

¹Queer Skin, Straight Masks: Unveiling Masks in ShaniMootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*

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Shani Mootoo is an openly lesbian Caribbean writer and painter. She was born in Dublin, grew up in Trinidad and currently lives in Toronto, Canada. Mootoo's experience as an immigrant is central to her works. Her ancestry can be traced back to India and her present to Canada; however she is very much rooted in Caribbean culture and life. The Caribbean pulsating matrix is an interwoven tapestry of different intersecting cultures. The Caribbean demography today is a strange mix of descendants of Indian and Chinese indentured labourers, African Slaves, British, German and Irish missionaries, not to speak of European colonial settlers of every denomination. The Caribbean is a potpourri of cultures. Surprisingly, even after the amalgamation of such varied cultures, the Caribbean has retained one single identity "that was not Black, Indian, White, Chinese, Syrian, Lebanese, Christian, Hindu or Muslim but encompassed all" (Mootoo, *This is the Story You Must Write 2*). Different cultures came accompanied by different languages yet the *lingua franca* has remained English.

Even though Mootoo writes from beyond, her writings are deeply rooted in the Caribbean space. Mootoo finds the constantly shifting boundaries within the Caribbean space the right place for blurring of borders. This blurring by default makes transgressions both possible and acceptable. Her writings explore the variant themes of "transgression" be it social or sexual. Her interest lies in unravelling the silenced

¹The first part of the title is taken from the essay "Queer Feelings" by Sara Ahmed in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*.

narratives. Even her earliest poems portray the love between two men or two women which greatly disappointed her parents. The young ShaniMootoo was constantly reminded by her grandmother to conform to the ideal of the “*nice Indian girl*” (This is the Story You Must Write 2).

Mootoo’s Trinidadian upbringing is very clearly visible in the setting of her novel *Cereus Blooms at Night*. Set in the fictional island of Lantancamara it depicts the painful and terrifying life of Mala Ramchandin and is interwoven with multiple narratives of the “sexual deviants”. It is narrated by Tyler, the only male nurse in Lantancamara who is entrusted the responsibility of taking care of Mala Ramchandin. Abandoned by her mother and later by her younger sister, suffering consistent sexual abuse at the hands of her father, Mala crosses the thin line between sanity and insanity after being deserted by her lover. This desertion comes as the final blow to Mala and she stops talking altogether. It is Tyler who through her songs, monosyllables and sometimes incoherent muttering, weaves her life story for the readers. Mala is the connecting chord linking all the queer characters. It is through Mala that Tyler meets Otoh Mohanty, the “son” of Mala’s lover Ambrose. It is around Mala that her mother Sarah’s and Aunt Lavinia’s homosexual love blooms. The novel has several characters that cross social and sexual borders. It resonates with narratives of breaking barriers.

Mootoo’s novel distrusts borders, dislodges the universal notion of heteronormativity and re-defines gender norms. The normative gender identity is constructed through regulatory practices. It is these regulatory practices that govern the cultural intelligibility of gender norms. The notion that one is one’s gender to the extent that one is not the other gender restricts gender identity within the binary pair. This binary construct of gender norms leaves no space for those who cannot be categorised within the borders of the binary pair.

The narratives of hetero-normativity form a powerful discourse, a vicious circle which limits gender identity. Such narratives not only shape our bodies but also our lives. These narratives of compulsory heterosexuality are established through repetition of heterosexuality as norm. Sara Ahmed in her essay “Queer Feelings” writes:

“through repeating some gestures and not others, or through being oriented in some directions and not others, bodies become contorted; they get twisted into shapes that enable some action only insofar as they restrict capacity for other kinds of action” (Ahmed 423).

It is through this process that an ideal is created which everyone must look up to and follow. The ideal includes only “certain bodies, certain directions, certain ways of loving and living” (Ahmed 423). Moving away from the ideal can create psychic and melancholic effect.

Mootoo's characters do not 'fit in'. Their identities are formed outside the borders of binary gender identity. The characters transcend these boundaries and create their own centres in the peripheral space. The lines that define borders are disrupted, blurred and sometimes even erased. Tyler, a nurse by profession, is biologically male but feels within as a female. OthoBoto, as the very name suggests, is born biologically female but grows up to become a male. A lesbian love relationship blooms between Mala's Aunt Lavinia and her mother Sarah.

Mootoo's seamless interweaving of this homosexual love relation between Sarah and Lavinia poses a serious challenge to the hetero-normative narrative. Lavinia, the daughter of a white missionary, in school was close to only one person, Sarah who is of Indian indentured labourer ancestry: “Chandin would regard Sarah jealously and wonder what attributes she had that he lacked” (Mootoo, *Cereus* 35). The discourse of hetero-normativity constructs an ideal family on the basis of threat. The ideal family (heterosexual) is presented as vulnerable to outside forces (homosexuality), and therefore it needs to be protected. Reproduction is the defining characteristic of such an ideal family. Sara Ahmed draws our attention as to how:

“heterosexuality becomes a script that binds the familial with the global: the coupling of man and woman becomes a kind “birthing”, a giving birth not only to new life, but to ways of living that are already recognisable as forms of civilisation”(423).

Mootoo, categorically challenges such stereotypes and very clearly presents the lesbian family as a happy family. The time Mala and Asha spend in the garden with mother Sarah and Aunt Lavinia are the sweetest of Mala's memories. The two girls seem to enjoy the company of Aunt Lavinia. They play, dance and laugh together. Together they form a complete happy family. Mootoo sharply contrasts this happy non-ideal family with the unhappy ideal family of Sarah and Chandin. Sarah, when in the company of Lavinia feels more comfortable. She talks in broken English which does not seem to bother Lavinia. It is a companionship born of genuine affection. But, with Chandin, Sarah feels alienated. Mala and Asha are deprived of their father's love

and there is no love between husband and wife. Mootoo dismantles the notion of an ideal family which sanctions union only between heterosexuals. The natural affection of Lavinia towards the children makes Sarah and Lavinia good same-sex parents. The children look forward to the visits of Aunt Lavinia, to listen to her stories and to go out on trips together.

In Mala, Mootoo draws a character singularly non-judgemental, remarkable in both her acceptance of the peripheral and her rejection of stereotypes. Mala does not question the naturalness or appropriateness of her mother and Aunt Lavinia's relationship. Yet she is somehow aware that this relationship is blossoming in secrecy and its discovery can have heavy consequences, her

“heart leapt when she saw the tips of Aunt Lavinia's finger grasping mama's waist She spent Aunt Lavinia's visits listening anxiously for her father. Whenever Mama and Aunt Lavinia did not seem to hear him return she would bound noisily up the stairs or barge in on them” (Mootoo, *Cereus* 60).

Chandin Ramchand in comes across as the representative of hetero-normative society which seeks to suppress and if required simply erase such transgressions from the norm. It is the fear of discovery by such Chandins that propels Sarah and Lavinia's decision to leave for some faraway place where they can live a happy life. Sarah and Lavinia pay a heavy price for their defiance of the rules of society. They are separated from the children and have to flee to a foreign land to live the life of their choice.

Though Mootoo attempts to give her queer subjects central space of acceptance in her narrative, yet in a society that has grossly failed them, they still exist in peripheral spaces. Sarah and Lavinia cannot exercise their love in public spaces, “It seemed to the children that their Mama and Aunt Lavinia were wanting to conduct all their visits indoors, or only as far outdoors as the backyard” (Mootoo, *Cereus* 59). Although their relationship has crossed the borders of binary gender norms yet they remain somehow trapped within the boundaries. The complete absence of Sarah and Lavinia from the text after their union seems to imply that a fully bloomed lesbian relationship is not acceptable and cannot see the light of day. In the essay “Sexual Citizenship and Caribbean-Canadian Fiction: Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here*” and Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*” Heather Smyth writes: “The utopian spirit of this vision . . . is compromised by Lavinia and Sarah's haunting absence from the

text, the violence of their exit, and the extremity of abuse inflicted by Chandin on Mala and Asha after Sarah's necessarily hasty departure" (150-151). The relationship of Sarah and Lavinia also has damaging effects on Sarah's daughters. Sarah never makes a second attempt to meet her daughters. For homophobic readers "Sarah's abandonment of the children is a confirmation of their expectations of the licentious lesbian, who cares for her lover and so abdicates her familial responsibilities" (Mohammed 6). Even in the case of Tyler and Otoh, though they have come out openly in the public, their love relationship still flourishes in the shades, "We would meet away from the curious eyes on the periphery of the grounds" (Mootoo, *Cereus* 132). Mootoo's graphic portrayal of the heterosexual sex act between Mala and Ambrose and even Chandin's rape of Mala contrasts sharply with her surprising hesitation in depicting the homosexual sex act. It seems to suggest that even for Mootoo the homosexual sex act is unrepresentable.

By making Tyler, the narrator of the novel, Shani Mootoo in a way places a person of "deviant" sexuality in a position of power. She deconstructs the dichotomy between the privileged and the subordinated. The privileged position of Tyler gives him power to narrate, to produce meaning, represent that which has remained unrepresented and also to present the un-representable in a positive framework which till now had been represented in terms of negative "others". It also in a way provides the acceptance of his position as a queer subject and is also perhaps an attempt to normalise deviant sexualities. Choosing nursing, a profession explicitly thought to be for women, Tyler disrupts the norms of gender identification that is applied to different kinds of professions. He is the only man in *Lantana camara* to be trained in this profession. He is always treated as an outsider for his feminine behaviour: "Being an outsider that time – and I suppose I still am and may always be" (Mootoo, *Cereus* 6). The nurses mock him and pass sly comments on his dressing sense. Once the nurses praise the neckerchief Tyler is wearing. But, Tyler could make out the malice in their superfluous words:

"Behind the flattery, the edge of mockery was plain to anyone who must, as a matter of survival, learn to detect it I am aware of the subtleties and incremental degrees in a hostility – from the tight smile to the seemingly accidental shove – and I have known the gamut" (Mootoo, *Cereus* 15-16).

Facing such hostile comments almost every day Tyler has learnt the survival strategy. He knows that he cannot hide his deviant ways, so he “was quietly proud and did not enter into a façade of denial” (Mootoo, *Cereus* 16). Contemplating his own sexuality, Tyler questions: “Over the years I pondered the gender and sex roles that seemed available to people, and the rules that went with them I was preoccupied with trying to understand what was natural and what perverse, and who said so and why” (Mootoo, *Cereus* 51). It brings to our mind the question raised in *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy “Where the Love Laws lay down who should be loved. And how” (177). Tyler has become so used to being treated as an outsider or to be looked at as abnormal that he is genuinely surprised when the doctor who comes to treat Mala Ramchandin does not think of Tyler as an outsider and treats him normally:

“For the first time in weeks I was not a curiosity. I was so accustomed to being seen as one that when treated like a regular fellow, I fumbled and blushed. And became aware of how desperately I want to be – and be treated as – nothing more than ordinary” (Mootoo, *Cereus* 24).

Tyler yearns to be treated as normal. It is the heterosexual norms that create the opposition between feminine and masculine attributes of the female and the male respectively. Deviant sexual practices or sexual desires that do not conform to the ideals of hetero-normativity are prohibited and punished. These nonconformist gender identities become non-understandable, un-knowable and logically impossible. These nonconformists occupy a space in limbo. Tyler feels that he belongs to the space of the in-betweens. He contemplates:

“Nana has accepted me and my girlish ways but she was the only person who had ever truly done so I wondered for the umpteenth time if Nana would have been able to accept and love the adult Tyler, who was neither properly man nor woman but some in-between, unnamed thing” (Mootoo, *Cereus* 76).

Tyler is caught in the in-between space of identity crisis. He wants to belong, to be accepted and treated in society as normal. It is only Mala who truly understands Tyler. In her childhood she had witnessed the loving lesbian relationship between her mother Sarah and Aunt Lavinia. She had seen them happy together. Mala even steals a nurse’s uniform for Tyler. But Tyler is so used to people staring mockingly at him that when he wears the nurse’s uniform in front of Mala for the first time, her

indifference makes him feel “horribly silly, like a man who had put women’s clothing for sheer sport”(Mootoo, *Cereus* 83). It is only later that he realises that “the reason Miss Ramchandin paid [him] no attention was that, to her mind, the outfit was not something to congratulate or to scorn – it simply was. She was not the one to manacle nature, and I sensed that she was permitting mine its freedom” (Mootoo, *Cereus* 83). Mala is not a person who would interfere in the business of nature. For Mala, Tyler’s gender identity is not a matter of great concern. A person’s identity is not formed on the basis of sexual orientation alone. Identity intersects with many other things such as a person’s profession, social positioning, religion, class, ethnicity and so many more.

Sara Ahmed points out that “Normativity is comfortable for those who can inhabit it” (425). Being comfortable means being at ease with one’s own body and surroundings. For a queer subject the comfort zone of hetero-normativity becomes an uncomfortable space. She gives an example of a chair. The same chair which is comfortable for one person may not be comfortable for another person with a differently shaped body. When one becomes comfortable, the space becomes seamless. But hetero-normativity is that space of public comfort where only those bodies are allowed to be comfortable which have already been shaped through legitimacy narratives and in the process naturalised. For those who are heterosexual, hetero-normativity is the space as it should be. One is not consciously aware of the imposition of norms. But when the queer subjects are coerced to fit into the hetero-normatively defined space, they feel discomfort, disoriented, out of place, unsettled and awkward. Queer subjects feel that they cannot put on the familiar social garb of heterosexuality which is shaped for some bodies and not for others. Tyler feels: “Not a man and not ... a woman, suspended nameless in the limbo state between existence and non existence” (Mootoo, *Cereus* 83). Tyler looks at himself as a woman trapped in a man’s body. He is ashamed that his “mammary glands were flat” (Mootoo, *Cereus* 82). Through the character of Tyler, Mootoo foregrounds the identity crisis that one feels when one is born in the wrong body. She portrays how Tyler suffers the ice-cold stares and the sneering of the people around him. Only few seem to understand him. However as Tyler grows he stops his attempt to “shake” off his “perversions” (Mootoo, *Cereus* 51) and develops into a confident person who asserts his “deviant” gender identity. He gives voice to his sexual attraction towards other men.

Through the character of Otoh Boto, Mootoo presents how the society ideally

should be. Born a woman he grows up to become a man. Tyler in the very first meeting seems to recognise Otoh's sexuality:

“At one glance he had the angularity and sprightliness of a girl reluctantly on the verge of becoming a woman, and at the next the innocent feyness of a young boy who would never quite grow into the glove of manhood” (Mootoo, *Cereus* 108).

For Tyler, Otoh is “uncommonly lovely” (Mootoo, *Cereus* 110). Otoh's transformation into a boy is “flawless”. Nobody seems to notice that Otoh was born a girl, “So flawless was the transformation that even the nurse and doctor who attended the birth, on seeing him later marvelled at their carelessness in having declared him as a girl” (Mootoo, *Cereus* 118). The transformation of Ambrosia to Otoh is seamless. There is no trace left that he was ever a girl. His parents remain so engrossed with the problems in their marital life that they fail to notice their daughter's transition into their son.

“Elsie fully expected that he(she) would outgrow the foolishness soon enough. But the child walked and ran and dressed and talked and tumbled and all but relieved himself so much like an authentic boy and Elsie soon apparently forgot that she had ever given birth to a girl” (Mootoo, *Cereus* 118).

Mootoo beautifully foregrounds the fluidity of sexuality. Fluidity in gender identity is not something that has evolved in recent years; such identities have always existed even though they have remained as invisibles. Elsie's statement to her son conforms this: “you are not the first or the only one of your kind in this place” (Mootoo, *Cereus* 258). Elise has not forgotten that her son was born a girl. Otoh is surprised when his mother approaches him with a marriage proposal. It suggests that Elsie has accepted Otoh as her son.

But Otoh's flawless transformation is in a way a utopian example. Crista Mohammed in his article “Subverting the Lesbian-Gay Agenda: A Re-examination of Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*” suggests that Otoh's transformation is so naturalised that it excludes and glosses over the pain and trauma that a transgender child would necessarily face in the process of his/her coming out to parents and society. The social, psychological, physical trauma that a transgendered person goes through in the process of coming out of the closet has been neatly overlooked.

The state of being transgender cannot be easily defined as gender nonconformity. It is more of gender dysphoria. There is a difference between the two. Gender nonconformity is a state wherein a person feels that his/her gender expression does not match the culturally defined norms of the gender he/she must belong to i.e. feminine or masculine. For example, if a man decides to stay at home and take care of the children, it is gender nonconformity because in accordance with cultural norms of society a man is expected to move out of the space of the house to earn the livelihood for the family. Whereas gender dysphoria:

“specifically refers to the distress a person feels when their gender identity doesn't match the sex they were assigned at birth if gender dysphoria is present in childhood and persists into adolescence, there's very high chances it will remain into adulthood” (Gold 114).

Tyler and Otoh are in a state of gender dysphoria and not just gender nonconformity. Tyler goes to a foreign land to study nursing because he thinks that in a foreign place his perversion would be less recognisable than his foreignness, to be “somewhere where my “perversion” which I tried diligently as I could to shake, might be either invisible or of no consequence to people to whom my foreignness was what would be strange” (Mootoo, *Cereus*51). Tyler is always preoccupied with finding answers to his question as to what is natural and what is perverse. Who makes the rules of identification and why should it not be the choice of an individual? Otoh also strongly believes that “he(he) was really and truly meant to be a boy”(Mootoo, *Cereus* 118). Though, Elsie earlier thought that Otoh's perversion could be psychologically cured, but by the end of the novel she accepts her daughter to be her son.

By the end of the novel Tyler and Otoh are united. Tyler is more confident about himself and asserts his individual identity. Tyler is finally liberated from all the restraints that society imposes upon an individual to make him/her conform to the cultural norms of gender rules. Tyler suggests, “Lately restraint and I have been hostile strangers to one another (Mootoo, *Cereus* 267). Tyler defies all the rules to re-define them:

“I wore lip colour more thickly than usual, shades brighter than my dark lips.... I tied a flower-patterned scarf around my neck, and on my temples.... Miss Mala ... squealed when I pulled the nurse's uniform from behind her dresser and put it on” (Mootoo, *Cereus* 268).

Tyler is not ashamed of his feminine inclinations anymore. It is an act of freeing

oneself from the clutches of societal norms.

Perhaps Mootoo wants her readers to realise the role of repressive ideologies in suppressing deviant sexualities. She attempts to create a heterogeneous space where multiple identities are recognisable. She categorically rejects homogenous narratives in her attempt to popularise plurality. The novel ends on a note of hope, hope for the acceptance of queer subjects unapologetic about their queerness. Perhaps only the unashamed acceptance of heterogeneity can create the space for a hundred different flowers to bloom together each emitting its own individual fragrance.

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