



THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL: ANALYSING QUEER IDENTITY AND FAMILY IN MADHAVIKUTTY'S 'THE SANDAL TREES'

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ABSTRACT

Homosexuality is a reality in India. The survival, popularity and circulation rates of Bombay Dost, India's first and only gay magazine may be cited as evidence. Most significantly, what is keeping the gay reality in India alive is the gay groups, gay liberation organisations and various NGOs scattered all over India. Thus, though homosexuality in India is a reality, very few serious studies of it have been undertaken, at least at the academic level. The studied silence maintained by the Indian academic intelligentsia on the subject of homosexuality can be cited as a reason for the homophobic attitudes represented in fiction. With a few notable exceptions, Indian academics always contributed to the myth that homosexuality is unknown in India by ignoring it completely. This research article is a study on the representation of how the lesbian and the lesbian family is positioned in relation to the heterosexual family in Kamala Das's 'The Sandal Trees'.

Keywords: queer studies, lesbian studies, lesbian identity, The Sandal Trees,

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Madhavikutty (Kamala Das) explores the innermost recesses of the female psyche in her uninhibited portrayals of man-woman and woman-woman relationships, says K.Sachidanandan, the poet-editor. The political ramifications of the woman-woman relationship posited alongside man-woman relationship has been noted by Rosemary M. George in her essay 'Queernesses All Mine: Same-sex Desire in Kamala Das's Fiction and Poetry'.

'Chandana Marangal', written by Kamala Das in 1988 and translated into English as 'The Sandal Trees' in 1995 by V.C.Harris and C.K.Mohammed Ummer, charts the complex love life that spans five decades of two Nair women who are unable to ignore the attraction and love for each other even as they fall in and out of love from their heteronormative married life.

Kalyanikutty and Sheela fall in love as adolescents in their native place initiating themselves into the sexual landscape. When the nature of their relationship is discovered Sheela is married off to a family friend who is twenty one years her senior. Following this Kalyanikutty too chooses to marry. Both become doctors with Kalyanikutty's fees being paid by Sheela's mother after her father's death. Kalyanikutty divorces her husband after two and a half years of marriage but Sheela remains in hers. Realizing that Sheela would never leave her husband Kalyanikutty emigrates to Australia.

The time-frame of the narrative begins with the return of Kalyanikutty after twenty six years, the wealthy widow of a rich Australian. The unexpected reappearance of Kalyanikutty disrupts the monotony

o Sheela's life bringing up all the suppressed desires and loathing. Kalyanikutty's arrival affects her ex-husbands family as well as she goes in search of him and seduces him. He and his daughter agree to leave his current wife and go to Australia with Kalyanikutty. But following the wife's suicide attempt Kalyanikutty leaves for Australia alone.

The ramifications of the politics of location and the materiality of the contexts that encompass a work of art can never be contended. Inextricably embedded in the cultural contexts of its production; the religious, cultural and political discourses that enabled its production play a crucial role in determining the conditions of production, marketing, reception and canonization; even as it tries to make a political intervention in the status quo.

Lesbianism as a political category has made its entrance very late into the Indian context. Having been denied even sexual agency in the heteropatriarchal paradigm, the existence of a lesbian identity and culture has been invisible on the public domain. Dreaded on the social domain as an intrusion into the established relations of power, lesbianism is assumed as heralding the end of the normative institution of heterosexual family. The heterosexual family has held an uncompromising position in the Indian culture since recorded times. The institution of heterosexual family is very entrenched into the culture and reigns undisputed; and a family derived from this union is considered sacrosanct. The Sandal Trees was published at a time when a gradual transition from the joint family system to the nuclear family system and the cries against this disintegration of the family were already loud.

Homosexuality is not alienated in Das's writing. Depicted as normative and entangled in the heteropatriarchal relationships it is posited alongside the dominant structures of sexuality.

In 'The Sandal Trees'...this backtracking and crisscrossing into same-sex relationships and back to heterosexuality with the possibility of return left open is greatly intensified... Das presents in same-sex desire a pleasurable alternative to socially sanctioned heterosexuality. (George 118).

The fluid nature of an individual's sexual identity and the notion of sexuality as a cultural construct as contended by queer theorists find expression in the novel.

In 'The Sandal Trees' same-sex desire is not a reluctant of forced choice due to lack of heterosexual options as is seen in Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaf* but a choice permeated with the certainty of individual agency. Kalyanikutty opts for a lifestyle based on her own terms and her choice of sexuality. As opposed to the subtle representations and images of same-sex desire and sexuality in other works of Das, in *The Sandal Trees*, homoeroticism cannot be marginalised as insignificant or an adolescent phase. To Sheela, the heteronormative familial institution turns out to be a disappointment after her pleasurable initiation into homosexuality by Kalyanikutty.

The implications of the novel as imparting a constructive articulation to the hereto silenced and disregarded segment of the society is irrefutable. The lesbian protagonists in the novel are not outcaste and castrated as was the tendency in most of the Malayalam fiction hitherto that represented homosexuality—Vaikom Muhammed Basheer's *Sabdangal* being a case in point.

Nevertheless, the novel inadvertently sabotages the attempt to reveal the lesbian existence to the insulated society by a deliberate exclusion of the term from the novel. The image of the lesbian that emerges in the novel is not concerned with the political ramifications of her sexuality. Published as it was, before the entry of the Indian lesbian as a political and cultural subject, the novel is more concerned with sexuality as a personal choice.

An independent and unashamed lesbian emerges in the novel as Kalyanikutty is not only unapologetic about her sexuality but also revels in it. The work refrains from representing the lesbian as a disadvantaged member of the community by focusing on how class enables a wide range of sexual experiences for women. At the outset of the story the poverty of Kalyanikutty frees her from the obligation of protecting the 'family honour' and helps her to extricate herself from the prescribed sexual role and identity. As the plot progresses, her

new economic independence gained through her career as a doctor and also the death of her rich Australian husband helps her to pursue her own inclinations.

The Sandal Trees offers a bleak and unrelenting image of the heterosexual family, be it the marital life of Sheela or her life at her parents' house. Sheela is married off to a man twenty-one years her senior. Not only is there a complete discrepancy in age and interests, he can never give her the pleasures that Kalyanikutty could; as evidenced from Sheela's declaration to her husband "You are twenty-one years older than me...I could never see you as my husband." (Das 16). She fails to form any kind of bond with her husband of three decades. She says, "In fact I cultivated silence, it grew and stood between me and my husband like a sandal tree, giving me much happiness" (13).

The heterosexual family does not get any better a treatment during the girl's childhood. Adultery, lies and deceit seem to be common in a tradition-bound conventional family uncompromising in its practice of hegemony at various levels.

The story portrays the heteronormative family as a current that moves inexorably on, dragging everything in its path. Moving with the current Sheela is unable to or denies to attempt a struggle to find happiness. Bleak as her married life is she decides to remain in it succumbing to the delusions of 'safety' and 'security' offered by the heterosexual family. She is not unaware of her situation, "I was reluctant to go back to that all-too-familiar world of mine that comprised my house, the lovely objects on display there, my aged husband, my patients, everything" (24). Kalyanikutty on the other hand fights and manipulates the family for her needs and in the end succeeds in breaking away from that unrelenting current.

Das critiques the heterosexual marital life when she shows how ridiculous and inadequate are the yardsticks used to measure an ideal marriage. When the local Rotary club asks Sheela and her husband to participate in a contest held to choose an ideal couple, she says,

"Why not? Our marriage has lasted so long. I haven't betrayed you, and you haven't

betrayed me. We haven't slept apart for a single night. We can certainly win this contest." (17).

Lesbian bonding presupposes that both the partners are prepared to challenge the patriarchal heterosexual power structures that has invalidated and stigmatised lesbianism. The lesbian pair creates an interactive space of their own embedded within and around the larger mainstream heterosexual world thereby effecting a crucial reversal in the subject positions. However, this familial reversal of subject position refuses to materialise in the Sandal Trees as Sheela prioritises the heterosexual family over the one Kalyanikutty suggests; a union of two women, an egalitarian, symbiotic lesbian relationship.

Nevertheless, at the close of the novel Sheela acknowledges Kalyanikutty as her only love; a fact which her husband tells her he has known and lived with for the three decades of their marriage. It ends with Sheela's lament "Oh, my love, how can I live now" (26) establishing the primacy of the women's relationship thereby conceding it a partial acknowledgement if not a complete one.

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