

In Search of a Queer Utopia: Performing Heterosexuality and Social Conformity in Shani Mootoo's *Valmiki's Daughter*

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Abstract

*The diaspora community has been the source of the Indian subcontinent's queer imagination. Migration produces a new understanding of sexuality and gender identity; however, it doesn't always deliver in terms of freedom and acceptance. This paper critically comments on the racial, societal, and cultural issues Indo-Caribbean immigrants face in Shani Mootoo's *Valmiki's Daughter*. It focuses on how Valmiki and his daughter Viveka experience the various expectations placed on them by their family and the Indo-Caribbean society in which they live, continuing their traditions and culture, invariably forcing them into performing heterosexuality and conforming to the societal codes.*

Keywords: *Indo-Caribbean, queer desire, race, social conformity, postcolonial, diaspora*

Introduction

The diaspora community has been the source of the subcontinent's queer imagination, and the inclusion of queer studies within the diaspora has been an important development in literary and cultural productions. Sandhya Rao Mehta voices that "in spite of protestations to the contrary by critics who resist the link between the queer and the diaspora sharing exclusivist positions, the potential marginalisation of the queer and the diaspora within normative communities has allowed for a sustained exploration of gendered identities within diasporic spaces" (2015, 19).

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A person's geographic and social location is crucial in understanding the construction of queer identity. Gayatri Gopinath argues that the spaces of public cultures in the diaspora emerge "as a contested terrain where heteronormative notions of female sexuality are both enacted and challenged" (2005, 161). Published in 2008, *Valmiki's Daughter* talks about desires and how their expression is constrained by the "orthodoxies of heterosexuality and family" (Narain, Donnell, and O'Callaghan 2011, 3). The novel explores the intersection between Caribbean regional geographies and queer sexualities. Unlike her previous novels, Mootoo places the events of *Valmiki's Daughter* in "real" locations around San Fernando and Trinidad, as opposed to imaginary ones which offer the potential to form new worlds.

Shani Mootoo considers space as an open and transcultural realm "that is indulged in a sensuousness which evokes myriad tastes, smells, colors, textures and voices" (Helff and Dalal 2012, 78). Her descriptive writing style, describing the space of San Fernando and Trinidad and taking the reader on a journey through them, indicates this. However, the picture she paints of this lively and vibrant transcultural space directly contradicts her concept of local and familiar spaces in the novel. The affluent Indo-Trinidadian middle-class background provides a narrative backbone to the novel. In their article "And She Wrote Backwards", Sissy Helff and Sanghamitra Dalal (2012, 50-51) note that in choosing the affluent Indo-Trinidadian middle class, Mootoo focuses "on a generation whose life has still been affected by the bleak horrors of indentured labor, a denial of intimacy between partners and negating of homosexuality, it does not come as a great surprise that this generation readily sacrifices private happiness only to uphold an elite status."

Mootoo's works are more than literary triumphs, given the tensions around sexuality in Caribbean societies. They break the literary silence around sexuality and non-heteronormative desire and offer an imaginative bridge into public conceptions of sexuality, desire, gay rights, and citizenship in Caribbean societies. The Krishnu family is the prime example of this – living in a house built on secrets, with Mootoo focusing on the head of the family, Valmiki, a successful doctor, and Viveka, a twenty-year-old college student.

The eponymous Valmiki and his daughter Viveka are forced to suppress their queer desires as their revelations would make them outsiders in the Indo-Trinidadian community. The double life that they are forced to live raises questions "about the societal construct of gender and identity in general and its perception" (Helff and Dalal 2012, 76) in the community they live in. Valmiki does so by maintaining a family while disguising his sexual "deviances" under cover of a philandering husband, and Viveka gives in to performing the role of a good Indian daughter and marries a man of similar class while throwing away her desire for Anick, a married Frenchwoman. Catherine Stookey notes:

The refusal of Caribbean people to confront queerness in their own midst only makes it more difficult for them to discuss and understand. The lack of terminology

for Mootoo's queer characters with which to articulate their identities does not make their experiences any less rich or meaningful, however. (2017, 2)

“What’s in a name?” Terms as Part of a Self-identification Process

Terminology is an important aspect of the self-identification process of an individual. In the novel, Mootoo explicitly explores the conflicts arising from the intersection of Indo- Caribbean and queer identities. However, she never uses terms like gay, lesbian, or bisexual in her work. Instead, “her descriptions of her characters’ conflicting experiences with their sexual orientations and gender identities are expressed less concretely through intricate descriptions of desire and bodily discomfort” (Stokey 2017, 1). The word ‘homosexual’ is mentioned only once throughout the novel and that too only in Devika’s thoughts. Even Valmiki refers to his sexual inclinations as a “thing” or an “aberration”.

By not using terms like lesbian, gay, and bisexual, Mootoo seems to bring out the complexities of identities and, instead, focuses more on the emotional nuances of their relationships. Viveka’s emphasis on V.S. Naipaul’s writing “in terms of the communal life in Trinidad” can be seen as a connection to “her queerness and gender namelessness” (Ghisyan 2015, 93). The freedom from labels can be seen as Mootoo’s way of destroying understanding of sexuality as being fixed in binaries; gay or straight, homosexual or heterosexual. In the novel, her characters’ sexuality suggests fluidity, which is only contained when societal expectations are placed on them.

This fluidity is most evident in Viveka and Anick; assigning them specific terms would take away their individuality and experience. They’ve both had, as did Valmiki, heterosexual relations, although they much prefer homosexual ones, which may bring confusion regarding their identities. The novel underscores the sexual diversity of queer individuals in a particular space who are assumed to be primarily heterosexual. In their journal article “Shani Mootoo: Writing, Difference and the Caribbean”, Denise Narain, Alison Donnell and Evelyn O’Callaghan (2011, 4) note that Mootoo’s texts “by so persistently implicating heterosexual structures (marriage, the family) and suggesting possibilities for its rehabilitation, call on readers to recognise the potential of queer subjects — and narratives - for re-imagining Caribbean subjectivities of all kinds across all genders, ethnicities, sexualities and classes.”

Western terminology doesn’t always apply to diasporic communities. Evelyn O’Callaghan (2012) believes that Mootoo’s refusal to use Western terminology like ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’ and ‘homosexual’ lies in her political purpose of promoting queer identities in the Caribbean. Using Western terms makes it easier to blame homosexuality for being “western” and something associated with white people. Therefore, the terminology is unavailable to the Krishnu family “since it is so firmly grounded in influences that postcolonial Caribbeans are still trying to escape” (Stokey 2017, 1).

Influence of Socio-cultural Background in the Formation of an Identity

Race is a contributing factor in maintaining cultural and social standing for the Krishnu's, as what gets them acknowledgement "is not what black people have that makes them Trinidadian (they have culture, we have money—which is better?) but a profession, wealth, children to carry on our names, and friendship with the whites" (Mootoo 2008). This further enforces the importance of heterosexuality and procreation to continue the "Indian" culture. Western thoughts related to race also influence the characters' sexualities and gender identities, which is visible in Viveka's envisioning of herself as a blond-haired boy named Vince, who has blue eyes and is an epitome of strength, "who would not let her cry" (Mootoo 2008).

Viveka's attraction towards her former gym teacher Miss Russell and Anick also indicates her inclination towards white people. In this way, Viveka's desires, "whether they are focused on the people she is attracted to or her gender identity are shown by Mootoo to be strongly shaped by lingering ideas of Western beauty" (Stookey 2017, 1). The influence of 'whiteness' on the characters' words and actions is as complicated as the ideas of sexuality and gender explored in the novel. It is indicated in various instances that Caribbean culture still considers the white Western woman an embodiment of femininity and an ideal to strive for. Anick's beauty, for example, is the epitome of femininity for both Devika and Viveka, who are otherwise at polarising ends regarding their thoughts. Zoran Pecic notes this particular moment where both mother and daughter are joined by their views:

Devika's ideas of what constitutes 'proper' femininity clearly differ in the image of Anick compared to her own daughter Viveka, who she sees as plain and not exhibiting ladylike traits. Viveka, albeit directly opposed to her mother's view of femininity, is also impressed with and attracted to Anick's expression of femininity. (2013, 87)

More than just beauty, Anick's exoticisation is a matter of culture, class, race and society. However, an interesting contradiction of the same idealistic race is the society's double standard towards mixed-race individuals and white people who have emigrated from their own country to live in Trinidad, as they represent people who have failed to achieve something in their own country. This double standard is almost ironic, considering that the Indians in Trinidad are also immigrants.

Social class influences the characters in their expression of sexuality. Viveka's social standing forbids her in many ways to be herself and to do as she pleases. Devika forbids her to play volleyball because playing sports will make her more "mannish" than she already is, and it will also serve as a platform which can lead to mixing with Trinidadians from the lower classes, "men of African origin", and other Indians who do not belong to their social class.

Mootoo's placement of the Krishna residence in the prosperous Luminada Heights can be described as a move which "sets the scene for exploration of the racial as well as social elements in the construction of cultural and sexual belonging in Trinidad" (Ghisiyawan 2015, 77). The novel always emphasises reputation, manners, appearances, saving face, and propriety to the extent that the characters start feeling imprisoned and unhappy, even wishing to throw it all away. It is obvious how socio-cultural backgrounds influence the formation of an identity. The downsides of a society with so much societal oppression are hard to ignore, as Stookey notes:

Valmiki could never be in a public relationship with Tony or Saul, Anick must stay with a husband who loves the status she brings him more than the woman she is, and Viveka faces constant pressure to make her multilayered gender identity and presentation more digestible for her upper-middle class Trinidadian bubble. (2017, 3)

Concluding Remarks: Diasporic Imaginings of a Queer Utopia

The picture that Mootoo paints in her story of the situation of queer people in Trinidadian society is incredibly complex and reflects the intersections of various identities. Affluent Indo-Trinidadians, concerned with maintaining their status, "expect their children to follow Indian traditions and are impatient with transgressions of any sort" (Gupta 2017). For these people, the "concepts of femininity and masculinity derive from and define Indian tradition" (2017, 3) as they try to maintain the authentic core of Hindu consciousness in a Trinidadian context.

Viveka understands the implications of her attraction towards Anick and tries to comprehend the dangers of its revelation, as "a confession of her desire for Anick would result in the expulsion from her family and the society around her", which leads Viveka to seek "alternative readings and interpretations of sexuality, unimaginable within the standard mappings of space, nation and sexuality" (Pecic 2013, 85). Following the parameters set by Indian moral codes becomes paramount in Indo-Trinidadian society.

However, as we see in the novel, such codes often squash the self-expression of anyone who does not conform. Gayatri Gopinath (2005, 4) states that "conventional diasporic discourse is marked by a backward glance", which fills the diaspora with nostalgia for their origins and "what is remembered through queer diasporic desire and queer diasporic body is a past time and place riven with contradictions and the violence of multiple uprootings, displacements and exile."

In her work, *Sex, Secrets and Shani Mootoo's Queer Families*, Evelyn O'Callaghan (2012, 236) comments that Queer theory's origins in the West "privilege the entity of the individual in its discourse on human rights, which has the potential to limit the consideration of social

structures and the idea that desiring is most often *enacted* in relation to others.” The Indian social structure portrayed in the novel gives more value to wealth, status, and image than to the individual and its identity. Therefore, queer characters are forced to play heterosexuals in public with these performances.

Valmiki is forced into performing heterosexuality, both by society and his own conscience and could never come to terms with his homosexuality. He lives in denial, often wishing to love “a man, a man from his own world with whom he would share another life” (Mootoo 2008), and wishes for his daughter to break free. Albeit, he never says that to her directly and chooses instead to stay on the sidelines, watching her as she falls into the same pattern as he once did when he chose to marry Devika.

Viveka and Valmiki both long for freedom from societal norms. Although Valmiki is bound by his own homophobia, Viveka shows readiness to embrace her sexuality until her relationship with Anick ends due to the latter’s pregnancy, which drives her to marry Trevor and eventually move to Canada at the end of the novel. Her decision on this move represents her diasporic imaginings of wanting to find queer utopia in another country, as the one she grew up in failed her. Marriage in such a situation is considered “a means to an end” (Mootoo 2008). The queer Indian characters, when forced to conform, “split their sexual identities repeatedly by being heterosexual in public and homosexual in private” (Gupta 2017, 4).

In her path-breaking article “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”, Adrienne Rich (1980, 653) argues that compulsory heterosexuality has been forced and subliminally imposed on women and yet “everywhere women have resisted it, often at the cost of physical torture, imprisonment, psychosurgery, social ostracism, and extreme poverty.” This performance ensures their recognition and validation; however, it is emotionally and mentally taxing for the queer individual. Mootoo implicitly acknowledges that individuals who do not abide by normative sexuality are constricted in their choices and spaces in many societies, and the fact that Valmiki and Viveka had only two available options, “to leave the country or to live a lie, attests the power of discursive processes and practices that still regulate bodies, genders and desires” (Harris and Pires 2015). Her exploration of these struggles demonstrates the complex circumstances in which homoerotic love may exist, though its acceptance remains a utopia.

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