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Interrogating Sexuality: An Exegesis of Bisexuality in *Cobalt Blue*

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Abstract:

This paper analyses the gender performance of bisexuals and their behaviour through the love triangle between two siblings and an unnamed paying guest discussed in the novel Cobalt Blue by Sachin Kundalkar. It delves into the unconscious perspective of every individual, where one feels both feminine and masculine attributes inside an individual. It accentuates the invisibility of other sexuality or its existence through the characters of the above-mentioned novel where heterosexuality and homosexuality are the only visible identities except at the point where the paying guest enters the life of Joshis to question another identity for readers. It is a comment about the unspoken identity, gesture, and gender expression of the uncategorised, as well as the unnamed character of Cobalt Blue.

Keywords: *bisexuality, exegesis of sexuality, homosexuality, masculine-feminine*

Introduction:

The most repressed, undefined, unconscious, and indeterminate sexuality catches one's attention the moment readers skip it in the novel or by the audience in the plays. Such sexuality is often unmarked in this world where the surfeit of identity and sexuality politics plays a significant role. The least explored sexuality amongst lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender is bisexuality. "Bisexuality is a broad term that describes physical attraction, romantic attraction, or sexual behaviour that is not limited to one sex. In the scientific language of sexual orientation, bisexuality encompasses both heterosexual (different sex) and homosexual (same-sex) attraction or behaviour." ("Bisexuality")

When the voice for LGBT was first upheaved by several thousand people during the Stonewall riots in 1969, the chief objective was to hear every individual's identity and sexuality

ratification in society so that gender equality could be perpetuated. The term bisexuality was first unfolded in the late 19th century to explicate sexual acts and desires. (Callis 12) The term 'bisexuality' transpired from Middle Eastern and Southern European cultures, and then from Western science. Earlier, the most commonly used terms were 'bisexd' or 'bisexous' in Europe, pertaining to conceptions of primordial androgyny. These are drawn from ancient Greek and near Eastern mythology. These were succeeded by the introduction of the term 'bisexuality' in 1859 by anatomist Robert Bentley Todd, who was a contemporary of Charles Darwin. The existence of this term subsisted before the above-mentioned time, unlike the word 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual.' Although bisexuality used to be perceived in the organisms with male and female reproductive powers during the 1800s rather than as a matter of human sexuality. (Callis 215) Fritz Klein, an American author, stated that till 1978, bisexuals were largely given the status of the invisible and non-existent entity and he insisted that the deep silence on bisexuality should be broken. With this, he launched a topic which is still relevant and found in the bisexual emancipation literature with a similar lack of acknowledgement and invisibility.

There were myriad connotations of 'bisexuality' as it referred to physiology and anatomy to insinuate the forms of life that are sexually analogous, thus thought to exhibit characteristics of all sexes. Since the beginning of the 20th century, it is being studied as an amalgamation of masculinity and femininity in a person. It is more about psychological rather than physical traits. Bisexuality also throws light on sexual attraction to individuals of all sexes. Although these three terms have diverse historical backgrounds but they are distant from being different. (Monro 14)

When sexuality was categorised between homosexuals and heterosexuals, the lesser-known bisexuality was not accredited appropriately. A report mentioned by The Centers for Disease Control and prevention in 2016 displays that 1.3 per cent of women and 1.9 per cent of men accepted their homosexual, gay, or lesbian identity. This data bespeaks bisexual people may have the largest single group in the LGB community for both men and women. All gender identities come under one big umbrella term, i.e. 'queer.' To read bisexuality profoundly, one must try to see this identity through a queer lens, with its differences and individuality. Both the terms have political and academic influence, they both are complex to pin down as they do not possess a simple or singular definition. Queer identity has multiple ways in academia and culture; it can be used as an adjective for homosexuality or effeminacy or as a defamatory noun. It also refers to something which is an unordinary or incorrect way of living in society. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, queer as an identity was utilised in a bigger way in which all non-heteronormative individuals could dwell. (Callis 214) "Queer also became an identity category in itself. Individuals who wanted to label themselves with a non-label, who wanted to be fluid or inclusive in their stated desires or who wanted to challenge hegemonic assumptions of sexuality described themselves as queer" (215). Later

on, queer theory builds up the way to perceive academic thought that underscores the constructedness of gendered and sexual identities along with their categorisation. Seidman explains Heterosexuality and homosexuality as binary social constructs which according to queer theorists are observed in specific historical moments rather than a recognition of innate sexualities. (215) Queer theorists read power politics and discourse, which forges the notion of individuality that defines individuals by sexual object choice, which is natural. (216) Homosexuality is described as an identity to “expose the deeper contours of the whole society and the mechanisms of its functioning” (216). Heterosexuality is, therefore, “queered” through this branch of thought, as it loses its status as the original or default sexuality and becomes rather one half of a binary in which each side is intelligible only in relation to the other.

Earlier sexologists did not rely on this definition of bisexuality and believed bisexuality comprises an anatomical condition, i.e., intersexuality, and a state of mind. Hence, a bisexual person enunciates masculine and feminine traits. For example, Ellis and Kraft-Ebing, two early sexologists, concluded bisexuals as “organically twisted” and “psychical hermaphrodites.” (217). It was not until the 20th century that scientists decided to utilise the term bisexual to refer to individuals who feel sexual attraction to women and men. People were still used to seeing this term as derogatory as a species of pervert, unlike sexuality with anatomical/ psychological intersexuality. Bisexuality was claimed as a stage of development in the early 1900s instead of individual sexuality or category by numerous authors.

The theory of sexual evolution is referred to exemplify this, in this model, the “human species evolved from a primitive hermaphroditic state of today’s gender differentiated physical form (with the) psychological development of the individual parallel (to) this evolutionary process.” (217) It reveals that all human embryos begin as an inter-sexed entity, and so they all do begin as bisexual. As Wilhelm Stekel, a psychoanalyst, delineates, all humans are bisexual and there is no exception to this rule. Similarly, a renowned sexologist, Havelock Ellis, trusted that the roots of sexual life are hidden in bisexuality. Although he opines all humans behave to express their heterosexual or homosexual identity. He describes the point that all men and women started as bisexuals and gradually felt more enchanted by one sex or the other. He further diagnosed the statement that bisexuality as identity becomes dubious in the study of sexuality. (217)

Some bisexuals believe in making the disparity between gender and sex. For them, gender is a social or psychological distinction, recognised by the common practices of men and women. For example, while women prefer skirts and dresses in western society to the contrary, men prefer nothing of this sort. It is considered a gender issue. In such situations, sex is understood as a biological difference between females and males. Bisexuals get lured by more than one gender, but not over one sex in most cases. For example, a male bisexual gets attracted to masculinity and

towards too many aspects, but not to the male body in some cases. Bisexuality is misunderstood as a type of adultery or polyamory. “Polyamory is the practice of engaging in multiple sexual relationships with the agreement of all the people involved at a time with the knowledge and consent of everyone involved. (“Oxford Dictionary”) Bisexuals are evaluated with the popular misconception that they always remain in relationships with men and women simultaneously. It depends on their choice whether they wish to obtain lifelong monogamy, serial monogamy, polyamory, casual sexual activity with the same partners, casual group sex, and celibacy. Some individuals follow polygamy with the same gender partner or maybe with other genders as well.

A person is heterosexual or homosexual in this world, as the characters in *Cobalt Blue* written by Sachin Kundalkar, understood the Mystery man as gay by Tanay’s eyes and straight by Anuja’s eyes, who are siblings to each other. Tanay is a young man who studies English literature and gets wooed by his college professor. Anuja is his sister who is fond of playing hockey and is enthusiastic to become an environmental activist. Amidst an emerald hue of Kochi, a Marathi brahmin family resides in a big veranda house with Cobalt blue shade that believes in traditions and values. They are greeted by a paying guest who has no name, no caste, no religion of his own; he is a seeker. In the division of binaries and non-binaries, all the characters avoided the reality of the paying guest as a bisexual individual. It is written in the background of 1996’s society that is constructed upon the heterosexual perception where there is acceptance towards gays and lesbians, but a lack of existence or neglect for bisexuals. Although this acceptance was constricted to the young generation only. The paying guest becomes a friend of Tanay and indulges in a love relationship with him first because maybe he saw the entire ambiguity of sexual attraction as an easy-going process. Being known as homosexual was much easier than being known as bisexual in any society. The Marathi brahmin family of Joshis in Kerala believe in integrity, ethics, solidarity, and acceptance of a few of the gender performative roles. It is a saga of the mystery man who arrives at the house of Joshis with the overwhelming sentiments of love, romance, affection and sexual liaisons in the life of Tanay and Anuja. *Cobalt Blue* is a Marathi novel translated into English by Jerry Pinto, which traces the twice failed relationships of two disparate gendered siblings. This alliance occurs in an ostensible environment of an orthodox Marathi family. Through the memories of Tanay and Anuja, this novel probes the resilience of a family where they know each other’s hobbies, professions, favourite cuisines etc., but are unacquainted with their son and daughter’s internal feelings. It provides minutiae of fear, excitement, intuition, and hidden sexuality of an individual’s life through the monologues of Tanay and the journal of Anuja. Through their secret thoughts, the unnamed paying guest and beloved of both of the siblings come up as a bisexual entity about whom they were entirely unaware. It draws the two-way character sketch of the same man, and both the sketches could not provide the reason for abandoning Tanay and Anuja because they both could not understand him.

Although, Tanay was seeking “friendship with someone who was studying information technology: or someone who wanted to settle in the United States. Anyone.” (Kundalkar 4)

The paying guest gave rent to Mr Joshi but much more than that to Tanay and Anuja, on the contrary Tanay, a homosexual man after a casual encounter thinks that paying guests is the permanent partner of his love life. It depicts Tanay’s betrayal and his silent revenge when he does not talk to Anuja much about how she was and where she was. “I don’t know how you managed it; an intense relationship with me, an attraction to Anuja, and then to elope with her? To live somewhere else” (Kundalkar 23) Tanay’s agony and aggression reveal how a homosexual and heterosexual society just overlooks another sexuality or identity. The term bisexual is never used or heard throughout the novel or by any character, as if it does not exist. The romantic attraction between man and woman comprises the unnamed character’s compassion, identity, and sexuality. Tanay’s character was a deeply tragic one as compared to Anuja although, it was Anuja who had to go through medication and mental therapy after the breakdown.

In an Indian middle-class family, a housewife dreams of keeping her entire family bound together, but what happens when she feels alone during the afternoons? She faces the darkness of thoughts and anxiety issues in the afternoon’s light. Similarly, when Tanay feels betrayed by the paying guest, he too feels himself sitting lonely and mourning the absence or loss of his beloved because unlike the spouse of the Indian family the mystery man would not be going to come back at the end of the day thus, making Tanay felt like a housewife to the mystery man. Tanay remembers his childhood as “the best time because it is where you enjoy time without seeking pleasure in the bodies of others. When you are looking for a relationship, the process weakens you. You feel you have to bear with whatever the other person wants. This is one of my basic beliefs about human nature.” (Kundalkar 51) Ironically, the mystery man never expresses his longing to get intimate emotionally. His parents died in an accident in his childhood; he was raised by his maternal aunt and uncle. But after finishing senior secondary, he left the house and indulged in earning and living alone; always keeping his relatives at a certain distance. Through the diary of Anuja and the monologues of Tanay, we get to know that the mystery man shared his childhood incidents with both of them and his attitude towards the life of being a ‘seeker.’ He once told Tanay that he likes people who are good at heart... totally free. One can dialogue with them, he could adjust the rest. So, to become sexually intimate, one needs to be his friend, then only the further bridge of initial insecurities could be crossed over. Such statements of the mystery man prove that he befriended Tanay and later on Anuja at the initial stage and then revels in a relationship afterwards.

One noteworthy incident which he shares with Tanay— as a child his Seema Maushi (maternal aunt) used to take advantage of his innocence and his maternal aunt’s husband (Mausa Ji) used to praise him and hug him in the house in everyone’s presence but abused him sexually in

maternal aunt's absence. Through Tanay's monologue, readers get to know about the sexual harassment of the mystery man in his childhood. "Inside the house, he hugged you, praised your performance and let his weight on your body one night, you tried to scream. He grabbed your mouth and stifled your screams." (Kundalkar 92). This novel not only acknowledges the bisexuality of the mystery man but his childhood traumas also, which are used to get reflected through his action, silence, and the pain of living in solitude. Whenever Tanay tries to hug the mystery man at night, he would wake up yelling, sometimes. When he tries to take him in his arms to make him relax, he would push Tanay away and get withdrawn into a corner, seeking loneliness. As a child, he could not see motherly or fatherly love, those sentiments, and the meaning of family which lead him to get distanced from all such relations. After the day he met with sexual violence, the mystery man showed his maternal aunt what her husband did to his body and then packed his bag to leave the house. He straight went off to Mr Dixit, his lawyer. The further events of changing college hostels and rented rooms continued till he passed the twelfth standard. He asked Mr Dixit to sell the Mumbai flat, the shares, the three cars and the land near Kolhapur. Until he started earning through selling his paintings, he had enough to survive. The mystery man does not rely on keeping concerns or warmth together with people, he told Tanay

"Forget about symmetry, Tanay; forget about balance." (Kundalkar 95)

This statement expounds that harmony was miles away from a mystery man's psyche. He keeps things in flow, and never tries to hold objects or persons close to his heart, thus he never try to hold the closest relationship neither with Tanay nor with Anuja.

Similarly, one cannot explore symmetry or balancing acts while performing sexuality and gender roles. Either denotes balance and normative individuality, whether one is lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. The unconscious part of sexuality prevails in every individual, and bisexuality does not imply sexual perverseness. It is complete in itself, like other sexualities.

When Tanay's English mentor at college told him that women, these women take away every man from us. This very remark manifests that society is constructed upon either homosexuality or heterosexuality, the other identity of bisexuals is still in denial. It is never heard appropriately nor accepted, and not even believed.

Susanne Penington pens down her thoughts about bisexuals 'doing gender' in their romantic relationships, whether homosexuals desire opposite gender traits in their relationship or is it always binaries v/s non-binaries? (Penington 34) She opines that feminine man pair with masculine man and masculine woman with a feminine woman. In all such couples 'masculine' partner is assumed to be a dominant person so that he/she can process power and control over the submissive one. But what about bisexuals? How do they perform gender in such relationships with men and women? Does the traditional gender scripts of performance impact them? For example, whether the bisexual male who

follows masculine traits through performativity with a female partner also follows masculinity with a male partner or not?

In the case of the mystery man, one observes that he is full of dynamic personality and confidently follows masculine traits with both his beloveds of him, i.e. Anuja and Tanay. He follows a similar pattern with both people.

People in Western literature do not discuss the significance of sexual orientation. (Goob 18) Individuals have a finite concept of identities or orientations there. They see sexuality as devoid of sexual relations and practices across cultures. There is a substantial gap in contemporary sexualities in literature as seen in *Cobalt Blue*, the politics of binaries v/s non-binaries lead to utter disappearance in the identity of the mystery man who was unable to express his thoughts either to Tanay or to Anuja because of stigmatisation of his sexual identity. Society is requisite to change its focus not only on identity politics but also on sexuality politics. Most bisexuals either would be considered gays or lesbians. It catches one's attention to trivial issues pertaining to identity construction and its social and political ramification.

Cobalt Blue underscores the trajectory of critical bisexuality studies, encouraging readers to 'integrate the concept of bisexuality to think critically about where it has emerged from and how its origin continues to shape contemporary debates.' (Callis 220)

Most homosexual partners desire a masculine partner for physical intimacy as explained by Goob in Concepts of Bisexuality just like Tanay who gets lured immediately towards the sight of a mystery man when he comes out of the bathroom with his heavy muscles, his bare body in a towel fascinates Tanay and he could not able to move his eyes for a moment. There may be a slight possibility in the novel that the paying guest may intentionally be exploring his sexuality when he mated with Tanay and Anuja both. "Thus, some homosexual men may intentionally misrepresent themselves as bisexual to increase their sexual appeal to potential sexual partners." (Goob 55)

In the 1980s, there were a few remarkable studies done by Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor (56) on bisexuality to achieve their emphasis on gender. These scholars explored gender dynamics in bisexuals' relationships and resulted that bisexuals act traditionally in their relationship with women and men. By doing so, they faced a contradiction in scholars' expectations because bisexuals do not abide by the social norm of "compulsory heterosexuality," they also veer off from conventional prescriptions for gender. (57) Bisexuals often process the institutionalised gender scripts in a way that they have commonalities with other sexualities than their typical traits.

In *Cobalt Blue*, the mystery man possesses typical gender norms in his demeanour, he is masculine and dominating in his identity. He is profoundly influenced by the idea of domination and rigid in carrying paramountcy in his attitude. He never obeys Tanay or Anuja's decisions. On the contrary, his adamancy infuses to change the two siblings' behaviour towards him. Pennington in her

research paper significantly mentions an interview of male bisexuals and female bisexuals, on that basis males, are penchant toward physical intimacy than females and are unavailable for emotional involvement with their partners. Women are less inclined toward physical intimacy and more toward emotional bonding according to their answers. One of the members shares his personal experience with men who have higher libido, whereas women have a comparatively lower rate in that. It is found in their interactions that women are impulsive in maintaining relationships as compared to men who are better at sex.

Due to conventional gender practices chiefly compulsory heterosexuality has risen a conundrum of performativity here. Bisexuals proffer to be known as cisgender in their social recognition, but varied in their sexual orientation. A bisexual male believes in masculine traits whether it is aggression or physical strength whereas a bisexual female believes in fragileness, shyness, or full of warmth according to these respondents.

The mystery man tends to be certain of his gender and another person's gender when it reaches the sexual performance. When he is with Anuja, he used to express his masculine nature of monopolizing and unanswering questions, sometimes, even this affinity was visible in his sexual acts too. Similarly, he performs masculinity with Tanay during interactions, gay meetings at his friends' homes for a house party, and sexually also, he keeps his upper hand constantly. A bisexual individual is affirmative about the opposite gender while getting intimate, he or she always prefers the other gender in a relationship. The entire idea of another person's bisexuality is utterly irrelevant to bisexuals whether their partner is recognised as a woman or man but he or she may search for a partner who would be willing to perform the relatively 'opposite' gender during sexual intercourse that they desire to perform. Bisexuals do not rely on society's dualism of gender. What they believe is 'solidarity of gender', where each individual can accept the partner beyond their feminine or masculine traits. The non-normative notion of sexuality plays a vital role here in composing the relationship.

The mystery man behaves disparately in his relationship with Tanay and Anuja; his different gender expectations veered unexpectedly for the readers. The mystery man's actions were self-explanatory and his inner child went through a lack of emotional attachment during childhood. As his parents died in some plane accident, he had to live along with his maternal aunt and uncle, but there also he suffers the wrath of destiny and the miseries of an isolated child who faces harassment from his uncle. This whole incident serves right from Fairbairn's theoretical structure where two significant things are requisite to nurture a child's action, first, the infant must feel affectionate by his mother at first step followed by fatherly affection or the other close relative's love and second, his compassion must receive equally by other members in the family. A person's characteristics of the whole life are determined by the roots of trauma. The mystery man lives in the void of love, where

his vague behaviour creates distance and affinity in his conversations with Tanay and Anuja. The inner child of mystery man secluded himself from every relation, whether of his Seema maushi, his friends, or any companion. In these years, he becomes close to only one person, i.e. 'self', he finds comfort in himself, got a job, earn for himself, and lives for himself. "Fairbairn claims that the relationship with the internalised object is accompanied outwardly by thumb sucking, masturbation, excessive feeding or drinking, homosexuality or incest." (Judd 7) His bisexuality emerges because of his seclusion from familiar objects like his parents, aunt and uncle which leads him to quest for love or companionship in other people like Tanay and Anuja.

Conclusion:

This work embodies a same-sex love story when it was taboo to discern such topics in public. Tanay, a college-going young man, is wooed by his college professor while learning how to write poetry with warmth. It has been many years since some acclaimed theorists like Freud disclosed their views on homosexuality and bisexuality, configuring aberration and perversion, but it will still require more awareness and acceptance of breaking the 'in-betweenness' of gender fluid identities. The exegesis of *Cobalt Blue* has myriad ways to show up, but the most obscure part of this novel is bisexuality, which is read in oblivion. The protagonists of the novel suffer a heart-wrenching experience of broken trust by the mystery man is chiefly the cynosure of the story but what remains unexperienced by the readers is the childhood trauma of the paying guest who never shares the pangs of sexual harassment widely except with Tanay and Anuja. Those childhood traumas forge one way for making him the ambiguous person leading to fraudulence with both the siblings, yet he could not hide his sexual orientation, i.e. of being bisexual. Hence, he opts for the easiest path of eloping alone without telling first Tanay and then Anuja.

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