

Lesbian History: A Challenge to Gender Studies

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Abstract: *This article argues that lesbian history has offered a challenge to gender studies which for long espoused only the cause of women versus men. The history of lesbians is the critique offered by a fringe category to question the dominant field of gender studies. More broadly, it is a call to think beyond categories and to evolve new meanings of terms like gender and identity. Through a peek back into history it is established that alternate sexuality was both acknowledged and accepted. The disgust and phobia associated with alternate sexuality is a very nineteenth century phenomenon. Literature and cinema is invoked to analyze the contemporary approach and attitude towards homosexuality. It is established that heteronormativity in its hegemonic avatar needs to be contested to become more accommodating of homosexuality.*

Keywords: *heteronormativity, history, identity, lesbian, sexuality, women.*

I. Introduction

Lesbianism or female homosexuality is the quality or state of intense emotional and usually erotic attraction of a woman to another woman.[1] Homosexuality in women is also called Sapphism after the Greek lyric poetess Sappho who expressed love and passion in her poems for various people of both the sexes. She was born on the island of Lesbos. The two words 'Sapphism' and 'Lesbian' by the 19th century were adopted for female homosexuality drawing upon Sappho's works. However, the references to physical acts between women are few and subjected to debate in her poems. The idea that love could exist between people of the same sex thus was a subject of discussion even in the nineteenth century. The current understanding of Lesbian history is a product of twentieth century American and European theorists. This essay is an attempt to trace the challenge which lesbian history has posed to gender studies. Speaking from the margins, this history challenges the dominant gender narrative. At the same time it acknowledges its own limitations through self-reflexivity. The experiences of the lesbians vary significantly depending on race, class, nationality, etc. The category lesbian itself is a construct with multiple variations. Hence, an attempt has also been made to locate it vis-à-vis other forms of alternate sexuality. A brief foray into the representation of lesbians in literature and cinema has also been made. And lastly, the demands of the lesbian community are seen in the larger context of the LGBT[2] movement.

II. Acknowledging Lesbians

Feminist history had long debated in terms of heteronormativity which meant that physical normal relations were between the opposite sexes. The feminists for long spoke about only the rights of women versus men. The rights of a lot of women who were oppressed as well but not necessarily by the men was consciously shadowed. Just like the American Army policy of 'Don't Ask Don't Tell', these feminist historians also brushed the issue of lesbianism under the carpet. The proponents of alternate sexuality were thus completely silenced as marginal voices of those who did not fit in this narrative, the deviants. Lesbian history developed in the 1980s and challenged this silence. It spoke about such diverse expressions of love, passion and sexuality like cross-dressers, romantic friends, student-teacher 'crushes', butch/femme partners, transsexuals, trans-genders and many more.[3] The first efforts in lesbian history were thus directed towards securing a place for the lesbians as a subject of history. This sort of recuperative or additive history had its own historical problems. The sources for study were few, mainly of the upper-middle class influential women. And even here, it did not receive the same attention as gay politico-legal movement. The category lesbian itself was contested because of the variations within it (like repressed lesbians who were married). Accepting a man as gay was much easier than accepting a woman as a lesbian.

III. History Of Lesbianism

Lillian Faderman's de-eroticization of lesbian relations as romantic friendships evoked a homo-social order showing a lesbian continuum. This was critiqued as ghettoization. Anything deviant from the heteronormative was to be categorized as something harmless just as Faderman tried to do. But in the 1980s and 1990s, the theories of butch/ femme role playing and literary historical representation of lesbian sexual desire gained ground.[4] Subsequent studies revealed that as early as the 1940s, butch/ femme role playing was being

carried out in New York bar clubs.[5] Also eighteenth century writers did acknowledge cross-dressing, tribadism, sapphism, bosom sex, etc. which posed a serious challenge to the medico-scientific argument of lesbianism as deviant behavior. However, a major problem at this time was the lack of sources as the number of confirmed lesbians was a minuscule. This was no surprise given the patriarchal structures of religion, law, family and even feminist history. The homophobic lid of these structures was blown up finally by lesbian history.

IV. Post-Structuralism And Queer Theory

The problematic of lesbian identity was finally resolved though not fully in the 1980s and 1990s in the wake of post structuralism and queer theory. Judith Butler introduced the concept of performativity in gender by which she meant that gender has no meaning of its own and identity is a result of sustained set of acts. Sex and gender are discursively produced and are very different. Identities are in flux as is evident from the existence of heterosexual relations even within homosexual partnerships like the butch/femme. Thus, lesbians questioned the use of gender as an analytical category because it essentially was devoid of any meaning of its own. In fact, Judith Butler accepted a 'definitional uncertainty'[6] for the category of lesbians. This showed that open-endedness is better than straitjacketing especially in history as it is context-specific. The question no longer was "Who is a lesbian?" but "Who represents the lesbian?"[7] Joan Scott also argued for emptiness as well as an overflowing of meanings in concepts like man-woman.[8] This implied that meanings and values are not fixed. Many feminists have warned of a patriarchal male homosexuality subsuming lesbianism and demanded distinctive theoretical stances for the latter. The counter critique was that both queer theory and lesbian history had to operate in a mutual discursive zone as they shared many similar challenges.

V. The Straitjacket Of Identity

Lesbianism as a sexual category was and is still not the primary identity amongst many lesbians who instead appropriate race, class, age, ethnicity, and nationality as the primary identification. Hence, the theorization of lesbian-like[9] behavior is culture specific. In this way, the dominant western feminist approach to lesbianism was questioned and even subverted. Lesbian-like behavior posed a challenge to the feminist historians to reclaim the unseen, and the unspoken so as to make feminist history representative of gender in its truest sense.

Lesbian history itself needed to be more accommodative of the other non-normative behaviors. The trans-genders, transvestites, transsexuals, drags, inter-sexuals, bisexuals, and other such categories needed to be seen side by side with lesbians. These groups were on the periphery too and hence shared a common crisis of identity. A simple binary of straight-lesbian could not suffice to explain these other contentious identities. Faced with the same existential problems posed by law (adoption rights, same-sex marriages), religion, occupation and, medicine (health benefits), required that they be seen in a similar domain. All these categories could be clubbed together under alternative sexuality.

VI. The Indian Case

In India, in the late eighteenth century a genre of Urdu poetry called rekhti was popular. In this the poet used women's speech and talked about their world. Carla Petievich argues that rekhti was a parody of love literature namely the ghazal by men. She further says that rekhta another popular poetry form was different from rekhti. While the former expressed love the latter **Petievich** argues was merely sexually suggestive bawdy poetry.[10] But Ruth Vanita is of the opinion that rekhti was very much in the tradition of riti kavya, medieval romances, and erotic treatises. It was an evolution of these earlier forms prevalent in Indian languages. Rekhti depicted female sexual relations and its reception in the society. The very fact that it was popular and widely circulated shows that alternative sexuality of women was an acknowledged truth. Rekhti poetry was thus providing an alternative world to the women. It was both produced and consumed by the women. The society which had homoerotic male relationships was equally aware of the female sex relations as is clear from the terms in vogue around this time.[11] Just like the ghazal there was ambiguity of gender in the compositions but it was to tease and not to express divinity as in the former. The obvious influence of Hindu traditions on rekhti as well as its erotic content, effeminate style led to its expurgation in late nineteenth century. The revulsion of homosexuality thus seems like a product of British colonization and the associated modernity.

Indian mythology speaks of alternative sexuality. The story of the birth of Bhagiratha (bhaga- vagina) as argued by Ruth Vanita drawing upon 14th century devotional texts from Bengal was the result of the union of two co-wives. The narrative texts often highlighted emotional bonds and thus the possibility of a lesbian relationship is explored here. But even the prescriptive medical treatises like the first century Sushruta Samhita make a case of a child born as a result of the mixing of fluids due to the intercourse between two women.[12] The medical veracity is doubtful today but the very fact that such a thing was mentioned as early as the first

century shows the existence of lesbians in India. Vatsyayan's Kamasutra of the third century also legitimizes same sex love.

Contemporary Indian cinema has also explored alternate sexuality. But apart from Deepa Mehta's Fire there is no portrayal of a lesbian relationship. Mehta's movie led to rioting because of the choice of names for her characters - Radha and Sita. But even here the relationship is shown to be less of a choice and more of trying to find alternative avenues because of an unhappy marriage. The gay question has been well addressed by movies like I am, My Brother Nikhil, Bomgay, Memories in March and Mango Soufflé. Indian audience is still reluctant to accept lesbianism on screen with the exception of a few sleazy commercial projects which nowhere come close to exploring the issue of lesbian identity. The portrayal of lesbians in the literary medium going back to Ismat Chughtai's Lihaaf (The Quilt) is more forthcoming about lesbians. But even this medium is more biased towards gay portrayal. In the twenty-first century with the LGBT movement gaining a stronghold and people with alternate sexuality openly declaring their orientation, it seems likely that more literature and cinema delving into these issues would be appreciated.

VII. Conclusion

The reception of lesbianism in all its avowal in the Indian public sphere still has a long way to go. It is difficult to imagine a common universe for homo and heterosexuals in a patriarchal order that still justifies honour killings. Lesbianism in India has thus posed a challenge not only to the study of gender or feminist history but also to patriarchy and the hegemony of heteronormativity. But most importantly, lesbian history has forced us to rethink the assumption that identity is fixed and definable.

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