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Subverting the Lesbian-Gay Agenda: A Re-examination of Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*

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Abstract

In Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* Mala Ramchandani has been driven to insanity by a series of cataclysmic events – her mother's abandonment of the family and the marital home, the fleeing of her beloved sister, a protracted period of sexual and physical abuse at the hands of her father, the loss of her lover and their inevitable corollary of acute psychic trauma. Working against an assumed heterosexual normativity of gender relations, Mootoo explores dichotomies, inner compulsions and outer markers of sexuality and gender and so establishes a continuum of sexual identities and sexual behaviours in antithesis to the male-female, masculine-feminine polarities. There are instances, however, where the novel contradicts its own agenda. The central argument of this paper is that while Mootoo makes good on undermining heterosexual privilege and subverting entrenched binary constructions of gender and sexual identity, this is limited as far as the novel, at times, rather than challenging hegemonic modes of belonging, ossifies them. Inadvertently, Mootoo thus contravenes what I construe as her trust placed in "the power of the printed word to reach many people" (Mootoo, 1998: 4).

Introduction

If Queer theory has social and political aims, in particular an “oppositional design upon society, for it is informed by resistance to homophobia, heterosexism and the ideological and institutional practices of heterosexual privilege”, then Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1998) may best be located in the canon of Queer Literature (Peter Barry, 2002: 140). Indeed, Heather Smyth argues that *Cereus Blooms at Night* “examines the withholding of belonging and citizenship from lesbians and gay men in Caribbean cultural and national space” and shows the crucial links amongst “place, culture and belonging, in relation to sexuality” (Smyth, 1999: 143).

Describing the medical management of intersexed infants, Kessler points out that there is an “incurable belief and insistence upon male and female as the only natural options...compelling a culture of two genders” (Kessler, 1994: 218). The existence of labels such as “male”, “female”, “feminine” and “masculine” are social constructions, which imply the non-existence of anything in between. In direct contestation to this, Mootoo presents characters that “fit” neither side of the gender/sexuality binary, but rather must be located along a continuum of gender/sexual roles and behaviours. *Cereus Blooms at Night* depicts sexuality as “a fluid form of identity and parallels sexual indeterminacy or outlaw sexuality with other forms of boarder-crossing identities” (Smyth, 1999: 147). Tyler, the narrator, is biologically male, has a sexual affinity for men and engages in cross-dressing. Indeed, he felt that “there was something delicious about the confinement of his hairy legs in stockings” (Mootoo, 83). Mootoo renegotiates gendered roles and the sexual division of labour through Tyler’s natural inclinations and vocation, respectively. Nursing is a vocation dominated by women. As a nurse, Tyler demonstrates a palpable concern for his charges. In this regard, Tyler is a natural caregiver and so subverts the view that care giving is the exclusive preserve of women.

Tyler is a postcolonial sexual hybrid. Native to Lantanacamara he sought foreign education where his “perversions” were either “invisible or of no consequence to people whom [his] foreignness was what would be strange” (Mootoo, 51). It is, thus, on two accounts that Tyler is dislocated: he is a postcolonial subject – the exotic other and in a “suspended nameless” limbic state, neither man nor woman, between “existence and non-existence” (Mootoo, 83). Tyler sees himself as a woman trapped in a man’s body. He feels ashamed that his “mammary glands were flat” and that his “man’s member mocked” him (Mootoo, 82).

This “in betweenness” is reflected in the complex narrative structure that employs two different narrative voices – a third-person, omnipotent persona who reveals the inner workings of characters, primarily those of the protagonist, Mala Ramchandani, and a first-person narrator, Tyler. Epistolary narratives may also be discerned in letters written by Asha. While the shifts between perspectives are seamless, almost undetectable, they point to a transgression of literary norms. This hybrid narrative strategy thus disrupts the long-held literary tradition of canonical writing that demands employment either of a first person or a third person narrator. Mootoo thus implicitly proposes a narrative

continuum—a new literary, decolonised space that allows for the examination of the dislocated, the unaccommodated.

Then there is the character of Otoh. Otoh is a short hand version of Otohoto, an acronym for “on the one hand but on the other”, a name earned from his “vexing inability to make up his mind” (Mootoo, 118). Otoh’s name is emblematic of his sexual identity for, on the one hand he is anatomically female, but on the other, he possesses the outer markers of masculinity. Otoh is pivotal to the destabilisation of visual markers as tangible evidence of the essence of signifieds. Otoh is perceived to be male because of outward gendered indices that point to this conclusion – his gait, his strapping build, his clothes. Mootoo therefore undermines the way society privileges the visual realm. She challenges reductionist tendencies that model identities based on cultural markers.

Mootoo’s transgression of syntactical conventions asserts the Saussurean view that the connection between signified and signifier is arbitrary. Language, as a cultural product, is exposed as inherently deficient – language is informed by the cultural mores of society and so not only defines reality, but also limits it. She problematises the ability of language to adequately reflect reality, particularly the diversity of sexual identities and gender, by interchanging or presenting both male and female pronouns. This is best demonstrated in the tracing of Ambrosia’s evolution from Ambrosia to Otoh – here there is a series of he/she or him/her insertions that point to a duality that resides in the person and body of Ambrosia/Otoh – that is, a female body with masculine inclinations. The use of both pronouns demonstrates an inherent, defective rigidity in language – “a word is not the substance itself” (Mootoo, 229).

The characters of Otoh and Tyler are not the only ones who defy gender/sexual binary pairs. To demonstrate the extent to which society exists on gender and sexuality continua, other ostensibly homosexual characters are found in the text – Sarah Ramchandani (Mala’s mother) and Sarah’s lover, Lavina Thoroughly, Randolph John Hector (brother to the gardener, Mr. Hector) and a married man who propositions Otoh.

Mootoo explodes many binary pairs. Obvious enough are the polarities of gender and sexual identity. But the proffering of gender and human sexuality continua is anchored in a geographical continuum of sorts. The novel is set in the town of Paradise, in the island of Lantanacamera. The extent to which the setting is fictional is tenuous, given very close resemblances to the physical and socio-cultural landscapes of Trinidad – rolling sugarcane plantations, the presence of several ethnic groups, the use of Trinidad Creole in dialogue and the presence of imperial forces (particularly early on in the novel). In fact, the setting of the novel is neither entirely fictional nor imaginary. Condé promulgates the view that the novel’s semi-fictional island setting and indeterminate time aim to erode fixed certainties which have tended to shape reality and human experience (quoted in May, 2002). This “deliberate haziness” intends not just to subvert categories of belonging but also to replace dichotomies with continua – continua that so pervade the novel as to become normative (Condé quoted in May, 2002).

Mootoo extends her tinkering with geographies to include a microscopic examination of the protagonist's immediate world – bugs and snails and all. Living within the confines of her garden, Mala is neither outside nor inside; that is, she rejects life within the home and outside in the village. She occupies the interstices of two geographies; geographies that reject pain and dislocate her. A denizen of her wild, untamed, verdant garden she lives in an Edenic space that is plunged in the middle of a Postlapsarian world. Here order, as epitomised by the gardens of the colonisers, is rejected in favour of disorder. Disorder becomes a space to reconstitute self; it is imbued with healing properties as it becomes Mala's location of escape from extreme psychological trauma. In her garden, she is able to return to a state of innocence, as embodied in her alter ego Popoh (a childhood nickname). It permits a psychic journey back to a simpler, unsullied period – a time that predates her mother's desertion, the escape of her sister and the loss of her virginity to the incestuous proddings of a drunken, cuckolded father.

Mala's garden is not the only unfettered space; so too is her mindscape. For all her seeming insanity, Mala exercises no harsh moral judgements that seek to alienate others. This acceptance of people may be best explained by the following, as discussed by Leo-Rhynie and Pencle:

Bem (1981) proposed the development in children of gender schemata which respond to the bipolar gender distinctions in society and which guide the development of other schema, as well as the extent to which children, as they grow, function socially in gender-appropriate ways. These schemata provide children with a framework for interpreting their own behaviour...the sex role concepts are initially imperfect because of the child's level of cognitive development, but they are gradually refined as age advances and intellectual development improves. Sex role behaviour, therefore, is not just made up of acts of imitation, but is based on generalised, organised concepts, which develop as the child's, experience increase and behaviour is matched to such experience (2002: 203).

Having in her formative years been exposed to the love and sexual bonds between her mother and Aunt Sarah, Mala's gender schema does not constrain her to view alternative sexual relations as society would. She does not regard such constructions of sexuality and gender as illicit or aberrant. Mala, thus, was not one "to manacle nature" and permits others their own freedoms (Mootoo, 83). Moreover, Mootoo does not depict the mother-daughter relationship as troubled – a theme that O'Callaghan identifies as recurrent in the works of West Indian women writers (1998: 304). Unlike the stereotypical mother, who socialises "girl children into a life of renunciation, denial, repression and guilt at their own sexual needs, with terrible psychic results – including failed heterosexual partnerships", Sarah does not leave Mala apologetic about her own sexuality. In fact, her trysts with her childhood sweetheart, Boyie, were not only initiated by her but were clearly liberating. Sarah's lesbianism perhaps provides a new ontology for Caribbean mothers, as much of their daughters' sexual repression "is tied up with compulsory heterosexuality" (O'Callaghan, 1998: 304).

While Tyler and Otoh are the signal characters used to bend gender and demonstrate sexual hybridity, Tyler critically undermines Mootoo's gay/lesbian agenda on two counts. Firstly, Tyler is a self-acclaimed "pansy":

I was once assigned – only once thankfully – to assist Toby with fixing a leak on the roof. (I will refrain from dwelling on the verbal rocks he tossed in my direction and say only that he made no effort to hide his disdain for my ways. At the end of the ordeal, he told me plainly that he was going to leave the job if he ever was put to work with this pansy again.) Another time I helped Mr. Hector move heavy furniture from one bungalow to another. I saw him watch curiously, as I struggled with the weight of some items and the awkwardness of others (Mootoo, 11).

Tyler is thus “feminized”, that is, he is imbued with qualities conventionally associated with womanhood; he is the stereotypical homosexual. The characterisation of Tyler, the homosexual, is treated in concordance with entrenched homophobic notions of the homosexual as subnormal, abnormal and incomplete. He poses no challenge to long-held homophobic views of the homosexual as someone less than a man, someone more akin to a woman – a man who could never live up to the rigorous demands of masculinity. Tyler’s dubious masculinity is best echoed in a question posed by Otoh’s father, Ambrose Mohanty, a supposedly tolerant Lantanacamarian - “He is a Mr., isn’t he?” (Mootoo, 135).

Secondly, Tyler’s inner ruminations concretise the pervasive view of homosexuals as overly libidinous and lascivious. In no more than two pages and on no less than three occasions within these pages, Tyler’s strong sexual attractions to other men (police officers) are revealed (Mootoo, 9-10). His subsequent sexual fascinations with other men include the doctor who attends to Mala on her second day at the nursing home, Mr. Hector, the gardener, and later on, Otoh. This is not to say that heterosexuals are less psychologically occupied with sex – but the frequency of Tyler’s preoccupations, especially in two consecutive pages, does little to undermine homophobic ideologies that construct the homosexual as morally debased and sex-starved.

More significantly perhaps, Mootoo does not depict the homosexual sex act. This is incongruent with any intention to challenge the normativity of heterosexuality. We assume that, in their ramblings in the cane fields, Tyler and Otoh have consummated their relationship (132). Indeed, perhaps constrained by ‘good taste’, Mootoo only explores in explicit detail the consensual heterosexual sex act via the consummation of Mala’s and Ambrose’s relationship (235-6). More troubling though is her detailing of incestuous rape scenes between Chandin and Mala. The depiction of these violent and disturbing rapes asserts the view that heterosexual acts are normative to the extent that they alone make palatable reading; even when such encounters are forcible, and worse, transgress the entrenched taboo of consanguine sex! The exclusion of the homosexual sex act thus relegates homosexuality to the periphery – it is not acceptable enough to be depicted. Tyler and Otoh are allowed their ‘strange’ proclivities – but there is no literary space for the articulation and demonstration of their sexualities.

Mootoo explores lesbianism via the relationship of Sarah Ramchandani and Lavina Thoroughly. Sarah is more comfortable with Lavina, she uses the Creole freely in her lover’s presence and is not given to code switching to meet the demands of an exacting husband. Through Lavina there is the possibility of friendship and companionship borne out of genuine affection. This contrasts with Sarah’s and Chandin’s relationship where Sarah was emotionally alienated at the start – she was, after all, a mere ego-prop for a

rejected, lovelorn Chandin. Lavina's natural affection for the children proposes same-sex couples as viable parenting models; indeed both girls were attached to "Aunt Lavina" and looked forward to her visits, her stories and their excursions. Lavina's influence has an indelible influence on Mala as Lavina has inculcated in the protagonist an abiding love for the natural world.

Based on the evidence gleaned from the text, the relationship between Sarah and Lavina has deleterious effects on Sarah's children only in so far as it was an adulterous one that led to the estrangement of Sarah from her children and their father. But to the homophobic reader Sarah's abandonment of the children is a confirmation of their expectations of the licentious lesbian, who cares more for her lover and so abdicates her familial responsibilities. While I do not suggest that a woman's primary and essential goal is to care for her children, normative femininity has been constructed in such a way as to insist that it is the children who come first and all else after. To the unconvinced reader, Sarah, who has not made a second attempt to retrieve her children, is the reckless libertine who cares more for her libidinous freedoms than the well-being of her children. In addition to not attempting to reunite with her children, Sarah ostensibly has not even written home. The intervention of Judge Walter Bissey unearths a box of undelivered letters from Asha, but to Sarah's discredit, there is none from her.

While Rich calls for the rejection of the "bias of compulsory heterosexuality, through which lesbian experience is perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent or simply rendered invisible", the lesbians of *Cereus Blooms at Night* are only partly visible. They make a hasty, unceremonious exit from the novel. Little has been done to demystify lesbian sex acts, for like the Tyler/Otoh union, Sarah's and Lavina's liaisons are merely hinted at – lesbian sex in *Cereus Blooms* is thus rendered invisible. Moreover, to the homophobic readership, Sarah's desertion of her children constructs the lesbian as "abhorrent".

In an egalitarian world Chandin would have equal responsibilities as father and as the abuser more blame to shoulder, but then, fathers are not construed as central to caregiving. While the typical audience will view Chandin with great loathing, he may strike a more empathetic note than Sarah, for he is, after all, a man – a cuckolded one to boot. May points out that the fact that the community looks on Asha and Mala with pity suggests that their suffering is widely known. In addition May identifies a series of euphemisms or linguistic strategies of avoidance when broaching the topic of Chandin's incestuous relations with his children. According to May (2002):

Mala's suffering is always described as being caused by the fact that Chandin "mistook Pohpoh for Sarah" (Mootoo, 65). This phrasing implies that Chandin's raping of his daughters nightly for decades was accidental, without intent, such that he cannot and should not be held accountable for his actions. The gossip continues into Mala's adulthood, resurfacing once she and Ambrose become an item after he returns from his foreign education: "It seemed a waste to the townspeople that such a catch would be so preoccupied with a woman whose father had obviously mistaken her for his wife, and whose mother had obviously mistaken another woman for her husband" (Mootoo, 109).

Furthermore, residents of Lantanacamara excuse Chandin because:

...he was once the much-respected teacher of the Gospel, and such a man would take to the bottle and to his own child, they reasoned, only if he suffered some madness. And, they further reasoned, what man would not suffer a rage akin to insanity if his own wife, with a devilish mind of her own, left her husband and children (Mootoo, 211).

The moral duplicity and sanctimony of Lantanacamarians is best exposed in the actions of the “righteous postman, [who deemed] the Ramchandani house a place of sin and moral corruption” (Mootoo, 263). His non-delivery of the mail therefore works to sever ties between Mala and her sister, Asha.

Another troubling point in the novel is Otoh’s transformation from Ambrosia to Otoh. This “transformation was flawless” – depicted as being so seamless and so naturalised as to appear highly contrived and implausible (Mootoo, 118). Such a facile changeover in sex/gender identity minimises the attendant anxieties and trauma experienced by both the inter-sexed person and his/her family¹. In a utopian world that is free of impinging hegemonies, perhaps such fluid transformations may be possible, but this is Paradise, a semi-imaginary geography, which Mootoo has carefully crafted as intolerant of “aberrations”.

The union of Tyler and Otoh, while crafted by Mootoo to point to a useless rigidity of the homosexual and heterosexual dichotomy, inadvertently asserts heterosexual privilege. Tyler is feminised only as far as his behaviour and inner compulsions are concerned; he is in fact biologically male. Similarly, Otoh is outwardly constructed and conceives of himself as male, anatomically, however, he is female. What is particularly undermining of the novel’s agenda to destabilise hegemonic gender/sexual polarities is that in an attempt to present such gender/sexual hybrids, Mootoo has in fact reconstituted the normative binary – Tyler and Otoh are biologically man and woman respectively. But what is one to make of the match at the psychological level? Tyler perceives himself as a woman, and Otoh as a man. To the homophobic readership, the Otoh-Tyler union is a veritable coup-de-grace that restores the heterosexual binary as normative for indeed, it may have procreative potential.²

May suggests that in linking various forms of exile, Mootoo “connects histories, narratives, and identities that are often conceptually separated.” Further, Mootoo undertakes the ambitious project of questioning issues of “representation, knowledge, and power not only to clarify the violence at the heart of practices of knowledge, faith, and love but also to claim queer space within the Caribbean and South Asian diasporas” (May, 2002). This radicalism and literary innovations (semi-imaginary setting, hybrid narrative perspectives and indeterminate time frame) may be identified in what Sarah Hoagland describes as “intellectual inventions” occasioned by Mootoo’s own outsider/insider status – a lesbian and post-colonial subject commenting on the ‘Third-world’ condition from the vantage point of a metropolis (Tong et al, 1995: 162). In

¹ See Kessler (1994) who investigates gender/sex assignation in inter-sexed infants.

² Kessler proposes that intersexed infants are designated as belonging to either sex based on anatomical, hormonal and chromosomal investigations. The ability to procreate is dependent on the reproductive capacity afforded by all three.

quoting Hoagland, Marilyn Frye makes the critical point, that non-belonging is a privileged epistemological place as far as it affords freedom from impinging, restrictive ontologies (Tong et al, 1995: 162). Exploring the politics of lesbian existence, Hoagland posits that:

...in the conceptual scheme of phallogocrities there is no category of woman identified woman, woman-loving woman or woman-centred-woman; that there is no such a thing as lesbian. This puts the lesbian in the interesting and peculiar position of being something that does not exist, and this position is a singular vantage point with respect to the reality which does not include her. It affords her a certain freedom from constraints of the conceptual system; it gives her access to knowledge which is inaccessible to those whose existence is countenanced by the system. Lesbians can therefore undertake kinds of criticism and description, and kinds of intellectual invention, hitherto unimagined (Tong et al 162).

“Migration and exile are fundamental to human experience... each movement demands another definition and redefinition of one’s identity” (Davies in May, 2002). A key locus of redefinition in *Cereus Blooms at Night* is “that of citizenship in a way that can account for multiple identities and hybrid histories” but “attention to multiple histories and identities is not easy when the educational, political, and legal categories used to describe reality deny the existence of a whole group of people” (May, 2002).

By exploding dichotomies of gender, sexual binaries and exploring incest and rape, which in turn are linked and likened to the foisting of imperial hegemonies on the colonial’s modes of being, in the interstices of the real and the imaginary, utilising crossbred narrative perspectives and suspended in an indeterminate time-frame, Mootoo is able to explore multiple identities, but not in an entirely unfettered way. Epistemologist Susan Babbitt, in exploring what she terms “adequate understanding”, argues that thinking objectively must be redefined to mean being “biased in an appropriate way” (quoted in May, 2002). This necessary bias, however, is difficult in contexts of inequity even if, legally speaking, there is “freedom” of expression and no undue constraint on one’s person” (Babbitt in May, 2002). Indeed freedom from restrictions, and the ability to organise and express oneself as one pleases, is not real freedom for everyone. For some views, under systemically unjust social conditions, are much more difficult to make plausible. And some possibilities for human development are not imaginable (Babbitt in May, 2002).

Thus, while Mala’s garden provides a utopia where there is no intervention “in nature’s business” as they were “left to their own devices”, Mootoo nonetheless succumbs to working within the realms of society’s ways of knowing (Mootoo, 136-7). Her principal characters and their relations, while providing strong challenges to entrenched, accepted modes of being, nonetheless bow under the weight of pervasive stereotypes and hegemonic ideologies and thus work to reassert gender polarities and heterosexual privilege. By playing to a largely heterosexual audience, Mootoo is circumscribed by predominant cultural schemata that work to regulate the extent of her exploration of alternative gender identities and subordinate sexualities. While she is trusting in “the power of the printed word to reach many people”, her text is more convincing to the choir and less so to the unbelievers (Mootoo, 4).

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