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LOCATING QUEER SPACES IN INDIRA GOSWAMI'S *UDAYBHANUR CHARITRA*

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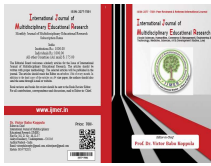
Abstract:

Binary assumptions of gender identity and expression have been destabilized with the advent of postmodernism. The rigid dichotomy of gender identity, man/woman; male/female, masculine/feminine could no longer accommodate new realities and experiences. This new reality defies the conventional sex/gender-system by dismantling the binary oppositions such as man/woman, male/female, heterosexual /homosexual. This paper is an attempt to read Indira Goswami's novella, *Udaybhanur Charitra* from a queer perspective. Dr.Indira Goswami popularly known by her pen name as Mamoni Raisom Goswami (1942-2011) was a celebrated Assamese writer, novelist editor, poet, scholar hailing from Assam. She is also the recipient of the prestigious Jnanpith Award; the highest literary award in India for her novel, *Datal Hatir Uye Khowa Hodah* (*The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*). Most of her works deal with the oppressed, her voice is the voice of resistance against social norms. This paper also attempts to highlight the resistance to the dominant heteropatriachal order and locate the different trajectories of queer spaces in her novella, *Udaybhanur Charitra*.

Keywords: Binary Assumptions, Gender Identity, Postmodernism, Rigid Dichotomy, New Realities, Queer Perspective, Heteropatriachal Order.

Binary assumptions of gender identity and gender expression have been destabilized with the advent of postmodernism. The rigid dichotomy of gender identity, man/woman;-male/female; masculine/feminine could no longer accommodate new realities and experiences. This new reality defies the conventional sex/gender system by dismantling the binary oppositions such as man/woman, male/female, heterosexual /homosexual. This paper is an attempt to read Indira Goswami's novella, *Udaybhanur Charitra* from a queer perspective.

To locate and analyze the queer spaces in *Uday Bhanur Charitra*, the study is based on different theoretical perspectives. Post-structuralist philosopher, Foucault, tries to disrupt the gender essentialism ingrained in the sex/gender system. In his work *History of Sexuality* Foucault describes the origin of modern homosexual identity which is essential to understand the theory of sexual-identity function. According to Foucault, "Sexuality must not be thought of as a natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct." (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*) Medical discourse and legal discourse created the need to understand "about sexual identity, particularly the homosexual." Drawing heavily from Foucault, Judith Butler questions the binary assumptions of gender and sexuality. In her work *Gender Trouble* Butler asserts that gender is one's performance which is preceded by an anterior subject. It rejects the common understanding of the existence of the subject before performance. She applies a reverse logic, where performance precedes the subject. The performativity of the subject is a process which is never complete. As such gender is also a kind of process and the concept of fixed and stable identities cannot be ontologically true. According to Butler the gendered body is performative. Further, in the same book she writes, "If gender is an object which a person a person wants to be (but never fully realized) then gender is a process or an action. Gender should not be used a noun, an existence of essence or a static cultural label. It should be considered as a repeated behavior." What is interesting is that the subject does not voluntarily perform one's gender. The performance of gender is not a voluntary act, it is a compulsion imposed by the structures of compulsory heterosexual matrix. She also questions the



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binary assumptions of gender and sexuality by pointing out the difference between sex and gender. Just as nature is a “site or surface of inscription” (Butler, 1993, p.2) in the same way gender is similar to a cultural construct which is imposed upon the surface of matter, understood either as the body or its given text.” (Butler, 1993,p.5)

Joan Scott states that “gender is a social fact imposed upon a sexed body.” (1986)

The fact that sexuality is a cultural and social product and not naturally made have led to the conceptual understanding of gender fluidity. Apart from other factors gender and sexuality of a person are considered as potential markers of identity which determines the social identity of a person. ‘Sex’ refers to the assigned physical or psychological differences between associated with a person’s biological sex. The notion of gender identity is more than the outward identity of a person as it also involves the inner knowledge about one’s identity. ‘Sexuality’ is the sexual desire of a person in consonance with the gender identity one identifies oneself with.

The word ‘Queer’ includes within its fold those people who are not heterosexual, for instance, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender etc. The queer theorists contends that the terms ‘Sex’, ‘Gender’ and ‘Sexuality’ do not have a linear relationship. The primary focus of queer theory is on fluidity of gender identity and gender expression and the consequent disruption of established norms. It is an anti-identitarian stance, an identity without an essence. The term queer theory was coined by Teresa de Lauretis (1991) in her work *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities*. One of the key concepts in the understanding of queer theory is the idea of “heteronormativity”-which relates to the institutional structures of understanding and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent-that is, organized as a sexuality-but also privileged.” (Berlant) Gayle Rubin in her essay *Thinking Sex* (1984) draws on the Foucaultian model of rejection of biological explanation of sexuality. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick bases her work *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) on Gayle Rubin’s essay, *Thinking Sex*. She questions the binary opposites of gender which according to her constricts one’s understanding of gender and sexuality. She maintains that sexuality is far too complex to be confined to neat binary divisions.

The non-adherence to the strict binary divisions of gender male/masculine and female/feminine also find considerable reference in various ancient mythologies and religious narratives of human history. Hindu religion dates back to the Rig Veda, the oldest sacred religious text, which was probably composed between 1500 and 900 B.C. One of the passages of the Rig Veda reads, *Vikriti Evam Prakriti* which may be translated as “what seems unnatural is also natural.” (Pattanaik,2017)

Wilhelm in *Tritiya Prakriti: Understanding Homosexuality, Transgender Identity and Intersex Conditions through Hinduism*, there are references to the third gender can be traced in the sacred Vedas which recognized three genders. (Wilhelm,2007) Hindu mythology dealt with the concept of queerness thousands of years ago. For instance, Lord Shiva is depicted as *Ardhanarisvara*, which is a combination of three words- ‘Ardha,’ ‘Nari,’ and ‘Ishwara’ meaning the Lord whose half is a woman. The *Ardhanareshwara* form is created by the merging of Shiva and Parvati in a single body-while Parvati dwells in Shiva’s left body, Shiva remains in his right half. So in his way Lord Shiva is both the male and female energy. This androgynous form of Shiva embodies the totality which is beyond duality. (Pattanaik 2017: 124)

Before examining the representation of queer spaces in *Udaybhanur Charitra*, it is necessary to understand how Assamese literature addresses and handles such themes. Over several decades Assamese fictional narratives have been an exploration of dominant heterosexuality. However, it was not until recently in the present times regional narratives redefine the conventional notion of gender and sexuality. The depiction of queer voices by Assamese writers is limited if not altogether unheard of. The lives and lived experiences of such non-binary people have been represented particularly in the latter half of the 20th century and the early part of the 21st century. In this context, some instances of such Assamese queer writings are-the short story *Suwali Hostelor Egoraki Lesbian (A Lesbian in a Girls’ Hostel)* by Gobinda Prasad Sarma which deals with the dynamic of lesbian relationship in a girls’ hostel. Moushumi Kandali’s *Triyattor Golpo (The Tale of Thirdness)*



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which explores male homosexuality set against a hetero-patriarchal society. Manikuntala Bhattacharya's novel *Mukti* (Freedom) represents people inhabiting marginalized spaces in the society including male homosexuality and its repression. In Sanjib Pol Deka's short story *Nukua Kahini (The Untold Story)* brings out queer voices subject to sexual exploitation between members of the same sex.

The narrator in Indira Goswami's *Udaybhanur Charitra* describes Udaybhanu as an unconventional artist. This unconventionality highlights his queer artistic expressions, queer experiences or relationships that fall beyond the mainstream. From his childhood onwards Udaybhanu played a second fiddle to his elder brother, Nayanbhanu. To vent out his frustration and anger he takes refuge in alcohol. His passion for painting and photography unleashes his creative side. In the opening paragraph itself the readers can witness him in an inebriated state dragging a sack with a dead body inside. He desperately takes photographs of the rotten corpse from various angles. He reveals to his mother that the corpse is none other than his dear friend, Mohammed Musa. The queer element is introduced here when Udaybhanu shows such a deep attachment with the mortal remains of his departed friend little realizing the bizarreness of his action. His mother Labanyaprabha, keeps hoping that a woman should enter her son's life. As a typical wife she is concerned about her ailing husband and as a mother she is worried about her alcoholic son. She abhors the fact that Udaybhanu's friends frequently visit their house as it makes him more prone to alcoholism. She is much pleased when Madhavalata Devi, an aspiring author, shows interest in writing a book on artists like Udaybhanu. In a matter of days, he develops a close bond with her. He would share with her a lot of things about his life and experiences which she would carefully note down in her golden notebook. Udaybhanu's friend, Haren, cautions him not to trust any woman to such an extent. In a general way he has a misogynistic attitude towards women. He also reminds him about his relationship with Jamini who soon left him on the lurch. The reading of the text suggests that the two men, Haren and Udaybhanu share a special bonding which at times goes beyond friendship. The sexual tension between them is evident when Haren gets possessive about Uday's blossoming affinity with the beautiful Madhavalata. The queerness of Udaybhanu as a character remains buried deep within him. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her work *Epistemology of the Closet* (1993) argues that closet is a fundamental aspect of homosexual identity and culture.

Like Basil Hallward of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Udaybhanu is also an artist with a secret. However, unlike Basil who made a painting to capture the beauty of his male friend, Dorian, Udaybhanu wanted to make a painting of the lissome Madhavalata. In his ramblings with her, he is careful enough not to disclose about his tender feelings for Mohammed Musa. The narrator depicts the emotional landscape of Udaybhanu's mind: "And Mohammed Musa? No, nothing could be revealed about him to anybody. Even if his chest is ripped into pieces, he will not say anything about it. This matter is very close to him just as his flesh is connected to his body..." (Goswami, p.135, Translation-Mine)

Udaybhanu is himself perplexed about his condition and consciously or unconsciously he tries to seek refuge in art and alcohol. In the words of his friend Arabinda, "You drink consistently because, as most psychologists interpret it, it allows you to escape from the many things of your life that haunt you." (Goswami, p.135, Translation-Mine)

He feels strongly connected to Madhavalata and considers her an endearing friend who patiently listens to him. He also regrets the absence of his sister, Moina, who used to be an essential part of his life. Madhavalata is a female figure in the life of Udaybhanu as a friend, as a sister or as a reflection of his caring mother. At times he does display behavior that coincides with heterosexuality; heterosexuality of the protagonist may be seen as a mask to disguise his covert homoerotic desires. Another possibility is that Udaybhanu is attracted to both the sexes thereby exhibiting both masculine and feminine qualities at the same time. On seeing his incomplete portrait of Madhavalata, he utters her name making an emotional outburst. The narrator states: "In his nostrils he could smell the scented flesh of a woman. The smell is like rice starch! This must be the smell of human flesh." (Goswami, p.140, Translation-Mine)

Moreover there is something else also which Uday feels but that is a mysterious and unnamed feeling. Perhaps Uday can find himself inhabiting a third space which lies outside the conventional boundaries of gender and sexuality. To understand this apparently complex position one may take the alternative "to be between, to pass between, the intermezzo" (1987:277)



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as suggested by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. His queerness is marked in the course of the narrative as the author carefully unsettles the notions of fixed sex and gender identity. Udaybhanu like the character of Orlando in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), has a gender expression and or identity that is neither 'male' nor 'female.' Orlando's ambiguous identity shatters the sense of gender differences-his/her self is constantly dynamic, forever subject to change. Goswami also carves Udaybhanu's character with extremely fluid borders. The strong attraction which Uday occasionally feels for Madhavilata may be because of his slippery gender identity. Moreover his longing for her may seem as a masquerade of heterosexuality due to the prevailing societal pressure; which Adrienne Rich calls "*Compulsory heterosexuality*."

Understanding Uday's artistic sensibilities Madhavilata shares with him many insights into the realm of art and paintings. In the course of their conversation, they discuss the lives of great painters like Raphael, Leonardo Da Vinci, Michaelangelo etc. and their same-sex inclinations. In the course of the narrative Uday in the presence of his mother categorically declares, "I will live my life like the famous artists. I will live my life like Raphael-like Michaelangelo, like Leonardo." (Goswami, p.169, Translation-Mine)

The distinguishing feature of Udaybhanu's character is his child-like innocence which is diametrically set against his violent temperament. The seething violent streak in his character may be attributed to the forced sexual repression in a heteronormative society. His sister, Anima, usually reprimands him for his late arrival at home that too in a drunken state neglecting his sick father. In one such moment Udaybhanu felt like shedding tears but he could not do in the presence of his elder sister. In that precise moment his mind was flooded with the memories of his late sister, Moina and Mohammed Musa in front of whom he could show his weaknesses. His vulnerable self is projected when he finds himself surrounded by an all pervading emptiness and loneliness. Whenever he experiences any emotional turmoil like small child he would weep uncontrollably on his mother's shoulder. When Madhavilata took back the incomplete portrait of hers and tore the golden notebook into shreds, he found it hard to understand her actions. The narrator writes, "He put his head on his mother's shoulder and started whimpering." (Goswami, p.168, Translation-Mine)

Madhavilata also understands his gender fluid nature which is suggestive of both masculinity and femininity. In her perception he has a "flower like softness" coupled with a "dangerously aggressive nature" (Goswami, p176, Translation-Mine)

The queer spaces in Indira Goswami's *Udaybhanur Charitra* may be traced in such abrupt shifting of Udaybhanu's gender identity categories; categories which indicate a process instead of a closure. As Simone de Beauvoir in her ground breaking work, *The Second Sex*, writes: "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one." (1943:30)

Through this powerful statement Beauvoir claims the fact that gender is a construct, which is in an ongoing state and that the concept of 'woman' does not have a fixed essence. The same principle may be applied to 'man' whose gender is also an unstable category.

In spite of his repressed homosexuality, the narrator depicts the male-male intimacy between Udaybhanu and Haren. When Udaybhanu's mother was away for the treatment of his ailing father, Haren used to spend nights in his house. One day Anima and his friend Bolen are shocked to find Udaybhanu and Haren sharing intimate moments like lovers. Anima is in a state of shock when she witnesses that the ancestral bed of the household has been defiled by her brother and his male lover. Labanyaprabha, Anima and Bolen represent the heterosexual matrix which is disrupted on Udaybhanu's homoerotic encounters with Haren. Anima feels threatened in her father's house when she learns that Haren strews her brother's bed with rose petals. Towards the end Madhavilata estranges herself from Udaybhanu and chooses to move away with her long time friend, Arabinda. In a dramatic way Haren pacifies the dejected Udaybhanu by kneeling down before him and placing rose petals on his hairy and sweaty chest. In the words of Haren, "This society has banished us. We have to rise up by



ourselves by supporting each other. We have to keep each other happy just like the way we expected from our beloveds...by touching your body...your lips..." (Goswami,p.223, Translation-Mine)

The non-binary people and their disposition may be seen as sites of resistance and perhaps as such many writers refrain themselves from dealing with queer themes. Most of them do not want to portray the lives and experiences of such sexual minorities for which such themes might not gather much readership. In the Indian context the bulk of queer regional literature is still limited and Assamese writers are also no exception. Most of the writers are not able to transcend the traditional boundaries of a heteronormative society. There are some Assamese writers who are bold enough to introduce and explore queer voices in their writings but they do so in a restrained manner. This may be because non-normative themes might upset the prevailing standard of equilibrium which might unsettle the minds of the readers. Possibly there are some truths which are best left half told than not to be told altogether. In the portrayal of Udaybhanu, the author points out the indeterminacy of the subject position with the instability of the assigned gender categories. The depiction of homoerotic relationship between Udaybhanu and Haren, the presence of the female, Madhavilata, acts as a simulation to dilute the queerness of the protagonist. Moreover identity itself is an unstable concept and so the dichotomy man/woman, heterosexuality/homosexuality might often slide into one another.

The reading of *Udaybhanur Charitra* suggests that queer spaces inhabit the blurred terrain of homosexuality and heterosexuality. The divide between gender binaries is artificial and they may be subject to constant blurring within one and the same individual. The question of identity or category functions only as a label to differentiate one thing from another. It is an established fact that we know the world around us by categorizing similar things into groups and labels. However, the importance of a person or a thing lies in the way it is or he/she is and not by with what identity it or he/she is named. In such a view the construction of determinate identity is rendered insignificant. This position leads to the humanitarian acceptance of and compassionate understanding of the different lived experiences of all persons regardless of their gender identity and sexual orientation. The deep-seated homophobia ingrained in the cultural consciousness of a majority of people in a largely heteronormative society should transcend beyond binaries to give way to a more liberalizing outlook. Having said that, to deviate from a long established tradition with its digestible binaries and accept new ideas might seem shocking to the public sensibility. The change in the mindset of the society at large will require much time and patience.

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