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Locating Lesbian Experience in Nancy Garden's *Annie on My Mind*

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Abstract:

Sexuality is always granted as synonymous to the male-female binary orientation of the "heteropatriarchal" society until it whispers homosexual paradigms. Society is historically wrapped in a homophobic climate where alternative sexualities like lesbianism, gay, transgender are derided as social transgressions, unethical blasphemies and sodomic perversity. The right to live a dignified life is curtailed to this chunk of minority group as legalisation on LGBT rights still stands limping in many countries. Immigration, persecution and cross-dressing technology are manifestations of disowning their reality.

The paper would focus on lesbian experiences in Nancy Garden's representative novel, *Annie on My Mind*. In the course of the study attempts will be made to locate how social agencies like school and family impede a compromise of their homosexual identity and make the characters shameful to publicly acknowledge their sexuality as a human right. The lack of assertion, the public's hostile gaze, the psychological trauma of double consciousness and the incongruous cultural make-up to deny education to such minority as a sign of abnormal and infectious social trend are other conjoined areas of discussion. The novel also hints on how queer literature is received as trash sensory stimulators for deviant and perverse sexual desires. As the focal aim is directed on lesbianism, Radical feminism, Foucauldian precepts on sexuality and Teresa De Lauretis principles of homoeroticism have been embarked upon. Ultimately the object of the paper will be to bring about a democratic awareness and acceptance of such queer identities by limiting stigmatization of any kind that threatens their life and living.

Key words: Gender, Heteropatriarchy, Sexuality, Homosexuality, Lesbianism, LGBT, Garden, *Annie on My Mind*

Gender and sexuality are words and images clipped

From magazines waiting to be glued down on our vision boards.

But they are always OUR visions boards because the way they were

Originally assembled does not make sense anymore. - Lauren Juninga

We live in an era of phenomenal transformations. Our wish to map the world and the individual and to dress the body with the designs of culture and society has submerged the historical latency of gender and sexuality into the 'the niceties and creativity of civilization'. The whole vortex of defining what is gender and sexuality and their composition in identity formation in a vastly conscious gendered society is indeed a complex engagement. The usage of the term 'Sexuality' imbibes the domain of endless biological, discursive and epistemological thoughts more particularly in the way knowledge is constructed about our own private self and its definition in public life. It is in this rising tides of complexity that the

question of the legalisation of LGBT (Lesbian ,gay, bisexual and transgender) rights and the legitimacy of homosexuality in a homophobic milieu comes into observation. Before brewing into the heart of the matter it is pertinent to know what is sexual identity and homosexuality. In the book *Sexual Identity Synthesis: Attributes, Meaning, Making and the Search for Congruence*, sexual identity is defined as follows;” Sexual Identity refers to one’s self-denigration according to one’s sense of biological sex, gender, orientation, behaviour and values; it is influenced by both Nature and Nurture and is a complex and multifaceted construct.” (Mark and Eric 2)

All though gender and sexuality are conditioned by the power of the dominant cultures there still remains a possibility when the identities cannot be made certain within the heteronormative code. These ways of being that are exclusive from the tight compartment of being man- woman involves queering for those who wish different ways of being lined in the spectrum of gender, sex and identity. This nebulous finding in sexual difference came to be known as ‘homosexuality’ a term coined by Karoly Benkert in 1869. People with different sexual orientation like lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender are stereotyped and castrated for their sexual dissidence. Interest of such minority community within the heterosexual society is at stake and assertion and expression of their sexual identity denies them socio-economic-political rights. In this regard, queer ideology or theory assumes itself as a pan-humanitarian apparatus to champion the cause of identity politics in favour of such people embracing alternative sexualities.

Lesbianism, a strand of homosexuality, tends to be an offshoot of radical feminisim to some extent but then it engages itself in a more dialogic affirmation to construct orientation based on woman’s psychological solidarity and satisfactory homosexual filiations. Down the lane of history, it has been traced and vulgarized as unnatural sinfulness which could be purged by corrective rape, death penalty and life imprisonment. The stain of injustice and indignity is still buttressed even though LGBT laws have been adopted by some nations with the eye of modern intimacy. When we talk of human rights, our understanding about this invisible community should not be myopic by cultural, social or religious constraints rather it should be humanitarian, galvanised by respect, tolerance and protection of their cause and identity. The proposed paper aims to record instances of lesbian experience with reference to a representative novel, Nancy Garden’s *Annie on My Mind* (1982), and by doing so endeavours to resist marginalisation of any kind in bringing about a positive change.

Annie on My Mind is a vignette, it leaps us into the world of two adolescent lesbians, their ‘passionate friendship’ developing into a queer relationship, their pulsating urge to fulfil love-making, and their psychological destitution in facing its consequences in the world that thinks their love as a “handicap”. Much substance of the novel can be located in the way it brings out the psychosexual riddle oscillating in the mind of the narrator, Eliza Winthrop and the Sapphic complex seen in Annie Kenyon. At the same time it rides us back from the inward landscape of their identity crisis into the outward social reality within the environment of an educational institution (Foster), an active symbol of the politics of ‘totalitarian heteropatriarchy’. The first encounter of Eliza and Annie in Metropolitan Museum of Art can be seen as a reflection of their imaginative space that fosters a submissive bonding between them in the way they sneak into the roles of the King Arthur and the Knight at the Hall of Arms and Armour. With Eliza, the illumination towards Annie kindles first in her lesbianic gaze as she sees her” as the Goddess Isis herself...her back very straight...she stood so close to me, our hands would have touched if we’d moved them.”(Garden 6).The homoerotic force intensifies to an extent when Eliza ruminates,” Have you ever felt really close to someone? So close that you can’t understand why you and the other person have two separate bodies, two separate skins.”(Garden 46) There is a call for metaphorical union, of satiation of the swelling passion for Annie. One can ascribe here the

scholarship of Jerrold Seigel(1999) that such intuitive questionings bring close to one's identity of a particular type thereby taking into function the physicality, social relativity and self-positioning of the wants and desires in our mundane existence.

The myth that homosexuality is abominable and therefore a cause of social and ethical anxiety is almost a fad for it is natural and inherent in human race. It is tapped within our sub-consciousness right from birth and it is through repression that these tendencies are blocked in our conscious self. In *Sex and Character* (1903), Weininger states:

...the rudiment of homosexuality, in however weak form, exist in every human being... the adolescent stage, while there is still a considerable amount of undifferentiated sexuality... passionate attachments with a sensual side rule amongst boys as well as amongst girls.(Weininger 49)

The novel is a distinct marker for the dynamics of lesbian relationship. The discovery of Liza's identification with the lesbian type is rooted in her natural choice as one belonging to this way of being; I'd wondered why I'd rather go to movies with Sally or some other girl than with a boy, and why, when I imagined living with someone someday, permanently I mean, that person was always a female." (Garden 54)

The story of 'gender inversion' is located exactly at a point where both Eliza and Annie authenticate their subjectivity by narrativizing the Greek folklore of the origin of the unfortunate disparity between heterosexuality and homosexuality. But no matter how hard they try to accept their queerness they are both caught in a homophobic hesitance and double consciousness leading to self-criticism. Identity crisis restricts them from the 'come out' process and this takes toll of the emotional health of the lesbian partners Eliza and Annie. In Annie, the realization of her being gay was deeply settled much earlier than Eliza but she masked it with the fear of compelling the other into it. Eliza tries to impersonate the normative behaviour until its awareness leaves her completely helpless:

The worst thing was that we were shy to talk about it. And we got so tangled up that we began misunderstanding each other more and more often...we were afraid that someone would walk in and it wasn't long before we began using that fear to mask our deeper one...(Garden 60-64)

Such psychological orthodoxies are symptomatic of the cultural prohibitions that relegate the status of homosexuality as transgressive indulgence. When the working of the libido between Eliza and Annie becomes intense, they are governed by "fetish", in a way both the lesbian individuals become the subject and object of desire unlike heterosexuals. Teresa de Lauretis describes this desire as love, "articulated from the fantasy of dispossession" where the desire is no more a sexual perversity but an assertion of love for each other, a moment when homoeroticism sublimates into aesthetic communion between two bodies and two selves.(Lauretis 286)

Analyzing *Annie on My Mind* may lead many critics to give a reductive judgement on grounds of its focus on the adolescent characters and their deviant identity as temporary errors of hormonal disobedience during adolescence. Very tacitly, Nancy Garden armours the lesbian issue by providing two adult counterparts in Miss Stevenson and Miss Widmer- the teachers of Foster Academy. In lesbian literature, they can be situated as close couples in the way they had defied heterosexuality and preferred living together independently, away from the lost paradise of 'hetero-marital' relationship. It is the social panics who compel them to practice a life of veiled existence with their identity getting pushed into the margins. However, their closeted life had its own candid uniqueness, "they were like couple of old shoes, each with its own special lumps and bumps and cracks, but nonetheless a pair that fit with ease into the same shoe box."

(Garden 69). Their presence in the background brought comfort and courage to the young girls in asserting the choice of their identity and it intensified all the more as they spend time together in their house. Eliza's earlier complain about the distorted representation of lesbian identity in an encyclopaedia gets healed as both of them accidentally and quite symbolically bring "out of the closet", the plethora of queer literatures closed within Ms Widmer and Ms Stevenson's shelf at their house. The alchemy of liberty and the recognition of their being excite them as they scurry along the array of books, mirroring their identity-*Female Homosexuality* by Frank S Caprio, *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman* by Abbot Bolt and Love, *Patience and Sarah* by Isabel Miller and *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall. These literatures pose as testaments that lesbianism is not a pathological anathema and their state of queerness is to a certain extent normative and natural. The novel also punctures the negative understanding of pejorative clichés like the dissident lifestyle of the "butch" or the "femme" thereby contesting the rift between sex and gender.

The turning point of the novel is situated at a point when Eliza and Annie are caught in Ms Widmer's house by Ms Baxter and Sally after their first sexual encounter. Ms Baxter connotes their act as a blasphemy and voices the religious sanctions condemning it as vicious crime.

Sodom and Gomorrah are all around us Sally...There is ugliness and sin and self-indulgence in this house-as I have long feared. And to think the president of the student's council-a-a—a lesbian?...I feared the relationship between you two(pointing at Ms Widmer and Ms Stevenson) was..is immoral and unnatural. (Garden 87-88)

In a later part of the novel when Eliza has to face prosecution for this obscene conduct in Foster, Sally despises her conduct and alerts her to read *Leviticus* and *Roman:26*. Homosexuality cannot be criminalised on the ethics of Divine disobedience for history has a record that traces the way we actualise certain social and cultural prejudice by reading and interpreting the scriptures. If we penetrate deep into such rigidities we can cite how racial segregation, low status of women and slavery have been now pulled out from the mark of religious authenticity. Jack Bartlett Rogers arguments this conviction in his book, *Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* stating; "We took certain scriptures out of their context and claimed to read them literally, with tragic consequences for those to whom these verses were applied."(Rogers 34)

The fate of Ms Widmer and Ms Stevenson, their immediate expulsion from their jobs is a sad tale of many such people whom society rejects economic opportunity and personal freedom. Their tragic destiny can be alluded to Simone Bradley making love with her student, Annabelle Tillman in a Catholic boarding school in the 2006 released film, *Loving Annabelle*, directed by Katherine Brooks. Well, one of the overriding myth that consequence their victimhood is that homosexuality is contagious and 'given meaning and character by its location in time and social space.'(Weeks 6). The sexual configuration of a homosexual and lesbian *per se* is essentially ingrained in the psyche and external interference has probably negligible impact on one's orientation. It cannot be schooled or propagated as the radical feminist eluded it to be a political tool for liberation against the hegemony of the patriarchal society. It has to be weighed as an enduring reality. Hence Ms Baxter's accusation of the duo (Ms Widmer and Ms Stevenson) to incite licentiousness, having given choice of reading matter I will not call it literature—"having also been given leave to use your house as a..Trysting place...a place in which to indulge in unnatural lust!," seems flimsy and bereft of logic. (Garden 88). Another key concern that is detrimental to textual politics is the popular belief of judging queer literature as *jouissance*. Even the history of the novel's reception in 1982 has the scar of censorship controversy in Kansas, Olathe where the book was banned from the libraries of the school until it was repealed after a

long court trail in 1995. Queer literature is probably silenced under the pretext of upholding sexual purity and fundamentalism. Freedom of representation and expression is withheld on the basis of one's sexuality and gender nonconformity.

The potential crisis with a LGBT identity is centred in his/her sense of depravity from the accepted social norms where performativity constructs one's image in the living environment. It becomes chronic as one is put to indiscriminate public gaze. The fear of ostracization and moreover 'psychiatrization' threatens their orientation and their existence is one of passivity. Eliza's mental set up during the interim of the proceedings of granting her permission to join the MIT Massachusetts at a precarious moment when her conduct was put to test is one of deep anguish and guilt. She is broken as she imagines; ...what it would be like if people always reacted to Annie and me that way—being hurt by us, pitying us; worrying about us, or feeling threatened- even laughing at us... (Garden 101)

Foster becomes the veritable emblem of power and institutional machinery of discipline and control that converge within it the larger picture of the laws codified in a society. It is again anchored on Puritanic morality in one hand and pseudo-modernist on the other hand for it assumes to bestow democratic virtues to the pupils and the public. Paradoxically it champions dignity and equality and on the other side of the line it uses 'institutional manipulation' for hetero-sexism. Accusing Eliza's lesbianic identity and curtailing her right to education is the cruellest way of repressing individuality. While this is what Foucault terms "pedagogization of children's sex" in his book *History of Sexuality*. (Foucault 7)

Family structure plays a dominant role in constructing the sexuality and identity of an individual. The Winthrop family dubiously tries to manipulate Eliza's reality. The 'deployment of sexuality' is ordained by the parents who sexualize the children through their control on their actions, choices and desires. This is evident when George Winthrop (Eliza's father) sighs; "Liza, damn it, I always thought I was—well okay about things like homosexuality. But now when I find out that my own daughter might be.....I've never thought gay people can be very happy, no children, for one thing no real family life. (Garden 102)

The heterosexual society demands procreative behaviour with aim towards extending progeny of the family. While this seems to be lacking in a homosexual relationship which would in a Malthusian sense contribute to 'biological waste'. However such expectancy can be derided on the accountability of child adoption strategies. In a lesbianic stance, sex is no more "a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice" (Butler, 10) that has to be engaged in the bumping of the female body for procreation.

However the novel ends on a happy note with the Board of Trustee's decision of no disciplinary action against Eliza's conduct and their granting her permission to pursue studies at MIT Massachusetts. The novel's closure is enlightening for the cause of lesbian rights. It recognises the legitimacy of consensual intimacy of two persons, irrespective of their gender and sexuality and builds a congenial environment for their liberation and emancipation. Years later when Eliza reminisces her past, she is seen no more as a girl bound by conflict but as a woman who is willingly heading towards personhood;" The only thing that seemed truly real to me was one thought that wouldn't let go in my mind: I'ts Annie...And what we did they think is wrong, when you pare it all down, was fall in love." (Garden 106)

Once when Oscar Wilde was under trial for his homosexual indecency he remarked;"The Love that dares not speak the name." Homosexual identities are not human shams and their existence cannot be silenced. Hillary Clinton in her address at the Human Rights Celebration at Geneva (2011) brought to attention the issue of LGBT rights, stating:

Reaching understanding of these issues takes more than speech. It does take a conversation. In fact, it takes a constellation of conversations in places big and small. And it takes a willingness to see stark differences in belief as a reason to begin the conversation, not to avoid it.

LGBT rights should be legalised in all nations irrespective of their cultural differences and other ambiguities. The ongoing flux around the globe cannot be cut into bits and pieces revolving around the two forked meaning of gender but it needs the attendance of the representation of everyone in or outside gender and sexuality. If progress is the call of the day, we have to recognize their priorities through social activism, aesthetic representation and political liberation which were denied to them since the evolution of the human civilisation. Time is here to change history.

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