



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 2. Issue 4.,2015 (Oct. -Dec.)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

MAPPING IDENTITIES: A READING OF SHYAM SELVADURAI'S NOVEL
THE HUNGRY GHOSTS

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ABSTRACT

In a homophobic world, the perception of gender has been always in terms of binaries- male and female. The unacknowledged identities, which do not conform to the hetero-normative world, suffer from alienation, discrimination and penalized without consideration of their plea. As a matter of utmost concern, the novel- *The Hungry Ghosts*- by Selvadurai brings into fore covert experiences by a gay character named Shivan. Though the character leads an alienated life and engages in covert operations to give vent to his desires, the novel serves as a mouthpiece for these 'queer' identities. Since there are serious allegations against homosexuality as a 'disease', it becomes hard to come to a consensus to claim it as natural. Moreover, it becomes an absolute imperative to delve deep into the functioning of society to decipher the reason behind heterosexual existence and homosexual relegation. In order to understand the secret underpinnings, I have used the theories of eminent queer theorist Judith Butler. This paper takes up Butler's formulation of gender as 'performative', demand for 'compulsory heterosexuality', consequences of 'melancholic heterosexuality' to understand the reason behind existence of unacknowledged multiple identities in a homophobic world.

Keywords- Homosexuality, performative, queer, homophobia and identity

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Shyam Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts* is a novel attempting to unveil few complicacies of gender and tour the readers in a non-sanctioned world of homosexuality. His act of writing is polemical. Writing a novel allows him the space to contest the cemented heterosexual identities. The issue of gender is a sensitive one. The act of providing counter arguments may disrupt the age old beliefs regarding gender; resulting in social alienation, discrimination and even incarceration. The social agendas form a core subject in analyzing gender as it constantly manipulates to legitimize heterosexual expression. In 19th century, as Michel Foucault opines in *The History of Sexuality*, homosexuality became "a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious

physiology" (43). It was during this time when society tried to figure out sexual orientations which are normal and perversions. The diverse ways of perceiving homosexuals created an environment where queer ideas gained prominence. The oppression and relegation of homosexuals to psychological disorder could be ascertained throughout history. As recent as 1998, Christian right ministries placed advertisements to "cure" homosexuals (Kirsch 15). While castigating homosexual identity, societal roles create a homophobic world. It treats homosexuality almost as a sin which is punishable by law. Gender has been variedly interpreted by critics. Raewyn Connel, in her book *Gender* points out that in common usage gender refers to the cultural difference between men and woman based on their biological differences. Basically "dichotomy" and "difference" is the foundation on which such ideas are based (9). However, this kind of interpretation has its own limitations. Gender is much complex to be studied through these perspectives. Connel refers to an industry of "pop psychology" that believed and popularized the notion that men and women are from different planets altogether. Their interpretation proves men to be superior to women altogether. Psychologist Janet Hyde referred to this notion of gender difference as a hurdle in woman's employment rights and adult emotional relationships. This concern of binary opposites keeps homosexuality out of the frame. Selvadurai's attempt to create a homosexual protagonist draws our attention towards those identities that do not conform to the otherwise "natural identities" such as masculine and feminine. He endeavours to challenge this notion of "natural" and engages in a quest for a space that tolerates multiple identities. Kirch in his book *Queer Theory and Social Change* claims that queer includes lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual and transsexual; which are seen as variants of human behavior having their own individual rights (Kirch 33).

Homosexuality, as it does not conform to the heterosexual matrix was termed as "queer". Queer theory emerged in order to challenge this normal binary opposites regarding gender. Though the term "queer" was initially used to deride and vilify same sex desiring people, it was reclaimed by organisations such as Queer Nation to celebrate their differences from the set norm. Selvadurai's act of writing is backed by this bold attempt by queer theorists to acknowledge multiple identities. Gender does not refer to male and female as was previously thought. It is multiple. One of the key exponents of queer theory is Judith Butler who had presented radical ideas about gender. She examines the processes by which identities are formed and posits that a subject is not given. It is fluid and always in the process of becoming. The instability of gendered identities is shown and a necessity for studying gender in specific historical and discursive context is appealed. Butler borrows Foucault's notion of production of subject. Juridical systems of power create a subject; but this subject is constrained, restricted and monitored by the political structure. Considering this analysis Butler finds that the juridical formation of language and politics which seems to represent woman is produced in accordance with those political structures. For Butler, gendered identities are "performative". According to her there is no pre-supposed subject behind the deed. It is to be noted that "performative" does not signify performance. In a performance there is always an actor or performer that conducts the act of performing; but Butler's performative aspect denies the presence of a subject. In other words there is no doer behind the deed. The absence of a pre-existing subject is the core idea of Butler.

In her book *Gender Trouble*, she says:

Gender proves to be performative, that is constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed (Butler 34)

Moreover, the expressions or acts conducted by individuals are performatively constituted as gender. What one expresses in a conditioned world may not be its gender. There is no identity behind the expressions of gender. Moreover, "Gender" cannot be separated from the political and cultural intersections in which it is produced and maintained. Therefore, it becomes an absolute imperative on our part to explore the social conditions responsible in stabilizing heterosexual identities.

Shyam Selvadurai's novel *The Hungry Ghosts* presents a homophobic world. The protagonist named Shivan fears to articulate his desire, choice, as he is marginalized, oppressed and even penalized for his failure to adhere to the established social norms. The character struggles to establish its gender identity as individuals

are permitted to wear heterosexual identities only. This paper aims to showcase how Selvadurai de-stabilizes and subverts heterosexual identities and engages in quest for a space that tolerates multiple identities.

Queer theorists have always engaged in questioning and enquiring what is “normal”. Nietzsche’s idea that nothing is “given” or “natural” is the premise on which queer theory grounds itself. In this context, the title used by Selvadurai in his novel gathers pertinence and deserves critical attention as it seems to question the very notion of “natural” allotted by the society. In the novel, the narrator refers to his Tamil father as a “hungry ghost”, who visits her mother in her dreams with “stork like limbs”, “enormous belly” and “his mouth no larger than the eye of a needle, so he can never satisfy his hunger” (24). The plurality of “ghosts” suggests Shivan’s own homosexual identity which is treated as un-natural, spooky and even lacking sanctity. The metaphysical existence of his identity haunts his entire life. The imagery of “mouth” smaller than eye of a needle suggests the absence of his modes of expression. The homophobic world is antagonistic towards harmonious co-existence and willful tolerance towards homosexuality. In the novel, we find the characters trying to claim that they are queer not by choice but by birth. A heated argument between Amma, Renu and Shivan brings forth the perception of homosexuality. When Shivan’s mother comes to know about his homosexuality she says:

“Are you an idiot to choose to be gay when this plague is going on?”....“Amma, Amma,” Renu intervened, “it’s not a choice. Shivan is naturally like this.” (Hungry Ghosts 129)

For Amma, Shivan’s homosexuality is something he had deliberately chosen. His grandmother too shared similar thoughts. After the discovery of relationship between Mili and Shivan, she says that the Jayasinghe boy has a part in “changing” Shivan into this “grotesque” character (222). She scolds him to let himself down to such “corruption”. However, Shivan appeals that he is homosexual by nature. Renu too while arguing with her mother says that he is homosexual in orientation right from his birth and it is not a choice.

Judith Butler in *Subjects of Desire* gives an account of the nature of the self. During the formation of the “self”, it desires the Other which is within itself. Unlike Hegelian philosophy which opines that the self consciousness must destroy the Other to know itself, Butler’s self and Other exists in a state of simultaneous autonomy from each other. The self desires recognition from another self consciousness. It tries to transform the world in order to gain autonomy. A self can assert itself by making an impact upon community. As Sarah Salih, in her understanding of Judith Butler, says that a subject can achieve its identity only by being in a community. It would articulate its presence through the body and work (Salih 28). Judith Butler in *Subjects of Desire* says:

True subjectivities come to flourish only in communities that provide for reciprocal recognition, for we do not come to ourselves through work alone, but through the acknowledging look of the Other who confirms us. (SD 58)

The lack of sufficient space for homosexual beings is mainly due to operation of compulsory heterosexuality in the society. A community that stresses the need of heterosexual identity engages itself in determining one’s sex, gender and sexuality. Indeed, the role of institutions, discourses and practices plays a crucial role in its determination. However, the identities that one is assigned is mere construction. There are many avenues open to subvert and challenge the existing power structure. Judith Butler in her work, *Imitation and Gender Insubordination* brings in the concept of “drag”. It refers to the way genders are worn and imitated trying to project itself as natural. The imitation is a “phantasmatic ideal” of heterosexual identity; existing only in the imagination, brooding over it and treating as original. For Butler, the imitation is a never ending process and so there are possibilities which may challenge or subvert this heterosexual matrix. Selvadurai in his novels presents characters that do not fit into the heterosexual categories of male and female. Being homosexual, the characters feel the urge to “do” their gender a bit differently from the heterosexuals. However, the law forbids them from undertaking such a step and threatens their existence altogether. Simon de Beauvoir’s famous statement, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” has been well acclaimed by queer theorist Judith Butler. Indeed, gender is something which they “do” rather than what they really are. Gender is not given. It is what one does. It is an act or a sequence of acts. Butler’s conception of performativity gathers pertinence as she claims that there is no “doer” behind the deed. Unlike a performance that presupposes a subject, Butler

negates such possibility. But the problem is that the choice of gender offered is very limited. It is already assigned. A person has limited choice of gender: Male and Female. This is apparent in the novel as Shivan discovers that he is homosexual and wants a life that can be truly called his own. A living where he could exercise desires and choices freely. However, he is not allowed to “do” his gender. Being homosexual, Shivan had to lead a mysterious life or more precisely two parallel lives. The law condemns homosexuality and this is the reason why Shivan “smuggled” articles relating to the gay movement in San Francisco and New York (57). He had to hide them under his mattress and make sure his mother never discovered them. While narrating Shivan’s early childhood, his craze for reading books facilitated his access to the biography of a homosexual actor Montgomery Cliff. At that moment, he confides in the readers about his “discovery” of being homosexual (56). The realization of his gender identity made him wary of a Shivan shows that he is a born homosexual, rather than a patient suffering from a disease. His reading provided him with a warning about the dangers involved in declaring oneself homosexual. He could foresee the homophobic world ready to gulp him at once. Another warning was issued by Sriyani after figuring Shivan and Mili as gay. She said that Sri Lanka would penalize with ten years in jail if one is homosexual in sexual orientation (215). Butler claims that there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender. Identity is “performatively” constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results (GT 34). Though the characters wish to “do” or lead their lives differently, they are forced either to compromise or else penalized. In a conversation, Mili says that in Sri Lanka they will have to lead bachelor’s lives and will never be together. He accepts his situation because he has no choice and Shivan too agrees with it. In case of Mili the situation is even worse as his homosexual orientation is penalized by death.

The role of community also brings us the concept of “melancholic heterosexuality”. The way an infant is mandated to wear heterosexual identity right from the formation of his ego. Prohibition is one of the grounds on which gender identities are created. Butler in her work, *Gender Trouble* uses Freud’s ideas to explicate this phenomenon. “Melancholia” is when the subject is not aware of what it has actually lost. In this case an infant immediately associates the loss with the outside world. Taboo against homosexuality and incest works as soon as an infant is born. When a girl child desires her mother, she is replaced with something from the outside world. Butler claims that this process is due to the prohibition of homosexuality in society. Similarly, the girl later substitutes desire for her father due to prohibition of incest. In this process, she is bound to become a heterosexual being. Butler’s idea is that sex and gender is formed in response to prohibition. Thus, Butler points out that gender identity appears primarily to be the internalization of a prohibition that proves to be formative of identity (86). The heterosexual identity has a ground on which it works to keep its legacy alive. An individual’s gender identity is basically what it had wanted to be but is not. As Butler says:

If the heterosexual denial of homosexuality results in melancholia and if melancholia operates through incorporation, then the disavowed homosexual love is preserved through the cultivation of an oppositionally defined gender identity (GT 96)

Now this prohibition creates a problem for those having homosexual orientations. A straight person can cultivate heterosexual living but a homosexual fails to create an “oppositionally defined gender identity” i.e homosexuality. To borrow Butler’s idea, we find that the law that prohibits homosexuality and incest also in some way or other inadvertently creates produces substitute identities and desires. First of all the law the law creates homosexuality only to repress it so that heterosexuality is born. Homosexuality is a need for the survival of heterosexuality.

If the incest taboo regulates the production of discrete gender identities, and if that production requires the prohibition and sanction of heterosexuality, then homosexuality emerges as a desire which must be produced in order to remain repressed. In other words, for heterosexuality to remain intact as a distinct social form, it *requires* an intelligible conception of homosexuality and also requires the prohibition of that conception in rendering it culturally unintelligible (GT 106).

What is important is that the prohibition at the infant stage sometimes fail to establish heterosexual identity and there are individuals like Shivan, Mili, Michel or Oliver who are attracted to the same sex. Butler in her work *Gender Trouble* explains that gender is constituted by the cultural impositions on a sex body. With the presumption of existence of binary sex, there is no certainty that the cultural construction of “men” will attribute to the male body and construction of “woman” would be to the female body. Thus gender becomes a “free floating artifice” (9). There emerges possibility of multiple identities like masculine woman or feminine man. However, the communities that surround the homosexual characters in the novel are homophobic. It does not acknowledge a subject that fails to conform to the established modes of sexuality. The communities are afflicted by “homosexual panic”. As Sedgwick uses the term to refer straight culture’s paranoid response to instable identities. Being homosexual, Shivan tries to come to terms with his gender identity. He knows about the rules set against him; yet he tries to convey the idea that “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it!” (Hall 53).

Selvadurai’s characters show that gender is not stable. There are possibilities of multiple identities and these would evolve despite the workings of law. Homosexual individuals are in a quest of creating a space which is not “oppositionally defined gender identity”; but co-existing with heterosexuality. This reminds me about Shivan’s early years at Toronto, when he feared that he would be ignored, discriminated being an Asian in a Western country. However, to his surprise he was welcomed to that country wholeheartedly as people were “indifferent” to his presence (94). This implies that acceptance or willful co-existence of multiple identities do not come in treating each other in a special way but by being “indifferent” to differences. Canada offered a space for gay communities. The appalling presence of gay bars provided him with an outlet to give vent to his desires. Shivan found a pamphlet that read:

If you think you might be Gay, and need help coming to terms with your sexual orientation or just connecting with the community, this pamphlet is for you (*Hungry Ghosts* 95).

Shivan enjoyed a relative autonomy to live with Michel in Canada. Selvadurai seems to appeal for a similar kind of space unlike Sri Lanka where being homosexual is regarded as something degradable to someone’s social position. Shivan’s sister Renu says that Sri Lanka is a conservative country and it would be disgraceful to her mother if the society finds out that Shivan is gay. The space for multiple identities is possible and the destabilization of heterosexual identity is skillfully presented in the novel.

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