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## **Lesbian as the Absolute Other: Usha Ganguli's Rudali in Perspective**

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**Abstract:**

*The lesbian has been constructed by the hetero-normative order as a pathological or psychological disorder. Desiring the same sex has been considered to be an act of perversion. The paper critically looks at the discourse of lesbian and foregrounds the idea of choice, which may not be just sexual but can also have a phenomenological conditioning. Usha Ganguli's adaptation of Mahasweta Devi's Rudali is a reading of the relation between two women, Sanichari and Bikhni, where the lesbian is presented in the light of becoming. With the two remaining in close communion with each other at the face of adversity, the paper reads their struggle as a resistance to male hegemonic order. Their defiance in remaining in almost entire dissociation with the men, and taking up rudali as the profession along with the prostitutes' conscious attempts to foreground their profit motive in trading their flesh with men, speak of an exclusive space sharing between women that go on to construct them as the absolute other to the institutions of patriarchy.*

**Keywords:** *Lesbian, Lesbian Continuum, Other, Performance, Performative, Hetero-normative discourse, Phenomenology*

The idea of desire itself harbors the wish to have something; to possess something completely so that it may satisfy oneself. Heterosexual desire across cultures has been conventionally seen as the normative order, while the desire to possess the body of a person from one's own sex has been regarded as a psychological and pathological disorder. Any act of expressing this desire would be an act of perversion; it would be held 'unnatural' and hence the person doing so would be liable to be stigmatized. Hetero-normative discourses have ideologically constructed this in such ways as to ignore the existence of the gays and more so of the lesbians. Havelock Ellis and Krafft Ebbing were the first among the 19<sup>th</sup> Century sexologists to identify the image of a "different woman" who would be sexually inclined towards another woman. This female 'invert' by her nature would never remain constrained within the limits set by the heterosexual society but would always try to proliferate and possess her object of desire, i.e. another 'woman'. The Lesbian couple was further divided into butch and femme; butch being a 'masculine invert', would make bolder expressions of her desire for her partner, the femme, who would in turn play the role of a docile woman as ready as ever to stimulate and satisfy the passion in the former. (Putting Your Daughters on the Stage) Hence such readings of the lesbian couple spoke of a mimetic imitation of the heterosexual order, for the essential distinctions between the 'normal' heterosexual couples and the 'abnormal' lesbian couple and then again the differences between the partners in a lesbian couple itself was an attempt to fit the divides into a system which would allow only binary categories to exist.

However such essentialism has been questioned and lesbians now are seen as constructs like any other man, woman or a gay. But even to arrive at this recognition, there have been debates among the sociologists, academicians, activists and cultural theorists over the decades. Feminism has tried to occupy the site of conjunction between the 'lesbian' and the 'woman', to seek a balance between the two terms, to strike relationships between them which do not necessarily exist, though it has resulted in the lesbian getting 'closeted' within the 'feminist frame' (The Gender Closet, Lesbian Subjects, 210). Adrienne Rich in her stimulating essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", which appeared in the Summer 1980 volume of 'Signs', proposed the formation of a lesbian continuum to battle out men identified women's 'normative order' and establish women-identified lesbian existence. She called for a network of women which would not just subsist on mere genital sexual experience but emotional comradeship as well. She urged the feminists to take up the critique of compulsory heterosexual orientation for women and speak in favour of lesbian existence. But such women identification too has been criticized by critics like Bidy Martin who voiced for a "sensitivity to difference" (Martin, Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference[s], in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, 275), for "What appears in the place of the woman-identified woman is, in effect, the difference-identified woman" (Caulhon Cheshire, Lesbian Disappearance under the Sign "Women", *The Gender Closet: Lesbian Subjects, A Feminist Studies Reader* 214). A lesbian hence under feminism was recognized as one who would identify her difference from the heterosexual man but not the difference that exists between her and another heterosexual woman, notwithstanding the intrinsic difference in a lesbian couple itself. Hence the lesbian was conceived in terms of a monolithic identity of a woman, thereby dissolving the lesbian in it. Cheshire Caulhon therefore remarks that 'Feminism has moved straight from "There is no essential Woman identity" to "There is

no essential Lesbian identity" (214), thereby ignoring even the presence of the 'butch-femme role playing' in the lesbian performance, not to speak of 'race, class, ethnic and national structures'(214) as anti-essentialities already present.

When feminism thus closets the lesbian, lesbianism needs to speak for itself. Martha Vicinus's *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women* spoke of a separate history of the lesbians though there exists no public documentation of it, unlike the gay history. Taking the poststructuralist notion of silence being more expressive than voices, Vicinus argued that the lesbians self-imposed upon them a disguise in order to remain sheltered from being disturbed in their performance, by the hetero-normative hegemonic ideas of patriarchy. In the pursuit of constructing a history of the lesbians, Vicinus took into account a number of examples from the middle ages to the present and found a commonality between them, where they all remained "hidden from history" (refer to the title of an anthology co-edited by Martha herself). Any feminist account of the lesbian history may look at the politics of silencing from the part of 'patriarchy', thereby establishing it as solely responsible for the ignorance of the lesbians in conventional history. Vicinus takes just the opposite stance and critically looks at this as a strategy on the part of the lesbians themselves and hence argues that "we have too long assumed that women in the past could not name their erotic desires, rather than recognizing their refusal to name them" (Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*, xix). Traditional critics while investigating the lesbian history asked the question of what they did or didn't do on bed, while for Martha, the women she discussed here "were erotically attracted to women, whatever their sexual practices"(229). She speaks of a range of women in erotic love with other women, but who were never branded as lesbians. Beginning with Sarah Ponsonby and Eleanor Butler, the two ladies of Llangollen, who lived in seclusion in the pastoral Wales, Vicinus moves through the nineteenth century highlighting such names who never have been charged with lesbianism but if critically looked upon, reveals factual details that suffice such assumptions. She refers to an eccentric landowner, Anne Lister, from whom were found a number of diaries, which spoke of sex between women; she also refers to a community of women artists in Rome, who lived in complete detachment to men; she also speaks of one Mary Benson, who lived in spiritual communion with many women. What are common in these women are that they disguised themselves in some socially acceptable roles and that their relationships speak of a coming togetherness, hence their remains the idea of becoming conscious of one's own choice. All of these women fore-grounded their choice of living with other women, sometimes even in complete separation with the men folk, thereby constructing a world of their own.

Echoes of such relationships we do find in Usha Ganguli's adaptation of Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali*. Though the original novella primarily focuses on the question of class and caste in the face of oppression in a complex Indian society, Ganguli's adaptation foregrounds the issue of gender as the play moves centering on the relationship between Sanichari and Bikhni, two childhood friends who after a long gap of several years chance meet in a 'mela'. They choose to remain with each other, both of them being abandoned by their near ones.

With Bikhni staying in Sanichari's house now, Ganguli traces the relationship between the two with details which point towards some subtle things, that may get lost under the brilliancy of the plot. In deciding to remain together both of them proliferate their own desires, thereby foregrounding their choice and then what follows is the performance of two women intimately involved with each other. With Bikhni massaging Sanichari's hair, caressing her, decking her with gifts of earrings, Sanichari found in the former a true partner, who became the first one to give her any gift after her dead husband. Sanichari's emotions found a firm set haven in Bikhni where it can confide itself. Both of them enjoyed a course relationship, which was devoid of any male intrusions. Such women identification moves closer to the idea of 'lesbian continuum' (Rich, 648). Hence propelled by the personal choice, which was again governed by the condition of solitariness they were in, they embark on a journey together, be it loving, 'acting coy', getting emotionally involved, or be it solidifying with each other, pampering, sympathizing or even saying that "... in my whole life nobody has ever done so much for me"(Rudali,140) - the performances which lead them closer to becoming lesbians. What comes out of this is that both the lesbian and the woman were present in the same person, as is the presence of any other self, be it masculine, feminine, gay or the lesbian, but when the woman in Sanichari, which was again a constructed imposition imposed upon by the society, gets frustrated of its expectations, the lesbian self in her is confronted with a choice of proliferating itself and so it does. Hence what can be inferred from this is that the lesbian even as an active choice is not confined to the 'mirror stage' only, but can also come up as a resultant phenomenological choice, which is followed by a series of performances in repetition, as is claimed by Judith Butler in an interview by Max Miller: "We act as if that being of a man or that being of a woman is actually an internal reality or something that is simply true about us, a fact about us, but actually it's a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduced all the time, so to say gender is performative is to say that nobody really is a gender from the start"(bigthink.com, your behavior creates your gender) everyone becomes one. One is what the roles make one. So one's identity, one's being is in the process of becoming. But then becoming entails the ideas of mutability, possibilities and potentials for change. Hence the acquired lesbian identity may again get transformed into any other, by the agency of a choice being conditioned by circumstances. However the play reads this in a different light.

Having constructed Sanichari and Bikhni in terms of the lesbians, the play mirrors their performances in such ways as to establish them in direct opposition to the male dominated discourses. That Sanichari finds a comforter in Bikhni, is already discussed but their relationship finds greater dimensions when they become economically independent. Resistance to male intrusions is one thing but under the inhibitions of class in the profession of 'rudali' and 'prostitution, what remains to be critically deciphered is the idea of turning the patriarchal institution of pride in making the 'rudalis' cry for one's dead associate, into an instrument of making money. Both the 'rudalis' and the prostitutes subvert the whole process of being objectified by using their bodies (rudalis by beating their breasts and crying out as loud as they can and prostitutes by trading their bodies) to churn out money from their

employers and customers at their own discretion. For the prostitutes, they 'consensually' go into sex with men being compelled by circumstances, but the play presents clear indications of them finding emotional and even sometimes physical comfort in other women, thereby constituting a world of their own being integrated by the 'lesbian continuum'(648). Such defiance of the norms by living in dissociation of the normative patriarchal society and transforming the instruments of oppressions into profit producing agents, Sanichari, Bikhni and the prostitutes, read here as lesbians, establish themselves as the absolute other to the patriarchal institution of hetero-normative order.

Hence the play, as adapted by Usha Ganguli is not just a reading of hegemony initiating the whole process of class struggle, however meek it may be, but also defiance on the part of the women who constitute among them a lesbian association not only in terms of physical and emotional interdependency but economic as well, thereby negating the socially constructed significance associated with the patriarchal heterogeneity.

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