



THE INTERSECTION OF SEXISM AND HETEROSEXISM IN SACHIN KUNDALKAR'S *COBALT BLUE*

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Abstract

Our social structure has always been split into different classes, castes, races, genders or sexualities with one group in a particular category has always been dominant on and oppressive to the other group. Under this system, people belonging to a majoritarian or powerful group are privileged to control and discipline the minority or powerless group. Likewise, in the categories of gender and sexual orientation, it is men and heterosexuals who have been in the domineering positions to suppress and silence women and non-heterosexuals. These gender and sexuality-based prejudices called sexism and heterosexism generate the atmosphere of misogyny and homophobia. The novel *Cobalt Blue* by Sachin Kundalkar underscores both sexism and heterosexism within its plot. Kundalkar underscores how hetero-patriarchal society while monopolising the hegemony of heterosexuals and men oppresses and even marginalises both homosexuals and women.

Keywords: Sexism, Heterosexism, Heterosexuality, Homosexuality, Oppression, Patriarchy.

Sexism: Any sort of biasness or preconception based on a person's sex, gender or gender identity is called sexism. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines sexism as (1) "prejudice or discrimination based on sex" and (2) "behavior, conditions, or attitudes that foster stereotypes of social roles based on sex" (Sexism). For ages, in almost every society around the globe, men or males have been socially, politically, culturally and economically in commanding and domineering positions in relation to women. Consequently, sexism more often is termed as

discrimination or prejudice against women or females. The term 'sexism' has been first coined by Pauline M. Leet in her talk on "Women and the Undergraduate" in 1965. Leet explicates the term by bringing it in parallel with racism:

When you argue . . . that since fewer women write good poetry this justifies their total exclusion, you are taking a position analogous to that of a racist — I might call you in this case a "sexist" . . . Both the racist

and the sexist are acting as if all that has happened had never happened, and both of them are making decisions and coming to conclusion about someone's value by referring to factors which are in both cases irrelevant. (qtd. in Shapiro 6)

Glick and Fiske divided sexism into two components, with the positive stereotypes manifesting in benevolent sexism, the negative in hostile sexism, and a combination of the two producing ambivalent sexism. Hostile sexism remains explicitly hostile or combative toward women or females. However, the benevolent sexism seems to convey positive messages, obscuring the hostile aim of dominating and controlling women. It works through 'complementary gender differentiation, 'protective paternalism' and 'heterosexual intimacy' (qtd. in Lorenzi-Cioldi and Kulich 7-8).

Historically, women have been victimised and discriminated on various levels. They have been denied equal access to education; deprived the right to vote; dominated in the marital system and have rarely been represented in language. The semantic rule in language has always been gendered to favour males and erase females. Accordingly, the generic masculine terms like the guy, man, mankind and singular masculine pronouns like he, his and him have been used to represent the whole humankind. This system of keeping male-as-norm by default treats all non-males or non-men as inferior and second-class citizens. The exclusion of woman or any non-man from the linguistic discourse further reinforces the male supremacy or patriarchy in society. Patriarchy while privileging men the right to discipline and control women breeds sexism in both the private and public spheres. People with a sexist frame of mind often use derogatory gender stereotypes for people based on their biological sex. In familial structure, a woman is forced to comply with her father in childhood, husband in her married life and son in her widowhood. It must be noted that the sexist assumptions about anyone's sex directly or indirectly restrain other sexes as well. Therefore, sexism is a belief system "that one sex is superior to or more valuable than another sex. It imposes limits on what men and boys can do and should do and what women and girls can and should do"

(Masequesmay). The sole aim of sexism is to maintain and perpetuate male supremacy or patriarchy and consequently dominate and restrict women in society.

Heterosexism: A belief system that privileges heterosexuals as the only norm and consequently marginalises all non-heterosexuals (bisexual, homosexual, pansexual, asexual etc) is termed heterosexism. Heterosexism hegemonises the definition of 'normal' and 'natural' to heterosexual attraction or sexual activity only and therefore, any alteration in this is invariably demonised and stigmatised. It stems from the oppressive belief that identifies heterosexuality as the only 'valid' form of sexual orientation and consequently suppresses all types of non-heterosexual behaviour, identity or relationship. It is impact of heterosexism only that the discourse of sex education is confined up to the sexual attraction, sexual behaviour, sexual activity or relationship between men and women only. Elizabeth P. Cramer, in her *Addressing Homophobia and Heterosexism on College Campuses* (2003), expounds heterosexism as:

The expectation that all persons should be or are heterosexual. The belief that all heterosexual relations are normal and the norm. These expectations and beliefs occur on individual, institutional or cultural levels. The behavioral manifestations of heterosexual beliefs include denying marriage licenses to same-sex couples and restricting health and retirement benefits to those in heterosexual marriages. (2)

A very simple and common example of detecting heterosexism is asking a woman if she has a boyfriend/husband and asking a man if he has a girlfriend/wife. This unintentional assumption comes to mind because it is assumed that everybody is heterosexual primarily then if someone is a woman, she would "naturally" be dating/marrying a man and vice versa. This oppressive heterosexist assumption about the entirety of heterosexuality breeds many homophobic evils and crimes that treat non-heterosexuals as low-class citizens and labels them as pervert, sinful, ungodly, immoral, deviant, unnatural, disordered, abnormal etc. A heterosexist

mindset does not expect or imagine any sexual attraction or activity between people of the same sex. Accordingly, two people of the same-sex sharing intimate relation are often viewed as having homosocial relation. They are invariably seen as nothing more than friends. Raj Rao in his *Criminal Love?* opines:

There is a silent pact at work . . . between homosociality and heterosexism. Heterosexism may be said to be the safety valve that prevents homosocial behavior from being read as homosexual. In India, two people of the same sex can be as 'physical' with each other as they please, and yet not be called homosexual. On the other hand, two people of the opposite sex cannot be 'physical' with each other, and not be called lovers. (Rao 73)

This camouflaging of homosexual relation as homosocial bonding erases the existence of all non-heterosexual people. It is the heterosexist bent of society that segregates the opposite sexes to the negligence of the existence of same-sex love.

Thus, both sexism and heterosexism are somewhat analogous to each other, with sexism being prejudiced against women and heterosexism being prejudiced against non-heterosexuals. Heterosexism, thus, validates the rule of heterosexuality just as sexism validates the rule of patriarchy in society. Sometimes, it is discerned that people with sexist mentality use heterosexism as a tool to demean women; likewise, heterosexist people use sexism to demean non-heterosexuals. Addressing a gay man as a woman, for example, not just censures gay behaviour but also exposes the implicit prejudice against women. Thus, sexism is a gender/sex-based prejudice and heterosexism is prejudice based on sexual orientation. Sexism operates when women are seen as inferior sex/gender and men are privileged the right to control and discipline them. G. M. Herek asserts that heterosexism "operates through a dual process of invisibility and attack. Homosexuality usually remains culturally invisible; when people who identify as homosexual or who engage in

homosexual behavior become visible, they are subject to attack by the society" (qtd. in Cramer 1).

Writers often highlight the menace of racism, sexism and heterosexism through their works. They accentuate how society while privileging one group of people, discriminates against others. *Cobalt Blue* is one such novel in which Sachin Kundalkar underscores the intersection of sexism and heterosexism within its plot. The novel while highlighting gender discrimination also "explores, the discovery, resulting confusion, and bravado of homosexuality in a hostile environment" (Aggarwal). *Cobalt Blue* is the story of two siblings: Tanay and Anuja, who fall in love with the same man, a mysterious painter. Through this unusual love triangle, the novelist foregrounds how society is negligent of homosexual love and treats women as inferior to men. The novel has been divided into two parts: Tanay and Anuja which bring forth the different experiences of both the siblings while falling for the same person. *Cobalt Blue* was originally written in the Marathi language by Sachin Kundalkar in 2006 and translated into English by Jerry Pinto in 2013. The novel is "[a] glimpse into the treacherous terrain of tangled hidden relationships, both homosexual and heterosexual" (Roy). The plot of the novel recounts the events happening in the middle-class Joshi family in Pune, western India. The two parts of the novel while bringing homosexual and heterosexual in parallel also bring to the fore the different shades of sexism and heterosexism.

The tower room of the Joshi family is rented to an enigmatic painter who is nameless in the novel. He charms both Tanay and Anuja who, while falling for him are completely oblivious of each other's relation with him. During his college days, Tanay, a closeted gay man, secretly has sex with many men, but he is never happy with it. Always feeling emotionally isolated, he decides to enter into a permanent relationship with the paying guest. But being a homosexual in a heteronormative world, a stable relationship is not that easy in his case. He has to hide his feelings from his family members because in their heterosexist frame of mind, he is assumed to be a heterosexual man and accordingly he is not supposed to fall in love with

anyone but a woman. He can openly meet the tenant in the tower room because they are assumed as having homosocial bonding. But his lover (the paying guest) cheats him and elopes with his sister, Anuja. After the tenant dumps him, Tanay feels lonely and alienated. In the first part of the novel, Tanay mourns his lost love: "That you should not be here when something we've both wanted happens is no new thing for me. Today too, as always, you're not here" (Kundalkar 3).

While sharing relationship with the tenant, Tanay finds the initial days peaceful for him, but as he begins to think of a long-term commitment, his peace begins to wane. His relationship with "[t]he paying guest has made him aware of the mediocrity, the ordinariness of his secure and comfortable life" (Aggarwal). Facing hurdles on his way, Tanay realises that being a homosexual, he is censured for many things. He is deprived of any explicit expression about his attraction or sexual activity. He is treated as an outcast of society. Although Tanay has an intense relationship with the tenant, he cannot give voice to his feelings. Even while having relation with Tanay, the tenant elopes with Anuja and after six months leaves her too. When the tenant dumps Tanay, all he (Tanay) does is keep his pain to himself only. Tanay cannot cry or articulate the mourning of his broken heart. Rather, his depressed face is misinterpreted and misunderstood as his concern for his sister. His mother misconstrues that he misses Anuja and brags that "[a]t the end of the day, it's family you can depend on. Blood is thicker than water" (Kundalkar 177).

Tanay does not dare to come out to his conservative family who always preaches about the collapse of culture. Their heterosexist bent of mind is marked when they consciously avoid renting their tower room to a girl because of having two boys in the house. It does not ever hit their heterosexist head that the two boys may also fall for each other. Though they always wonder why Tanay and the tenant take considerable time to open the door, it does not come even in their wild imagination that the two have any relationship with each other. They expect their son to be married to a girl. The thoughts that one day he will be asked to enter into

heterosexual marriage pain Tanay. They give his forehead sharp lines and his face a look of pain. While Tanay shares physical relation with other gay men, he comes to know that many of them have married out of fear of their families. Even when he goes with them, he avoids revealing his real name and instead uses pseudonyms for such encounters. Such is the plight of non-heterosexuals in a heteronormative world. They need to hide their real identity out of fear of being attacked or labelled as abnormal or unnatural. Except his lover, Tanay does not disclose his sexuality to any other among his folks and relatives. Rather, he feigns himself as a heterosexual male.

In a heteronormative world, there are strict gender norms that people are expected to fit in. Both males and females are forced to conform to those norms. Any deviation from these passes through the censure of the hetero-patriarchal society. When society sets rigid norms about gender behaviour, people with non-conformative identities are subject to both physical and mental violence. Tanay is mocked by Ram Kaka's son for his feminine gait. He questions Tanay why he walks like a woman. Addressing him Tannya and not Tanay, he tells him: "Tannya, walk straight, don't trip about like a girl, keep those shoulders up, push your chest out" (Kundalkar 45). Then he suggests Tanay's mother to ask him to play with the boys. This gendering of people starts early in their lives. Thus, Tanay learns how boys walk and learns the list of things that men do not do:

They do not wet their dry lips by running their tongues over them. They do not trot after their mothers into the kitchen. They don't use face powder. They don't sit on a motorbike behind a woman. They don't need mirrors in the rooms where they might change their clothes. On trips, they can go behind a tree. They don't even need an enclosed space to take a dump; they can do it in the open . . . When caned in class, they do not cry. (46)

Men who fail to perform or conform to these norms are often demeaned, demonised and hence marginalised from mainstream society. These

norms about sexes/genders while validating their defined identities also place one gender/sex over the other and simultaneously deny the existence of any other sexual identities other than heterosexuality. This produces and reproduces both sexism and heterosexism at the same time. Tanay, who fails to conform to typical masculine gender norms faces anti-gay slurs and demeaning jokes.

Even though Tanay is heartbroken by the same man as his sister, he is expected to cheer her up and bring her to normalcy. He does not find any outlet to his emotions whether of love or pain. He suppresses his unexpressed emotions inside and jots them down in a dateless diary. He repeats the same sentence multiple times to assure the intense agony of his broken heart. But his family members are completely nescient of his afflictions and heartache. The family that knows him the most knows nothing about him, his relationship, his heartbreak. On the other side, Anuja cries all the time; she has her reason which society approves but it's not the same with Tanay. His unrequited love alters the course of his life. His lover who listens to everyone attentively is nowhere to listen and understand the mourning of his heart. No one in the family or acquaintance does figure out what Tanay really feels bad about. With a heavy heart, he avers, "I have no tears now. Why should I? No one around me would understand" (Kundalkar 106). He decides to leave home and go to Mumbai to settle there. The heterosexist world that Tanay lives in does not accept his identity or recognise his pain. This hostility of society toward homosexuals keeps Tanay suffering in silence and forces him to leave his home and go to Mumbai. Besides, Tanay other gay characters in the novel also live a closeted life. Even the paying guest is the victim of the same heterosexism as Tanay. He does not dare to disclose his bisexual sexual orientation to anyone. Though his relationship with Anuja becomes evident to everyone at the end but he does not reveal his relationship with Tanay. Finding no acceptance of his sexuality, he is coerced to be in the closet and live double lives. All non-heterosexuals in the novel form groups and hold secret meetings to fight the anti-gay system or heterosexism that keeps all non-heterosexuals out of the periphery.

Kundalkar highlights sexism with the help of women characters in the novel. Women are treated as subordinate and inferior members of the family and society. In the Joshi family, Aai is secluded from the family during her monthly course. She is made to sit in a separate room and no one touches her and she touches no one. She is restricted to cook or do any work as if she is a guest in her own home. Through Aai, Kundalkar highlights the ill-treatment of women during their menstrual cycle. On other days, she is to do all the household work like a servant. She has to obey everything that Baba orders her. Anuja explains:

For many years, I had noticed that Aai would be working like a navvy all day in the house: she would have shabby clothes on, her forehead would be sweaty. But as soon as it was time for Baba to return, she'd have a wash and put on a nice sari . . . And when he knocked, she would open the door with a smile. Everything was aimed for that brief encounter at the door. (169)

Anuja wonders why Aai does not dress the way she wants to and why she is not well-dressed whole day. Patriarchy plays its part that forces women to act in certain prescribed ways just to please men. Aai works like a labour whole day but she is expected to dress well and put on a smile just to please Baba, the patriarch of the family.

The second part of the novel brings to light the story of Anuja who after spending six months with her lover in Pondicherry comes back home when he dumps her too. Anuja is introduced as an unconventional kind of girl who is rather "rebellious, impulsive and self-centred" (publishers weekly). She rides bike and loves trekking and mountain climbing. She is the one who initiates relation with the tenant. She breaks gender stereotypes and takes her own decisions but she is also not fully guarded by the menace of sexism. She does not dare to tell her parents about her love for the tenant because she knows they would threaten her for marriage. She leaves home as she's never happy with her family system. She claims, "How long could I have stayed in this world of Aai's religion and her swamis, her rituals and fasts; this world of Baba's, he who was

always afraid of what ‘they’ would say; this world of marriage and children . . .” (Kundalkar 118). After leaving home, Anuja and the tenant spend six months together in Pondicherry and then one day he leaves her too leaving many unresolved questions in her dejected mind.

The siblings’ experience and “. . . their stories seem the same yet at the same time totally different has been very well written from different perspectives of these two characters” (Tamishly). When Anuja comes back home, she is sent to a psychiatrist to recover from the depression. Just after two days only, she is sent to Sharayu Maushi for the change of scene. But her family never finds it suitable to talk to her or listen to her painful experience. Instead, she is intimidated to follow their rules. Baba demands, “Until the time you get married, you will behave yourself according to the house rules. You will obey. We gave you your freedom and we saw what you did with it” (Kundalkar 111). Her family behaves with her as if she is a mental patient. She begins to feel as a helpless child. She is sent to Dr Khanvilkar because except the paid doctor no one is ready to listen to her experience and it is this doctor who suggests her write a diary. Feeling ashamed of her actions, her family doesn’t talk much with her as if they are punishing her with their silences.

Anuja faces gender prejudice right from her home. When the tower room is rented by the tenant, it becomes a no-go area for Anuja. She is not allowed to go up or meet him. Her parents are shocked when she takes Science because it is considered unconventional for girls to opt for science. Even though she is a free-spirited girl yet she is to follow familial rules that restrict her gender. However, the holidays spent outside give her a flavour of independence where she is not to ask for any permission for everything. When she falls in love with the paying guest, she finds it impossible to tell her parents. She explicates that “[t]hey would have taken charge of everything, and we would have lost control of our lives. They would have accelerated straight to the marriage hall . . . called five hundred or six hundred relatives that no one had ever heard of and fed them and declared us married” (Kundalkar 159-60). Though Anuja loves

the tenant intensely, she is certain that she does not want to get married to him. She simply wants to savour her life without being tagged with any such entitlement. She finds marriage oppressive to women that takes away all freedom. Though it is her initiative to build relationship with the tenant and her decision to elope that he reciprocates, she cannot figure out why he leaves her. She questions: “If he had not wanted me to leave with him, he should have said so. Had I not given him enough time to think? Or did he assume that it was just a passing fancy for me? Perhaps that was it. He thought I was in for a good time and when he saw it was serious, he just had to get away” (173).

After Anuja elopes with the paying guest, she spends the money that she carries with her on household essentials. When her money is over, she becomes dependent on her lover. She narrates, “I had to ask him for money for every little purchase I had to make. He never gave me his wallet— not even to make things easy for both of us. Nor did he ever go to the market; but when I asked money, he’d give it to me” (Kundalkar 183). This is how benevolent sexism works by giving favours to women and making them feel inferior and thus subordinate. Anuja decides to take job and for next four months she works as a waitress in Madame Eveline’s restaurant for her earnings. But one day after four months, Madame Eveline sacks her on some false charges. Anuja comes home because she does not find enough money to support expenses. Realising the importance of being independent in life, she questions herself:

How had I imagined I would live without anyone by my side? I had planned nothing. Was that what went wrong? I should have sought independence. I should have thought to earn. Then I should have thought about saving. And then, I should have thought about a room of my own, however small . . . Our house was big enough for middle-class dreams but not for privacy. (181)

Anuja realises that financial dependence is one of the contributory factors for breeding sexism against women. So, she opts for the job to be financially

independent and empowered where she can have her space and take her own decisions. Anuja tries to fight the hegemony of patriarchy and comes out as valiant, dissident and resilient.

When Sabina offers her a full-time job at Green Earth, Anuja feels like crying with happiness. After all, she finds someone who genuinely needs her: her hands, legs, eyes and intelligence. But her family is upset with her decision of taking job. They oppose her resolution of earning and want her to complete her M.Sc. first. Baba says, “Do what you want after we get you married. Then you don’t have to stay here. Fight with your husband over whether you should work or not. But if you’re going to live here, you have to follow the rule” (Kundalkar 187). The parents want her to recover only to get her married so that they can do away with their sense of responsibility. Kundalkar divulges how women are treated in a patriarchal society. They are confined to mere sexual objects with no agency. But Anuja keeps on fighting for her dignity, space and rights. She confronts her father and asks him, “Where do these hoary old ideas come from? . . . “Marriage? My marriage? What give you the right? What did you do with your life? Got married, had children, then what?” (188) Listening this Baba gets so aggravated that he advances to slap her but Aai stops him only to slap Anuja herself. The family wants her to get married as Aseem is bothered about having an unmarried younger sister in the house. So, they want her to get married and clear out of his way. The family takes it as their right to decide about Anuja and if she resists, they manhandle her to silence her.

Tanuja’s gendering starts early in her life. During her eighth standard only, unlike the other two boys in the house, Aai trains her to do the kitchen work. By the time she is in college, she does the work that she learns to help out her mother. But Anuja has always been disinterested in cooking. She says about Aai, “When she tried to force me to learn cooking, I fought with her for the first time. I didn’t win; how could I? I did learn some cooking but I also decided that, when I grew up, I wasn’t going to be the one doing the cooking” (Kundalkar198). Though she does not cook when she elopes with the tenant, she faces other shades of sexism there. She starts

working to avoid asking her lover for money. And when she comes back home, she takes a job at Green Earth to support herself. In her home, Anuja is expected not to be out upto late hours and if she does, she is to confront the outrage of Baba. This gender prejudice from her family compels her to live separate from them.

By the end of the novel, Tanay decides to go to Mumbai and Anuja joins her new job at Green Earth. She lives separate from her family in Sharayu Maushi’s flat. When Tanay decides to go to Mumbai, Anuja sees his face after a long time. She explains, “His face was, as usual, blank but, now that I was looking at him, I see dark rings under his eyes. I hadn’t looked at him for so long, hadn’t really looked. I felt bad about it” (Kundalkar 216). Being herself, a victim of patriarchal suppression Anuja is unreservedly incognizant about the torments of her brother whom she understands the most. This way, both Tanay and Anuja do away with the illusion of being in the comfort and care of family. The tenant, their common love interest leaves both without explaining his reason. He may have his own problems, his own reasons and his own mystery but his actions catalyse the character of both the siblings. The three of them have different experiences and possibly different hurdles on the way. Anuja explains their journey, “It seemed as if all three of us were on a railway station with our bags, heading in different directions” (195). The one thing that binds them together is that they all are the victims of societal prejudice: Anuja of gender prejudice and Tanay and the tenant of sexual orientation.

Thus, Kundalkar brings to light “[a] complex exploration of family, sexuality and society through a love triangle involving a brother and sister” (Goshal). The novel satirises the family structure that is supposed to give comfort, care and identity to its members is actually supporting and infact enforcing sexism and heterosexism. Both siblings face many subtle and conspicuous prejudices and biases in their own home. The Joshi family “despite being a single, tightly-knit and fairly loving unit, each of its members has a life as separate and removed from the others as if there are walls around them” (Aggarwal). Tanay does not find any acceptance or

recognition of his sexuality even within the family system. He is bound to hide his sexuality from his own family members and live double lives. He is always tensed about his closeted life that gives his forehead stressful lines. This makes him feel alienated and isolated in his own home. Besides, Anuja faces many discriminatory and inequitable incidents by her family members. This forces both siblings to leave home and settle separately from their family. The two parts of the novel tell two distinct experiences of the same event. Tanay does not find anyone to share his experience so he consumes his pain inside. In his dateless diary, “[i]n short, broken sentences, he conveys his feelings of loss, longing and betrayal” (Lobo) whereas Anuja’s grieving is more evident and explicit that takes the form of her sobbing and depression. The entry of the tenant proves a catalysing element for both the siblings. Both love him passionately as “[h]e is unlike anyone they know before and through him they observe new way of behaviour in themselves. Each one establishes, unknown to other, a separate and very intense relationship with him” (Aggarwal).

Conclusion

Thus, the novel, *Cobalt Blue* interweaves heterosexual and homosexual characters within the plot to highlight both sexism and heterosexism. Both Tanay and Anuja suffer because of societal prejudices toward them. Even the tenant, a bisexual male is the victim of this heterosexism. All non-heterosexual characters in the novel suffer because of the heteronormative world they live in. They feel cloistered and estranged from the rest of society. It is because of this abandoned feeling that one gay man that Tanay gets physical with commits suicide. Many gay men due to societal pressure enter heterosexual marriages to present themselves as heterosexuals. It is this heterosexist society that forces them to live closeted lives. Both Anuja and Tanay break gender stereotypes: one of masculine and the other of feminine gender and both bear their repercussions. Hence, this offbeat love triangle of man-woman and man-man in the novel brings to light the subtle shades of sexism and heterosexism that so often slip notice in a hetero-patriarchal world.

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