that permanent relation is not possible among them. When shalini falls for the warden the nature of relationship between shalini and dayana comes into question. It can be seen as a relationship just as to satisfy the bodily desires instead of a true bonding. And for the warden shalini is a place to quench her desire.

Vellathandu by V R Sudheesh is a love story between two teenage girls who decide to live together against all odds. The family members of both the girls see their relationship as an illness. They are ready to break the traditional family set up when they say they will somehow manage to live without a male protection. The story comes to an end when one of them dies in an accident. The author, in a homophobic society cannot allow them to live together. He is afraid to break the tradition.

V R Sudheesh's story *pinanjaval* presents the relationship between a bisexual bookshop owner addressed as *chechi* and a teenage girl, Diya. Though Diya gets shocked at the news of chechi's marriage, she very soon overcomes it. After many days when they meet again chichi approaches her but Diya beats her with a book screaming '*kudumbamkalakkiii eniku thantha onneullu*'. Same sex relation in this story is shown as one that is resorted to by people of a family with loose morals and also as a relation that destroys families.

These stories downplay the very essence that makes up the fabric of same sex relationships. Same sex love should be presented just as how heterosexual relationships are presented. Instead the writers have carefully weaved the myths about same sex love and have also shown great interest in turning the attraction of the readers through some tickling sexual acts. The reader is most likely to get the impression that same sex love is all about engaging in sex. This irrelevant depiction would only add to the prejudice ignorance and homophobia of the society. Literature as a vehicle of change and as an agent that arouse social consciousness fails to serve its purpose compelling the sexual minorities to continue living in self hatred and fear.

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