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Gendered Subjectivity and Queer Sexuality in Manju Kapur's Fiction

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Abstract

Each human is conceived during the sexual act which determines that everyone is a sexual being. Therefore, it becomes imperative to comprehend one's sexuality. Such a quest for understanding the sexual behaviour of a person has led theorists to study individuals in their queer sense as well. Queer experiences were theorized in the early 1990s under the flagship of Gay and Lesbian theories of solidarity. Nature is colourful and each shade is gifted with beauty and uniqueness; thus queerness is the quintessence of Nature. But power seekers for ages have been manipulating and exploiting this sensitive area of the human self to gain access to the advantages of control, hegemonize and exert power over fellow beings. Therefore, all discourses related to masculinity and femininity are primarily based on the notion of heterosexuality. But heterosexuality is a prescriptive, not an inscriptive phenomenon in nature. To procreate and maintain social hierarchies, heterosexuality has been given a normative value. At this crucial time, when the world is already overpopulated and there is an ongoing debate on survival strategies, there is a dire need to reflect on the issue of sexuality from a broader standpoint. This paper intends to analyse how important gender is in understanding one's subjective experiences of sexuality. It also critically elaborates on the liberating and spiritual side of sexual energy and how it can pave the way to self-realisation. The paper concludes by establishing new knowledge in the field that fundamentally every human being is born a queer.

Keywords: Deconstruction; Femininity; Gender; Masculinity; Queer theory; Sexuality.

Sexuality Studies as a discipline has undergone various remarkable phases in mainstream culture and literature in recent times. Studying sex as an academic discipline has always remained challenging since it has been

considered a taboo subject. There are many inhibitions associated with it which curtail its wider significance by discouraging people to understand its deeper side. Sigmund Freud, psychologist and critic, was the first significant thinker to initiate discussions and form a discursive discourse on sex. Later, Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* laid the foundation for a full-fledged discussion on it. But the actual sexual revolution occurred when the politics behind sex was unearthed along with biases about gender by feminists and critics like Judith Butler, Adrienne Rich, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Initially considering sexuality as a biological faculty, then, interest in sexuality studies gradually achieved a certain pace. Its later developments were highlighted by theorists like Betty Friedan who, in her famous book *The Feminine Mystique*, admits that the problem with women is not only about sex but it's about their identity crisis. She claims, "for woman, as for man, the need for self-fulfilment – autonomy, self-realization, independent, individuality, self-actualization – is as important as the sexual need, with serious consequences when it is thwarted" (448). But still, it should be marked that the prevailing knowledge about sexuality and gendered subjectivity in our mainstream culture is still in a gradual flux.

The existing discourses on sexuality are more likely to be concerned about sexual identity or sexual orientation. There is rarely any attempt towards delving deep into the depths of sexuality which can pave the way for attaining knowledge of the self. Binda Sah opines, "Identity cannot be arrested in a proper name: a name is not an identity; identity is self-revelation and the quest for identity is the quest for self – a journey towards the discovery of the self" (4). No doubt, sexuality as a social, moral and political category has received much impetus, but its personal ramifications for individual life are still left to be fully explored. "The truth is, sexuality is complicated, and the best way we can really understand ourselves and each other is to be more aware of the many different ways humans can love" (Papisova). But still, women's literature across cultures has attempted to probe deeper into the heart and psyche of feminine consciousness. As Elaine Showalter, in *A Literature of Their Own*, writes that the main theme of women's literature since 1920 is the quest for "self-discovery" and "a search for identity" (13). But this journey from female sexuality to feminine consciousness is not that easy given the reason that in a patriarchal system, the woman does not possess control over her body and sexuality. It is governed by age-old conventions in which heterosexuality is the only valid social norm as far as sexuality is concerned. Any digression in this context is blatantly considered deviant and instantly invites social criticism for being queer.

Queer can be used in multiple different contexts in academics. Initially used in a derogatory sense, queer is generally considered a synonym for homosexuality or emasculation. Along the same lines, queer can be used to denote anything out of the ordinary and non-normative. In April S. Callis's words, "In the late 1980s and early 1990s, queer was "taken back" by activists concerned with gender and sexual freedom and became a word that described a particular type of politics" (214). Often considered deconstructive in approach, queer theory destabilizes sexual and gender identities allowing and encouraging multiple, unfettered interpretations of cultural phenomena. Tamsin Spargo defines, " 'Queer' can function as a noun, an adjective or a verb, but in each case is defined against 'normal' or normalising.

Queer theory is not a singular or systematic conceptual or methodological framework, but a collection of intellectual engagements with the relations between sex, gender and sexual desire" (8-9). Later, this field expanded itself in an interdisciplinary form and incorporated many fields under its consideration. Even in this same period, queer also began to be used as an "umbrella term" under which all non-heteronormative individuals could reside (Jagose, 96). This moment celebrates the union of Gay and Lesbian theories to reach a holistic platform so that fight against oppression and violence can be accelerated with a combined vision. The most interesting fact remains that women's studies and masculinity studies are grouped together in the seminal works of critics like Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Fausto-Sterling. The divide between Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transgender and intersexed is bridged under the canopy of queer.

Thus, feminist theory has broadened its focus from studying exclusively women to incorporating gender analysis in a set of shared relations; similarly, gay and lesbian theories mark a gradual shift from studying historically fixed identities dependent on object choice to explaining queerness in the context of fluid and unstable sexual norms. Such parallel shifts give rise to a shared ground and solidarity between feminist and queer scholars, who now prefer to study gender and sexuality as objects of analysis. Thus, "Queer theory is a segment of academic thought that focuses on the constructedness of gendered and sexual identities and categorizations" (Callis, 215). This field of inquiry does not have a fixed point of origin but has emerged as an academic discourse when gay and lesbian theories are studied under the flagship of poststructuralist theories.

Under the influence of poststructuralism, new knowledge based on radicality and non-normative approaches furnished a new direction to the

study of gender and sexuality. "Queer theory employs several ideas from poststructuralist theory, including Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic models of decentred, unstable identity, Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of binary conceptual and linguistic structures, and, of course, Foucault's model of discourse, knowledge and power" (Spargo, 40-41). This coming together of the most influential philosophers and critics helped shape a new and comfortable space in 'queer' to be shared by those who find 'gay' and 'lesbian' inappropriate and restrictive identities. "In popular culture, queer meant sexier, more transgressive, a deliberate show of difference which didn't want to be assimilated or tolerated" (Spargo, 38). Thus, being queer is to hold the belief that every type of sexual identity is fluid, flexible and unstable. Queerness implies a non-conformist attitude in relation to the social construction of sex/gender and the heterosexual/homosexual divide.

After independence in India, a new gamut of creative writings penned down by women novelists has opened up a new arena of female experience. These writers like Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Githa Hariharan, Arundhati Roy, and Manju Kapur – to name a few, have carved out a new space for themselves in the literary firmament owing to their direct access to Indian womanhood and its trials and tribulations. From this literary corpus, Manju Kapur has been selected for the present study. Kapur is a popular fiction writer who is counted among India's top women novelists writing in English. Kapur becomes the voice of the Indian middle-class educated woman who struggles to carve out a special niche for herself amid gender and sexual inequality prevalent on the land. Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* (2002) and *The Immigrant* (2010) have been taken up to examine how women in India have to undergo tremendous sexual struggle if they dare to explore different dimensions of their sexuality to attain self-actualization.

Therefore, the objective of the present study is to expose the politics of representation and how subjectivities are shaped by their gendered nature to establish new knowledge in the field that basically every human being is born queer. The analysis of selected texts reveals that sexual identity, instead of being a fixed marker, is a fluid concept under an evolutionary process. The paper highlights that sexuality is not only meant for reproduction and seeking pleasure out of it, but it also possesses some other creative impulses to lead towards the discovery of the self. In this context, Manju Kapur's both selected novels weave a tale of untold desires to inform the readers about the sexual anxiety women feel inside their marital status due to lack of experience to relate to themselves. The novels

are a bold attempt to convey the confused state of female sexuality and the way women perceive it in the web of relationships.

The protagonist of *A Married Woman* is Astha and of *The Immigrant* is Nina who tread on different paths to explore their sexuality to develop an understanding of their feminine consciousness. If Astha's journey of sexuality moves from being heterosexual to homosexual, then Nina's is from homosexuality to heterosexuality. Both these narratives converge at a very crucial understanding where both protagonists develop a capacity to look beyond their sexual orientation. This ability to look beyond gendered subjectivities forms the basis for a queer understanding of sexuality. It opens up a new avenue for sexuality studies to investigate human sexuality as a creative principle as well. This is where queerness becomes important to be considered an innate sexual identity. Joseph Bristow encapsulates, "Queerness requires an understanding of individual identity that remains alert and responsive to the endless variety of positions in which the very notion of identity might be articulated" (169). Moreover, marriage in India is the sole sanctioned institution that permits women to explore and express their sexuality with their wedded partners. Thereby, since childhood, a girl's body and sexuality become the essential priority to be taken care of by her parents, especially the mother. Therefore, by implication, Astha's growing sexuality appears a threat to her mother, which must be given a justified outlet at the right time and at the right age to save her from any possible immorality.

Kapur candidly states, "By the time Astha was sixteen, she was well trained on a diet of mushy novels and thoughts of marriage. She was prey to inchoate longings, desired almost every boy she saw, then stood long hours before the mirror marvelling at her ugliness. Would she ever be happy? Would true love ever find her?" (8). On the other hand, though, Nina is not ready to accept a heterosexual marriage as desired by her mother; yet she also suffers from homophobia: "Colleagues, friends, students, parent – her world was totally female. . . . Academics was full of spinsters, minatory signposts to depressing, lonely futures" (3). This mental state of belonging, neither to heterosexuality nor to homosexuality, features in her character as queer. In this context, Sharon Marcus mentions, "one of queer theory's most valuable contributions, and one that establishes an important link to feminist work on sexuality, is to demonstrate how homosexuality and heterosexuality mutually define each other" (197).

Nina's non-normative attitude about her sexuality opens up new vistas toward a queer understanding of herself. If there is something that brings

some relief in Nina's life is her friendship with Zenobia, a "special friend who gave Nina a small bottle of perfume, with Balmain written in tiny letters around its rotund middle, suggestive of desire and sex" (8). The level of the intimate bond shared between Nina and Zenobia clearly signals a queer turn in Nina's life where beyond the sphere of heterosexuality, her life is made fragrant with "desire and sex" (8) with a female friend. Zenobia discovers her own queerness as she is abandoned by her husband after six years of marriage. In accepting this new identity, Zenobia's life "was filled with nephews, nieces, good friends (Nina the chief one), supportive family, occasional sexual encounters and a passion for teaching" (8). Her experience of heterosexuality during six years of married life and her opinion about Indian men mark the queerness of her character. Her overall attitude towards matrimony is repulsive and of a non-conformist, "She frequently urged Nina to go abroad for higher studies, that being her only chance of finding a decent guy, for Indian men were mother-obsessed, infantile, chauvinist bastards" (8). It's easy for people to establish heterosexual relationships after failing to reach their desired homosexual identity as "Butler reconceives heterosexuality as the melancholic mimicry of a lost but unmourned homosexuality; a heterosexual woman becomes the woman she cannot have, a heterosexual man seeks to embody the man he is barred from desiring" (Marcus, 197).

Nina's marriage to Ananda opens new gates for her homosexuality to receive new dimensions into a heterosexual self-exposure. Ananda's sexuality is directly linked to his cultural background, which touches on another aspect of queer theory. Following some recent trends, sexuality in queer studies is not primarily linked only to gender or sex, but it also refers to the division between public and private, social reproduction and the construction of race and nationality. In Canada, inspired by Gary acquiring a girlfriend, Ananda tries to get along with Sue, the flatmate of Gary's girlfriend. He admires the ease with which girls uninhibitedly carry themselves in an "unself-conscious" manner. But such a robust display of female sexuality in no time becomes a threat to Ananda's sexuality. "Ananda's background, his tragic history, his Lucknow medical college, the stories he told of India, all made him a romantic figure" (38). He tries to get sexually involved with Sue but meets no success. This episode triggers his self-conscious attitude towards his sexuality. No doubt, he finds Sue a great source of attraction and excitement. He wants to let loose himself in her arms who is the embodiment of the white race. But somewhere he analyses his cultural upbringing thwarting his advances towards her, "his inability to love a white woman meant he had never really left India. Perhaps he was clinging to his parents, still unable to come to terms with

their deaths, still faithful to the notions of purity they had instilled in him" (39-40). Thus, sexuality also means cultural upbringing and its related responses to an individual's mental makeup.

Later, Ananda's initial sexual dilemmas and then a newly discovered confidence in his virility trigger him towards adultery. To quote Sharon Marcus, "For decades, literary analysis of forbidden desire had focused on adultery" (198). His intense involvement with his secretary marks a change in his relationship with Nina. She, too, drags herself into a non-labelled relationship with Anton, instinctually gripped by the idea of self-exploration. But this relationship, devoid of any emotional framework, leaves Nina empty and a victim of loneliness. At this stage, "She has the wherewithal to acquire a lover, but not the ability to sustain a life in which her emotions were independent of men" (265-66).

This makes her self-conscious, but at the same time, she pulls herself together to face this new challenge posed by her life itself. She boldly accepts the reality that the relationship between herself and others is purely a meeting of bodies, a healthy give and take. Then her non-normative attitude jumps to the next level when she decides to transgress all the established norms of gender and sexuality and enters a challenging phase of experiencing a pure presence of selfhood devoid of any other social and moral considerations. This queer concept of the fluidity of sexes and sexual identity is supported by Nina's ultimate realization: "Not that any one thing was steady enough to attach yourself to for the rest of your life, but that you found different ways to belong, ways not necessarily lasting, but ones that made your journey less lonely for a while" (330). Nina's queer stance can be validated by stating what Jagose observes, "Individuals who wanted to label themselves with a nonlabel, who wanted to be fluid or inclusive in their own stated desires or who wanted to challenge hegemonic assumptions of sexuality described themselves as queer" (96).

If Nina's sense of her sexuality is initiated by her queer desires, Astha is introduced to normative heterosexuality practised in the traditional institution of marriage. But the growth of her character in discovering her hidden homosexuality makes her worth the analysis. Astha's controlled sexuality begins after her marriage is exposed to bodily pleasures it receives in moments of pure sexual intercourse with Hemant. But sexuality is not confined only to the thrill that two bodies coming together generates; it also consists of emotional closeness and an element of sharing. Poonam Sharma comments, "There was a time when a woman needed a man for protection but today she needs a man for companionship, she needs a

partner who would share her feelings and emotions" (5). Therefore, soon after the birth of their daughter, Anuradha, Astha realizes, "Somewhere along the way Hemant's attitude to Astha changed. She told herself it was only slightly, but it oppressed her. Occasionally she tried addressing this directly" (66). The emotional aspect of sexuality does not gain any nourishment from its sexual aspect unless it is accompanied by a shared experience of loving and caring.

Astha's thwarted sexual impulse initiates her renewed interest in writing and painting, through which she gives her repressed sexuality an expression in an artistic form. In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler argues, "bodies take shape in response to norms, and that the process of materializing and reproducing norms can also change norms" (64-65). Thus her body finds expressions in the body of her work. Her womb is full of creative ideas and political commitments, but her merits hitherto remain silenced in serving the family and being an ideal mother and daughter-in-law. It is in the companionship of Pipeelika that Astha starts painting to get recognition for her own sake.

Poonam Sharma defines the position of Pipeelika, "Her sufferings in the hands of a conformist society pushed Pipeelika further close to Astha. Pipeelika suffered immensely due to social aggression and religious intolerance, her husband died trapped in the Matador, suffocating and screaming. Both women tried to ease their emotional trauma in each other's company" (6). Thus, they both try to fill the spaces in each other's lives with a caring partner and thereby their relationship grows. In this context, Sharon Marcus observes, "French feminist theory was interested neither in individual liberty nor the eventual eclipse of sexual difference. For thinkers influenced by Jacques Lacan's ideas about subjectivity, freedom was a necessary casualty and sexual difference an inescapable condition of human beings. Feminists in the United States understood lesbianism as the rejection of the masculinity embedded in heterosexuality" (Marcus, 194). This is the point in their respective lives when both Astha and Pipeelika explore their unlived sexuality. As far as Astha's case is concerned, she has always longed for an intimate touch to her inner being:

> In between they talked, the talk of discovery and attraction, of the history of a three month relationship; the teasing and pleasure of an intimacy that was complete and absolute, expressed through minds as much as bodies. Afterwards, Astha felt strange, making love to a woman took getting used to. And it also felt strange, making love to a friend instead of an adversary. (231)

First, this chance was given to Bunty and then Rohan, but none could score to that level. All her aspirations later are directed towards her husband, but Hemant proves to be a typical male who needs his wife only for his children, family and sexual gratification. In this situation, Astha does not resist Pipeelika's sensual approach to her. In this regard, Arpita Mukhopadhyay observes, "Lesbian feminism is typified by the assertion of difference and a desire to break the mould of the established order of things. It challenges the celebration of reproductive motherhood and the virtues of passive femininity valorized by the patriarchal paradigm. Lesbian feminism privileges multiplicity of meaning, resisting normative classifications and expressing scepticism about the underlying pattern of domination persistent in male logocentrism" (113).

Moreover, to call someone queer does not always refer to one's sexuality, but it also alludes to the non-normative attitude and transgressive disposition someone possesses. Michael Warner defines, "Every person who comes to queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatisation is connected with gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, . . . and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body. Being queer means fighting about these issues all the time, locally and piecemeal but always with consequences" (xiii). Thus, accepting oneself and delving deep into queer experiences usually do not come with ease, as social conditioning in heteronormativity impacts the mindset. Similarly, Astha's experience of exploring her sexuality with a partner of the same sex is so baffling that she is not able to decide anything for herself. "From time to time she brooded about her own sexual nature, but her desire for Pipee was so linked to the particular person, that she failed to draw any general conclusions" (232).

This new exposure to her sexual nature gives Astha an opportunity to review her marital life with Hemant. Earlier she was dependent for everything on Hemant, but once this sexual independence occurs to her, the whole perspective about her subordinate position in the family becomes apparent. "Now sexually involved with another, she realised how many facets in the relationship between her husband and herself reflected power rather than love" (233). Poonam Sharma concludes, "Lesbianism has been effectively used in this novel to establish firm relationship between two women and it also condemns existing forms of patriarchal exploitation. It is not just a sexual preference but an identity of a woman beyond male's domain" (7).

Being queer also means accepting a position where all possible binaries re-

lated to gender and sexuality get blurred owing to the understanding that there is a centre of being that is neutral, androgynous and closer to one's deeper reality. When Astha realizes this, she wants to move away from her chase for love and wishes to look for something more meaningful in her life. Thenceforth, her own harmonious companionship with herself weighs more than being in love every single minute with someone else. Astha widens the canvas of her heart and pays serious attention to her passion for painting. Pipeelika's presence becomes merely an additional charming factor to her work and commitments. Moreover, with time Pipeelika becomes too demanding that there remains only fighting, sulking, and turning away from each other. And Astha concludes, "What can I do? I live my life in fragments, she is the one fragment that makes the rest bearable. But a fragment, however potent, is still a fragment" (264). Thus, Astha's development from a gendered and sexually confused being leads her towards a queer stance from where she starts searching for herself a pure artistic presence.

Moreover, queer theory as an academic discipline tries to problematize and challenge rigid identity categories like male and female, norms of sexuality like heterosexual or homosexual, and gendered oppositions like man and woman, emphasizing the oppression and violence that such hegemonic norms justify. This view is supported by Adrienne Rich, MacKinnon, and Brownmiller, who "articulated a fundamentally liberal politics, since they assumed that to deprive women of autonomy, equality, individuality and happiness is to commit unacceptable violence on rights-bearing human beings" (Marcus, 194). This is true in Astha's case who has already wasted much of her creative energy in reflecting on whether she belongs to Hemant or to Pipeelika. If Hemant once triggered her feminine self, the companionship of Pipeelika helped emerge her masculine self, which is constructive enough to paint and deliver political lectures. This helps her realize that she can stand alone as an artist beyond the sphere of marked gender and sexuality. The novelist defends, "How would she live? But she had to, she had that rock of stability women had, her husband and her children" (285).

Thereby, Astha develops a new fascination for her work and family with a renewed self-reliance that she needs to do soul-searching instead of brooding over her loneliness, her desire for steady companionship, and the need for commitment to one's sexual and gender categories. While Hemant objects to her too much involvement with the canvas, she reflects, "How could she make him understand? Work was the only place she could forget everything, where she could become her mind, her hand, and

the vision inside her head" (301). The novel concludes with Astha holding her independent exhibition with twenty paintings and thus giving a farewell to Pipeelika. Therefore, she transforms her sexual anxiety into a queer creative force to serve her work, family, and home.

The ending of Astha's story opens up a new dimension of queer sexuality where she prepares her womb to deliver artefacts which can reflect her inner turmoil and unlived fantasies. She realizes that like a true ascetic, she can completely immerse herself into the world of colours and canvas and thus can forget all other categorizations of her artistic self, "There she was with shrouded canvases, bottles of turpentine and linseed oil, tubes of colour lying in baskets around the easel, and grey rags stiff with dried paint. These were the tools of her trade, these were the things that established her separate life, touching them was comfort" (299). Worship for work bestows upon Astha her long-awaited sense of a fulfilled self. This is the place where she feels confident and expresses herself without inhibiting her individuality and subjective interpretation of her creativity. Manju Kapur reports, "As her brush moved carefully over the canvas, her hand grew sure, her back straightened, she sat firmer on her stool, her gaze became more concentrated, her mind more focused. A calmness settled over her, tenuous, fragile, but calmness nevertheless. She thought of her name. Faith. Faith in herself. It was all she had" (299). This life of an artist is Astha's true identity where she belongs neither to Hemant (heterosexuality) nor to Pipeelika (homosexuality) but rather exclusively to her own original (androgynous) self.

On the basis of the above discussion, it can be concluded that sexuality and its gendered nature is not merely what is perceived through heterosexual and homosexual categorisation, rather queerness can alter the way an individual constructs both subjective and social demarcations of legitimate sexual behaviour. The study proposes a fresh possibility of a neutral, pure and dedicated dimension of human sexuality to its being a creative impulse as well. The energy throbs not merely to reproduce life but to create new channels of human inquiry. Such an understanding of one's sexuality can become a liberating experience across genders and sexual divisions. The queer capacity to look beyond gendered subjectivity marks a positive note towards achieving a fresh knowledge of one's queer creative principle.

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