



Fluid Borders: Queer Perspective on *Seahorse* by Janice Pariat

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to review Janice Pariat's Seahorse through a queer perspective and shed light on understanding the negotiations that occur between identities. Identity has long been a very debatable issue and a discourse on tribal identity and queer identity becomes convoluted as neither of the two identities are stable and sheds light on the idea of double marginalisation. The novel offers a nuanced insight, delicate and subtle, into the complex issues of identity formation treading along the fine line of belonging and unbelonging. The paper will also attempt at understanding the complexity of bisexuality and the idea of queerness lacking from the Northeastern cultural point of view that ultimately, queer identity, be it homosexual or bisexual or any other identity within the umbrella term 'queer', is that of invisibility and also highlights the sense of being 'uprooted' in their own home. Through the study of the novel, the paper seeks to understand the fluid nature of sexual identity and also the close affinity of man with Nature.

Keywords: Queer, Identity, Nnortheastern Literature, Culture

Introduction

Chakraborty equates the experiences of queer people with that of tribals by highlighting that both are marked with deficiency(2021). His statement highlights the side-lining of queer people and tribals alike. However, when 'queer tribals' are brought to the picture, the statement divulges the double marginalisation of being both queer and tribal at the same time relegating them to "an-other". Such is the issue of queer tribals that it represents the notion of "discovery of the self in the other" (*ibid.*), based on marginalisation and exclusion.

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A historically queer interpretation of any ethnic group or a tribal individual from Northeast India becomes problematic due to various impediments. Casey writes that there can be no formation of identity without memories, because the self and the society are essentially “steeped in memory” (1987). The subject in conflict is that there is non-existence of any queer related tribal memory which makes it even harder for queer tribals to have an identity that encompasses what they are. There is no denying that memory is the foundation of oral literature, a feature common to all ethnic groups of Northeast India, through which ethnicity and cultural traditions are preserved. However, there being no ‘queer memory’, queer tribals ultimately find themselves in a no man’s land. King states that memory is not about looking at it as a lost fact leading to its rediscovery, but about looking at it as a text that needs interpretation (1996). This allows for reinterpretation of oral literature on one hand, and on the other hand, there are recent literary developments that focus on queer aspects of Northeast India.

Aims and Objectives

1. To study the intersection of tribal and queer identities through the analysis of the novel.
2. To examine the complexity of bisexuality as represented through the protagonist Nem.
3. To study the invisibility of queerness within Northeastern cultural context.
4. To explore the fluid nature of sexual identity and the connection between queerness and the natural world.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The paper employs qualitative and literary analysis approach. By using Janice Pariat’s *Seahorse* as a primary source, the paper endeavours to analyse the complexity of queer identity within the Northeastern context due to its lack of queer language and history. The research aims to evaluate through Eve Sedgwick’s “crossing and recrossing” which highlights constant flitting between sexual identities, Steven Angelides’ idea on bisexuality which states bisexuality as “the other” and Edward Casey’s theory on memory which argues that identity cannot be formed without memory.



Queer Perspective on *Seahorse*

Seahorse (2014) by Janice Pariat can perhaps be considered as one of the first novels in Northeast India that deals explicitly with LGBTQIA+ characters. The title itself paints a picture of fluidic motion, of flitting and moving boundaries, of water and its varied forms. A modern retelling of the myth of Poseidon, *Seahorse* explores the depths and nuances of sexuality through Nehemiah (Nem), the protagonist of the novel, who is from Meghalaya, and his platonic as well as sexual relationships with the different characters in the novel that ultimately makes it a bildungsroman.

“Everything opens *in medias res*” (Pariat2014), marks the beginning of the novel as it starts with “Nicholas’ disappearance.” (*ibid.*), raising the question: Who is Nicholas? Pariat, through Nem, then takes on the task of introducing Nicholas to the readers through vignettes and memories as he recalls his times spent with Nicholas – beginning from the time he saw him first till his disappearance. The novel essentially brings Nem’s inability to deal with this trauma to the forefront as he tries to move on with his life with this mystery lodged in the back of his mind. This ultimately also bring to question the notion of identity. As Rose states:

[O]ne of the most basic of all human questions: who are you? This is not a question that can be answered with a name nor can it be answered satisfactorily in words. Rather, the question requires qualitative demonstrations. Answers emerge in the lived experience of relationships developed in shared time and place. Ultimately, answers are a sharing of perceptions, attitudes, experiences, and, I think, compassion. (2014)

Tied to the story of Nem and Nicholas, is another thread (Lenny, Nem’s friend from his hometown and his untimely death) that ultimately entwines their fate together: “Nicholas and Lenny, though worlds apart, are inextricably linked. On either side of a diptych, bearing the names of the living and the dead.” (Pariat2014). Through this particular link, Nem tries to answer the idea of identity as: “We are shaped by absence. The places that escape our travels, the things we choose not to do, the people we’ve lost” (*ibid.*).

The protagonist is not the only queer character in the novel. Pariat weaves a nuanced and layered threads of identity that no one can be pigeonholed to just one identity as there are instances of lesbian experimentation, gay sexual relationships, and heterosexual intimacy interspersed throughout the novel. Being a study on northeastern identity, the analysis will be



limited to Nem and Lenny as both are Northeastern characters and in construing their identity, the power play of heteronormativity comes to the forefront and homophobia that entails from something foreign and unknown – queerness.

There is no denying that queerness in northeast India remains a foreign topic due to lack of queer history. The lack of language to essentially describe what queerness is continues to be the crux of the problem when bringing queer perspective to Northeastern literature. Queerness exists, but language fails to stand by it. While the presence of transgender is prominent, often referred to as *hijras* or the third sex, known by different terms in the different states of Northeast India, there seems to be a huge chasm as gay/lesbian/bisexual identity finds no place. It is erased as it is not acknowledged, driving them to invisibility. In Pariat's short story, "A Waterfall of Horses" a character highlights the idea of "lost in translation" due to lack of terms, ultimately highlighting the failure of language: "It's strange, all the things that language cannot say." (2012). As such, Kaustav Chakraborty's *Queering Tribal Folktales from East and Northeast India* (2021), while an achievement, does not really highlight queerness in a broader geographical locale to encompass the whole of Northeast India. It illuminates the idea of queerness through a queer study of folktales, utilising McGillis definition of queer as "that which is puzzling and confusing" (2003). It does not delve into the hetero/homo binary which remains one of the core features of queerness. Therefore, for queerness to be understood, it would require much more time to be accepted or popular as it is only the beginning and to build it upon queer language, which is seemingly lacking in northeastern India. Much of the queer aspect is invisible as highlighted by the queer characters in the novel, Nem and Lenny.

To study queerness is to focus on 'non-normative' or 'abnormal'. The normal bodies are those who uphold the ideas of those holding power in a culture, which essentially is heteronormativity. What is often considered to be nonnormative from the stance of normativity is effected by transgression. Transgression denotes the attitudes of surpassing boundaries (Chakraborty 2021). For this reason, crossing boundaries, or boundaries that are fluid brings the idea of morality and societal structure under threat. There is no denying that tribal societies are often influenced by mainstream society. The conversion of tribals into Christianity brought about the views held by the latter society, which has always seen any form of deviation as a sin or a disease and as such, Nem's family echoes the same sentiment



when it comes to his friendship with Lenny in the aftermath of the accidental discovery of Lenny's sexuality by his father.

Lenny as a homosexual character echoes queerness. Sports can be seen as a way for men to express and construct masculinity, and Lenny openly defies it by asking Nem:

“Is this what you do?” he asked. “Sit around watching these guys fight over an orange ball?”

“Sometimes.”

“Do you play?”

I thought it pointless to lie. “No”. (Pariat2014)

Nature is queer: it is always changing, always creating. Thus, the association of Lenny with nature by Nem highlights his queerness and the situationality of setting himself apart from society: “He smelled of smoke and pine forests, of something wild and unexplored.” (Pariat2014). This paves a path to understand Lenny as queer by nature. Nem's description of the moments he spent with Lenny and Lenny himself veers towards an understanding of creation of queer space (not necessarily sexual in context) as they seem to be living in a different time and space altogether: “When I was with him, though, time dissolved into significance. [...]. He ate when he was hungry, slept whenever he happened to be tired... He was out of time. Removed from it like a modern-day Tithonus, existing at the quiet limit of the world.” (*ibid.*). The heteronormative society suffocates Lenny and his queerness which ultimately serves as the reason for his constant desire to be a wanderer, to travel and be free of any impediments that stops him from being who he really is: “I have to get out of here, Nem” (Pariat2014).

The friendship, however, reaches a point of stagnation when Mihir comes to the picture: “Maybe on one of those excursions he met Mihir. The stranger. The solitary backpacker who drifted into our hometown” (Pariat2014). Furthermore, Nem's description of Mihir lends him the queerness that he used to define Lenny with: “I remember [Mihir] carried the scent of bonfires, of nights spent out in the open, of old wood-bone” (*ibid.*). Mihir, then, ultimately, represents the complete unification of queerness into one's nature which attracts Lenny. As such, he exercises his queerness by being physically intimate with Mihir only to get caught by his father that moves the plot forward as Nem is thrown, inadvertently, into the world of



queerness. Lenny, on meeting Mihir, crosses the border as observed by Nem: “Lenny was secretly, silently reanimated. They would travel together, it was planned” (*ibid.*). Lenny, it seems, stretches the fluid border till it snaps that ultimately leads to embracing his homosexuality/queerness.

A slightest deviance from the norm is a cause of great discomfort. Nem states that he would be killed if his parents “suspected the slightest deviance” (Pariat2014). Furthermore, he also recalls an incident where a plant bought by his father did not turn out to be hydrangea, but a creeper and he stood there looking at it bewildered. Nem says, “sometimes, he looked at me the same way” (*ibid.*). Thus, the core issue when it comes to queerness reverts back to lack of language. Queerness, then, remains or is seen as ‘unknown’ that leads to confusion as society no longer knows how to deal with it as in the case of Lenny, who after getting caught, is sent to a psychiatric institution. Queerness, as something abnormal, is seen as a disease and is also against “Christian principles” (Pariat2014). The same view is echoed by Nem’s parents on receiving the news that Lenny was caught in bed with Mihir:

“Did he do anything to you?”

I was much too taken aback to reply.

“Tell me, did he?”

“What do you mean?”

It grew, the look in his eyes. Twisting on his tongue.

“Did he... touch you?”

His words hung in the air, cleaving the space between us.

I shook my head.

Perhaps then it changed to relief. He sat back in his chair.

“It’s better you don’t see him again.”

“But why?”

[...]

“Right now he needs to be left alone with his family. You see, Lenny is suffering



from—a disease. Your mother and I don't want you around him..." *It's contagious.*
(*ibid.*)

This marks a turn of events in Nem's life as he is sent away to Delhi. However, this move takes an ironic purpose as he encounters Nicholas: "I was sent away. I was offered to Nicholas on a plate. Something like fate"(*ibid.*)

Queerness is also marked by invisibility, something which haunts Nem: "I was in most ways unremarkable." (Pariat 2014). The view of the self with low self-esteem hovers above Nem as he often sees himself as the 'next second best': "Why did he settle on—for he didn't quite select—me? Convenience perhaps, I was strewn on his path like some hurt, grieving creature. He'd had no choice." (Pariat2014). Despite such feelings, he develops a sexual relationship with Nicholas and his sudden disappearance leaves him wanting for answers. And the journey for answers leads him to London where he draws closer to meeting Nicholas again. This journey, both physical and metaphorical, is imperative in studying Nem's identity as he negotiates between his tribal and queer identity. For this reason, it becomes paramount to view Nem through the lens of a bisexual perspective as he exhibits the same that can be analysed through the dissimilarity between the terms identity and behaviour and to look at it through the nature of sexuality (Solli 2012).

Foucault states that the challenge of limits and transgression is monitored by a simple inflexibility. This inflexibility is that transgression continuously crosses and recrosses a boundary stacked up against a window of extremely brief duration only to return back again to the confines of the uncrossable (1977).

The moment of collision of transgression and prohibition when applied to sexuality and sexual acts exposes the bisexual characteristics of Nem. The borders between 'limits', which can be seen as things that are often looked at as taboos in culture and society, and the acts of transgression that makes an individual a transgressor becomes fluid as it stretches only to recoil back just like Sedgwick's phrase, "crossing and recrossing" (1990). The idea of bisexuality as a fluid sexuality highlights another feature: becoming 'an-other' amidst the grounds where sexuality is defined based on the hetero/homo binary. Angelides writes: "within the prevailing discourse of sexuality from sexology to gay liberation, bisexuality has functioned as the structural Other to sexual identity itself, that against and through which the identities of hetero- and homosexuality are constituted" (2001).



Bisexuality is problematic when it comes to adopting a definition to understand the term. Malcolm Bowie describes the three manners in which bisexuality is understood. Firstly, it is represented primarily as a biological idea, synonymous with hermaphroditism, marked with the presence of male and female sexual characteristics within an organism. This was expounded by Darwin and his contemporaries, a definition that is prevalent even today. Secondly, bisexuality refers to having both feminine and masculine psychological characteristics. The third and the most common definition is the characteristic of individuals to be attracted sexually to both male and female (qtd. in Naylor 1999).

In contemporary times, definition of bisexuality cannot be simply narrowed down to the third and yet is the most common way to understand bisexuality. Marjorie Garber stresses upon the nature of sexuality and its narrative. She focuses on the paradigm shift that has occurred in understanding sexuality, which suggests that it is fluid and not a fixed identity, however complex. She further adds that bisexuality allows room for sexuality to be involved in a process of growth, transformation and not a stable and knowable state of being (1995).

Based on such understanding of bisexuality, Nem echoes the same. However, a snag presents itself when he differentiates Nicholas with the rest of the people that he had sexual relationships with. Nem defines his sexual relationships as:

More often, rather than love, there were fleeting encounters. Here and there, at a party, a book launch, after-show drinks at the theatre. A secret venturing into Delhi's darkened gated communities, into flats I didn't see in daylight, that I never visited again. short, graceless forays into rented rooms that had seen endless liaisons, and a thousand forms of desire... some lovers I remember for their vagaries—the one who liked to be licked on his wrist, who looked always in the mirror, who asked for my hand on her neck. A tattoo on the inner thigh, slick, and wet, a leaping dolphin. (Pariat2014)

However, the difference is seen in the way he describes Nicholas: "He is a taste. The carver of my appetite" (Pariat2014). Furthermore, on being asked why he loved Nicholas by Myra, the other love interest of Nicholas before Nem, Nem replies: "To you, he was breath... for me, he was like a beautiful word that you learn to say... and your tongue is forever changed because you can pronounce it" (Pariat2014). This creates a clearcut demarcation in Nem between love and sexual encounters which can be studied based on sexual behaviour and



sexual identity. This creates an easier channel for Nem to flit between the two and to test the fluid borders. Storr defines, “sexual behaviour [a]s something universal, while on the other hand, sexual identity is something culturally and historically specific” (1999). Nissen holds similar view but between sex and sexuality: “sexuality is something you are, while sex is something you do” (2001). Thus, for Nem, staying within the border is engaging in sexual performance with the female sex and crossing the border involves engaging in same sex acts which becomes even more complex when love is thrown into the picture. Solli writes that love much more complex than one allows it to be. According to him, love is uncontrollable and that the heteronormative society demands denial, erasure of feelings and desires to conform to such heteronormative norms (2012).

Ultimately, the idea of performing masculinity and femininity is completely negated as Nem does not base himself on the basis of the hetero/homo binary, although cannot be denied that such is the view held by his parents which ultimately leads to Nem staying away from his family as his career inadvertently leads to seeking Nicholas. The earnestness with which Nem seeks Nicholas comes and goes as he tries to find the reason for his disappearance. The reason is ultimately revealed as the novel draws to a close and they are reunited. Nicholas replies: “Because the truth can only be told by someone else. My confession would have been tainted, no matter how hard I’d fought it, by self-preservation” (Pariat2014). This statement highlights the length to which a person could go to preserve themselves for truth. In this manner, Nem’s journey can also be seen as a way of self-preservation (preserving his queerness and love) to protect his truth.

Throughout the novel, however, there is not a single instance where any of the characters claim to be gay or lesbian or bisexual. The question of such identity does not even arise throughout the novels as the characters are at ease with who they are and who they are intimate with. This can be attributed to the definition of identity as given by Pariat: “Identities are not fixed once and for all at the moment of fabrication, but are repeatedly made and remade through interactions with human” (2014).



Conclusion

In conclusion, from the analysis of the novel, it is noticeable that there is hardly any sort of negotiation between tribal identity and queer identity. Perhaps the reason why there is no explicit mention of pigeonholing identities to the characters discussed could be the probability in knowing that the northeastern states lack a queer history and a queer language as reflected by Lenny and Nem, who drifts from one space to another space identifying themselves more with Nature than any other forms of fixed or fluid identity. Thus, the idea of queer tribal is ultimately negated, lost in journeys and events. After all, with no sense of rootedness, like the way it is for queer tribals, they tend to float with nothing to anchor them to their birth soil and all they can describe themselves is as ‘unremarkable’ and lost in translation.



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