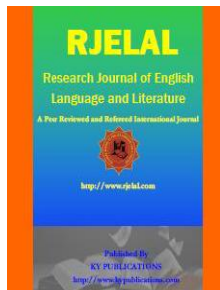




THE POLITICS OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE: A CASE STUDY ON QUEER- DISCOURSE IN KERALA

NASIF.M

Guest Lecturer in English
Malabar College of Advanced Studies, Vengara, Malappuram, Kerala.



ABSTRACT

Homosexual relationship has been represented culturally as something sick or criminal. Gays/ lesbians are labeled 'abnormal' and are marginalized. The main reason for this is undoubtedly the institutional structures that are powerful enough to mould the popular representations of sexuality. The paper is based on an interview with Nasser, who openly claims that he is both a homosexual as well as bisexual. Nasser discusses the sexual tensions he had when he was a child, his realization that he is attracted to males in the same way as he is to females and his ultimate understanding that he is a bisexual. The aim of the paper is thus to bring forth a sexual justice as a part of social justice.

KEY WORDS: Homosexual- gays/lesbians- bisexual-marginalization-sexual representations-institutional norms.

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INTRODUCTION

The term 'Queer', which used to be a slang word for a person with homosexual orientation, is now an umbrella term used to designate people with sexual orientations other than the dominant heterosexual ones. It was quite unfamiliar for the public with the sexual identities of lesbian, gays, bisexuals, and transgenders until the studies on queer identities came into forefront.

Gay, lesbian and queer studies are separate but related fields of cultural inquiry that attempt to establish the analytical centrality of gender and sexuality within a particular area of investigation. Lesbian and gay literary theory became prominent only in the 1990's though it began earlier in the 1960's and 1970's as a part of the liberation movements. Lesbian and gay studies have maintained a close relationship to the activists who strive to achieve for gays and lesbian all the rights enjoyed by heterosexuals.

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. It upholds that sexuality is a construct and subject to change. Gay/lesbian studies grew out of feminist studies and feminist theory. Gay/lesbian studies do for sex and sexuality what women studies do for gender.

While gay/lesbian studies focused largely on questions of homosexuality, queer theory expands its realm of investigation. Once, the term queer was slang for homosexual. In recent years, 'queer' has come to be an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual identification and is used to describe a budding theoretical model which has developed out of more traditional lesbian and gay studies. Resisting the model of stability, queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. Stressing on the impossibility of any 'natural' sexuality it calls into questions even such

apparently problematic terms as 'man' and 'woman'.

Mainly, queer theorists do the task of deconstructing the binary unstable opposites heterosexual/homosexual where the first is given privileges and the second is marginalized and also challenging the essential assumption that heterosexual and homosexual are universal and independent of cultural difference by proposing they are social constructs subject to change. Alan Bray argues in his book *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* that, the origins of homosexuality can be traced back to the end of the 17th century with the emergence of an urban homosexual subculture that sprang up around 'Molly Houses' which appeared in 18th century London and other cities. It is a room where men with sexual interest in other men and cross dressing men could meet each other, but not necessarily for sex. He argues that these houses are significant because they constituted homosexuality in the modern sense as an identity, a way of being in the world. Many homophile organizations originated in Europe particularly in Germany at the end of the 19th century. These organizations argued that homosexuality is innate and therefore it can be subject only to nature and not penal law. Gay/lesbian philosophy aimed to secure more tolerance for homosexuality. It not only sought recognition of homosexuality as a legitimate identity for a minority population but also to free the homosexual in everyone.

The late 20th century ushered in a new era of social acceptance of minorities and homosexuals at least in heavily urbanized areas. Many of the films openly made references to homosexuality. In 1994 the first month long annual observance LGBT history Month began in the US and has been picked up other countries. A gay identity became a revolutionary identity as it wanted to overthrow the social institutions that marginalized homosexuality rather than social recognition.

India, with its myriad forms of gender identities and sexualities making their presence felt throughout a history spanning thousands of years, has yet to open up to the subject. From the unapologetic homosexuality of the *Kama Sutra* to

the homoerotic temples of *Khajuraho* and the love interests of Mughal emperors and Sufi saints, India has not been unaware of the existence of LGBT people in the midst. But sexual topics of any kind are avoided in polite conversation in India and any talk concerning homosexuality is a taboo. The horror and prejudice against homosexuality lingers on even when the subjects that were taboo in the past like birth control, venereal diseases etc are discussed freely. Though much has been said and written about the 'condition' of homosexuality every work ends up with the assumption that homosexuality is a case of mental illness.

Hinduism, the largest religion of Hindustan has taken a positive, neutral and antagonistic attitude towards homosexuality. Throughout the Vedic Texts we come across descriptions of saints, demigods, unions by god and goddesses and even supreme Lord manifesting multiple combinations of sex and gender. Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra*, the comprehensive literary output of classical India, whose fame rests on its treatment of sex has an entire chapter on 'Auparishtaka'-homosexual intercourse. The *Arthashastra*, the ancient Indian text on statecraft mentions a wide variety of non-vaginal sexual practices which, whether performed with a man or woman were sought to be punished with lowest grade of fine. The *Manusmriti*, which lists the code of conduct for a Hindu speaks of homosexuality as something to be regulated. *Rig Veda*, one of the four canonical texts of Hinduism says "Vikriti evam Prakriti" (what seems unnatural is natural) which can be seen as a recognition of homosexuality. Apart from these references in the Hindu epics, there have been many references to homosexuality in India even in recent times. It has been prevalent in India particularly in boarding and private schools where the teachers could exploit the students and students themselves practiced homosexuality in their hostel rooms. It still continues. In 1994 the discovery and rise of AIDS in India's largest prison, Tihar jail in Delhi, led to a survey co-ordinated by the IMA, which found out that the two thirds of the prisoners had participated in homosexual activity. Several organizations came out supporting decriminalization of homosexuality in India. On 29 June 2008, five Indian cities-Delhi,

Bangalore, Kolkata, Indore and Pondicherry celebrated gay pride parades something that is common outside India. The participants in the parades which include various indigenous, gender and sexual minority groups has the tradition of wearing colorful masks for the partial purpose of hiding the wearer's identity from public view and avoid meeting the family members. Since the decriminalization of homosexuality, a number of pride parades have taken place in major cities in India. On 2 July 2009, Delhi High Court struck down the Section 377 on the basis that the legal prohibition against same-sex act would be a violation of the fundamental rights provided by the Indian Constitution. On 16th January 2012, the Supreme Court hearing a bunch of appeals filed against decriminalization of gay sex observed that homosexuality should be seen in the context of changing times and that it should not be seen in terms of sexual intercourse.

Media has played an important role in eradicating homophobia. Homosexual couples can't adopt children in India. If they raise a child together only one of them is recognized as a 'parent'. They can't open joint accounts, take loans or buy property together unlike their heterosexual counterparts. Sexuality is today at once the most personal and private, the most public and the most political of issues that engage us both intellectually and practically in everyday life. Contemporary Indian identities are constructed out of the peculiar and particular effects and perception of tradition, modernity, colonization and globalization.

Kerala, commonly known as God's own country is renowned for its high literacy rates, gender equality and social development with comparatively low per capita income. Though Kerala is highly civilized, hospitable and literate, it is backward and conventional beyond imagination in matters of sex, sexuality and diverse sexual orientation. It is not advisable for a man or woman to be intimate in public or travel together in Kerala. The woman who walks through the streets after late night work is not safe and is stared at. Often she has to face nasty comments from people around. In the bus stand and railway stations she has to tolerate sexual advances and actions. If she reacts the entire

blame would be put on her. For homosexuals, transgenders, bisexuals and differently oriented people, Kerala is not a comfortable place to live in. being marked as "not normal", they are forced to live in constant fear, self contempt and invisibility. The strict morality has resulted in staring and peeping into other people's private life and sexuality. Religions play a crucial role in making the individuals highly "moral" people. There are plenty of incidents led to crimes and even to deaths resisting the peeping and mediation of the society into others' private lives. There is a case of the suicide of a post graduate student from Kerala Varma College, Trichur, when her friendship another girl was given a lesbian coloring by the hostel warden. Popular media and magazines took this kind of incidents a 'big-hit'. But these magazines and media pay no attention to the problems of transgenders, other sexual minorities and people who are living alone. In Kerala, when discourses like poverty, water scarcity, family, education etc are considered at the primary and secondary levels, sexuality is seen as something to be abandoned. Keralites' discussion of sexuality is limited in the vulgar and less standard comedy in the films. Its vulgarity is often distracts the families from the theatre. Such comedians and actors are given crucial 'position' in the society also.

The support bases working for sexual minorities in Kerala include Malabar Cultural Forum in Calicut, Loveland Arts Society, Vaathil, Chilla, Maithri in Trivandrum, Pennammabhavanam in Kottayam, Ananya in Palakkad, Snehatheeram in Kannur, Voice and Souhrida in Thalassery and the prominent among them being Sahayatrika in Trichur. There have been conventions organized in support of the rights of the sexual minorities. They had organized Queer Pride Marches in 2010 and 2012. It to a large extent helped to visibilize the need to bring in the queer rights into the public discussions. But there is a an interesting thing that, recently Asianet, a leading channel in Malayalam, conducted a discussion on transgenders as part of the talk show- *Nammal Thammil*. When the program was screened a cautionary statement appeared below the screen in bold letters "the views expressed in this programme are not necessarily

what Asianet endorses". From this very statement, we can assume that a channel like Asianet, which is very popular and powerful in their viewpoints, is cautious and scared of the 'literate' and socially 'developed' public. Even though, many Malayalam writers and film makers have included homosexuality in their writings and films as themes. In a nutshell, homosexuality in Kerala is still under a veil-unacknowledged and unaccepted.

Bisexuality is romantic attraction, sexual attraction or sexual behavior towards males and females. The word also means having both male and female reproductive organs, and showing characteristics of both sexes.

Being bisexual means we have the potential to be attracted to people of our own gender or bisexual people have the capacity to love people of their same gender or of a different gender.

This can include physical, sexual and emotional attraction or relationships. Bisexual people may be men, women, transgender or gender queer. They may be monogamous or abstinent or may have multiple sexual partners, just like heterosexual, lesbians and gay people. If we look around us, many people are bisexual and bisexuality cuts across distinctions of race, ethnicity, gender, identity, age, class, ability and religious affiliation.

To determine our sexuality can be highly confusing. Teen agers often feel a lot of pressure to choose to define them as being heterosexual or homosexual. Sometimes, you might feel that you also do not fit either of these categories. And you may notice that you have sexual feelings about people of your own gender and other gender. This feeling may indicate your sexuality as bisexual.

It is perfectly natural for some people to be bisexual and to feel attraction to people of their own gender and other gender. Sexual feelings towards women, men, transgender people and gender queer people are perfectly natural and 'normal' for bisexual people.

Bisexuality is one among the three major classifications of sexual orientation along with hetero sexuality and homosexuality.

A bisexual identity does not necessarily equate to equal sexual attraction to both sexes. Commonly, people who have distinct but not

exclusive sexual preferences for one sex over the other also identify themselves as bisexual. In other sense, someone does not to be exclusively homosexual or heterosexual, but can feel varying degrees of both. But among LGBT sexualities, bisexuals often face discriminations in every field. Bisexuals contend with discrimination from gays, lesbians and straight society around the very word bisexual and bisexual identity itself.

These people spend a lot of time wondering what will happen if they disclose their bisexual identity in the workplaces, offices, and home and wherever they go. Will it change their friendships and relationships? Will it affect their working relationships, will it be a shame for their whole family.

We think that sexual attraction is the key to bisexuality or homosexuality, not the relationships or the sex or the lifestyle. We do not think of the emotional attraction between these people. We consider these people as unfaithful and as a group of people who have got a sexual disease. We are not ready to accept the fact that being bisexual, homosexual or being queer in gender is not a disease. When someone feels that his/her partner is a gender queer, they leave them or get divorced as soon as possible. Being bisexual doesn't make people unfaithful to their partners, family or the society.

INTERVIEW

Nasser is a person who unhesitatingly introduces himself as a homosexual and bisexual. He lives in Adivaram, in Wayanad District. He is the second among the five children of his parents. His father was working abroad. Nasser belongs to Muslim community and he claims that he is a practicing Muslim.

He is aged forty, works with an organization called Suraksha. This organization is formed and maintained by Kerala State AIDS Control Society. He is working as the Director of three major projects.

1. Malabar Cultural Forum is an organization formed by the mother NGO named Indian Youth Association.
2. Suraksha Mission Program (KSACS)

3. PEHJAN- It is a project funded and maintained by an organization in Karnataka, named SANGMA.

The important thing to mention here is that Nasser got married while he was twenty five years old. He has five children- three daughters and two twin sons. At 13, Nasser realized that he was attracted to males in much the same way as he was to females. He felt he could identify himself with females better and so he often found himself in the company of his classmates. The attraction he felt for males was in every way similar to the sexual tension experienced by females with regard to the opposite sex. Today he knows himself for what he actually is, i.e., a bisexual.

Nasser dropped out of school in standard nine. In school, most of his friends were girls. He was not interested to befriend with boys and unknown of the reason of being so. But now he realized that it was only because of his sexual orientation. From the very moment of his birth, the elements of homosexual orientation were there in him. He considers it as a genuine peculiarity of human beings, and when he was thirteen years old, he realized homosexuality as his taste for sex. At this time, most often he mingled only with girls, but he had two or three boys as his close friends. He was involved in three relationships with men, lasting two years, six years and nine years respectively. Each one of them ended with marriage of his partners. The anguish and heartache he felt then was as strong as that felt by any other under similar circumstances.

He believes that sex, though important, was never the all-defining factor for those indulging in bisexual relationships. These relationships too follow the grind of courting, mutual attraction and then finally sex, as is the case in heterosexual relationships. His family was well aware of his effeminacy but chose to remain in dark in the matters of his sexuality. Through his friend Sukumaran (also a bisexual), Nasser learnt that Calicut was a city much more tolerant towards those of this kind. Following which he came to Calicut in 1998 and met Shaji Kondotty. They resorted to wear dhotis as it made them feel more feminine, and would meet at the Calicut KSRTC stand and talk four

long hours. Later they started meeting in Mananchira square, where many of his kind would hang-out. Here they mingled with each other, shared their experiences and found ways to release the pent-up sexual tension within them.

In 1999, he acquainted himself with the MCF, a project organized by the mother NGO, for the welfare and protection of those like himself. He involved himself in the AIDS control program instituted by them. Mother NGO played a significant role in making the sexual minorities aware of their rights and also made them realize that they were not created thus to endure the torments, isolation and marginalization by others. They were made to attend programs on AIDS control and other welfare schemes. During the early stages, the members of the MCF led a gypsy lifestyle. They travelled far from home and lived in cramped quarters with vile living conditions. But Nasser endured it all as for the first time in his life he was free to live his choice. But alongside this elation there existed the fear of being exposed as a bisexual by the media which covered their work, for which he was as yet unprepared for. In 2005, when he turned 25, MCF became a registered organization setup for the welfare of the sexual minorities.

When Nasser turned 26, his family members insisted on him getting married as they felt it would cure him of his effeminacy. The compulsion to change, both from within and from others was tearing him apart. The alienation by his family drove him to the brinks of suicide. In the end, he reconciled with fate, gave in to his family's wishes and married the fifth woman he met.

After marriage, Nasser was constantly worried about the fact that he failed to satisfy his nuptial duties he would once again come under shame and ridicule from his family. But his fears proved to be misplaced as his wife is as yet unaware of his condition and seems to be fully satisfied as regards their sexual life. They have five children and lead a normal life like any other couple. In the years after his marriage, Nasser has changed a lot as regards his manner of dressing, speech and behavior but within him he is still the same and will remain so always. From time to time he takes on partners and satisfies the other half of him.

Nasser believes that forced marriages with no regard to sexuality are and evil best kept at bay. Both the parties involved will suffer. The child born of such bonding will become a pretext for not having a healthy sexual relationship anymore. Women suffer more as they are forced to submit themselves to such a fate and not utter a word.

When asked what he would do if any of his children turned out to be like him, he said he would stand by their choice as their strongest ally and counsel him in all matters regarding their well-being when entering into such a relationship.

Earlier MCF and such other organizations conducted their programs discretely but today, they are conducted in full view of the public. 'Orukkam' is one such program conducted on May 30th every year by MCF which includes cultural programs, meetings and orientation classes and is attended by 4000-5000 of its members.

CONCLUSION

This is a brief description of the interview and I conclude this study with Nasser's own words:

"First of all, I have a request to all the students who gets education, is that, you people should understand that basically it is not a disease, but a genuine phenomenon. You should not consider us as a group to be marginalized from the society. It is not fair to identify a person based on his/her sexual taste. It is cruel to categorize individuals on the basis of their sexual preference. Another thing is that, the society should allow us to mingle with them. Many often we are refused to do jobs with the 'normal' people. I have a request to you is that we people should be permitted to participate in all kinds of gatherings and functions. I say so because, we are completely denied from all these kinds functions and programs, but I am quite sure that, these kinds of functions can influence us a lot to improve and to understand ourselves. It would also help us to change according to the society. It would also help us to mould our character. I can say so as I have the experience in Suraksha. Even today the condition has not changed; we people are marginalized from the family, friends, society, workplaces, educational institutions, cultural organizations, marriage functions and public gatherings where everyone gets united, we people

are marginalized. The kind of trauma at that time cannot be explained to anyone. People should hold a broad mind towards the people like us to make a harmoniously moving society."

To me, it seems, in death it doesn't matter whether one is man or woman. The benevolent earth receives us all, those above, those below and all those in between. And if I quote Rig Veda, "Vikriti evam Prakriti".

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