

Crossing the Borders: Travelling with a Queer Identity

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Abstract

The recognition and acceptance of gender beyond the binary categories has emerged as an important subject of discussion in literature. There is an increasing consensus that the identity of an individual cannot always be tied to normative ideals. The regulatory practices that stabilise identities can be challenged with a change in the cultural setting. However the recognition of a subject's homosexual identity often results in a tendency to homogenize the diversities within a category. The process of homogenization in a gender category imposes common attributes represented by a majority of that category upon individuals, again resulting in practices of exclusivity. Often gay travel is represented in literature as means to escape the homophobic and hegemonic heteronormative practices. The novel *Less* depicts travel as an effective means to assert one's self amidst the homogenising gender practices. The paper tries to analyse how the protagonist's experience of travel in Andrew Sear Greer's novel *Less* results in an affirmation of queer identity that does not impair his individuality. Travel initiates a process of self exploration, negates tendencies of self denial and results in an assertion of individuality. It helps in fostering a liveable identity that is beyond collective identities and norms.

Keywords: Gender; Queer Identity; Self; Travel; Tropes.

Travel is a significant motif in literature and history as it plays a pivotal role in human life. According to Carl Thompson "To travel is to make a journey, a movement through space" (9). This movement can be large or small in scale such as across continents or just stepping outside one's home but involves a negotiation with alterity and self. The role that a place plays in the formation of one's identity based on gender, ethnicity, race and class is intrinsic to narratives on travel. Here it is also important to note that in such narratives the notion of identity is discerned as flu-

id because it can be invented, challenged and multiplied. Homi Bhabha in *Location of Culture* refers to the “in-between” spaces as “terrain(s) for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity...” (1). The effect of travel upon the self can be either positive or negative transformation based on the nature of travel undertaken, for example whether the travel is forced or voluntary. Travel is an encounter with the other wherein we define ourselves not only in relation with others but also against them.

Gender identity is defined as an individual’s internal sense of self as male, female or a non binary category which is in between or outside these two categories. The attribution of identity based on gender has been traditionally associated with biological sex. However it has now been widely agreed that sexual orientation cannot be the only marker for gender identity. In other words gender identity can also be a matter of choice influenced by physiological factors, social interactions, personal experiences, and psychological factors. We are also aware that the sense of self-coherence becomes difficult for individuals when certain sexual identities are contested in their culture.

The construction of identity within a social structure occurs when individuals reciprocate normative behaviour patterns and social roles within groups. This also leads to an identification of the self. When individuals realize that their emotional and sexual attraction is towards same sex, it requires an alteration from normative behavioural traits and a reconstruction of their identity. Therefore the self identification of gays is associated with the process of coming-out. The interaction of gay men in homosexual and heterosexual environments demands multiple roles that result in a dynamic structure of self. Judith Butler affirms in *Gender Trouble* that gender is “a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time. An open coalition, then, will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure” (24). However in the case of gender as a cultural and social practice there is often a tendency to assign and cluster similar attributes under a common denomination.

Queer theory emerged in the 1980s to define the characteristics of sexual subjectivity and was influenced by the works of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Diana Fuss and Eve Sedgwick. Though Gay and Lesbian Studies strove for liberation of homosexual community from social constructs,

one often finds attempts to impose uniformity within the very community. Queer theory analyses the orientation of sexual subjectivity, interrogates the heteronormative tendencies and promotes resistance against homophobia. It aims at dismantling regulatory practices and establishing fluidity of identity. The process of developing a sense of self is linked to one's experiences. Similarly gender is also not a stable property but that which evolves, it is a continuous process established through representation and performance. So the discovery of one's sexual subjectivity is a lifelong process. The process of 'coming out' of normative gender practices should not compromise an individual's pursuit of self discovery. We often find that these days in addition to obliteration of individual differences, there is also an imposition of heteronormative practices of hierarchy and institutions such as marriage upon the third gender. According to Lisa Duggan, homonormativity is "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them..."(50).

This paper intends to analyse how the travelling subject with a queer identity involves in an acceptance of his individuality against practices of homogenization within the group. The prominence of travel in cultivating such an acceptance of self is examined in the narrative. It is often difficult for homosexuals to maintain a liveable identity in the midst of collective identities and social interaction. One would imagine that travel would become a labyrinth to the agonised protagonist, rather it functions as an Ariadne's thread to salvation.

The theme of travel has almost exhausted its possibilities in different epistemological categories over the years. As far as gender studies are concerned, travel narratives have been effectively analysed from the feminist perspective. However there is a dearth of extensive studies on travel narratives as means to question homonormative practices and its forage into queer studies. Travelling has always been identified as masculine and women travel narratives are comparatively less in number. Travel as a space accommodating the other gender constructs has rarely received academic attention. Churnjeet Mahn in the essay "Travel Writing and Sexuality" is of the opinion that "travel writing can be a perfect vehicle for the queer: travel has a long association with subjects crossing conventional borders and boundaries, and the margin and periphery are travel writing staples" (175).

Jan Borm in the essay "Defining Travel: On Travel Book, Travel Writing and Terminology" asserts that travel writing is a collective term for a

variety of fiction and nonfiction texts whose main theme is travel. The novel *Less* by Andrew Sean Greer cannot be labelled exclusively as a travel narrative because though the fictional narrative ventures into a world tour undertaken by the protagonist, neither does it record nor regard the grandeur or decay of the places visited. Nevertheless the novel situates travel as a major theme which aids the protagonist in a self introspection. In fact the novel begins and ends with a cyclical journey in the life of Arthur Less which leads him to undertake simultaneously an 'inner' journey. Even when narrated with humour, *Less* compels a reading into the agonies of a middle aged gay author toppling upon the uncertainties of travel. As a narrative on gender issues it presents travel as a medium invigorating the protagonist amidst cartloads of problems hauled by his identity and age.

In the recent decades, the visibility of gay communities have increased and so has the fluidity of sexual identity. The struggle to negotiate with the self propels the concept of liveable identity. The need to defend and stabilize identity evolves as a method to contradict homophobic and hegemonic heteronormative practices. The collective identities meant to create solidarity in minority communities are at times in conflict with the individual's sense of self.

Homecoming with greater understanding of the self is a continuation of an allegorical stance as depicted in works like *Ulysses*, but here the subject has to also assert himself against the homonormative practices. Eric Leed in his book *The Mind of a Traveller*, finds travel and experience to be intrinsically connected. Experience as we know is related to the construction of identity. "Travel is clearly seen to be endowed with potential of education...travelling self is not meant to be shaped, strictly speaking, but explored with the assumption that the road is not so much the space for metamorphosis but one conducive to an accrual of self-knowledge" (Lipski 3).

The protagonist of *Less* is the writer Arthur Less who is a forty nine year old gay. He is not known as a writer even after having authored two novels, but as the ex-lover of Pulitzer winning poet, Robert Brownburn. The narrator, we learn by the end of the novel, is Freddy Pelou who had left Less to marry another man called Tom. It was to avoid this marriage that Arthur Less had decided to escape into the world of travel. We also learn that the travel plan is unique because even when it appears expensive, Less hardly spends any money as most of the travel occurs on sponsorship. The six places he travels to are New York, Italy, Germany, Africa, India and Japan. In every place Less has an assignment to fulfil which never

materialises in the course of the events that unravel. In New York, he is to interview a famous author HHH Mandern which turns out to have the theme of a Halloween party that forces Less to be dressed as an astronaut. However the severe attack of food poisoning of interviewee cancels the event. Instead we find Less lost in reminiscences of childhood growing up with an identity crisis. Conference in Mexico is arranged for the Russian River School of writers including him and Robert Brownburn.

Again the programme is revised as Robert's wife who was supposed to attend the meeting injures her hip. Here he indulges in recollecting the strained relationship with Robert Brownburn. So in Mexico also nothing new happens, not even the tour of historical sites. Italian city Turin is where Less is invited to receive an award. The ceremony turns out to be a hoax as it had been preordained that he would be the winner. It is here we find his struggles as a gay writer. In Berlin he is summoned as a visiting professor to lecture on creative writing. Contrary to his expectations, the students turn out to be enthusiastic about him rather than the course. The fifth place is Morocco where he is called by a friend Lewis to celebrate the fiftieth birthday of Zohra. Zohra is a stranger to Less and therefore he doesn't have anything to do with the function. Here again it is an encounter with his own identity crisis that troubles him. In Sahara along with Zohra's, the birthday of Less is celebrated which drowns him further into anxieties of old age and death. The final destination is in Japan where he had volunteered to write an article on a traditional cuisine without being a professional in the concerned field. In this place again Less can be found lost in an array of memories which ranges from the death of his mother to a nightmare of his own doom. So in these six places, the travel is into the psyche of Less and not about concerns of geographical displacement.

There is a dynamic relation between shame and identity. It not only torments the self but is also a social experience. Eve Sedgwick says "Shame is a bad feeling attached to what one is: one therefore is something, in experiencing shame. The place of identity, the structure of 'identity', marked by shame's threshold between sociability and introversion, may be established and naturalised in the first instance through shame" (12). Jean Paul Satre in *Being and Nothingness* asserts that shame is a phenomenon of reflection and that is the recognition of the fact that one is indeed an object which the other is looking at and judging (20).

In the novel *Less*, the protagonist is marked out for shame not only by others because of his queer identity but also by himself as an unsuccessful individual. The flight to each place is described as a horrible experience

with fear of jet lag and boredom which causes him to drug himself to sleep and to be only half awake in the course of travel. This clearly portrays a lack of excitement in the travel undertaken which eventually changes as he embraces himself. The encounter with people, places and culture contributes significantly to this development of the self.

Travelling also enables him to be involved in self introspection. The multiple layers of ambiguity associated with memory give us a hint about the painful transition. However this import of memory is to "repair the present rather than faithfully repair the past" (Castiglia and Reed 13). It is not degenerative remembering but that which promotes sexual consciousness. Wherever Less meets people, they pose similar questions related to his gay relationship with Robert Brownburn and the experience of living with a genius. The memories about his childhood spent with his parents and then adulthood with Freddy, Robert and other older men makes him realise the compromises he made in order to remain an 'insider'. If in his childhood the conflict was against homophobic parents then in the adulthood it was against the homonormative practices. In both cases, he forgets to assert himself. During the trip, another memory of childhood that floods back is that of camping trips to battlefields with his father. He later discovers that a book named *Growing Up Straight* in his father's library is marked with advice activities for "sissy sons" (130). This makes him realise that his father was trying to make him imbibe a heterosexual behaviour as if it was a performance that could be learnt.

Such fragmented memories which resurface during the course of travel also reveal to him unconscious acts of self denial that he engaged in throughout his life. There are also memories that reflect his failed attempts at successful relationships. Loneliness in relationships is another trait which recurs in his memories, he thinks on how life with a genius like Robert Brownburn was often like living alone. So whenever he was unable to stabilise himself, he used to escape into memories of a past that further traumatised him into seclusion. In the midst of people and new places though he is grief-stricken, he starts questioning the futility of self pity. In France where he stops for an evening, he meets a passionate lover Javier but does not take an effort to convince him into a relationship as he doesn't want to establish a hierarchy in the relationship again. However this association makes him understand that he always had a choice to assert his interests.

It is during these travels that he starts ruminating on his identity as a homosexual. He had always associated heterosexual men as homophobic

and intolerant. He remembers an incident when he was helped by a few men to find a lost wedding ring. The men had concluded he was a heterosexual and would be agonized by his wife if the ring were lost. He had thought then “ Was this how men felt? Straight men?” (60). Though he was a homosexual, he was afraid of losing the ring as it was gifted by Robert Brownburn and such carelessness would be met with similar troubles. This rumination of the protagonist helps us to see the presence of hierarchy in homosexual relationships being similar to heterosexual relationships.

According to clinical studies, gay men are plagued by a history of self-doubt and suffer diminished self-esteem. Arthur Less is so obsessed with the concept of ‘life with doubt’ that he decides to title his memoir as “ Life with Doubt” (66). This truly portrays his ideas on gender and its performance. In the airport when surrounded by American businessmen, he reflects on how “he feels un-American. He feels homosexual” (78) suggesting his deeply ingrained hostilities. Wherever he travels he always ends up thinking that he is in the wrong car or with the wrong guides and that any time he could be fooled or cheated. Such thoughts on low self esteem often corrupt his mind. Moreover Less contemplates on “horror of his own body” (91) when he is seen naked by a group of teenagers whom he henceforth avoids. Subsequently we learn that perils of aging in inextricably linked to his identity as a gay. This again we understand is relatable to gender binaries of male and female, wherein both are often engaged in an embodied performance. Usually in homosexual narratives there is a conspicuous absence of aged homosexuals but here Robert Brownburn in his eighties, Less in his early fifties and an array of men like Lewis, Clark, Alexander, Javier in fifties mark aging as a contested field in question of gay identity. The reader witnesses Less threatened of old age, frantic at Robert’s paralysis and afraid of his body showing signs of ageing. However the adventures of travel makes him suspend the agonies of an ageing self.

The idea of gender as performative, rather than given was introduced by Judith Butler. Gender trouble is created when there are unintelligible genders in the cultural matrix, meaning that gender doesn’t follow from sex. She puts forth the idea of gender performance in “ acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence of identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (Butler 185). Though homosexuality was labelled in the 19th century on medical terms we find that it also has been imposed with traits of identity. It seems necessary for the otherwise liberated category

to involve in an assertion of identity through acts of self nomination and choice. It has become necessary to engage oneself in the act of 'queering' as constancy is disrupted. Travel is an escapade for Less from the fear of that mirror which would reflect him as a lonely aged homosexual. Eventually he comes to terms with these realities by rebuilding his own self.

We learn that even within the gay community, they are expected to engage in certain expected patterns of behaviour. An encounter with a famous writer, Finley Dwyer furnishes Less with the knowledge that his works are not included in the gay canon as he is found a "bad gay" (145) writer whose heroes resonate only with tragedy and thereby proves disenchanting to gay men. This knowledge, however, relieves him from the pain of being sidelined by a famous critic as an ordinary writer with no exceptional skill. He learns that he is expected to engage not in reality of his identity crisis but in a counter discourse to the heteronormative society. Gender is thus not a stable attribute of identity, but something that must be constantly revealed and restated. Novels as famous as *Colour Purple* by Alice Walker were criticised for its fairytale ending by critics like Barbara Smith.

In a different cultural context like that of Berlin, everyone from his students to strangers in a club applauds his work *Kalipso* which narrates the tragic fate of the mythical hero Odysseus washed ashore on an island. The cultural differences of people revealed during the course of travel across the globe makes him understand that individual differences in a homosexual community can be normal. In Berlin, he seems to be feeling better because he hardly knows German. His knowledge of German is fragmented like his identity. He also finds that as soon as he speaks the language, his innocence results in an acceptance from others. The linguistic barrier along with cultural differences become predominant in the encounter of otherness, wherein he moves from the familiar to the strange aspects of his own self. An encounter with such oddities beyond gender helps him to analyse the identity crisis from a different angle.

According to Susan Bassnett in the essay "Travel Writing and Gender" travel has always been labelled masculine. "The adventure quest in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when men journeyed in search of fortune and the new worlds that were opening up beyond the frontiers of Europe, was explicitly gendered, since the idea of man as heroic risk-taking traveller underpinned not only the great travel narratives of the next centuries, but much of the travel writing of the twentieth century also." (225). The male domination has largely been displaced by entry of periph-

eral and marginalised categories of gender.

From an observer of the places, Less becomes a participant in the lives of other people whom he meets in these places transforming him into an insider. Queerness becomes significant here, not merely as an identity that the traveller carries with him but as a manner of relating to foreign people. Travel being an exploration of self becomes an effective means for defining an identity which is queered and challenged. The need for travel arises from the desire to get new insights which can pave the way for a better acceptance of the self. Mobility causes an expression of identity and subsequent questioning of it. The traveller is exploring his own identity which leads to a renewed interest in himself.

The overarching notion of sexual identity that obscures individual differences is deconstructed during the process of travel. It is also interesting to note that travel in the novel can also be taken as a trope that allows representation of unpredictability and instability of identity. Travel is not only about physical mobility but also a journey inward. It is educational and helps the traveller to grow and develop as a person. The literal journey transforms into a psychological or symbolic one where the protagonist is on the path of self acceptance. The cycle of the quest is completed in homecoming. The experiences of the outer world are utilised for self scrutiny.

The person with a queer identity questions the absurdity of his existence. The cultural shock is replaced by an effort to understand the real purpose of the journey and thereby self discovery which can deconstruct earlier perceptions. When the space is terribly foreign, the self engages in questions such as "Who am I among these people? Why am I here? What am I trying to prove to myself and others? (Barker 83). There is a continuous process of fragmentation and revival that strengthens the individual's self in foreign places. In the case of Less, the adventures in Sahara gives stability to his fragmented self, while that in Kerala and Japan bruises him and tears him apart, but what is important is that he is able to engage in a self assertion realised in his decision to join Freddy at his home. The ending line "...what do I want from life? And I say: Less" draws attention to the literal and metaphorical convergence of self acceptance. "The exploration of identity depends on the psychological construct of a circular journey – the destination becomes home; the self may be changed but only inasmuch as the change is tantamount to greater self-knowledge" (Lipski 1).

Here one finds that unlike Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the story of old Arthur Less and his young lover Freddy do not end in self

destruction but in self exploration, which happens because of the travels. The traveller has a melancholic return after severing ties with many people, unlike Odysseus' return to Ithaca. The ability to negotiate such challenges alone propels a feeling of self sufficiency and becomes an expression of identity. "In stripping away what we identify with, we also strip away from what we are not and open up to who we really are, beyond the trappings of our ego" (Samuel 63). Travel creates a space for queer expression and affirmation which also accommodates individual differences beyond collective identities and norms.

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