



# Depicting Sexuality/Eros - A concept dominated by men, lent to women

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Eros as a concept has for centuries come to connote passionate love, love of the sensual kind. Deriving its name from the Greek God of love Eros, who is often represented by the image of Cupid, 'eros' is a contentious concern associated with the innate instincts of life, a life energy in other words. Over years, sexuality a close approximation of the term eros in contemporary reality has come to be understood keeping in mind several factors. This paper aims to study sexuality as a concept depicted in novels or narratives as primarily dominated by men and only lent to women or people who don't identify as a part of the two ends of the conventional gender binary. Three texts that the paper will explore are *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin, excerpts from Plato's *Symposium* and *The Mothers of Maya Diip* written by Suniti Namjoshi. All the three texts delve into the concept of sexuality from different perspectives and explore multiple contexts of sexuality while trying to represent it vividly through the stories the novels they seek to tell. The paper will develop on the concepts of representation of sexuality and gender, changes in these representations over the years and the dominance of masculinity/ the male perspective even in texts of queer literature on sexuality, marginalizing women and people who identify as any other gender not restricted by the binary.

The discourse on sexuality is dynamic, creating its way and determining its course throughout history. Sexuality has been contextualized, created and reconstructed in different ways by feminists, queer theorists and post colonialists. Although the perceived shame associated with eros or sexuality has weaned off considerably with texts dealing with sexuality and portraying it with little hesitation, as readers, one sees a pattern of masculine sexuality being represented, others not being afforded the space to define their sexuality in their own terms, only being assigned their understanding of sexuality by the men of society who happen to govern how sexuality will be perceived and accepted.

*Giovanni's Room*, written by James Baldwin in the year 1956 has come to garner immense critical acclaim since its publication. It follows the story of David, a young American boy who faces difficulty in accepting his sexuality and tries throughout the entire length of the novel to repress it. While the novel has several allusions to the sexuality of the main characters, David and the titular Giovanni, readers never see a vivid description of the sexuality of other characters who are women or transgender. Their presence almost feels like a ploy with little to no effect on the progression of the story and that which falls under the shadows of David's uncertainties about his sexuality. They are not afforded an individual space to develop or discover their own sexuality and their sexualities remain latent and subservient throughout the text.

*The Mothers of Maya Diip*, a novel written by Suniti Namjoshi in the year 1989, is a fabulistic tale of a utopic land where matriarchy exists and only women live and thrive on this land. A faraway land, in reality and concept, adulthood in women here is synonymous to motherhood for all women are expected to be mothers. While the narrative shows a land of only women existing and depicts the lesbian relationships that flourish, an interesting aspect is that sexuality is not overtly delved into. Despite being a queer novel about only women with men unconventionally playing a very peripheral role,

readers encounter a rift in its representation of sexuality and uniqueness. It is only towards the end that men find space for themselves, yet in that limited space and time, they are developed enough to portray themselves as a dominant force existing in another society where they have irrepressible power. Giving massive importance to the act of procreation, the writer has repeatedly shown the need to have men in the society thereby undermining the entire pretext of a world where women can be the sole decision makers.

A text significantly different from the other two, written centuries before by the Greek philosopher Plato, *Symposium* is a work dedicated to eros and its various understandings as presented by different Athenian citizens who have come together in Agathon's banquet. The myths presented in this book have met with several criticisms over the years for its immense preoccupation with the sexuality of men, considering women and other genders as secondary people with their sexuality being defined men. As the text progresses through different people putting forth their opinions on eros, readers realize the repeated association of incompleteness with the idea of eros, an incompleteness that causes vulnerability in women and other gender than men desiring other men.

Over the years since these texts have been written, a large number of people have undertaken studies to develop ideas on the representation of sexuality through these characters. For instance, in *Giovanni's Room*, as a scholar discusses in his essay, David after moving in with Giovanni and taking the role of housekeeping accuses him of treating him like his 'little girl' showing that as a girl or a woman that he is considered to be, he has no agency over her sexuality that is only given to him by Giovanni. As the essayist continues, Hella 'is used as a reminder to David that a more socially acceptable path exists for him', in the process disregarding her own identity that is automatically assumed to be straight despite the novel not exploring her life from an individualistic perspective. As written in the paper titled 'Gender Roomours II : Gender and Space', the writers say 'Hella (his fragile anchor in heterosexuality)' showing how she is a ruse to understand a man's sexuality, not her own. In a thesis by Amber Celestin, called 'Defining Spaces : Giovanni's Room and the Journey to Identity', the writer talks of Hella, one of the very few female characters in the text in these terms – 'Hella is a space in and of herself, a place in which David wishes to take up residence, claiming it in the name of his manhood and personal identity.' It becomes clearly evident then that Hella is shown to have no sexual identity of her own.

A text far removed from the reality, research conducted on *The Mothers of Maya Diip* shows how even in feminine texts and identity, sexuality in women is hardly explored. As Sharmila and Praba have written in their essay titled 'Cultural Feminism in Suniti Namjoshi's *The Mothers of Maya Diip*' 'Jyanvi has sinned against motherhood, which is the premier identity of the Mayan women, their religion and their family structure.' While a text primarily devoted to women, lesbianism and thereby sexuality, it does little to dwell on the concern of sexual identity and interpersonal relationships other than motherhood. Talking of the text, Namjoshi says that she has shown "an Asian perspective, an alien perspective, later a lesbian perspective (Mann)." As has been written in the book 'South Asians Novelists in English- An A-to-Z Guide'-

“Maya, like its name, proves to be both compassionate and illusory, a state in which motherhood is revered but in which a hierarchical, exclusive, even murderous political system flourishes as the matriarchate replicates patriarchal organizational patterns’

The given segment shows how women's sexuality yet again is subservient to other concerns in the text, with patriarchy being a dictating force established to compare any other existence, including one predominantly under women with lesbianism being the accepted sexual orientation.

In Aristophanes speech in *Symposium* which talks of a primitive humanity and the sexualities attached to it, the genealogy of love 'puts pederasty on a pedestal and places heterosexuality and female homosexuality in a subordinate position'. In his paper titled 'The Antimonies of Human Sexuality in Plato' by Odia, he raises an important question 'Could it be that the presence of females in lesbian love and heterosexual love is the reason why these sexual orientations are inferior to that of homosexual love?' giving a nuanced insight into how texts from time immemorial considered men to have the ultimate say and to be the definition of sexuality while females or people who didn't subscribe to either of the two, conventionally defined genders were expected to accept their reasoning of superiority, their own sexuality falling inferior to their stand. There is 'an unusual celebration of male same-sex desire by contemporary Western standards. Plato is

explicitly linking manliness not with heterosexual desire but with homosexual desire' as has been rightly said by Gillis in 'Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies' while the desires of the other genders are portrayed to be of less importance and thereby not 'noble'.

This paper will elucidate on an already accepted notion that sexuality as a concept even in terms of depiction in novels and texts falls under the purview of men and problematize this outlook. While women and other genders are present in discourses of sexuality, they don't have an open say, and never given the opportunity to discover them, even in the pages of these texts. This paper will bring to light the stark injustice of this reality, and show instances to substantiate how this reality has not changed over years. Critically analyzing the texts, situations where the dominance of men in sexuality and relative latent passivity of characters of other genders in the texts will highlight the unfairness of representation of sexuality, even in queer texts. While research has been done previously to understand the depiction of sexuality and its changing dynamics over the years from an ancient, mythical perspective to the modern landscape, this paper will look at it from a critical viewpoint, questioning whether these representations uphold the ideals of sexuality being a universal concept which however in truth is owned by men and only lent to women and other genders as an issue to be accepted that is external to their individual identity and can only be determined in a context of a man's sexuality.

In the novel *Giovanni's Room* very early on, after his intimate moment with Joey, the narrator writes 'I made up a long and untrue story about a girl I was going with' showing how the imagined girl is only a ruse in the large scheme of his sexuality, her sexuality being immaterial and unworthy of special attention for society at large. Hella, the main female character of the text in several separate occasions highlights how it is just men and their sexuality that is given importance in the text, her sexuality being presented as a consequence. The Hella David describes is free-spirited, experimenting and not restricted but the Hella readers encounter in the book is very different from this representation of her. She returns home, desirous of marriage and raising her own family, an unsatisfactory subscription to the 'ideal' heteronormativity. She says 'I'm beginning to think women get attached to something by default.' showing that the society doesn't offer women the space to understand their own sexuality, only offers it to her as a pre-determined notion, a concept that is mirrored in the representation of women's sexuality in this particular work as well. Not once are readers introduced to Hella's experiences during her tour, only accepting her as a person who believes in the heteronormative principles. Hella's desperation to know the truth behind David's relationship with Giovanni in these terms- 'You've gone away somewhere and I can't find you. If you'd only let me reach you-' shows how his sexuality is important and subject to multiple explorations while hers is taken to be implicit. The entire incident of David's sexual act with Sue shows how she is only a presence meant to prove his own supposed sexuality. It has very little to do with her own interests or sexual needs or her own sexuality per se but more with his need to 'prove' his sexuality. The conscious absence of women and their sexuality in the novel shows how sexuality is considered a concern meant for men and only passed to women and other genders. In the bar, readers see an incidence of deliberate and arrogant misgendering by the narrator. He talks of the trans people in belittling terms and uses the adjective 'grotesque' to describe them, while in reality it is his language and self-importance that stops him from accepting their gender and sexual orientation which he thinks should not warrant any importance or interest.

*The Mothers of Maya Diip* as a novel has been beautifully crafted to show a utopic world where only women exist and govern their lives. However, despite being a queer text, surprisingly the text doesn't build into the sexuality of its characters. Women are shown to necessarily grow up into mothers, motherhood being the defining factor for the development of their identities. It is in relation to the children they look after that their entire lives revolve. A text which shows lesbianism as the accepted norm, it however doesn't explore the interpersonal and sexual relationships between these women. It remains a matter of speculation, up to the readers' interpretation with no overt representation. It is only through Jyanvi's character that one is acquainted with their sexuality although it falls under the shadows of motherhood. In the 'Song of a Non-Mother', Jyanvi talks of how she 'loved my love with passion' and discounts the extreme importance given to children which leads to her persecution. In this way, the novel represents women's sexuality as secondary to their characters. When Valerie talks of a heteronormative world the idea of which sounds 'outlandish', she shows how Ashans have control over Mayans and the process of procreation. In thus being restricted to the forced heteronormative sexuality to produce babies, Mayans or women are yet again being denied their space in the concern of their own sexuality. Jyanvi as an individual is more invested in her relationship with Saraswati but this predominant part

of her identity is repeatedly made to recede under the innate need of this society to make every woman a mother, dismissing her sexuality's importance.

In *Symposium*, the entire speech of Phaedrus talks only of men as 'beautiful' lovers, not once raising any concerns about the sexuality of any woman, common or heroic. Achilles and his love are talked about, but not once do readers get a view of any feminine individuals. While the term 'lover' is genderless, it becomes clear that it is only of men that the word is talking of, their sexuality. In the speech, Pausanias says Common Aphrodite, is the 'love that the baser sort of men feel' directed towards women who are assumed to be unintelligent. In this way, not only is a woman's sexuality being represented as non-existent or unworthy of consideration but their intellectual abilities are also undervalued. Even in Aristophanes speech talks of the male-male union as the highest form, one to which any other union falls short. Noticeably almost all the speeches are made by men, Diotima coming at the very end. She is the only female figure to give her opinion on sexuality, but despite that she doesn't explore female sexuality. All the speeches talk of union of men, leaving the conversation about women and other genders implicit, not according them any space in the discussion, only considering the discussion an excess with no importance.

After a critical analysis of all the three texts that form a part of queer literature, it is vividly clear that while the texts deal with sexuality and present it both overtly and covertly as a part of identity that needs to be discussed and explored, it gives men the space to do this while for women and people who don't follow the gender binary. Sexuality feels like a concept meant only for men, to discover and women are borrowing from a space where they are mere ploys, trying to negotiate their individuality. Depiction of sexuality even today is often evaded or shrouded by morality but the point to be noted here is how even the limited works that talk of sexuality push women to the periphery of this discussion. While these works have taken a major step towards beginning conversations on sexuality, they are a long way away from representing sexuality in equal terms where every gender has a say in their own orientation.

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