



## SURFACING THE SILENCES: READING BRITISH LESBIAN FICTIONS THROUGH THE LENS OF RELIGION AND FAMILY

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### Abstract

Religion is frequently regarded as an obscurantist hangover which needs to be neglected especially when the freedom of women is put to the forefront and commonly family has been treated as the primary root of patriarchy thereby recognising it to be one of the strongholds of women's oppression all over the world. Therefore faith and family have been measured to be the major controlling forces in creating a gendered society. A major perception that arises from these two organisations is that they both have an inclination towards dominating women. However what needs to be remembered is that women have played a central role in the development of history and theology in every culture. But their morality gets questioned and reprimanded when they aspire to become autonomous, free and sexually visible, particularly if they are inclined towards same-sex relationship. Verily there has been a politics behind the exclusion of something, especially if it is tabooed or deviating from the norms. It is around this perception that my paper will be focussing on. This paper seeks to carry out a close textual comparative analysis of two primary American texts i.e. Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) and Shamim Sarif's *I Can't Think Straight* (2005) in light of intersecting issues of religion and family and their attitudes towards lesbianism. It analyses that how far female homosexuality have been able to create a niche in the society and to what extent these two different cultures i.e. Islam and Christianity have been able to embrace or reject same-sex love in females.

**Keywords:** Sexuality, Lesbianism, Women, Religion, Family

## Introduction

Sexuality is understood as the way in which people experience their bodies, pleasures and desires. But a sexual identity is in fact a modern phenomenon which has emerged only in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Western world. In the pre-industrial European societies, sexual practices were primarily subjected to moral and religious problematization and categorisation in the context of sin. It will not be erroneous to say that during the ancient period sexual morality was extremely controlled by moral and legal rules and the rules were based strictly on sexual practices whereas the subject of desire was marginalised. Practices such as sodomy did not give rise to moral anxieties in classical sexual culture. Penetration symbolised male as well as social status, but it barely mattered whether the penetrated was a woman or a boy which conveys that same sex relationship did exist in antiquity. What did matter was who penetrated whom. This is the reason why "classical world has been described as a world 'before sexuality' by historians such as Michel Foucault, Paul Veyne, David Halperin or John Winkler" (Mottier 4). Before sexuality was invented, social status was negotiated around the active or passive distinction, and not on the basis of heterosexual or homosexual categorisation which emerged much later in history. Therefore in order to bring out the meaning of our own sexuality, to make sense of the sexual experiences, modern era believed in categorising the sexuality such as heterosexual and homosexual.

The ancient past believed in the idea of one sex body which conceptualised women's bodies as similar but inferior versions of male bodies but from the eighteenth century onwards a biological differentiation was drawn between men and women's body. Basically male and female bodies were considered to be biologically different which was on the basis of biologization of gender differences. Cultural anxieties about sex intensified in response to the rapid social

and political changes brought about by industrial modernisation; and the outcome of these changes was it brought about a decline in public and private morality. Earlier what were considered to be the fundamental obligation to society were a legitimate marriage and a sex, which was expected from every citizen whether male or female whereas modern understandings of sexuality placed sex as an object of scientific study. It located sex as an area of scientific study as well as of subjective experience, firmly in the realm of nature and biology. With the advent of sexual libertinism developed in Europe, biological models of sexuality dominated sexual science throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. In addition to the biologization was gender differences, a further central feature of the biological model of sexuality was the assumption that 'natural' sexual behaviour included heterosexual acts and desires only. Heterosexuality was therefore treated as the implicit norm, whereas homosexuality came to be conceptualised as an abnormal departure from the norm. The American doctor James G. Kiernan adopted the term 'heterosexual' in a medical journal in 1892, he used it to describe the "sexual perversion of having sex for recreational rather than procreative reasons through abnormal methods of gratification which referred to ensuring pleasure while avoiding reproduction" (Mottier 36). Now in both the era when sex was not construed as a shared experience reflecting emotional intimacy but penetration to the time when sex became an object of scientific research, there was one thing in common i.e. censorship of female sexuality because sexuality is generally understood only in relation to a heterosexual paradigm of oppositional duality which prescribes gender roles and gendered social codes. Even the Abrahmic narrative says that Eve was sent to drive away Adam's boredom which depicts that conventional meaning of sexuality is understood only in terms of opposite sex.

Though there were several instances in late antiquity about men engaging in same sex desire but little material exists on intimacies between women, and historians of sex in the ancient period such as Halperin or Foucault focused almost entirely on male-to-male sex. The seventh century BC poet Sappho born in Lesbos is one of the rare examples of sources describing intense infatuations and love between women. This is to say that the history has witnessed many such examples of women intimacy and the tale still continues but such non-normative desirability between women has always been a subject of contempt not only in religion but also in the families of respective individual; and within this framework the life experiences of lesbian women have been almost invalidated. Even philosophers like Monique Wittig have tried to essentialise the very category of lesbians by homogenizing them into a single harmonious group and discarding them from being a woman. Reading to Monique Wittig's theorization of "lesbian" in *One is Not Born a Woman* (1981), Diana Fuss analyses that: "A lesbian, then, is not-woman and a not-man; she is blatantly a cultural construction and obviously not a product of nature because women are defined strictly by their relation of dependency on men and lesbians, in their sexual practices at least escape this relation of domination altogether" (Fuss 56)

Religion has its own role to play in an individual's life. It does not matter how much one tries to maintain a distance from it or feel sceptical about it, it has its own significance in everybody's life. In this paper also I have tried to analyse the repercussions of the clashes between religion and an individual's sexuality through the chosen texts; since the texts are based on the tenets of religion like Christianity and Islam and their perception towards normative and non normative forms of sexuality (here it is women engaged in same-sex desire). As early Christians believed in the idea of self mastery they promoted virginity and sexual withholding for men as well as women. In the

context of a shift in political power towards church authorities, sexual desire came to be blamed for binding humans to their worldly obligations to spouse or children. According to them, it prevented them from concentrating on spirituality and preparation for the afterlife. Celibacy and purity came to be eulogised, whereas sex and desire became regulated.

Christian ethics therefore developed a notable hostility towards sex and more generally towards carnal desire, which it saw as an obstacle to spiritual salvation which chained humans to their animal lusts. It was this sin which polluted humans from the moment of birth. Christians saw families fundamentally as obstacle to religious devotion. However Church fathers recognised that celibacy was not a welcoming thing for most of the believers to lead an ideal Christian life. Marriage was therefore seen as an acceptable compromise with the material world and praised as a building block for society by theologians such as Paul who argued that spouses owed each other the 'marriage debt' of sexual intercourse as long as procreative motivations were the main purpose.

Keeping in mind the importance of sex and marriage in Christianity, it was found that reproductive sex within marriage was approved whereas other lustful sexual practices were disapproved by Church authorities. Their prohibition against same sex relationship between women was continual. But church authorities' attitudes towards male same-sex relationships were quite contradictory. "The medieval historian John Boswell records examples of same sex unions between men that seem to have been sanctioned by religious ceremonies, arguing that such practices were very much in common in early medieval Byzantine society and repression of such practices started from the fourteenth century onwards by the Catholic Church" (Mottier 22). Even specific acts such as sodomy, were at times tolerated and especially in the eighteenth century persecuted. It was from the nineteenth

century that with the conceptualisations of the sodomite as a different kind of person, the modern homosexual was born.

On the other hand homosexuality is neither an uncommon subject in Islam and nor it can be called as a 'feature of western decadence' by Islamist commentators. Though there has been no evidence found in Quran with reference to female same-sex desire, but it does mention about men who are not in need of women in Surat al-Nur (Quran 24:31-24:33). The concept of homosexuality has been known to Islam because of a messenger named Lut. He was sent to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah as a prophet, and was commanded to preach to their inhabitants on monotheism and the sinfulness associated with homosexuality and their lustful and violent acts. To this day, same sex acts are still a significant taboo even among Muslim communities in the West, and they remain controversial issue in many Muslim-majority countries where levels of tolerance can vary between clandestine social acceptance and exemplary state punishment.

In *Behold I make All Things New* (2020) Dr Riffat Hassan points out with reference to the homosexual sisters and brothers that there are two main reasons that are generally given to justify the negativity shown toward them. "The first is 'religious' and the second focuses on what is 'natural.' Islam condemns homosexuality on the basis of different Surahs present in the Quran and those are Surah 7: Al-Araf: 80-81; Surah 11: Hud:77-79; Surah 15: Al-Hijr: 67-72; Surah 21: Al-Anbiya: 71,74; Surah 26: Ash-Shu'araa': 165-168; Surah 27: An-Naml: 54-55; Surah 29: Al-Ankabut:28-29 and Surah 4: An-Nisaa': 14-15".

Based on the above mentioned scriptural texts, different reformist thinkers have interpreted them in various ways which have come out to be influential in moulding societal attitudes towards homosexuality. For instance Karen Armstrong, the moving spirit behind the worldwide launching of a Charter of

Compassion in November 2009 has stated: 'If your understanding of the divine made you kinder, more empathetic, and impelled you to express sympathy in concrete acts of loving kindness, this was good theology. But if your notion made you unkind, belligerent, cruel, self-righteous, or if it led you to kill in God's name, it was bad theology.' (The Spiral staircase: My Climb out of Darkness, 2005))

The struggle to liberate scriptural texts from traditional, negative interpretations is a difficult one for different communities. Some modernist Muslim reformers have come up with a rallying cry i.e. 'Back to the Qur'an, forward with 'Ijtihad' which means 'independent reasoning'. It is of the view that any rule in the tradition which appears to be obscure should be purged and they would use their reason before implementing the principles.

#### Analysis of the Texts

Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) is set against the backdrop of a family where sex is a taboo subject. Jeanette's step mother is a missionary secret whereas Jeanette is a bright and rebellious orphan who is adopted into an evangelical household in the industrial north of England. It is the coming of age story of a young woman who struggles with her lesbianism while seeking to maintain a relationship with a mother who cannot accept her daughter's sexual orientation. As Christy L. Burns writes in her article titled as *Fantastic Language: Jeanette Winterson's Recovery of the Postmodern Word* that "A narrator, suggestively named Jeanette, describes her upbringing in a strict Pentecostal family, her struggle to break from her mother's harsh strictures, and her move into lesbian sexuality" ( Burns 284). Jeanette was brought up with religious fundamentalism and her mother's absolutist world view --- as rigid binaries. Licensing one binary over the other becomes an easy way for choosing right over wrong thereby sustaining the social, religious and sexual norms. Jeanette says: "She had never heard of mixed feelings.

There were friends and there were enemies" (Winterson 1). Her mother taught her to read the Book of Deuteronomy and all the lives of all the saints and how they were not fit for worship but she did not want her daughter to learn French. She did not want her daughter to go to school because it was a Breeding Ground.

When Jeanette developed a soft corner for a girl called Melanie and she wanted to confess it before her mother but she could not as she knew that her mother will not be able to understand her. When asked by a Pastor that "Do you deny, you love this woman with a love reserved for man and wife?" (105). she replies "To the pure all things are pure" (105) Jeanette was adopted by her mother to serve the Lord; therefore she could not love Melanie and Lord simultaneously according to Pastor. What needs to be marked here is Bible has been taken as a 'tormented' term on homosexuality where God's wrath has been brought upon to those people who were engaged in same sex relationship. The city of Sodom in Genesis 19 is known to be associated with homosexual conduct. Here some angels are sent to the city of Sodom in the form of men and they decide to stay with one of the messengers of God who was Lot. But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, including young and the old men surrounded the messenger's house. And they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them." (*Genesis 19 v4-5, ESV*) Accused of indulging themselves in homosexuality, in the later part of the Old Testament the Sodomites were also into different sins like adultery, oppression, lying, abetting criminals, arrogance, complacency and indifference to the poor along with same sex attraction. This is how the angels discovered the truth and the outcry against Sodom was justified. Leviticus also contains two prohibitions against homosexual activity: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" (*English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Levi 18 v22*). "If a man lies with a male as

with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them" (*English Standard Version, 2001, Levi 20 v13*)

Narrator was said to be infected with demons and therefore in order to get rid of them she was not given anything to eat for two days. Jeanette was not the same girl as she had been earlier. She had started questioning the theologies, the teachings which was ingrained deep in her mind. She had often thought of questioning her mother, trying to know how she perceived the world. She had a notion that she and her mother shared the same world, but with time she realised that both of them belong to the different planets. She understood the sexual politics when she was asked to leave home by her mother. Jeanette says: "It all seemed to hinge around the fact that I loved the wrong sort of people. Right sort of people in every respect except this one; romantic love for another woman was a sin" (129). A dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship has also been mentioned by Alison Bechdel in her graphic memoir *Are You My Mother? A comic Drama* (2012) which brings emotional entanglements between Alison and her mother to the forefront. As rightly mentioned by Laura Miller in her *Are You My Mother? by Alison Bechdel - review* that "Even in fairly tranquil mother-daughter bonds there are flourishes of longing, resentment and tenderness that no sensible person would ever try to chart". Jeanette was deeply hurt when her mother saw this act of her, loving a girl as a deliberate act to sell her soul. According to her mother, Jeanette had challenged a man's world; she had tried to defy God's law sexually. Nobody understands a child more than a mother because she embodies compassion and concern for her child. But for Jeanette's mother, it was the ministry (the church) which was to be weighed and not her daughter.

Jeanette had so much bitterness for her mother that she says "my mother had painted the white roses red and now she claimed they grew that way" (138). Her mother left no stone

untuned to humiliate her. She tells "you will have to leave, I am not having demons here" (139). It was Jeanette who had made an immoral proposition that cannot be approved and that is why she was treated as an outcast. Her mother did not mind telling her before everybody that she was no more her daughter. Jeanette had returned to her home after spending her days away from her mother. While returning to her mother she was sceptical about whether the people are going to embrace her because of her unnatural passion. She was haunted by her past. Her present was a way far different from her past. She was no more the same girl who trusted her mother during her childhood days. Jeanette was betrayed by the servants of God. Those servants were none other than her own people, her own mother whom she had idealised in her childhood. All her life she needed the company of someone who would be utterly loyal to her. She missed this loyalty all throughout her life.

Shamim Sarif's *I Can't Think Straight* (2008) depicts the flourishing romantic relationship between a British woman of Muslim heritage named Leyla and a Christian Arab woman called Leyla with ethnic links to Palestine. This book challenges the Western stereotypes who consider Muslim and Arab women to be compliant and their male counterparts to be perfectly patriarchal. It is an unconventional love story between two non-normative women which serve as a challenge to the contemporary Islamist erasure of homosexuality. Heike Bauer in her article *Comics, Graphic Narratives, and Lesbian Lives* (2015) does mention about a cartoon anthology named as: *Juicy Mother* (2005) and *Juicy Mother: How They Met* (2007) edited by Jennifer Camper where "reflections on Arab-American identity, challenge the racialized boundaries of contemporary culture" (Bauer 11). Campers own graphic novel called "Ramadan" is about Samira, a practising Muslim lesbian who fasts during Ramadan. Ann Wood, in her article titled as *Jennifer Camper's Lebanese lesbian cartoons* mentions: 'Camper, the director of the Queers

and Comics Conference says : " I want to tell really cool stories, but I want to include the type of women I don't see in media and in culture, and my perspective of the world, which is a little different" '. Sarif's queer narratives also act as a welcome antidote to the constant exclusion of the rebellious viewpoint of non-normative women of Muslim and Arabic ethnic heritage in dominant LGBTQ discourses in the West. Shamim Sarif a British woman of South Asian Muslim heritage ensures that narratives investigating non normative Muslim female sexualities have their rightful place in contemporary British culture. It deals with the cultural and familial obstacles a lesbian couple overcome in contemporary Britain and Jordan. It undertakes a critique of intersecting issues of gender, ethnicity, faith and sexuality with certain ideological and cultural limitations. It competes with western ideologies which denounces Islam's incompatibility with western liberalism.

It portrays young women of South Asian and Arab heritage who are not confined to domestic spaces or expected to depend financially on men, although their fathers' wanted them to be a part of their family business. The women depicted by Sarif are well travelled and therefore uncooperative of familial expectations which show a positive challenge to gender roles in diasporic Muslim and cosmopolitan Arab communities in Britain. The kind of attitude these women possess unsettle the image of the repressed and domesticated Muslim or Middle Eastern woman, an image which is often portrayed by the West.

However, marriage plays an important role in the family of Sarif's two female protagonists. According to them the definition of marriage is not just a union of opposite gender, but one which strictly abides by the ethno religious boundaries and also has to be financially advantageous. After rejecting the first three proposals, Tala was going to have her fourth engagement with Hani who was

handsome and affluent. But one thing was very certain that her mother was passionately planning to use this fourth marriage to be the final one which could wipe all the "lingering shame and embarrassment of other three" (19). On the other hand there was Leyla a budding writer who pretended to be particular about her ideologies though she knew she will never be able to "live up to his father's reasonably pitched ideals" (30). The two women were about to get settled with their male partners till Leyla was invited for dinner at Tala's place. When Leyla had answered all the questions of Tala's mother regarding her date with Ali, Tala said: "Ease up on the questions. She's marrying Ali, not me" (35). Though everyone laughed at this easy, flippant comment but it was the unstudied suggestion of union between two women that did not go well with Tala's mother. When the two ladies meet at tennis court they happen to talk about religion and divine intervention and discuss about whether it is expectation or conditioning what make people follow certain paths. The author develops familial religious conditioning in her narrative and constructs it as a negative influence which prohibits the romantic aspect of an individual. Since these characters come from a background where religion is given the utmost priority, they are expected to remain within the boundaries of their ethno religious communities.

The passionate love between Leyla and Tala had already started to bloom. This was not the first time that Leyla had been in a relationship with a woman. There had been a series of silent yearnings throughout her late teens and early twenties. What they had all in common was that the attraction was usually hidden, forever unspoken, and always unrequited. Leyla herself had admitted the truth about her sexual orientation, she says: "and the truth was every one of these attractions had been to other women" (62). Leyla wanted to vent out her feelings but she found hiding those emotions to be easier because the consequence

of disseminating it would have been be far reaching.

Even though Tala lived in the West she carried the guilt with herself that she was ashamed of her relationship with a woman. She was highly conscious of her social stature and therefore ingenuously tells Leyla: 'This is not a way to live, Leyla'. 'It's not easy. It's not acceptable' (93) to which Leyla says: "You live in the West now" (94)

Tala was struggling with her sexual identity and on the other hand there was Leyla who had revealed to her mother about her inclination towards a girl. Leyla's mother cries:

Who did this to you?

Mum, I haven't caught a disease. I'm just gay, like I have brown hair.

First you stop coming to mosque, now you are up to your neck in sin!

It's not a sin.

It's a huge sin!

According to who? Leyla was closed to tears now.

According to God! Maya yelled

What kind of a God is that? I don't accept it!

Then you will burn in hell, stated Maya (146).

This conversation between Leyla and her mother shows that religion has a controlling role to play when it comes to homosexuality, especially when it comes to Islam. Although Leyla's mother Maya seemed to be initially outraged by Leyla's spiritual degeneration, the novel focuses on her inner state of mind and illustrates that her dissatisfaction was more connected to cultural practise than to religious orthodoxy: "Without Leyla's marriage, without the preparations and shopping and congratulations and general elevation of status amongst her peers at the mosque, she could not imagine what else could be left for her" (164) This shows that Maya was more concerned about the social perception, and her own status within her ethnic community.

On the other hand a soft corner of masculinity has been shown towards such marginal sexualities, for instance when Leyla was confessing about her sexual orientation to her father, she could feel her father's arm around her, offering her, his own handkerchief. On the other hand Tala also admits before her fiancé the cause of her denial for marrying him and to her surprise Hani's response was "You should be proud of yourself, Tala for admitting it eventually. Not many people do. Especially from our part of the world" (187).

### Conclusion

Religion has been a constant entity in the history of mankind where individuals have been prescribed of how one can attain a blissful life in this world and what practices can bring about the wrath of God. When studied closely, homosexuality is possibly one of the disputable topics surrounding Islam and Christianity and yet more liberal interpreters of both the faiths have come forward for a broader understanding of religious scriptures who encourage authentic interpretation of sacred texts which should match to the nature of the Almighty who is the most compassionate and merciful. So far as the viewpoint of family is concerned towards such atypical sexualities, mothers have not been able to accept their daughters' sexual orientation whereas an empathetic attitude of patriarchy has been observed in one of the texts. Based on the above findings this paper examines how Winterson (1984) and Sarif (2005) have been vocal about their sexual identities which according to the society and religion do not fit into the normative sexualities. By penning such characters, both the authors have been able to bring out the issue of minor sexualities' struggle, hopes and desires to the centre of the discussion. Over the past few decades, female same-sex desires have gained acceptance in some parts of the world. Nonetheless, most of them remain closeted, fearing discrimination from the families who might see homosexuality shameful. Despite of the narrow adjectives used by the different communities of different

religion and culture, lesbianism has been able to come out of the closet and make its presence felt in the different societies and cultures across the globe.

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