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Mridula Koshy's *The Large Girl*: A Distinct Feminine Self

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Abstract

Mridula Koshy's short story *The Large Girl* overtly presents the new woman and her feminine desires in a new perspective quite similar to Ismat Chughtai's stories in a Post modern context. Women writers have been challenging the traditional, age old portrayal of a self-sacrificing female towards the conflicting female protagonists, often searching for their own identity and desiring in a new feminine self. Being bold and beautiful they even represent sexuality of women in their texts which has remained till recent times a silent/controversial subject to talk or write about. Under the influence of Post modern feminism, the image of women in recent Indian writings has also undergone a sea change in modern Indian women narratives. But the most controversial lesbian subject has not been discussed loudly so far in Indian literature by any male or female writer. Still in this cosmopolitan world a few female writers like Manju Kapur, Mridula Koshy, Kamala Das, Amruta Patil, Shobha De and Anita Nair with a fresh outlook and a new perspective in a stream of feminine consciousness became the pioneers to explore and portray the element of lesbianism in the modern and post modern world. Based on this emerging voice in literature, the paper attempts to explore/unearth lesbian voices in Mridula Koshy's short story *The Large Girl*. The paper would also put light on many pertinent questions regarding lesbianism when a woman turns away from heterosexuality for making her life more independent and comfortable ignoring the wicked and cruel concept of patriarchal social structure.

Keywords- Postmodern, Narrative, Feminine, Consciousness, Lesbian, Sexuality

The paper attempts to explore a distinct feminine desire in Mridula Koshy's short story *The Large Girl* in proximity to lesbianism which is still a taboo subject in India. The text reconstructs a new possibility of lesbian identity within heteronormative structure by shaking the pillars of Indian patriarchal society. Along with it, the story also underscores many other awakening of feminine consciousness, which includes her sexuality, desires and her journey to achieve individualization. Feminine consciousness not only makes a woman aware of her rights and position in patriarchal society but also create an awareness regarding her sexual orientation. "Lesbian experience is closely woven within wider feminist concerns and can be understood as such if we consider sexuality to be something more than sexual act, and intrinsic very being" (Sukhthanker xiii). In the story, the unnamed protagonist's feelings, desires, and physical attractions run contrary to the heteronormative standards of Indian patriarchal society. The protagonist herself realized her attraction for same sex when she was an adolescent. Generally, an adolescent is conditioned in India in that way that he/she developed attachment for opposite sex. Kivel and Kleiber stated that most research on adolescent development —assumes that development is inherently heterosexual and that successful transition from adolescence to adulthood includes developing attraction for and attachment to individuals of the opposite gender (215). But the protagonist was an exception to this conditioning. She did not have any inclination for an opposite sex. She formed her sexual identity after realizing the fact that she was different, quite similar like Janet, her classmate. This was the beginning of her realization of lesbian identity. Earlier she had not even noticed Janet, only in class X she felt her presence that is why Janet complained, "You are the little Miss Richie Rich who ignored me all through school" (LG 144). Although youth with same sex desire experience many obstacles to their development as their heterosexual peers, feelings, desires, and physical attractions that run contrary to the dominant messages and norms of a heterosexual society can greatly retard their sexual development (Brooks, Gunn & Graber 434). But the protagonist did not face such obstacles because she was in boarding, far away from her patriarchal home where she could have been completely at the mercy of strong patriarchal undercurrents. But in boarding, she is quite free to explore and express her desire to Janet. Feminine consciousness makes a female aware of her sexual identity which is often equated with a self concept or simply self. According to self-discrepancy theory, individuals have multiple domains of the self. Individuals have an actual self; the actual self is composed of beliefs about who they think they are. The Self-discrepancy theory notes that beyond the actual self, individuals also have an ideal or social self. As a social construct, the self develops through socialization and by following age old patriarchal norms traditions (Higgins 8). In between these two self, a person gets split between her real self and social self. And it is always the social self which dominates. The protagonist was also split into two selves. In actual self, she wants to be with her female lover as their bonding was so deep that once the protagonist stated, "This life has not been enough and will continue to not be enough to love Janet" (LG144). Social self puts a woman in a

limited sphere carved for them by men. It also made the protagonist aware that her life is restricted and she has no right to cross the threshold of ideal heteronormative structure. If she follows her actual self she would not be put into the category of an ideal Indian woman. In order to be an ideal woman the protagonist suppressed her lesbian desire and married Mohan. Even after getting married to Mohan, her lesbian desire did not end, it still continued in the form of nostalgia and longing. Social self of a woman is nothing but an imposition of compulsory heterosexuality which does not give any space to woman to explore sexuality.

The tradition of Compulsory heterosexuality not only binds or restricts the life of a woman but also controls the behavior, gender and thinking of a woman and doesn't allow exploring sexuality according to one's choice but according to the norms laid by it. "Compulsory heterosexuality deny women their own sexuality: give them confinement and crush their creativity" (Rich 24). In *A Large Girl*, the impact of compulsory heterosexuality is also visible on the protagonist. Heterosexual society considers any desire outside heterosexuality as unnatural, illegitimate and deviant. In her essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Adrienne Rich argues that lesbian existence is perceived 'on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent or simply rendered invisible through the basis of compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich 22). This perception creates a fear of isolation, rejection, ostracization, violation among those who want to have same sex relationship and nobody dares to break it. The protagonist yearns to be with her woman lover (Janet) rather than a man. But compulsory heterosexuality became too big an obstacle for her to follow her desire. She knew that it was not acceptable by her family and society to have a female partner so without protesting she succumbed to live according to the norms of heterosexual society. Under such compulsion she married Mohan but considered her life lacking luster. She expressed, "I agreed to get married because I lacked the imagination to see how else a girl might make a life. My imagination, Janet believes, has continued to be lackluster, and so she attempts obligingly to fill in where she senses inadequacy" (LG 145). It seems that what she was lacking in her life only Janet could fulfill it. It is a compromise which she has made in her life due to her patriarchal conditioning and compulsory heterosexuality whereas her heart and soul lies in Janet only.

The story underscores power politics of patriarchal society which never let any woman to have her own desire and identity besides one constructed by it for women. The protagonist learns that a woman's social standing tends to be evaluated in terms of her affiliation with male members of her family i.e. being the wife of, the mother of or the daughter of somebody, that is why she agreed to marry Mohan without even giving a second thought to her own actual desire. Her governing identity is classified by her gender and by her marital status. The protagonist knew her love for Janet would never be accepted by patriarchal society as natural. She would be considered as abnormal and insane. Her marriage to Mohan can be put into a case of 'Lavender Marriage'. Lavender Marriage is a term used to describe a male- female marriage in which one or both of partners are homosexual and

bisexual (Urban Dictionary 1). The partners in lavender marriage conceal the fact that the sexual orientation of at least one of them was not primarily heterosexual. The protagonist is by nature a lesbian but due to the terror intolerant and hypersensitive patriarchal society she concealed her sexuality and lived that sexuality which did not belong to her by marrying Mohan. It is therefore not uncommon among lesbian women in India who have entered into heterosexual marriages turning to anonymous help lines for lesbian women, struggling to balance their identity with society's ideal women: the motherly, feminine and pure being (Sharma 17) Women whether showing outward resentment or accepting passively in male dominating society give vent to other modes of relief and relaxation in the form of lesbian desire or bisexuality often challenging the set notions and ways of the traditional societies.

There is only a brief episode of lesbian relationship in the text. The lesbian desire of the protagonist is portrayed not as an outcome of patriarchal oppression but as a natural and original instinct like Meenakshi of Shobha De's *The Strange obsession* and the protagonist of *Precursor of Love*. When the text opens, she is portrayed as a completely heterosexual and quite happy and satisfied in her life. While watching movie Devdas, the protagonist undergoes reminiscence. She reflects back on her school time when she actually explored her sexuality for the first time. The desire for same sex manifests in her when she first saw her classmate Janet. She remembers, "She was so pink, I thought tulip" (LG 142). She described her as a large girl because her body structure is quite broad in comparison to her other school mates. When she saw her for the first time on sports day, she felt sexually attracted towards her. "What I wanted was to slip my hands down those trunk like legs...what must it be like, I thought, to have so much?" (LG144). The protagonist's desire kept on increasing towards her mate. They both remain most of the time together. Though earlier, it seems that it is a case of homosexuality of convenience, where generally girls involve with girls to explore or learn about sexuality in the absence of male partner or but the protagonist's desire did not outgrow as she matures and it becomes evident when she longed for Janet throughout her life. Her feelings never changed for Janet even when she met her after fourteen years. This is how she expressed her feelings for Janet when she met her after fourteen years, "I am still I was content to keep within myself: my inner curve yearning, in its own circular fashion, itself" (LG145). It apparently gives us a confirmation of her lesbian instinct which remained forever in her albeit hidden and under the surface.

The author seems to convey that sexuality is never stable; it is fluid and does not have a fixed role. One thing is quite clear that the protagonist is neither complete lesbian nor heterosexual in totality, somewhat inexplicable between them which mean that she is also to some extent bisexual cannot be put into a category of a true lesbian. The term "bisexuality" lacks clarity about the differences between attraction, behavior or self- identity. Many scientists prefer a definition based exclusively on attraction because behavior and identity are more fluid. Lisa Diamond in *Sexual Fluidity* has suggested that a shifting of sexual intimacy is more common in women than in men; that is consistent with my clinical experience (1).

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Though the protagonist has compromised her lesbian desire by marrying Mohan but she is equally fond of her husband like Janet. Nowhere in the story, has she been shown dissatisfied with her married life. In totality she is quite contented in her married life. Though she longed for Janet but she did not suffer from isolation, neglect, and emptiness like Astha of *A Married Woman*. She seems equally satisfied with both male and female partner. Here she appears as a case study of a double consciousness. According to Wallace, “double consciousness” is the awareness of “split personality (53)” The split happens because identity is pulled in two directions: on one side, the natural, spiritual identity, and on the other, the demands of daily life and social interactions which often force the individual to neglect the first side (53). The protagonist is also pulled between two sexualities. The one is her original desire and other is imposed on her. She tried her best to balance between these two sexualities but in the end she succumbs to the sexuality which is imposed on her by cultural heterosexual society.

The text also underscores the concept of Sakhi. Janet was like an orphan, because she was brought by nuns of the school. Her father was in jail because he killed her mother. She always feels the emptiness of her mother in her life and tries to fill that emptiness through the protagonist. Like a true ‘Sakhi’, Janet shares all her emotional upheavals with her. She reads with her, her favorite story *Kabulliwallah* and weeps a lot and gets angry over her parents and shows her aggression to the protagonist as if she is her mother. She says, “you don’t understand me.” How can you understand me?”(LG141) To mollify her, the protagonist says, “God, give me another life so that I can do it right next time. Another life, so I can appreciate you and love you as you deserved”(LG141). She understands her emotional turbulences and tries to fill it with her love and care and that made them more connected. Ashwini Sukthankar also opines regarding Sakhi Space: “The sakhi space where, in the gender-segregated Indian world, women can live and be together in relative freedom, can live with each other without being interrogated by anyone” (25). Sometimes the sakhi space becomes the medium to express a women’s hidden desire as it is quite convenient to explore sexuality with a woman without inviting any trouble.

Under the garb of friendship, she fulfilled her lesbian desire like Astha of *A Married Woman* and Sujata of the novel *Ladies Coupe*. By knowing that Indian society is homophobic that is why she is left with no choice but to live secretly. Lesbian panic is also quite glaring/visible in the story. It does not portray lesbian relationship of the protagonist and Janet as a fruitful relationship. The protagonist in the beginning of the story wanted to marry Janet. But she could not tell it to her parents her real “Self” due to lesbophobia. She knew she would be considered insane for having lesbian desire. She was also frightful of the reactions of her family and its repercussion. As Smith points out, “Lesbian panic occurs in narrative when homosexual panic is internalized: “lesbian panic is, quite simply, the disruptive action or reaction that occurs when a character...is either unable or unwilling to confront or reveal her own lesbianism or lesbian desire” (569). When Janet came back in her life, she decided to

put an end to her relationship due to fear of being caught by her children and husband. The consequences of being 'found out' have been portrayed as being horrific: in many cases, women were forced out of their families into a community of 'social lepers', i.e. people who are regarded as being 'alien', normatively deviant' and cases of mental illness (Thandani 10). Her fear that the prevailing norms of heterosexual society would never considers it as normal, she decided to leave Janet. She said, "I'm a married woman and a mother" (LG 145). The panic that lesbian desire can only destroy the rhythm of heteronormative structure, the protagonist decided to shun her lesbian relationship. She said, "I don't want to be destructive in any way in my life and yours" (LG 147). Though she shuns her relationship but that pang of desire still haunted her. When she is left by her lover Janet, she thought if Janet ever missed her. These are the last lines of the text where she longed for Janet. "Do you miss me?" "Do you miss me? A thousand and one chances will come and go in this city, in this small world. I will never see you again" (LG147). Although, she stopped herself from lesbian bonding, she becomes more and more nostalgic. Discriminative attitudes towards lesbian women in general have perceived themselves and their position in Indian society as 'foreign'. The social stigma attached to be a lesbian could thus be seen as a reason for many women not to embrace their lesbianism, particularly not in the public sphere.

To conclude the text is a mixture of two narratives - heteronormative and lesbian. The text is written in a third person and its centre focuses on the lesbian voice. The lesbian desire projected in the story is not a situational desire but a natural instinct. Very positively and with empathy she expressed the nostalgia of the protagonist for her female lover and nowhere the voice of Mohan is audible. He remained in the shadows/ background or in the protagonist's mind. But as we know patriarchy is such a strong pillar, it dominates whether it shows its presence or not. It is such a deep rooted conditioning of the mind that it does not let women accede independently. Lesbian narrative too fails in giving much visibility to the lesbian identity of the protagonist. We could hear the voice of the protagonist who seems to share her own unfulfilled lesbian experience. She goes into reminiscence. She becomes nostalgic and longs for her female partner. Though the author attempted to give a voice to marginalized desire but the fear of homophobic society seemed hovering over her, that is why she also rejected this desire in the end where the protagonist consider it as destructive. This fear seems haunting the author so much that she does not even named her protagonist. In order to evade any controversies for representing lesbian desires, it seems that knowingly the protagonist was not given any name. Everywhere in the text pronoun 'she' was used to represent her. The protagonist submissively accepted her lot as if her identity is no more than a shadow. The tone of the author seems empathizing with the protagonist's situation where she has become misfit in the society. She does not want the protagonist to part from the reality of heterosexual society but at the same time she does not want her to accept it completely at the cost of being a free woman.

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