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Dissent against Marriage as a Heteronormative Institution

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Abstract

*The paper/article dissents against the heteronormative marital structure of the Indian society through two Bengali films entitled *Memories in March* and *Arekti Premer Golpo* or *A Different Love Story*. Both the films focus on homosexual relations and even homosexual marriage and homosexual live-in relations in stark contrast to the dominating projection of heterosexual relations in cinemas. The heteronormative marital structure prevalent in society is connected to gender. The paper thereby proceeds into a brief analysis of gender and its cultural misconstruction. In cue with Butler the paper tries to show how gender is dependent on the performativity of an individual regardless of one's sex. The paper locates how binary system of gender construction is a major cause to the heteronormative conception of marriage. There is also a comparative analysis between the manners of dissent of the two films though both move towards the identification of relationships beyond the straightjackets of heterosexual relations. The paper thus intends to break the heteronormative institution of marriage by providing performativity as the ground for gender construction and thus of marriage.*

Keywords: marriage, heteronormative, performativity, gender, dissent.

Marriage in general terms is considered to be a bond of two individuals. In *What is Marriage* Girgis, George and Anderson has defined marriage as, “the union of two people (whether of the same sex or opposite sexes) who commit to romantically loving and caring for each other and to sharing the burdens and benefits of domestic life” (Girgis 246). However the hetero-normative social structure is such that marriage is always considered to be between two individuals of opposite sex. The institution of marriage and reproduction, divorce rights were considered by the second wave feminists. However the equality in marriage and marital relationship had been grounded on the prelim of men-women relationship. “Acceptance of sexuality is tied to the hierarchy of ‘normal’ sexuality and ‘deviant’ sexuality” (Salazar 4). This results in the heteronormative belief of marriage. “This privileging sexual value system creates a hierarchy of power and privilege, with non-normative sexuality at the bottom of the hierarchy. Heteronormativity is dominant in the sexual value hierarchy” (Salazar 4). The heteronormative concept of marriage springs forth from the misconception of similarity between sex and gender. But gender and sex are completely different terms. “The term gender identity implies that one's gender may not

match one's biological sex – indeed may not match either primary biological sex – for if it always did we wouldn't need the term gender identity" (Tyson 115). In *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler has explicitly said that, "When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically different from sex ... man and masculine might just easily signify a female body as a male one, while woman and feminine a male body as a female one" (Butler 9). However Butler also opposes the cultural construction of gender which is a direct cause of heteronormativity as it is conventionally regarded that a man with masculine attitude gets attracted towards a woman with feminine attitude and vice-versa. Any exception to this norm is unnatural. In cue with Butler, the two films celebrate the central characters having homosexual relationship on the grounds that their gender is determined by their performativity. It has been represented in the two films, where the central male characters are shown to get attracted towards the same sex.

The gender roles are dependent on the performativity of the individuals and this has been characteristically projected in both the films – it becomes difficult to categorize the individuals on the basis of their sex. All the central characters' gender role depends on their sexual performance which is independent of their biological sex or cultural norms. This is however in stark contrast with dominating idea of romance between heterosexual couples in cinemas. It is because not only gender but the idea of romance is measured according to the cultural standard where the heterosexual lovers' love culminates into marriage. But both the films are contrary to the idea of ideal love projecting love and romance between individuals of the same sex. Usually gender is considered to be dependent on culture. Thus among the North Americans, men who play the role of the penetrator do not come into the category of homosexuals. "As long as he behaves in a traditionally masculine manner – strong, dominant and decisive – and consistently assumes the male sexual role as penetrator (never allowing himself to be penetrated, orally or anally), a man remains a macho, a real man. As a macho, a man can have sex with both men and women, and not be called what North Americans call homosexuals" (Tyson, 329). "When the relevant culture that constructs gender is considered through law or a set of laws, then it seems that gender is as fixed and determined as it was under biology-in-destiny formulation. In such case not biology but culture becomes the destiny" (Butler 11). Butler refutes to this claim to the cultural dependence in the construction of gender. In *Gender Trouble* she makes a long discussion invoking from Beauvoir to French feminists to substantiate her view that cultural construction of gender limits gender within a set of norms. She thus comes up with the concept of gender based on performativity. This has been significantly adhered to in both the films: directly in *A Different Love Story* and symbolically but radically in *Memories in March*. In *A Different Love Story* the entire dependence on culture has been refuted through the interaction between Abhiroop or Abhi da and the journalists. To the journalist's question regarding the sexual choice of Chapal Bhaduri, Abhiroop or Abhi Da responds, "What if I make a film on the legendary Amitabh Bachan? What would be your questions? Would you still be interested in his sexuality?" (Ganguly *A Different Love Story*) It is not only an exposure to how the society looks on to the sexual choice of the non – heterosexuals since

culturally they are but a minority but also question the cultural dependence of sexuality. Abhiroop or Abhi Da's question propose that it depends on the sexual performance of an individual which is not dependent on culture. Thus the interest in one's sexual preference can never be the question of the journalists only because homosexuality is in minority. Further the cultural belief ingrained in the minds of individuals that relationships and marriage are between the opposite sex and the exceptions to this norm are 'unnatural' has also been exposed through this conversation. Depending on the cultural construction of gender the marital relations come into play. Culturally it is a norm for the opposite sexes to marry and co-exist with one another. Same sex marriage is unnatural because it is culturally accepted that biological males can establish relations with biological females: their gender roles are culturally pre-determined and any deviation to this is unnatural. Both the films thus dissent against this cultural construction of relationships. "Throughout our lives we are conditioned to aspire to marriage and family and the legality of marriage reinforces this framework indefinitely. Those who cannot marry are therefore 'others' and not productive" (Salazar 9). Since marriage is legalized between the opposite sex the same sex automatically become the other. Thus in the two films the characters dissent against the hetero-normative cult in marriage.

Though dissenting against the same authority of heteronormative marriage based on the cultural construction of gender the perspective of the two films are different. They define authority and thus dissent against it in different manners. *Memories in March* question the hetero-normative marital structure through the cultural formulation of masculine behaviour. It directly questions the cultural construction of gender trying to focus on the performativity which is in direct contrast to the dominant heterosexuality. On the other hand, *A Different Love Story* tries to bring about an inversion in the hierarchal pattern with homosexuals being on the highest ladder-rung. It directly identifies the cultural construction of masculine and feminine gender as the hegemonic power structure and tries to dissent against it focusing not only on the performativity which should be the grounds of gender but even presents the fluidity and flux in the gender creation. It directly posits question to the permanency in the gender roles based on cultural grounds through the character of Uday making the gender role fluid and independent of any constraints. This tends to question heteronormative marriage which is based on the cultural concept of gender: a male and a female with the cultural masculine and feminine gender roles involve with one another. *A Different Love Story* directly projects this through repetitive parallel shots of heterosexual and homosexual marriage. In *Memories in March* there is the projection of two types of individuals: one who supports the homosexuality considering it as natural as heterosexuality while it also projects individuals who are completely abhorrent of the homosexual marriage. But the thoughts of both the categories of heterosexual are kept at the periphery. They are not allowed to play any role in the central plot of the film and neither do they directly participate in the relation between Arnob and Sid. In *A Different Love Story* homosexual relations are shown parallel to the heterosexual relations through the dual relation of Basu, the lover of Abhiroop or Abhi Da, and Kumar, the lover of Chapal Bhaduri. Thus while

Memories in March conclude with a union between the homosexual son-in-law and the mother, *A Different Love Story* ends with both Abhiroop and Chapal Bhaduri leading an individual life free from the reins of their lovers. The second film definitely ends on a radical note projecting the homosexuals being independent with the capacity to lead their lives alone. Thus the role of heterosexuals is completely ignored by the end of the film.

The performativity of gender roles is also projected through the attitude of Chapal towards Kumar in *A Different Love Story*. The concept of labour-contract in marriage has been asserted in the film projecting the homosexuals being oppressed by the patriarchal structure in the similar pattern of women. In *A Materialist Analysis of Women's Oppression* Christine Delphy has compared marriage to a labour contract:

“These services are furnished within the framework of a particular relationship to an individual (the husband). They are excluded from the realms of exchange and consequently have no value ... they are unpaid. ... The husband's only obligation to the relationship, which is obviously for his own needs, is to provide for his wife's basic needs, in other words to maintain her labour power” (Delphy, 60).

This has been extended in the relation between Chapal Bhaduri and Kumar in *A Different Love Story*. When Kumar finds him for the second time he takes Chapal back with him bestowing upon him the responsibility of himself and his family. But it turns out that the protagonist is taken back to work instead of Kumar's ill wife. Chapal does all the household chores including looking after Kumar's ill wife while the latter engages himself with another woman. The only return for all the house-hold chores is three times meal, tattered clothes and insulting words from Kumar. The wife of Kumar and Chapal Bhaduri connect to one another sharing similar sorrows from the same man. Through the projection of such marital life there is a direct dissent against the hetero-normative marriage. Thus the film not only dissents against hetero-normative marriage but moves one step further by radically projecting the homosexuals as being submerged in the relation. However the film *Memories in March* does not try to draw any parallel between the homosexual and heterosexual marriage. There is no space for any heterosexual relationship. Thus though superficially, *A Different Love Story* appears to be radical by projecting the heterosexuals at the periphery, it is *Memories in March* that focuses only on homosexual marital relation successfully closing the doors to heterosexual relationship. Not even a single shot in the film projects any kind of heterosexual marriage. It highlights the romance of the two homosexuals completely ignoring the heterosexual structure of marriage. Thus this film directly dissents against heteronormative marriage by completely closing the space for heterosexual relations.

Memories in March also dissent against the cultural construction of gender which directly influences the heteronormative view of marriage. The cultural construction of gender that Butler refutes in *Gender – Trouble* has been symbolically projected in *Memories in March* through the fish within the bowl. Sid's mother wants Arnob to keep the fish with himself as it was most loved by Sid. But Arnob disagrees saying he can keep

anything but not the fish. He then proceeds, “Humans have a strange tendency to capture any creature they like. They love birds and thus cage them, they love fish and thus keep them in aquariums. They try to tame these creatures according to their whims and choices rejecting the animals’ individuality” (*Memories in March*). This is a hint towards the framing of culture as well. Regardless of one’s choice society tries to constrain the gender and sexual behaviour of an individual within the cultural construction of gender. This results in the dominant heteronormative pattern in marital institution. Just as fishes prefer sea and birds sky, homosexual people are attracted towards their own sex. Thus by not accepting the fish he dissents against the established norms of heteronormativity valuing his personal choice.

As realized the institution of marriage is determined through the play of gender roles. The cultural formulation has been distinctly dissented in *A Different Love Story*. In the social scenario “binaristic understanding of masculinity and femininity shape the ways we perceive gender ... the assumption of heterosexuality determines the ways in which we constitute that femininity and masculinity” (Francis ix). This in turn impresses upon the marital structure and the performativity in sexual relations. The “sex and gender system establishes not only the sex of the body but also the kind of desires they can have” (Francis 6). This has been categorically dissented in the film *A Different Love Story*. The central character Abhi da does not categorize himself as a female. When Chapal Bhaduri asserts that people like him which also includes Abhi are “women trapped in men’s body” (*A Different Love Story*), Abhi rejects it saying, “I feel that we are not females. Males are different, women are different and we are different” (*A Different Love Story*). This is a radical remark on the part of the character as it completely subverts the binary concept of gender. What remains unsaid and can be easily derived is that since they are different from other two sexes their choice in sexual partners as well as their sexual drive may also be different. The binary institution of sex and gender and the cultural roles ascertained to them has also been questioned through the presence of non- effeminate homosexual characters. In *Memories in March* the absence of Sid makes him an ambiguous figure. As Bhatkar projects, “The absence of Siddharth himself from the film, does not give any space or cues to think about his physical appeal, his mannerisms, his personality, his effeminacy or masculinity or anything of the sort” (Bhatkar 105). However through the description of Sid’s mother that the former was dotted upon by innumerable girls since his college days, Sahana’s acceptance of her crush for Sid and finally Arnob’s reference to the fitness freakiness of Sid make one imagine him as a conventional masculine figure. The character sketch of Basu and Kumar also has no shade of effeminacy. This is thus in opposition to the binaristic construction of gender which indirectly provides emphasis to heteronormative marriage. The binaristic concept of masculinity and femininity has direct influence in the acceptance of non- heterosexual relations. On account of the binaristic view, heteronormativity is all the more established in the mind since it fails to register any other kind of sexuality which does not confront to the binary understanding. A chief problem in the acceptance of homosexual relations lies in the fact that they do not fit with the concept

of binary opposite gender or sex. The categorization into the twin structure results in a major problem in the acceptance of males who are not masculine and females who are not feminine. The films also try to bring out the complexities inherent in naming a non-heteronormative relationships and its acceptance within the sanity of marital bond. "Love that cannot be labelled and are beyond the boundaries of definition, maybe also because these forms of love are complicated to be captured in the heteronormative structure" (Bhatkar 104). *A Different Love Story* thus projects the ambiguous relation between Abhiroop and Uday as also keeping the sexuality of Uday ambiguous: it does not fit in the heteronormative social structure. It becomes too difficult to place these varied relations within the heteronormative definition of marriage. The projection of such characters and such inexplicable relations make the films a direct dissent to the heteronormative marital concept. The two films clearly projects heteronormativity as a chain to the mutual existence of individuals marginalizing a group of people as secondary incapable of leading a marital life.

Both the films deal thus directly with the role of performativity in relationship. The performative structure enables in the construction of identity. The films however show the flux in sexual identity of an individual which simultaneously questions the permanency in the performative role of an individual. As Butler quotes, "Identifications are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly constituted and as such subject to volatile logic of iterability. They are that which is constantly marshalled, consolidated, retrenched, contested and on occasion compelled to give away" (Butler 108). Both the films intend to show sexual identity as undergoing "mutation, metamorphosis and diaspora" (Haraway 25). *A Different Love Story* projects Abhiroop as an individual who does not constrain himself to any specific gender performativity. While he boldly applies *kajal* in his eyes and is shown as performing the passive role in sexual intimacies, he also vehemently opposes when one of his staffs calls him 'madam' and offers him tea in a 'Minnie' cup used for giving tea to females. Abhiroop disagrees to have tea from the cup is a dissent against the culturally determined gender roles emphasizing the fluidity in the gender-identity. In *Memories In March* no space has been left for the conventional gender identity based on culture. The film completely rejects the conformed cultural gender-identity. As Butler explains the performativity she tells in *Bodies That Matter*, "Performativity must be understood not as a single or deliberate act, but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effect that it names" (Butler 2). This repetitive act has been indirectly hinted in *Memories in March* when Sid's mother, eager to prove that her son was not a homosexual, shows a packet of condoms to Sahana. The latter's reply hint at the repetitive sexual act: "Now-a-days all know of the various sexual diseases and go for protected sex aunty, and both of them were educated... what do you expect?" (*Memories in March*) Both the films thus dissent against the heteronormative marital structure by trespassing the heteronormative culturally constructed gender structure which is the chief catalyst for the heteronormative marriage.

The two films project how “gender specialization traps the individuals within the cage of cultural norms, but soon the impossibility of living by these socio-cultural norms are realized and then begins the journey of knowing the reality” (Bhatkar 105). It is during this phase of knowing the reality that one identifies oneself as transgressing the cultural construction of gender boundary. The films project characters who completely realize their sexual orientation, their sexual choice and thus move beyond the heterosexual marriage inviting a direct threat to the hetero-normative marital structure. It also projects ambiguous characters whose sexual orientation becomes difficult to categorize but is a direct dissent to the binary system of categorization and therefore of the hetero-normative strain. Finally both the films dissent against the heteronormative marriage but in their own ways. While one radically opposes the heteronormative structure through the parallel portrayal of homosexual and heterosexual relations though the latter is restricted to the periphery, the other keeps no space for any heterosexual relations to emerge on the screen. However both moves towards the identification of sexual orientation of the characters opposing the binary system of gender construction which is the root cause of heteronormative marital structure.

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