



Sexual Autonomy, Conspiracy Of Silence And Marginalization Of The Lesbian Self In Abha Dawesar's *Babyji*

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Abstract: Abha Dawesar's *Babyji* a provocative exploration of Sexual autonomy, conspiracy of silence and marginalization of the Lesbian self-focused upon the protagonist Anamika Sharma who navigates her lesbian self in a world that has no linguistic and social slot for her identity. Dawesar's portrayal of sexual autonomy is not merely a pursuit of pleasure but a subversive tool of the marginal lesbian identity to dismantle intersectional aspects of a heteronormative society. There are an erasure and obscurity shadowing the true lesbian identity revealing the conspiracy of silence where family and society know about the non-conforming but do not accept as a matter of shame. The silence marginalizes denying lesbianism as a valid identity and renders sexual autonomy not to break the silence.

Index Terms: Silence, Marginalization, Linguistic Erasure, Class, Power, Domestic Interior

Babyji by Abha Dawesar is a critical exploration of the power, desire and the subversion of the social hierarchies in the postcolonial scenario of India. The protagonist of the novel is Anamika Sharma and adolescent school going girl in her puberty and with her sexual orientation towards the same sex she navigates her identity as a lesbian in a world that has no language and slot to define her identity and existence. The novel creates a discourse to perpetuate normativity and justify the mental health of the excluded communities of the society and here specifically lesbians. There is a scope of analysing the teenage behaviour, their issues and challenges along with the changes occurring in their body due to hormonal changes at the stage of puberty which ultimately shape their identity.

The novel revolves around the protagonist referred as *Babyji* aka Anamika Sharma, a girl in twelfth standard and Head Prefect at school. She is an unconventional lover with many unusual lesbian relationships in which she has a connection with a divorcee lady, a maid servant and another girl of her age which is an extremely potent instrument challenging the privileged discourse of dominant heterosexual society. As Sedgwick quotes that queer is having innumerable possibilities, it may have excess of meanings particularly when the constituent elements of anyone's gender and sexuality are not made monolithically (Sedgwick, *Tendencies*).

In Anamika's case the idea is quite evident when she has three different affairs and this effectively defines the sense of indeterminacy and fluidity which are integral parts of the queer discourse. Anamika's confrontation with her body and the desire that she has reflected when she confides to the readers when she expresses, "I used to be innocent...My knowledge of the facts of life was based entirely on books...these books never went into any details....To remedy this I decided to read Kamasutra" (Dawesar 2).

This is actually the point where Anamika's aspect of desire in the novel comes out to reflect what she is allowed to read and what she is desiring to read and do which is even beyond her reading. She is a girl of teenage who is undergoing an important phase of transition and hormonal changes and the way she desires to read Kamasutra definitely forecasts her future inclination.

The lesbian experience and identities have been given a marginal position in the Indian society as well as the Indian writings which is very clearly presenting a cultural hesitation to understand and

acknowledge the sexual orientation of females and their concept of sexuality outside the established heteronormative norms and social framework.

The desire of the same sex is often excluded through a mysterious silence, some implications of denial and a kind of moral discomfort which all together suppress the idea that the sexual agency of females is regulated and controlled. The society and its set norms reflect that whenever there is a diversion from the established social norms, it will invite scrutiny and analysis without trying to locate the roots of its origin and an understanding.

In this context the literary texts become a powerful tool of expressing the condition of the restraint and obscure. Dawesar's narrative is not employing the coded terms and in fact it is very direct and lived experience rather than symbolic or mere sensational element. The setting of the novel has been done in urban space which develops a presumption in reader's mind that it consists of the intellectual openness and personal spaces therefore the queer will be understood and accepted but Dawesar's work reveals that in the urban settings also the limitations are present. Her idea of representing the urban modernity in the novel is existing along with the social expectations from a woman's behaviour under heteronormative lens and that is the reason why it every time makes an attempt to make it invisible and reflect that it is deviant from the accepted normal.

The lesbian desire is neither accepted nor rejected but there are a typical silence and an unspoken need for the secrecy. The atmosphere creates a persisting anxiety as the characters are scared of the results of the visibility. This is a realistic illustration to show how the regulation of sexuality functions and operates in a complicated fashion rather than being prohibited, it is not stopping but compelling the desires to private and unexposed so that social disruption can be avoided.

This clearly shows the critique of Dawesar where she reflects the true picture of urban society where conformity is more important than individual choices and freedom. However, the absence of open hostility towards lesbianism does not mean acceptance but it shows a different kind of system that manages many intolerable deviations through silence which acts as a disciplinary mechanism warning that the desires beyond heteronormativity should not try to challenge the social norms on open grounds. The novel confirms the idea that lesbian relationships remain valid only when they are not threatening towards the heterosexual normalcy. Such aspect is reinforcing the idea of Rich who in his argument reflects that women's desires are shaped by social conditioning rather than free choices (683).

Foucault's analysis of sexuality renders the most complicated forms of power functioning in the novel. As per Foucault, the modern societies do not repress sexuality outright but instead regulate it through discourse. His idea is completely relevant to Dawesar's plot of *Babyji* where social control is a prominent factor and the character is completely aware of being watched by the family peers and her idea of same sex is known to her peer group but the social control here manifests through gossips and internal restraint when the character realizes that people know about her and so the desires should be carefully managed. Lesbian behaviour and intimacy are limited to private spaces which justifies its complete prohibition and disapproval in public spaces. There is an internal surveillance by which the author tries to reflect that power starts dominating in a terrible fashion as soon as the individuals try to regulate themselves. Foucault expresses that social anxiety revolving round the lesbian desire is sustained not through force but through silence and quite pressure which itself is indicative of the disapproval and non-acceptability against heteronormative psyche.

Foucault justifies the idea that the mechanism of surveillance and power are subtle and internal which operate very meticulously the sexual experience of a protagonist under the impact of social anxiety. In the book, *The History of Sexuality* Foucault argues that power tries to oppress and show its real facet as soon as the individuals internalize societal expectations and regulate themselves in anticipation of scrutiny (92-93).

In *Babyji* the protagonist's awareness of the potential observation and scrutiny creates a kind of tension between crating a kind of self surveillance which conforms the idea that power not only operates through explicit coercion but also through internalization of norms that condition behaviour. Dawesar's depiction of the protagonist's measured engagement with her immeasurable desire. It is justifying the pervasive impact of the cultural surveillance effectively.

The lesbian identity remains marginal due to the emphasis of power, agencies and consent in shaping the transition of lesbian desires which reflects the sex choices and intimate relationships are not purely a matter of personal choices and desires but to a great extent they are also influenced by age factor, hierarchy, experiences and social positioning (Dawesar150).

Judith Butler's Theory of performativity suggests that identity and desires are not fixed but they are continually enacted and regulated with social contexts (Butler 520). In the similar fashion Foucault's theory of disciplinary power enlightens that the ways in which self surveillance and internalized social expectations are structuring the behaviour of the protagonist and make the desires contingent upon social acceptability are excluding the personal inclination to some extent (*Foucault 95*).

In an article 'Lesbian Movement in India: Right Wing Politics, Censorship and Beyond', FII Roy, Tanya reflects, "The erasure of the lesbian history and culture, in favour of a monolithic queer history and culture which only includes the former as a footnote, comes at the cost of lesbian lives being misunderstood and misinterpreted."

The article further explains the marginal status of the lesbian identity and reveals that lesbian existence was there in the variety of spheres throughout the history. It has inspired the Right-wing men and women in India. The agencies have expressed their fear and contempt at lesbianism when it is posited as an option to women and they have reflected that if physical needs are shown to be satisfied through lesbianism, the institution of marriage will collapse and reproduction will stop. The idea was expressed in a response towards Deepa Mehta's *Fire* 1996 which depicts the same sex relationship between the two sisters- in- law with neglectful husbands.

Some of the reasons underlying the marginal status of women in India expresses that many mainstream women movements and feminist organizations in India chose to distance themselves from lesbian women as a defensive measure and as a means of self-preservation. While the label of 'lesbianism' has brought a sense of discomfort to Indian feminists and since the inception of mainstream women's movements in the country, who are the ones who would prefer to employ 'single women' or 'women who love women' which is an obscure hiding term for lesbian and bisexual women.

In her book *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics*, Naisargi N Dave recollects a conversation with a journalist around labels where she said that identity gives people something in which they can believe and she also argues that what happened after the movie *Fire* was released, all these women heard the term 'lesbian' for the first time and the number of calls that she got was doubled or tripled. Therefore, the talk or conversation on lesbianism is no less important than intersectionality or contextual talk. *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Unprivileged India* Maya Sharma remarked for the protests against the movie *Fire* that on 8th of March for the first time the term LESBIAN appeared in the newspapers of Delhi, the word was loaded with fear, embarrassment and prejudice, a word that was shrouded in silence, a whisper that spoke of an identity that must be hidden from others, that frightened word that dare not cross any threshold was on that winter morning landing out at the door steps of millions of households on many parts of the country.

There is a subversion of the heteronormative expectations in the novel which is closely related to the negotiable situations in which the identity of the protagonist is navigating and soon adjusted. The aspect highlights how the desires can change simultaneously and conform to the social structure. By pursuing the lesbian relationship that defies the heteronormative expectations of the society, the protagonist is reclaiming the sexual autonomy and her emotional expressions and also trying to take extra care at the same time to make her desires and sexual choice undetectable for the society. This is a double strategy adopted by the protagonist which clearly justifies Foucault's argument which says that power can be exercised both through the constraints and opportunities making resistance possible only in situations when limits are imposed by social norms (*Foucault 95*).

In the novel Dawesar has portrayed the careful negotiation of the protagonist which expresses that lesbian desire in India is having a marginal status to a great extent and such choices in the context of urban India are both personal as well as social when acted within a cobweb of moral, cultural and familial constraints.

The novel is foregrounded in these subtle forms of resistance in order to exemplify that personal choices are not defined solely by rebellion but also by the ability to assert desire, intimacy and identity within the controlled limit of the social spaces. This nuanced view and portrayal is situating the experiences and desires of the protagonist as an emblem of the broader struggle that should reconcile with the social heteronormative pressures in the contemporary scenario of the Indian society.

Babyji by Dawesar affirms to the significance of Sexual autonomy, marginalization of the self and the conspiracy of silence closely connected to the lesbian identity in Indian English writings. Her work embodies the real experiences rather than coded or symbolic terms and concepts. The way the protagonist is navigating her secrecy in a dominant heteronormative society, her emotional intimacy and strategic autonomy exemplify the complex ways in which the agency and the resistance both operate in a constrained social order.

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