

Confessional Echoes: Autobiographical Dimensions in the Poems of Hoshang Merchant

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Abstract

The present study explores Hoshang Merchant's homosexual instinct and society's non acceptance of his desire. Poet's longing for parental love (particularly from his father) was never fulfilled, because of his parents' embittered relations and tragic death. He turns to his sister for love but after prolonged illness she also dies. These tragic incidents leave a vacuum in Merchant's life. In want of love, he felt drawn towards same gender for the fulfilment of his yearning. But, heterosexual attitude of society along with its social norms are not compatible with poet and his defiant behaviour. The encounter between poet's ideology and society, brings only sorrows and sufferings in poet's life.

Keywords: Family, Relation, Homosexual, Heterosexual, Social norms, Discrimination, Suffering and Pain.

Hoshang Dinshaw Merchant, an Indian poet, critic, editor and a teacher by profession was born in 1947, to Zoroastrian business family in Mumbai (India). He graduated from St. Xavier's College and has his masters from Occidental College, Los Angeles. At Purdue University, he studied Renaissance and Modernism, and for his Ph.D. degree in 1981, he wrote a thesis on Anais Nin. Since after leaving Purdue in 1975, at Massachusetts, he attended the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Centre and there he resided and taught in Heidelberg, Iran and Jerusalem. At these places he was exposed to different radical student movements of the left. He has studied Islam in Iran and Palestine and Buddhism at Tibetan Library at Dharamsala (north India). He taught poetry and Surrealism at University of Hyderabad before his superannuation.

As a prolific writer, Merchant has written twenty books on poetry. His two critical studies are *In-discretions: Anais Nin* (1990) and *Forbidden Sex and Forbidden Texts* (2008). He has edited India's first gay anthology *Yarana: Gay writing from India* (1999), and *The Man who would be Queen: An Autobiographical Fiction* (2012). The corpora of his poems are collected and published in four anthologies entitled, *Selected Poems* (1999), *Collected Works* (2011), *Sufiana Poems* (2013), and *My Sunset Marriage* (2016). In his poetic works which are regarded as biographical, Merchant manifests his

traumatic experiences as a child and his recovery from it. The process of recovery makes him to deeply explore the histories of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam, and the influence of these religions is clearly evident in his literary works. The themes of his works involve the family tradition, exile, homosexuality, defiance and pain of separation. In his personal context the theme of same sex love reverberates in his works. Merchant, true to his publicly projected image of Parsi homosexual, depicts the emotional and psychological pangs of same sex lovers and how society behaves or thinks about them. His deeply autobiographical poetry, primarily reflects his personal experiences and family relationships. Lifelong, he yearns for the parental affection, which he never received. Particularly, from his father he got criticism and punishment only, and upon it he never recognised him as his son. In his loveless existence and tragic death of his parents, he sought solace in the company of his sister Whabiz. Her prolonged illness and eventual death left a void and utter despair in his life. Ironically, since his childhood love remains a forbidden aspect in poet's life.

Every living being in this universe is born without caste, colour, creed and religion but not without love. Love is the invisible but omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient power who runs the entire universe. In context to this invisible power, in the poem "The moon of Madness" poet states that,

There was a real force that spoke
Not from clouds
But hearts of men
they named it...
LOVE (*Collected Works* 145)

In this stanza the natural and powerful drive of love is depicted but the love which is emanating from the "hearts of men" suggests poet's attraction towards same gender. The seeds of same sex orientation, in poet's heart has germinated in his childhood, where he has wriggled even for the glimmer of love. It is maintained in the poem "The Rivers Canto: Post-script" where poet reflects on his incestuous as well as homosexual inclination. Here, for his heartiest desire poet reveals that, "I thought of meetings and partings:/... I dreamt of fellating my father/I had lost my fear" (*My Sunset Marriage* 170). In his dream while enjoying his desire, poet lost his fear. It is a truism that our thoughts shape our dreams. Further, in an interview with Akshay K. Rath, poet embraces the fact that his orientation towards same sex love can be drawn from his childhood. He reveals that "My sister won't confess this 'Jealousy' and I always wanted to be a girl. I wanted to steal her boyfriends. I wanted the boyfriends to make love to me instead of her.... It all starts from home" (web. 29 Mar. 2020). It suggests that his childhood experiences have played a crucial role in shaping his identity as a homosexual. Poet depicts his first experience as a gay in the poem "Sindh" and manifests that "it was with a Sindhi boy I first found love/He felt love but being a boy, he took me from behind" (*Sufiana Poems* 130). During this physical intimacy poet closely observes his lover and finds that he owns the mesmerising beauty. Similar to heterosexual lovers, homosexual lovers also have same aesthetic feelings, the difference lies only in object of love i.e., gender. Further, poet has given the detailed account of his lover's beauty in his poem entitled "Yusuf in the Marketplace" as,

He is always young He appears
...
He walks with panther grace broad-shouldered
towards me
and his brows! What can I say of his brows

Jetblack straight hair combed back

...

Grace of my simple life (*Collected Works* 165)

Poet regards him and his beauty as the “Grace” i.e., life giving force of his “simple life”, symbolic of Merchant’s childhood which was devoid of love. In continuation to the physical appearance of his lover, in the poem, “Yusuf in Memphis in the Coffeeshop” poet explains that “my Yusuf stands tall/... So beautiful/women cut their hand in wonder” (*Collected Works* 216). His physical beauty is so alluring that everyone feels bewitched or awe stricken and feeling drawn towards him. Poet himself is desperate for his lover and wants to enjoy his love until his heart overflow with love. For this in the poem, “A Lost Poem Retrieved” he prays to God that “Send me that dream-man to keep me company” (*My Sunset Marriage* 157). In comparison with his childhood, presently the sea of love for him is full to the brim. This comparison finds expression in poem, “The Parsi Saint Homaji’s Memorial Day, June 1988”. In this poem the priest who visits him in the midnight is symbolic of his gay lover. In his company he feels the love of “million boy-lovers” (*Collected Works* 62).

The longings of the heart for love are beyond words, and poet and his lover are not an exception in this context. They both embrace and get immersed in each other’s love. This euphoric state of theirs is beautifully captured in “Four Poem of Illumination”. Here poet states that,

I ask him what he dreams;

He says, Heaven is here...

He sleeps on my bosom...

I see his curls, his mole

His face of beauty and...

...

I see Majnun with Laila’s eye (*My Sunset Marriage* 123)

In this stanza poet sees “Majnun with Laila’s eye” which means that poet himself has become Laila and his lover “Majnun”, this imagined change in his personality expresses the inseparable bond between their souls. Their love has made them wild with passion and even the thought of separation is unbearable for them. Further, an episode of their passionate love making is recorded in the poem “Yusuf of Canaan” where poet admits that, “His teeth mark is on my neck/... We have wounded each other as enemies/And are now seeking each other as medicine forever” (*Collected Works* 55). In these lines a beautiful image of love is pictured, where love itself is depicted as the cause of lovers’ injuries but at the same time their love making cures their wounds. Now, lovers have completely kept themselves aloof from the cacophonies of their surroundings by confining themselves within the four walls of love. But, the fragrance of a flower and love can never be concealed, because their basic nature is to spread out. The love depicted here also comes to the notice of society but poet and his lover do not care about their being exposed as homosexuals and remain indifferent towards the possibility of being ridiculed and judged on social parameters. The heat of their passion makes them to challenge the even the social norms. Their defiant behaviour is described in “Boy-Love in Afghanistan”, as “we would meet daily/Look into each other’s eyes/...he was free to search me/...like.../A blind man reading Braille” (*My Sunset Marriage* 92-93).

Merchant, while answering a question in an interview candidly states that “I am first gay and then an Indian or may be first an Indian then a gay” (Rath, web. 15 May, 2021). Poet has enjoyed his gay love and relations wherever he lived and publicly

accepts this truth of his persona, but perhaps his partners has kept their identities and relations secret. In this paradox and as the time passes their love becomes talk of the town. Undoubtedly love is the root cause of this entire universe but if it goes in different direction i.e., against the norms of society, which acknowledge only heterosexual relations, then it drowns its followers into the fathomless sea of despair and delirium. Human beings are social animals and society always affect each and every sphere of life of every individual. Therefore no one can survive without society, but contrary to it, in Merchant's poetry there is no place for society. This indifferent and defiant mind set of the poet will bring him to question and with the passage of time will cost him his peace of mind. In the society like India where almost every aspect of life is governed by culture and religion, it becomes impossible even to imagine about gay culture. Poet's adamant and rebellious behaviour towards society is depicted in the poem, "Secunderabad sans Light" as,

In this dark city I am the modern
my ancestors made. Unlike us
they lived and died without fuss. (*Collected Works* 37)

In this stanza poet regards the society as "dark city" i.e., backward or ignorant and himself a "modern". For him the gay culture is the symbol of modernity. In a challenging way he says that the ancestors have lived and died without having any new idea to live life according to one's own perspective. As is said earlier that culture, tradition and religion have their deep influence on society. In this context in the scripture *Quran*, it is said that "How can you commit an abomination such as no one in the world has ever done before you? You lust after men rather than woman, You transgress all bounds" (Khan 117). Since ancient times, Indian society is very much heterosexual, therefore the sexual matters in context of expression and preference are considered private. But here poet, without any concern of society and privacy of his relations, creates a flutter around him. But his partners, as is said earlier, have not revealed their identity as same sex lovers. They are living double lives, one as a heterosexual by being married to conform their status in the society and second as homosexual to quench their instinct secretly. This pathetic status of his lovers makes him feel that his life is now like a dream which can end at any time. Their double life and fear of separation because of social constraint find expression in the poem, "Romeo Speak". In their apprehension and dilemma one of the lover asks,

...When will I be caught
In the morning's flush naked
With her on a terrace? I can hear
Nightingales singing in graveyards
And at my wedding my buddy will dance
With swords. (*Collected Works* 54)

In this stanza, the same sex lover because of his double life is in fear of society and thinks that if he is caught "naked/With her" then his life will be in mess. It is indicated when he says that he hears "Nightingales singing in graveyards" and along with it saw his "buddy" i.e., male lover dancing "with swords" which is symbolic of threat for his love. This dilemma in the life of same gender lovers predicts that their love and happiness will go to graveyard i.e., destined to doom.

They have enjoyed their love and relations till now, which both neither have acceptance nor any name in society. No one can survive by contradicting social norms because "Heterosexism is widely prevalent in India ... That is to say, a biological born

male can only be sexually attracted to a biologically born female, and vice-versa” (Chakraborty 5). Resultantly, it is expected in the society that sexual attraction must be gender specific never gender neutral. Because of these social norms, the circumstances have turned against these lovers. Resultantly, the fear of separation has engulfed their respective lives. Merchant has realised the fact that his lover cannot face the society’s constraints therefore wants to end the relation. This sorrowful situation finds expression in the poem, “Death Poem in Three Parts” here poet reveals that my lover, “Like a slave struggling to be free/he appears bound in bed to me” (*Collected Works* 67). This helplessness of lover wrenches the heart of poet and it makes him to feel that everything in his life has gone to pieces. The title of the poem itself symbolises the slow and steady death of their love. The situation becomes more pathetic and heart rending when in “Poem” poet, “...step/out on a street unlit/except for sighs/and neighbour’s eyes” (*Collected Works* 75) he finds nothing. Only “sighs” are left in the life of homosexual lovers. The prying “neighbour’s eyes” are symbolic of society who is trying to single out and strangle their love. There are numerous instances when queer people come out in public to claim, “...their stature as sexual minorities in the society, voicing for the recognition of lives and fighting to share equal rights with heterosexual people” (Ravindran 49-50). In social context the problem is that the homosexuals go against while heterosexuals conform with prevalent cultural and social norms. Therefore, the followers of gay culture are kept at the margins of the society. They find themselves in constraints and blame society for its rigidity in context of their love. Even after these contradictions, Merchant still tries to convince his lover so that he can save his love. Therefore, in the poem “Welcome” poet affirms that,

A marriage is a thing of rings
Give me your hand
For I will ring it
...
Then throw away all rings (*Selected Poems* 107)

Symbolically, poet is trying to convince his lover by saying that society accepts the traditional marriages based on “rings” i.e., social tradition and rituals only. So, he wants to ring his lover to gain social acceptance for their love and relations. But in the last line of the stanza like a rebel, poet manifests that after social conformity they will “throw away all rings”. The social rejection and upon it, poet’s desire to gull and challenge society will surely cost him his love and peace of mind. It is because no one can survive at the cost of society’s norms, rituals and traditions therefore it is not society but poet’s own behaviour which is going against his own love and lovers. The love can never survive in constraints, suppression and secrecy. Even in such scary circumstances poet gives a call to his love in the poem, “If You Love Me/Be Wholly Yourself”. Here poet states that,

Come to me
...
Touch me, make me human
And though men will insult
As men must
Come out and love (*Selected Poems* 94)

In these lines poet is asking his lover to “come out and love” him because this touch of love, can make him “human” i.e., rejuvenate his soul. Although “men will insult” is symbolic of their love’s social mockery and rejection but still poet is adamant in his will.

At his call lover comes back to him but ironically just to aggravate his pain. This painful situation finds expression in the poem, “Four Poems of Illumination” where poet finally realises that “He comes to leave” (*My Sunset Marriage* 123) only. The increasing interference and restrictions of the society has shattered the love and lives of gay lovers. This forbidden love is now on the verge of collapse. Further, poet’s estrangement from his life, love and lovers find expression in the poem “Today Morning I Discovered”. Here poet finds that,

One friend left the town
Another I have left
A third is alone because the first left
I tell all I’ll make amends (*Selected Poems* 109)

Poet’s rebellious attitude towards society finally brings him to the state of complete loneliness and despair. Here he wants to “make amends” but it is too late because all his lovers either have left or leaving him one by one. This shock of separation throws poet in to the lap of hopelessness and delirium. He feels that the world is not a good place to live because love, which is an innate gift of God is denied to him and other homosexuals. In want of love, poet does not want to live anymore, so in the poem, “Winter Poem” states that,

Afraid to live
I wrote love letters to life
Life did not reply
Afraid to die
I wrote love letters to death
Death did not reply
One day one winter’s day
My corpse will hang Against a purple sky
In my death life thrashes her thighs (*Sufiana Poems* 120)

The poet is in dilemma about his life and death because both have denied to embrace him in their respective cloaks. He finally makes it evident that neither life nor death will be the cause of his death rather it will be the separation from his lovers. Finally, at his death only the “life” symbolic of his love, will thrash her thighs.

Ultimately, poet himself becomes the cause of his own sorrows and sufferings because he has kept the social norms at stake for his forbidden love. His defiance of social codes finally brings him to despair and pangs of separation for remaining life. Another reason behind non-acceptance of homosexual relations is that Indian society is governed by cultural, traditional and religious values and since time immemorial is rooted in heterosexual culture and relations therefore there remains not even a bleak chance to imagine about such relations. But still, homosexuals are struggling for their identities and a respectable status in the society. This is what Merchant is trying to do through his poetry and poetic rebellion.

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