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PLAYING HOMOSEXUALITY UNDER HETEROSEXUAL NORMS: A STUDY OF TWO
KANNADA SHORT STORIES BY VASUDENDRA

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses Kannada short stories of Vasudendra dealing with homosexuality. The paper explores the way in which the chief protagonist (Mohanaswamy) of these short stories uses heterosexual norms to construct himself and his relationship with his partner. The paper argues that this is one of the ways in which homosexuality plays itself out.

Key words: homosexual, heterosexual, gender roles, masculine-feminine

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In certain fundamental ways the homosexual world mimics the straight, often exaggerating, indeed perfecting its flaws- Dennis Altman

The aim of this paper is to show how the protagonist Mohanaswamy (hereinafter called MS) of Vasudendra's short stories deals with his homosexuality by trying to construct himself and his relationship with his partner, under heterosexual norms. The paper concentrates on the first two short stories of the collection 'Mohanaswamy'¹ by Vasudendra. The paper tries to show how MS has 'internalized/naturally has' many features associated with the 'feminine'. The effort is not to generalize that this is what happens in homosexuality, but to show that this is the way in which homosexuality plays itself out in these short stories. As Altman says, "We [gay people] have to discover our homosexuality, and having discovered it, we have a wide range of options..." (14). We will be arguing that the 'option' –if it is an option – selected by MS is to imitate heterosexual norms.

We will begin with a very brief introduction to the writer. Vasudendra is one of the new faces in the Kannada literary scene. He has so far published five collections of short stories in Kannada, one novel, four

¹ These stories have not been translated to English. Hence, all translations are mine. The translations are functional, rather than literary.

collections of literary essays, and a translation of a collection of short stories from Telugu. 'Mohanaswamy' is his recent collection of short stories published in 2013. Homosexuality is the major theme of many short stories in this collection, though a couple of his earlier stories did touch upon this aspect.

The two stories that we are dealing with are the first two stories of the collection 'Mohanaswamy'. For the sake of convenience we will call them MS1 and MS2. In both the stories MS is the protagonist. Both the stories are in third person, though it is clear that the narrative point of view is primarily that of MS. (see Prasad). MS is a homosexual who is living with his partner Karthik. There are enough clues in these short stories to suggest that MS is well educated, works in a multinational company, has to travel as part of his work and that he is very comfortable using English (see Prasad: 15). That is, MS inhabits the modern corporate world. In MS 1, MS has to fly to Delhi for some assignment. In the flight he talks to a man called Ramesh, who is disappointed in his love (heterosexual). MS is asked by Ramesh to talk about his (MS's) love life. So MS narrates to Ramesh his 'love' with Karthik, but pretends that Karthik is his girlfriend. So MS is pretending to be a heterosexual. Then the plane crashes: MS and Ramesh survive. After this experience, MS 'confesses' to Ramesh that Karthik is actually a man and that he is gay. The story ends with Ramesh saying that MS has not done anything for which he has to be sorry. MS2 deals with MS's break up with Karthik. Karthik is getting married (the arranged heterosexual marriage) and there are upheavals in MS's life. MS2 depicts how MS deals with this break up.

As we can see, in MS1, MS has to consciously rework his life with Karthik to make his story intelligible to Ramesh, who is a heterosexual. It is interesting how MS reworks his partnership with Karthik into heterosexual norms of boyfriend-girlfriend, meeting the parents, living together and sex before marriage. Thus, this story that MS creates is a copy, but the question what is it a copy of? Butler says. "The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight *not* as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy" (43). Here however, we have a heterosexual love story which is a copy of the 'real' homosexual love story. MS seems to think that he is playing a game ('How nice it is to share with a stranger the dreams of life coupled with a lot of white lies' (24): 'Mohanaswamy had enjoyed the sweetness of lying' (25)). He is presenting himself as the male and Karthik as the female in the heterosexual man-woman binary. So he constructs an elaborate love story which is basically true except that in reality both the characters of the love story are male, a fact that MS hides till the end from Ramesh. This story involves the love at first sight incident; getting introduced to the parents; going on weekend tours; sex before marriage; taking 'precautions' (in this case not taking precautions); and the question of children (again in this case not wanting children). And MS has to even show a photograph of Karthik, (he has to now show a photograph of a girl from his laptop). The irony is that it is the expected norm to carry the photograph of your spouse in a wallet, which in fact MS is doing as he has the photograph of Karthik in his wallet. So in the conscious and deliberate reworking of his story MS has to work within the norms imposed by the heterosexual expectations; even when he is transgressing them (like not worrying about getting married and not worrying about having children), these are conceptualized within heterosexual norms and are not independent of these norms. Here, we can remember Altman's statement, "... let there be no confusion: the very concept of homosexuality is a social one, and one cannot understand the homosexual experience without recognizing the extent to which we have developed a certain identity and behavior derived from social norms" (25). The operation of heterosexual norms in this context is not surprising because MS here is trying to make his and Karthik's relationship intelligible to a heterosexual. Thus this deliberate rendering of homosexuality uses the binary of male-female and masculine-feminine to make itself intelligible to the heterosexual point of view.

However, there are enough clues in the stories to indicate that this binary operates in MS's relationship with Karthik at a deeper level too. The irony of all this is that MS is describing himself as the male in the heterosexual binary with Karthik as the female and he is thinking of this as a game. But even in his asides (given mostly as direct thoughts) it is quite clear that the binary is working in his relationship with Karthik, but in the opposite manner. In his relationship with Karthik MS seems to be playing out a female role and the relationship seems to be an imitation of the heterosexual love relationships in many ways. In this story as well

as in MS2, we can see how MS seems to suggest that he has feminine features and behavior traits. In many ways it is the male- female binary played out between two men.

There are many ways in which MS indicates his association with the feminine. One of the ways is to take the expected feminine role within the 'living together' arrangement with Karthik. It is MS who cooks food and takes care of Karthik. In MS1 he tells Karthik before going out: "I have prepared curry for the night and kept it in refrigerator. Just prepare rice after you come back from the office. We have a packet of curds. Don't go to mess." (7). In MS2, he says he cooks for Karthik, preparing his favourite dish of lady's fingers. The following description of MS's domestic scene clearly mirrors the general gender roles assumed in most heterosexual marriages: "It was his [Mohanaswamy's] habit to turn on the Radio, put the cooker on the stove, sweep the floor..." (31). MS is elated when Karthik praises his food saying that MS's cooking is better than his (Karthik's) mother's (31). After supper, while MS warms the milk, Karthi watches television changing channels (39). Karthi throws around his clothes while MS tidies up everything. The domestic scene that is depicted in these stories is very similar to what one expects in any monogamous heterosexual relationship². Here again Altman's quote is apt: "Sometimes these [homosexual relationships] will be remarkably close imitations of traditional marriage, with each partner playing out the role of husband or wife" (30).

In his relationship with Karthik, MS indicates in many ways that he is the feminine half of the feminine-masculine binary of the relationship. It is Karthik who rides the motor cycle. MS sits on the pillion, enjoying the ride. When Karthik is 'engaged' to a woman, she sits in exactly the same way that MS used to sit. Thus MS sees himself as competitor to a woman with respect to Karthik's love. The description of MS sitting on the pillion and Karthik's fiancé sitting on the pillion mirror each other.

There is another instance of MS's and Karthik's relationship mirroring another heterosexual relationship within MS2. A mutual acquaintance 'Shobha' aunty is physically abused by her husband. Her husband has injured her right hand. She tells MS that husbands remember their wives only when they need them and they don't understand that women have their own like and dislikes in bed (33). This is mirrored in the incident when MS is physically abused by Karthik and here again Karthik hurts MS's right hand. Here too the abuse is connected a sex act as it is with Shobha aunty: Karthik hurts MS when MS is trying to have sex with him. In both cases there is a mention of the spouse not responding to the physical needs (48-49). Further, MS's reaction to the incident reminds one of what is typically expected from women in such cases: "Let alone hitting Karthi back, even in dream MS cant slap Karthi" (49). It seems that the statement "... sexuality is so gender marked that it carries dominance and submission with it, no matter the gender of its participants..." (Mackinnon, as quoted in Beasley, 203) is particularly applicable here.

MS takes on the role of the feminine not only in his relationship with Karthik, but also in his devotion to lord Krishna. His prayer to lord Krishna is a woman's prayer to a male god. He calls himself 'gopabala' (60) which is the masculine form of gopikashtri. Gopikashtries are female lover-devotees of lord Krishna and MS calls himself a male lover-devotee of lord Krishna: but his prayer indicates clearly that he expresses his devotion in the role of a female. He curses lord Krishna that he should be born as MS and feel the hurt of not being attracted to women; of not being able to hit back (61).

There many clues that MS casts himself as the feminine in his 'desires' as well. Here it has to be mentioned that the stories use the masculine pronoun when talking about MS. Also, the story does not make it clear whether the binary 'top-bottom' is applicable here. The story seems to be ambiguous about this: or it is possible that the binary is not particularly applicable here. There are some instances where MS talks about the use of condoms (13:23:62): but here there is no clear mention of whether only one of the two partners needs to use them. However it is clear that the sex described in these stories is the orgasm centered and the genital centered sex. MS says that Karthik 'accepted' and 'joined' him in the first meeting itself (21): then, "That was

² However, we have an incident which suggests the difference between this relationship and monogamous heterosexual relationships. Once, MS stares at another man in public and is insulted because of that. He narrates this to Karthik and Karthik consoles him saying one should not express one's homosexual desires in public: straight men become angry. MS says sometimes he can't control his desire [for men] (12). The point here is that there seems to be a greater tolerance for desire even outside the partnership of MS and Karthik. This is something that is not generally accepted in heterosexual relationships.

the final stage of the pleasure when a body penetrates the other and becomes one with the other" (42); and "This man is like a woman; he can't ever 'join' with a woman. How can I share my body with someone who can't 'join' with a woman?" (64). Further, there are many clear indicators also of MS's feminine desires. MS is not attracted to women, whereas Karthik is. This fact in fact is something that MS likes: it is said that the very fact that Karthi likes women increases MS's desire for Karthi (9). MS keeps photos of 'hunk' like film stars in his laptop (26). He describes Karthik as 'the man who rules' (39). His description of Karthik and other men that he is attracted to generally focuses on the well built tall body and the ripping muscles. He says Karthik can turn a woman into a shy bud with a just a look (65). These indicate that MS sees himself as the 'feminine' half in his relationship with Karthik.

This 'feminine' aspect of MS becomes very clear when he has a 'date' with another gay called Raghuraman. There are some who have "... argued that gay men and lesbians should resist normalizing institutions like marriage" (Calhoun 109). However, MS seems to be using the modern normalizing institutions of 'living together', 'dating' and 'internet match making' to his benefit. MS and Raghuraman do not hit off because both think of themselves as the feminine homosexuals. MS's conception of what constitutes the feminine is interesting. He thinks of the feminine as consisting of appearance, bodily gestures and behavior: "Raghuraman walked elegantly like a woman; womanliness was visible even in the way he had dressed elegantly"; "His womanliness was visible in the way he showed exaggerated emotions in his face" (63). This is certainly not a deconstruction of the masculine-feminine binary but a reenactment of it within homosexuality. With respect to transgendered persons, the positions "either/or" or "both/neither" are recognized (Nagoshi 93). "Either/or" position is one where a person tries to fit into either of the two categories available whereas "both/neither" position is where one refuses to fit into either the category of man or woman. In these stories, MS seems to belong to the "either/or" category particularly when we see his opinions about Raghuraman. The stories also do not seem to suggest that this a conscious 'choice' made by MS. At least these stories do not suggest that this is one of the options available to MS. He is 'just like that' just as Raghuraman is 'just like that'. May be there are fissures in MS's construction of himself as the feminine, but this is not obvious from the stories. It is clear from these two stories that MS presents himself as or performs the role of the 'woman' with respect to his homosexual relationships. To that extent there is an imitation of the heterosexual norms.

We need not assume here that heterosexuality is homogenous with every couple following the gender roles to the tee; that in heterosexual relationships it is always the men who ride bikes and women who sit on the pillion and that woman cook and men eat and that women behave in a particular way and men in another. As Butler says, "... there are structures of psychic homosexuality within heterosexual relations, and structures of psychic heterosexuality within gay and lesbian sexuality and relationships" (165). However this is the general expectation. It is interesting that MS is adopting feminine traits and this raises questions about "... [the] mimicry of the ultra feminine when more women are moving beyond the feminine stereotype" (Altman 34).

To conclude, the homosexual relationship in these stories seems to be closely modeled on the heterosexual relationships. The protagonist casts himself in the feminine role in his performance of domestic chores, in his desires and in his expectations from a relationship. We should remember that this is a rendering of homosexuality in fiction: so we should be careful in drawing any general conclusions. But we can safely say that these two stories show one of the possibilities through which homosexuality constructs itself. That possibility in these stories is that of imitation of heterosexual norms.

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