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Games of Belonging: Female Desire, Queerness, and Intimate Space in Janice Pariat's "Secret Corridors"

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Abstract

The policing of female desire via laws and then through societal norms has been largely observed and deliberated upon. The desiring woman is confined to the norms of the community and any transgression on her part invites harsh rebuke and consequences. This is further aggravated when the desiring happens to be queer in nature, and poses a challenge to the hetero-patriarchal structure of the society. This paper presents a reading of Janice Pariat's short story "Secret Corridors," by using concepts from law, gender studies and queer theory. The paper also employs certain theories of space in the analysis of the chosen text. The paper posits that even in the face of policing of female desire, especially queer desire, this desire can find its outlet in the intimate spaces of human relationships as Pariat portrays it in "Secret Corridors," even in the face of questions of belonging and not-belonging.

Keywords: Belonging, female desire, intimate spaces, Janice Pariat, queer desire.

Introduction

Janice Pariat's "Secret Corridor," a story from her debut collection of short stories *Boats on Land* (2012), is an exploration of adolescent desire and makes use of architectural space as a tool in the progression of the story and in the denouement of "coming of age". The story presents the petty politics at a convent boarding school where under the awnings of colonial architecture and the steady penetrating gaze of the nuns, a group of adolescent girls play games

of belonging. Identity markers become important in this context as belonging to a certain community or looking a certain way become important ruses to draw the fault lines of the social space of the school. Female desire forms the crux of the story and the nuances of this desiring is artfully brought to the fore through the character of Natalie. This paper, therefore, is a qualitative study that relies mainly on close reading of the chosen text and makes use of queer theory and feminist theories

alongside references to laws and theories of space in order to analyse the policing of desire, and specifically female and queer desire. In "Secret Corridors" the protagonist Natalie is a student at a Convent school in Shillong, and longs to be a part of the popular group of her class. This group is led by the beautiful Iba, with whom Natalie is fascinated. Through the story, Natalie's desire is brought to the fore, and her feelings towards her classmates. Natalie's sexuality becomes the reason behind her continued efforts to blend in with the group. The extent to which she goes becomes entangled in themes of queer desire, law, and social norms.

Discussion

Madhavi Menon in *The Law of Desire: Rulings on Sex and Sexuality in India* (2021) comments on the sexual morality that tends to govern the attitudes towards women in India. She discusses "a phobia about sex that disproportionately attaches to the bodies of women," (Menon 12-13). This is especially illustrated in how women's sexual relations are viewed and condemned on an everyday basis. By associating women to particular roles attached to their male counterparts such as those of a mother, wife, daughter, women's agency in sexual matters is castigated to the back burners and left to suffer the ignominy of either sanctimony or disgrace. This is observed by Menon, "The first assumption is that women should be fixed in relation to one man, either the father or the (proper) husband." (Menon 36). A similar attitude is observed in the story towards Carmel and her mother. Carmel's mother's supposed dalliance with different men becomes the defining factor for her ostracization by the group of girls in her school, and she has to constantly dwell in the peripheries due to this. Women's desire is questioned and their agency in matters of desire are constantly put to the pulpit of public discussion. Desire, which is supposed to be a private matter, becomes a public matter when it concerns a supposed transgression of the norm. In this matter Menon (2021) comments, "Both religion and sexuality

are simultaneously understood to be private and public," (23). Hence, Carmel's mother's transgression against her society by not being married to a 'local' man and instead having a child with a supposed *dkhar* becomes the centre of her identity. This constant extra-judicial policing of women's desire is mired in the confusion surrounding the simultaneously private and public nature of desire. Menon (2021) acutely analyses this by stating, "On the other hand, desire is assumed to be a private affair that is internal to the individual. But on the other hand, it is legislated upon as a public matter. Private desire is hopelessly entangled with public expectations. The private becomes legible only when it is public," (16-17). Thus, due to Carmel's mother's alleged transgression of the invisible codes of her society, she and, by extension, her daughter is subjected to the consequences. This tension between simultaneously private and public nature of desire is further analysed by Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharyya in their introduction to *The Phobic and The Erotic: Politics of Sexualities in Contemporary India* (2017), where they write:

But the point precisely is that only the heterosexual, patriarchal family is permitted to exist. And this family is about the passing on of property and lineage through men. The "normality" that this requires is produced, maintained and rigorously policed by the state, laws and social institutions. It is far from being natural or private. (Bose and Bhattacharyya xix)

In this quagmire of desire and its concomitant tensions, the burden of purity is placed on the women of the community and it is supposed that they should only commingle with the men of their own community. Thus, "[...] it was matter of national pride that a country's women should be pure and in their proper place," (Menon 37). Rao further illustrates this point by writing, "Patriarchal society gives men the right to live as they want. However, the same freedom is not given to women" (Rao 100). This is rooted

in the misconception that women's desire cannot be taken as it is. Menon says that this emerges from the misguided assumption that "women's desire cannot be trusted," (Menon 36). This is further complicated by women's willing participation in perpetuating this myth. The internalisation of these patriarchal precepts by women and especially young girls is represented in the story, "Secret Corridors".

This constant clamping down on female desire is further complicated when it is queer in nature. In such instances, not only do social norms come into play, but also the ambit of law is made prominent. This was the case in India until 6 September, 2018 when the judgement on the controversial section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that criminalised same-sex relations was made. The Supreme Court of India had declared that consensual relations between adult members of the same sex "cannot, indeed should not, be proscribed," (Sharma 144). However, before this judgement came to take place, the fear and stigma due to it had already made its place in the queer imaginary. Thus, Madhavi Menon wrote in 2017, a year before the said judgement, "In its role as protector and moral police, the State is coded as both masculine and heterosexual," (Menon 37). The prevalence of heteronormativity makes it difficult for queer individuals to desire in the same way that their heterosexual counterparts can do. This marks the imaginary space of the selected story as it is set in a time before the judgment decriminalising same-sex relations.

Bachelard writes about immensity being contained in tiny intimate spaces in his seminal work, *Poetics of Space* (1964). We see this in the opening line of the story, "That morning the world had shrunk to the size of a mole," (Pariat 81). Writing about poets, Bachelard states, "Poets will help us to discover within ourselves such joy in looking that sometimes, in the presence of a perfectly familiar object, we experience an extension of our intimate space," (216). Thus, confronted by the tiny mole on the girl that she desires, the dimensions of Natalie's

world are skewed beyond normalcy. Her confused state and the overwhelming desire that she bears within her become the main elements in progressing the plot of the story. The intimate spaces of little things and between people shape the course of events. Bachelard, again, writes, "There are two kinds of space, intimate space and exterior space, keep encouraging each other, as it were, in their growth." (Bachelard 218). Thus, even as we observe the movement of characters across the exterior space of the old colonial building that serves as their school, we also are made witnesses to the intimate spaces like the little mole on Iba that makes the readers privy to the inner workings of the protagonist's desire. This longing for her classmate in a room full of forty-five girls and a teacher is testament to the intensity of the attraction and is beautifully captured in the following lines:

It was a mouth that made Natalie think of forbidden things, like the forest behind her house, which she wasn't allowed to explore, or the pink roadside ice sticks she'd been expressly instructed not to taste. That morning, the intricacies of chemistry didn't interest as much as Iba's mouth [...] (Pariat 81)

Even as she yearns for Iba, Natalie is well aware of the barriers in place that will make it nigh impossible for her to pursue her wishes. She knows that she is thinking of 'forbidden things.' Thus, here it is observed that even at the very nascent stage of desiring, the process has already been curtailed by the normative diktats and the looming threat of the law. Female desire, in the case of Carmel's mother, was chastised and ridiculed for transgressing the unspoken rules of a closed community where the women 'should' only marry men of their own community. Any step against this is seen as an attack on the fabric of the community and the dissident woman has to face the brunt of social scorn. In Natalie's case, this is further pushed to the extreme as one moves from the normative to the domain of law. A girl desiring another girl

was not only frowned upon by the society, but such a relationship would have no legal legitimacy during the time that the story is set in. Hence, the queer female is doubly oppressed on the face of a simultaneously heteronormative and patriarchal society. This is further illustrated by Rao, who writes, "[...] sexism was reflected in the decision of the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), popularly known as Censor Board, to ban the use of the word 'lesbian'," (Rao 100). When use of the word 'lesbian' itself can be censored, then the question of desire is relegated to the dark corners of ignominy. In this complicated game of inclusion and exclusion, erasure of one's desire often becomes an easy route to take. Thus, Parvati Sharma writes,

I suspect most gay people, myself certainly, choose between self-assertion and self-effacement as instinctively as drivers 'choose' gears. You live and you love as a human being, not a category, and while nobody's love is particularly original, everybody's love is unique (Sharma 157)

Thus, we see Natalie in this quandary over her identity. She does not overtly participate in any action that would make her friends suspect her. Even as she is extremely attracted to Iba and the physical proximity to her causes her to shudder often, she is constantly aware of the need to police her own desire. This masking of queer identity is often undertaken as a compromise for one's family or friends. The skirting around of individuals around their queer identity is comment upon by Sharma:

If it is essential for my dignity that I declare myself gay, perhaps it is essential for my family's dignity to never quite speak of it directly. From this perspective, 'coming out' is not so much a revelation of identity, but, in consonance with its continuous tense, a kind of slow, unfolding dance in which both sides learn the steps as they move along; a dance

that, if done honestly and well, requires an expansion of spirit and heart on both sides, not just declaration and ratifications of identity. (Sharma 154-155)

Thus, any authenticity that a queer individual aspires to, is mired in games of belonging to a particular group at the cost of exclusion from another. Natalie, so we observe, dallies in this game and wilfully participates in humiliating her classmates in order to court favour from Iba and her coterie. She lies that Carmel stinks of "Old socks and sour milk" (Pariat 85) in order to satiate the other girls' need to humiliate her. Although their displeasure towards Carmel does stem from the aforementioned reasons regarding her mother and her transgressions, there is another, more sinister reason behind their persisting attempts at ridiculing her. Pariat writes:

The other reason the girls disliked Carmel was one they didn't talk about. She was exceedingly pretty. Whoever her parents might have been, that was something no one could deny. They merely punished her for it. (Pariat 84)

So, besides a fierce loyalty to the male counterparts of their community, they are motivated by envy of Carmel's good looks. Here, however, the issue is further complicated by the insinuation of some form of desire behind this. The commingling of hatred and desire fuel their petty games of humiliation and ostracization. This fuels Natalie's need to be a part of this clique in order to be close to Iba, the object of her desire, but also in order not to fall foul of them and become a target for their jibes and ridicule. In order to sustain her place in these games, Natalie alludes to the secret passages that lead to the boys' school. These secret corridors are imbued with meaning as they not only point to an adolescent fascination with adventure and exploration, but also allude to the inner workings of the protagonist's mind. The secret corridors in which her desires must be kept hidden. Goswami writes in this regard:

The title of the story is suggestive and symbolic, in the sense that the narrative dwells in the 'secret corridors' of Natalie's psyche and her sexuality which urges her to constantly crave fulfillment. The strange and forbidden sensations that she feels for her classmate named Iba cannot be revealed or shared with anyone else and hence, has to be tucked away in the secret recesses of her mind. (Goswami 29)

The architectural space in the story serves to foreground the constant state of fear that Natalie is in. She has to keep herself protected from the penetrating gaze of the custodians of the schools—from the nuns who "would be keeping a hawk-eyed watch over all possible entrances," (Pariat 87), and seamlessly blend in with the girls of her class. The enclosed space of the school becomes the playground for the girls' cruel power games, and in order to not fall a victim to it, Natalie ends up turning into a perpetrator of bullying. Even teachers are not spared in this as the humiliation of Miss Tina John by the girls proves. They judge and impart punishment from atop their figurative hill. This is aptly delineated in the scene where they decide to eat by the tennis court and descend down the stairs cackling with glee, "On their way down, past the corridor and long flight of dark green stairs, the girls laughed over their morning escapades," (Pariat 89). The spaces of the school are divided into ones where they can go and cannot. It is the prohibition from entering certain spaces that makes them more enticing to the girls. The drawn lines that divide the architecture of the school and forbid their entry, and their desire to enter these spaces in their adolescent fervour is encapsulated in the lines below:

Her mind was elsewhere, on their plans for the next hour—a quick lunch and then a stealthy expedition to the front of the school (where the students were strictly not allowed), down to the sloping lawns, within which was ensconced an octagonal wooden summer house built on a high

brick platform. This was older than the one in the playground, with diamond-shaped window panes and dark Tudor-style beams, surrounded by a tangle of rhododendron bushes and tall pine trees. (Pariat 89)

Natalie's intense pining for Iba is aggravated by the teasing games that Iba plays with her. This ranges from little gestures of intimacy to outright gestures verging on eroticism such as licking Natalie's cheek in the middle of their games. This act shocks Natalie as she has to do everything in her power in order to conceal her attraction to Iba in the presence of the other girls. Her flabbergasted reaction is captured by Pariat in the lines, "It was an electric shock; Natalie's stomach fluttered, something inside her constricted like a coiled snake," (Pariat 91). Her resort to a defensive position "like a coiled snake" foreshadows her fall from grace in Iba's eyes as in the very next line of the story their truancy from classes and exploration in forbidden corridors is discovered. It is then that "a long shadow fell across the floor. There was someone at the door," (Pariat 91), and Sister Josephine, the headmistress of their school, discovers their transgressions. The reprimand and the threat of informing their parents about their behaviour turns Iba and the girls against Natalie as it was originally her idea to find the secret passages that supposedly opened into Saint Anthony's, where they could find dates for the fete. Now, instead of being their friend and walking arm-in-arm beside Iba, Natalie is reduced a *bieit*, an idiot. She is no longer a part of their inner circle and is warned to keep away from them.

It is from this juncture, close to the culmination of the story, that Natalie finds herself on the other side of the fence. Her little lies and cruel tricks did not suffice for a permanent place with the clique, and she finds herself ostracised like Carmel, someone towards whom she had been unjust. The irony of the situation is that both the ostracised girls—although at odds in the beginning—eventually

find comfort in each other's arms. After being rejected by her previous 'friends,' Natalie is overcome with grief and suddenly realises the dilapidation that surrounds her. Pariat writes:

She leaned against the wall and swallowed her grief in great, empty mouthfuls. Only when she'd steadied herself did she notice where she was – the abandoned bathroom near the library. In front of her hung cracked, dirty mirror and, against the wall was a row of broken, bone-dry washbasins. The doors to the toilet cubicles hung awkwardly on their hinges. Natalie stared at her warped reflection – *bieit, bieit, bieit*. (Pariat 92)

Here, confronted with the dilapidation of the interior space of the school that mirrors her inner state, she can only stare at her reflection and call herself an idiot. In her despondence, all desire and yearning are lost; all affiliations of friendship and sisterhood no longer apply, and she decries herself for all of it. Then, it is only fitting that Natalie discovers a secret room that was used as a military hospital during the Second World War, after all the other girls have left. Here she finds Carmel, crying in a corner. It is here that it is revealed that she has lied about Carmel smelling bad in order to please the other girls. She had lied about her when Carmel in fact "smelled quite nice, of fresh linen and talcum powder," (Pariat 93). It is here, at the culmination of the story, that these two girls connect and find a common ground in their ostracization. It is here that queer female desire in the story finally finds its outlet. As Natalie and Carmel find comfort in each other's arms as "Their fingers brushed. Carmel's eyes met hers," (Pariat 94). They kiss and that kiss is the culmination of the story line. Finally, despite the constant policing of desire, queerness finds solace in the intimate spaces between people and in the clouded corners of the old school.

Conclusion

Thus, it is observed that games of belonging and social controls placed on women,

can eventually lead to an accommodation of their desires and agency through actions that may be viewed as transgressions of the social codes of a place. The intimate space of a school building and its various rooms, hidden and otherwise, in Pariat's story become the place of the playing out of the dramaturgy of social life, and these questions of identity are navigated by the characters as the question of law and social customs constant stare them in their faces. Pariat's story affirms that there is hope after all and presents a moment of reconciliation through the two characters.

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