

## **The Treatment of Homosexuality in *Murgikhana* (The Hen House) of Kewal Sood**

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With the advent of industrial revolution in Europe a new middle class emerged that experienced several novel experiences at family, work place, institutional, social and cultural levels. Some fundamental changes also occurred in individual's life splitting the traditional with the new, the modern. The economic affluence that followed brought a trend of investing more time in lengthy writings representing the neo-realism against the fall of drama and the dominance of poetic fiction. A new genre of writing long narratives emerged that would not represent the truth but was quite close to it. The genre became quite popular with the puritans, realists, modernists and democrats and spread like fire in the next century.

While romanticism, heroism, and entertainment of Victorian novel gave way to the more robust themes based on realism, modernity, social issues, individual rights, social condition, ideology and science fiction, the tender relationship between two individuals were treated with different lenses. Homoeroticism is not unknown in literature but it has been suppressed for centuries, explicitly for different reason like harsh penalties, social ostracism or banishment. Forman Brown's 1933 novel *Better Angel* was the first novel that dealt with homosexuality without disapproval and with a happy ending. *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) by Radclyffe Hall was another novel with a lesbian theme. It was however, censored by a British court and the following decades saw a good number of stories and novels representing homosexuality. After a lot of commotion and upheavals the American Psychiatric Association (APA) even removed homosexuality from the list of mental disorders in December 1973. In 2018, Supreme Court of India also

invalidated part of Section 377 (that criminalised all sexual acts which are against the order of nature) of the IPC, hence making homosexuality legal in India. Out of gay and lesbian studies and gender perspectives emerged the Queer theory in the 1990s. The theory conceives individual as a complex whole of different propensities or characteristics beyond a larger traditional sexual binary of male and a female.

In the Indian classical literature too the themes of homosexuality and transgender are not missing and Vatsayan's 'Kamsutra' epitomises multiple sexual behaviours. However, in the modern Indian literature it was probably Surya Kant Tripathy Nirala in 'Kulli Bhat' and Kamleshwar in 'Ek Sadak Sattavan Galiyan' who first brought bisexuality into discussion. The first novel, however that fully discusses the lesbian relationships without disapproval and contempt is Kewal Sood's 'Murgikhana' (Hen House) published in 1971. Kewal Sood, a close associate of Amrita Pritam and Mohan Rakesh is a prominent voice in Hindi and Punjabi literature. It was on his insistence that for the first time, I think, I have ever completed reading a novel and I must commit, I not only enjoyed reading it but also found it of great interest and contemporaneous in view of human relationships and the LGBT movement.

*Murgikhana* doesn't have many characters to make the readers lost with. Besides the chief protagonist Sheela there are Julie, Savita, Malti, Sita Devi, Suneel, Mrs. Singh, Manno and few more. Shimla, Juhu, Chandni Chowk, Hawa Mahal (a radio programme) and novels like 'Women in the Shadows' and 'Scent of Cloves' also keep on intervening as and when Sood wishes their presence. It is a story of a woman Sheela who has undergone early age sexual abuse by her friend Savita and her hostel warden Sita Devi that completely transforms the tract of her life from the conventional to the one contemptuous to the heterosexuality. While the chief protagonist fails to follow the normal course of life like her friends she falls to her new experience as if it had been her fate and natural. So, the early contempt, forced action of Sita Devi and the consequent entry into the homoerotic club of friends tells how the heterosexual text could be disturbed or even torn by the other sexual acts, if not to be identified as unnatural sexual acts as has been popular with the orthodox. While the message from the author appears to be sympathetic at one instance to the exploited under specific circumstance it also bears vengeance against the prevalent patriarchal social structure and the normative hegemony of the particular. Kewal Sood, instead of voicing for the space for lesbianism against the male-female binary, however, gets trapped between different pulls in Indian society, that leads Sheela to revenge against the deprived

heterosexuality and motherhood. But one should be thankful to Kewal Sood for having the courage to bring such a sensitive issue into discussion.

Cigarette smoking, perceived largely to be the habit of the adult symbolises maturity and adulthood in literature. It also visualises one's initiation into the adult world and even at times the tendency to take risk and seek sensation. In a society where smoking is considered morally low among women it may symbolise rebellion too, a truth that explains the chief protagonist Sheela in the novel. The novelist endeavours a lot to raise the level of characters to the western plane of modernity by introducing whisky, smoking, gowns, club and food, Indians are less accustomed to. No individual has enjoyed that much freedom as a poet does in Muslim society. Ghalib's 'Zahid sharaab pine de masjid me baithkar, ya fir vo jagah bata Jahan par khuda na ho' (O priest, let me drink wine in the Mosque, or tell me about a place where God doesn't reside), A couplet of Faiz 'Ho chuka ishq ab hawas hi sahi, kya karen farz hai adaaye namaaz' (let the lust loom over love, let the namaaz be performed after adoration) inspires the protagonist to follow what has become a ritual for her. Her intimate moments with Julie, Savita and later Manno represent a parallel life, less discussed, yet prevalent in the Indian society. Kewal Sood's depiction of lesbianism falls short of a counter force depreciative of the male chauvinist order and hegemonic patriarchy. Sheela and Savita might have been victim to Sita Devi but for Sita Devi was it natural or the outcome of the same experience is left for the readers to speculate. There are two Julies in Sheela's life, one of 'Scent of Cloves', and the other the intimate. Sheela feels like unfortunate Julia Ashley of 'Scent of Cloves' who was saved from Cromwell's Irish Massacre by her nurse and starvation by Dutch Captain but nothing comes out there for her rescue, not even Manno, in whose lap she cries like a child. Although, seen from a different perspective Manno also plays a saviour.

The novelist leaves several threads floating in the air clueless yet meaningful depending upon the perceiving ends. The killing of Sita Devi in the end by Sheela also leaves a vacuum to be filled and Kewal Sood appears to be more sympathetic towards Sheela by allowing her to give vent to her revenge for the loss of Suneel. While Savita enjoys a bisexual life happily Sheela fails to break out of the frontiers of male supremacy, misogynist opprobrium and keeps her contempt alive against the heterosexuality. Partly this happens because of the absence of LGBT, a movement that has wider acquiescence today than five decades back. Therefore, while Kewal Sood is ahead of his time in

dealing with this delicate issue, he falls behind the LGBTians who have succeeded in even legalising their individualities and space in different states today.

The train metaphor, called ‘heterotopia’ by Foucault representing a cultural, institutional or discursive space, also brings a variety of sensations to the reader. They not only represent a flow of life, culture and energy but also an epoch, a time space that either separates or connects. Trains also represent loneliness, togetherness, movement and infinite journey but the whole meaning changes while aboard or watching it from outside or from the window of one’s home. Description of train and the early morning rail squeal that haunts Sheela time and again speaks of her internal turmoil and agony of loneliness. Her frequent smoking of the cigarettes and drinking whisky not only symbolise an urge to break with the existent but also to rebel against the male patriarchal tradition. Sheela’s appreciation of her body when “her eyes fondle the pink walls of her room and kisses her body at both the ends, amorously. At times she has a strong desire to kiss her lovely pink frame wholly, but alas! And she rises yawningly from her couches” (10) also challenges the heterosexualism as a dominant force. The passing train keeps the homophobia inside her alive as it rattles her state time and again and pushes towards the energy drinks or puffs. Although Sheela tries to challenge the heterosexism by developing a world of her own yet her division between the two worlds keeps her weak, and in the end, she succumbs by killing Sita, for which many would not forgive Sood. Instead of securing a space for lesbianism and pose it as a force against the patriarchal order Sood ends up confining it to a homosocial space where hatred towards male doesn’t end and the bisexuality as an alternate doesn’t emerge.

Kewal Sood represents an era that is considered an important milestone in Hindi literature. His observation of the man, especially in the post-independence era, poised against the existential threats of modernity from the lenses of a psychotherapist is outstanding. His most important contribution is to bring the most sensitive and evaded issue of lesbianism into discussion and his *Murgikhana* appears to be the lead work of the era.

### **Works Cited**

Sood, Kewal. *Murgikhana* (The Hen House). New Delhi: Shilalekh Publishers, 1971. Print.