



"THE THREE OF US": A SAGA OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF WHITE MALE

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ABSTRACT

Abha Dawesar, US based Harvard graduate, writes in English and is the recipient of a New York Foundation for the Arts writer's fellowship. She lives in New York and writes under the tagline of South Asian American writer. Abha is the author of four critically acclaimed novels. *The Three of Us* (2003), *Babiji* (2005), *Summer in Paris* (2007), *Family Values* (2009). She exhibits grits by writing at crossing lines of race, gender and sexual orientation. *The Three of Us*, originally *Miniplanner*, is her first novel that explicitly explores the sexuality of the happy-gay-lucky Andre Bernard, a 24-year-old Manhattan banker, and his affairs with his boss, his wife and most of the characters in the novel. This novel was published in US as *Miniplanner* in 2000 and in Indian under the title *The Three of Us*. Abha Dawesar did not write in queer theme in her first novel as she manifests herself in her second novel *Babiji*, which she wrote from women's perspective.

Key words: Bisexuality, Gender Identity, Male Perspective

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The Three of Us, a book with descriptions of sex every few paragraphs, starts with newly gained sexual experience of Andre Bernard, who first time discovered his sexuality responding to same sex and then followed by heterosexuality. The novel explores the sexual orientation of Andre, the white man. 'Sexual Orientation' is the term that describes an individual's physical and emotional attraction

towards the same gender, other gender, or both genders. "Gay", "lesbian", "bisexual," and "straight" are all examples of sexual orientation. A person's sexual orientation is distinct from a person's gender identity and expression. According to Diamond,

Sexual orientation refers to the sex of the erotic/love/ affectional partners a person prefers . . . heterosexual, homosexual, and

bisexual which are the three categories of sexual orientation are better used as adjectives not nouns and better used applied to behaviours not people. Sexual identity, however, speaks to the way one views oneself as male or female, and gender or gender identity while related to orientation and identity are primarily concerned with the roles that males and females are socially assigned. (199)

To put this more precise all individuals have a biological sex- whether she is female, male or intersex. Gender is an individual's social and legal status as men or women. And sexual orientation is a term that defines an individual's sexual desire for the people of the same sex, opposite sex, or both. Similarly all individuals have gender and gender identity. American Psychological Association refers to gender identity as "one's sense of oneself as male, female, or transgender". It is one's deepest feelings about one's gender or deeply felt psychological identification as a man, woman, or some other gender, which may or may not correspond to the sex assigned to them at birth. Gender identity is expressed through the way one acts masculine, feminine, neither, or both.

The Three of Us, called *Miniplanner* in the U.S, is Dawesar's first novel that stuns all with its sexual permutations and combinations. It is credited with the novelist's observation at the investment bank. *The Three of Us* is the story of Andre, an investment banker, who is seduced by Nathan, his boss's boss. As the book opens, we see Nathan taking Andre to a strip club in New York, and sex happens between them and a "regular girl". "It is a common practice among investment bankers to take their out-of-town clients to strip clubs," explains Abha in *The Hindu* Online Edition of India's national newspaper. Abha's work experience in an investment work in New York gives her an advantage of providing first hand experience in the novel. What captures the attention is writing about a protagonist who's of a different gender from the author. Andre didn't resist the first sexual encounter between Nathan and him at Andre's place rather enjoyed every moment of it. The reason had nothing to do with professional growth, but true concern of

Nathan for Andre and vice-versa. Even Andre wonders at his newly discovered sexual urge for the same sex. Rather the relationship between Nathan and Andre had become so intense that Andre 'missed his skin at night'. Meeting, having lunch together, making love at night and then taking shower together in the morning had become frequently regular phenomena in the lives of both. Abha writes in a male voice feeling herself at every inch probed in white male experience, Andre.

I started kissing him. It was a glorious afternoon. Sun was steaming through my window on the irises and on Nathan's skin, which glowed like gold. His buttocks were so muscular that the aesthetic pleasure alone could have given me a high. I wanted him and was aggressive and unmindful of his comfort when I took him. (TU 16)

Nathan has been depicted as a just man, less given to jealousy and unreasonableness than Andre's other lovers, which could explain the favourable reaction of the gay community. Rajini Srikanth says:

But Dawesar does succeed in conveying the sense of a strong bond between Andre and Nathan that transcends sex, as becomes evident in Nathan's complex reaction when he discovers that Andre has also been sleeping with his Nathan's wife. Initially outraged and deeply hurt, Nathan ultimately realizes that his love for Andre is too powerful to leave them permanently separated. (184)

Andre tries to identify his gender but is not sure whether he is gay since he had never felt like attracting towards any man in his life, rather he relates his sexual experiences with women in his past life. Initially he feels attracted towards Nathan only and not towards any men. Andre experiences the same feelings of love and attraction for Nathan which he once had for Madhu, his Indian girl friend. Abha Dawesar unfolds the layers of Andre's mind as he himself is at fix to know whether he is a gay or not. Andre calls himself gay and rejects his bisexuality, though he is in bed with Nathan's elegant wife Sybil, Martha, bank secretary and Madhu, an Indian friend. Andre Starts feeling attracted towards men after developing his affair with Nathan. Andre

tries his hand with club gay at his place and his tries for Bobby, the lax player are sufficient proves of his homosexuality. He says, "Somewhere along the line my attention to Nathan had spread out into a general attraction to men" (156). Judith Butler's seminal work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, argues that gender identity does not oppose sexual biology but, on the contrary, performs the possibility of something otherwise than male or female. Butler argues that gender is performative, which opposed the idea that gender performance is an expression of some sort of innate or natural gender.

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal overtime to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender.

(GT 33)

Gender is not a noun rather verb. It is not something one *is*, it is something one *does*, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a "doing" rather than a "being" (GT:25) She holds the opinion that it is the performance of gender, that creates gender or in other words identity forms through repetition of acts or imitation and not due to a certain original identity that exists prior to repetition. Just at the age of 24 Andre was exploring adventures of sex with both men and women and is found in the traps and confusions of gender identity. Dawesar depicts Andre as a performer and is confused with identity. Somehow the novel tries to demonstrate the performativity of gender and constructivism of sexuality as enunciated by Judith Butler.

The Three of Us is a saga of sexual orientation where we find rare introspection and self-probing when a confused Andre Bernard wants the security of being something, of being definable in one word. More than one third of the book is

throbbing with sexual affairs where everyone comes and goes but hardly anything significant occurs. Even Andre recognizes the absurdity of his relations with all his lovers still he finds it hard to spend even a single evening without being in arms of either of lovers. While with Sybil in Nathan's absence Andre himself wonders at his sexual desires:

stared for a second in amazement at my handiwork and then realized I was in deep trouble. Not only was my sexual orientation highly dubious and my emotions for the husband-wife pair at best jumbled, but my physical desires were absurd and impossible. I wanted the same thing from her. I wanted from her what I had wanted from Nathan. I wanted from her what Nathan had given me. (TU 39)

He is sleeping with husband and wife every alternate day and has landed in the "inconvenient" situation of having to juggle them around. Andre himself recognizes "Having affair with a husband and a wife was terribly inconvenient" (TU 139). Andre feels physically and emotionally drawn towards Nathan while his sexual relation with Sybil had no flavors of love in it. He was sleeping with Sybil because she was sexy and he enjoyed her company but always longed for Nathan and even fanaticized his romantic life with him. When not accompanied by either Nathan or Sybil, Andre fills the spare days dating with Martha, who works as a secretary. After an office party, Andre gets involved with Martha and ends up impregnating her. And then there is Madhu, his ex-girlfriend caught in a bad marriage, who comes by and finds consolation in his bed. Andre. After office hours his social life becomes so complicated that he will need a miniplanner to keep track of his evening/night schedules with his lovers. When he has a spare day in his miniplanner, he contacts the Gay and Lesbian Center, hoping to find a lover. His typical week is stuffed with day and night appointments with his lovers. Andre filled his life with sexual adventures and sometimes acted immaturely, which eventually led him into an alienated state. Abha is aware the book could also be read as an adolescent fantasy. "In some ways, Andre has suddenly entered this stage in life where he finds himself in a sexual utopia," she says. "In

some ways it is his adolescence. Andre is not the most mature of people... adolescence comes at different ages to different people".

Andre, who had become a putrid pervert and a sex maniac, wanted to have a grip on his life, but had no control over "the chemicals that were inextricably linked not just to his emotions and his sex drive but also to his thoughts". (TU 62) Andre, for Abha, is a post-Nietzschean character who chooses "hedonism over something else, and a lot of it comes from a lack of understanding of where he fits in". His problems stem essentially from the denigration of the status of the human being "from being a soul to being a psyche". Andre split between guilt and sex drive "yearned for an earlier age when one could believe that love was about the soul" (TU 69). Due to Andre's sexual relationship with most of the characters, moves the book in the direction of comedy of situation. Andre's idea of keeping a miniplanner to handle his dates with his lovers makes novel a comic farce.

The Three of Us is an amoral universe of pheromones still cannot be called 'unnatural' Dawesar was just 26 when the novel was published in the US as *Miniplanner*. It was a time when many Indian debut novels were recreating forgotten childhood and lost voices, unlike other novelists of the period Abha refuses to harp on the autobiographical strains in *The Three of Us* rather 'thrives as a writer by the act of speaking in someone else's voice', in spite of her Indian origin she spoke out in the voice of a bisexual white male by sinking deep into his consciousness and sub consciousness. "My primary allegiance was to the work. I could not have been coy about the sexual details because Andre Bernard was not," says Dawesar. Very few writers have secured the voice for bisexuality and Abha Dawesar is one among them. Through her novel she brings bisexuality from the margins of Indian literature to the mainstream without the anguished cry of emotional baggage or political overtones.

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