

Gandhian Ideas and Sexuality: A Study of *Dhimuane Vibha* by Jayantee Dalal

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ABSTRACT

The notion of sexuality takes discursive turn in twentieth century as it marks the shift from a 'repressive' age about notions of desire and sexuality to Foucauldian notion of sexuality as self as the subject of desire. Nevertheless, this western notion is problematic in terms of Indian context as Mukherjee mentions how the Indian novels capture the clashes between 'self-determination of the individual and the intransigence of contemporary social reality'. However, Uday Kumar problematizes Mukherjee's argument by posing the idea of individualism as something that shifts from outer to inner within literature. The twentieth century is also significant in terms of Gandhi's influential entry into the Indian political sphere and influenced many areas like religion, economy, society, education and literature is one of the prominent areas among them. Gujarati literature during 1920s to 40s known as Gandhiyug reflects some of the Gandhian ideas such as eradication of untouchability, upliftment of villages, national spirit, peace, non-violence, truth, vishwamanvi (universal humanity) and vishwabandhutva (universal brotherhood). Taking into consideration the above arguments, the present paper attempts to study a Gujarati novel *Dhimuane Vibha* (1943) written by Jayantee Dalal (1909-1970) in order to examine how this novel deals with the notion of sexuality. Further, it discusses how the novel deals with Gandhian thoughts on sexuality especially in terms of its women characters. Overall, the paper attempts to analyse the novel in the context of Gandhi's ideas about gender and sexuality.

Keywords: Sexuality, gender, Gandhian ideas, femininity, embourgeoisment

The present paper undertakes a study of a Gujarati novel *Dhimuane Vibha* (1943) by Jayantee Dalal (1909-1970) in order to examine how this novel deals with the notion of sexuality. Here it is important to note that this novel was a trend breaking novel, the first of its kind written in the form of psychological novels in Gujarati Literature (Trivedi 1994). This celebration of the novel as a psychological novel highlights the idea of interiority connected to Foucault's description of modern sexuality. Hence, my understanding of the term sexuality comes from Foucauldian notion of sexuality.

Foucault explains that he uses the term "sexuality," neither to refer to "sex" nor "sexual practice" but the establishment of the idea in the western society that the self would be understood as 'subject of desire' (Foucault 1985). Elaborating this idea, he explains that such an understanding of the individual subject makes it possible to see that instead of a much accepted view of the 19th century as a "repressive" age about notions of desire and sexuality, there was actually an increase in the consideration of sexuality (Foucault 1985). This consideration is most apparent in the "discourse" about sexuality, and this discourse spans across institutions and genres of speech and writing. As Foucault explains, the dominant idea in the discourse of sexuality is the statement of the self as the "subject of desire" (Foucault 1985). Thus, by the term sexuality what Foucault means is, "...the practices by which individuals were led to focus their attention on themselves, to decipher, recognize, and acknowledge themselves as subjects of desire,..." (Foucault 1985).

Moreover, it is important to refer to Stoler here who elaborates Foucault's ideas in her book *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*. Drawing from Foucauldian ideas about sexuality not as the biological instinct or controlling the external realm by power, she explores the connection between this notion of sexuality and bourgeois class. Stoler draws attention to the famous four examples of deployment of sexuality given by

Foucault and how they stand for Europe's bourgeois society, as she contends: "The discursive and practical field in which nineteenth century bourgeois sexuality emerged was situated on an imperial landscape..." (1995). Correspondingly, Halperin's article 'Forgetting Foucault: Acts, Identities, and the History of Sexuality' has an important observation regarding the notion of sexuality where he discusses how sexuality and individualism are in correlation in the context of embourgeoisment. He argues:

With the rise of industrialization, the change was twofold. The social structure shifts from traditional and hierarchical to individualist and modern and inside this individual society, the personal life of bourgeois including "sexual roles, sexual object-choices, sexual categories, sexual behaviours, and sexual identities" also get changed. (Halperin 1998)

He further says that "Sex takes on new social and individual functions, and it assumes a new importance in defining and normalizing the modern self" (Halperin 1998: 96). Thus, Stoler and Halperin's arguments provide insights into how the notion of sexuality and individualism got shaped with the development of embourgeoisment.

However, this western concept of sexuality which denotes the individual as a desired and desiring subject is problematic in the Indian context as Meenakshi Mukherjee argues that in the hierarchical Indian social settings the emotional and mature love between two individuals is not possible as marriage is decided by the family and occurs at a very early age, even before puberty. The 'romantic' notion of love embedded in Western literature becomes 'illicit' in the Indian contexts. Discussing the dilemma of Indian novelists, Mukherjee (1985) states: "Indian novelists attempt to reconcile the demands of the novel with its emphasis on the self-determination of the individual and the intransigence of contemporary social reality." Uday Kumar problematizes Mukherjee's argument by posing the idea of individualism as something that shifts from outer to inner within literature (Kumar 1997: 270). Analysing the story from an autobiography of C. Kesavan, Uday Kumar in his essay 'Self, body and inner sense:

Some Reflections on Sree Narayana Guru and Kumaran Asan' focuses the incident where Kesvan depicts the incident of her mother in law who does not wear a blouse as a part of cultural conventions and when she wishes to wear it in the context of colonial modernity, she is reprimanded by her mother-in-law.

Kumar explains through this example how the act of wearing a blouse becomes a marker of desire and passion as she says, "it tickles me" (Kumar 1997). Her desire to wear a blouse and look sexually attractive in front of her husband makes the idea clear the locus of desire shifts from the body to the inner sense and leads to the production of a modern individualized desiring subject. In the words of Kumar, this marks the "internalizing of the erotic" (Kumar 1997).

The above arguments referring to desiring subject and sexuality are central to the discussion of the novel *Dhimuane Vibha* in present paper as the novel raises the question of an individual's desire via the major characters Dhimant and Vibha. This novel published in 1943 belongs to the *Gandhiyug* in Gujarati Literature which is marked by the Gandhian ideas (Trivedi 1994). Scholars like Bhulabhai Patel, Kaka Kalelkar and Hiraben Pathak consider the period from 1920 to 1940 as *Gandhiyug* which is the period of engagement with issues and aspects of Indian society of that time such as the eradication of untouchability, uplift of village, patriotism, peace, non-violence, truth, *vishwamanvi* and *vishwabandhutva* and the literature revolve around such themes (Trivedi 1994).

The paper focuses the negotiation of the novel *Dhimuane Vibha* in terms of how on the one hand, Gandhian ideas embedded in the novel place it in opposition to bourgeois ideology and simultaneously on the other hand, it engages with the bourgeois notion of production of the modern desiring subjects through the character of Dhimant and Vibha. Before analysing how the novel problematizes the concept of sexuality, the novel would be briefly summarised.

The novel, which is narrated from Dhimant's first person point of view, is not the straightforward narrative of scenario of Quit India Movement but one which is informed by the insights into Dhimant's personal life by him only. Narrator Dhimant or

kanoon to sahidishoshan no hatu. [The prisoners of War were to stay there....but the English had to treat them as per the international law. We were mere slaves of an enslaved country. The law meant for us was monarchic in nature.] (Dalal 1943: 124).

Furthermore, as a "staunch satyagrahi" (Dalal 1943: 21) Dhimant's life style inside and outside the jail, also depicts how Gandhian ideas are embedded in his life. For example, when Dhimant prepares to go to the jail, Vibha purchases all *swadeshi* items for Dhimant because he uses only *swadeshi* according to Gandhi's recommendation (p. 74).

This is how, the novel exhibits influence of Gandhian ideas and places them against bourgeois ideas. However, at the same time, the novel also exhibits the bourgeois notion of individual's desire. Here I would like to mention that my understanding of alliance between bourgeois ideas and individual's desire comes from 'Forgetting Foucault: Acts, Identities, and the History of Sexuality'. He observes that with the rise of industrialization, the change was twofold. The social structure shifts from traditional and hierarchical to individualist and modern and inside this individual society, the personal life of the bourgeois including "sexual roles, sexual object-choices, sexual categories, sexual behaviours, and sexual identities" also gets changed. As Halperin argues, "Sex takes on new social and individual functions, and it assumes a new importance in defining and normalizing the modern self" (Halperin 1998).

The novel is very important as it exhibits the individual's sexuality through its protagonists. The individual desires of Dhimu and Vibha, two prominent characters of the novel are expressed by the narrator only. As the novel is written using the first person narrative, the picture of Vibha emerges through Dhimant, who is the first person narrator in the novel. Throughout the novel, the character of Vibha is not depicted through the description of her body but by her character traits which show the shift of locus of desire of Dhimant for Vibha from body to the inner sense. For e.g. when she expresses her wish of joining the Satyagrah movement, Dhimu notices her style of speaking as he says: "*Vibhanibolvanirit ma ajabmadhryahatu*" [Vibha's manner of speaking was full of sweetness] (Dalal 1943: 26).

It is important to note that Dhimant's lexicon which creates Vibha's picture in front of the readers is full of the various character traits of her. For example, he mentions as well as appreciates different qualities of Vibha such as her disposition, cleverness and her ability to understand the difference between good and bad. Many incidents in the novel where Dhimant delineates her character is not through the description of her outer appearance but that of her feelings and desires. For instance, the episode depicting intimacy between Dhimant and Vibha one day before Dhimant goes to a jail concentrates on Vibha's facial expressions such as a "pure smile" on her face and closing her eyes as if "veiling her dreams." Her desire which is first articulated by her gaze and later on converted into the speech when she states clearly to Dhimant who plans to go to jail by undertaking the Satyagrah, "*tarasantannimatabanvanusaubagya to huvanchhuchhu*" [I desire to be a mother of your child] (Dalal 1943: 62). When he tries to avoid Vibha's marriage proposal before going to the jail, he notices Vibha's reaction as he marks: "*Vibhakhinnbanihati. Mansikvrutionadaman eenekadachaakli, l aparvah, betmabanavihati...*" [Vibha was sad. The suppression of her mental desires had made her impatient, careless and unconcerned] (Dalal 1943: 63). Furthermore, when she comes to see him on the railway platform, her desirous gaze at the pair of a mother and a child is recounted by Dhimantas: "*Ketketlubharyuhatu e najar ma! Manavhaiyaejanyahashe e sarvabhavemniakhandtajalvi ne tyadokatahata*". [That gaze was full of desire! All the emotions ever felt by human hearts were piping there in their entirety.] (Dalal 1943: 119). When Vibha visits Dhimant during his internment period, her desire is explicit in her words: "*Mannnathimantu Dhimu, jivangumavididhajevulagechhe*" [I cannot convince my heart. Dhimu, I feel as if I have lost my life.] (Dalal 1943: 114).

The above incidents mark the development in the character of Vibha as a desiring subject as they articulate the idea that the notion of sexuality within this novel shifts its locus to use Kumar's words "from the body to the inner sense" (Kumar 1997). Moreover, Dhimant a dissonant self-narrator also emerges as a desiring subject in the novel. In the beginning of the novel, his

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desire for Vibha is reflected in his utterance: "ekek vichar ne chhede Vibha zabukti: kyarekeni prafullmochha, Vibhamarajivan ma lagtuhatu?" [Vibha's memory fleshed at every thought: sometimes her happy face and sometimes the picture of her disparity. Was Vibha so much a part of my life that I felt so lonely today?] (Dalal 1943: 106). Though he tries to repress his feelings for Vibha by deciding not to look in the direction where she sits during the lecture, he fails in doing so as he confesses, "ignoring the mind, the gaze reached there" (p. 7). "Hitherto Vibha, who appeared pale, delicate and playful in the meeting, appeared today, grave and rosy like a dawn cloud" (p. 12). These are some of the examples which unfolds Dhimant's attraction for Vibha and his interest in Vibha as despite of his efforts to control his desire, he not only observes Vibha in the lectures but also is aware of her appearance and even of her skin tone. Dhimant's desire for Vibha becomes clear with his confession: "My heart also craved for a companion for a life time. Vibha had everything that I was looking for" (p. 75).

Thus, all the above examples are significant as the technique of first person narration itself plays a significant role in emphasising the individual desire of Dhimant as well as Vibha and in producing interiority. Both the characters emerge as a modern individuated desirous subjects as part of embourgeoisment while at the same time, the novel also proclaims influence of Gandhian ideas such as Satyagrah and Swadeshi movement which are against embourgeoisment.

Furthermore, this novel problematizes the norms of masculinity and femininity which are made available through Gandhian notion of sexuality. Here I will briefly explain Gandhi's ideas of femininity and show how the novel questions these notions. Sujata Patel in her article 'Construction and Reconstruction of Woman in Gandhi' analyses Gandhi's belief and ideas about women and their role in the society. Gandhi not only differentiates woman from man biologically but also attributes the qualities like self-reliance, patience, purity and a capacity to undergo suffering to women (Patel 1998). Bhikhu Parekh poses the argument that Gandhi's personal experience

makes him to think of female sexuality in particular way that is calm and not powerful and aggressive as that of male (Parekh 1989). Moreover, Dipesh Chakraborty also argues in the essay 'Khadi and the Political Man' that Gandhi considers female sexuality as passive whereas relates the attribute of aggression to male lust (Chakraborty 2002). However, the character of Vibha in the novel does not interact with Gandhian model of femininity. She does not emerge as a passive and calm woman but as an active one who powerfully articulates her desire in front of Dhimant. The woman who declares to be the mother of Dhimant's child as already discussed earlier is the one who proposes Dhimant for the marriage and at that time Dhimu notices the firmness in her voice which he finds to be lacking in him as he says: "*Mari uttej Nathikampitthataavajnisarkhamni ma enoavajsvasthanejindginikadvimithashthisabhar mane lagyo*" [Her voice was firm and seemed as if filled with bitter sweetness of life in comparison to my voice which was trembling out of excitement.] (Dalal 1943: 11).

Moreover, the novel through the character of Vibha subverts the Gandhian notion which confines the man as a bread winner and woman as a nurturer at home. In response to Dhimant's fear of shouldering financial responsibility of conjugal life, Vibha says: "*Lagnajivanniaarthikjavabdari no tamarevicharkarvano j nathi. Ani akhiyejawabdari mare mathe j hoolevanichhu.*" [You need not worry about the financial responsibility followed by our marriage. I will take it entirely upon myself..."] (Dalal 1943: 13). In this way, the character of Vibha, does not conform to the notion of femininity available through Gandhian notion of sexuality.

To conclude, the paper studies how the novel *Dhimuane Vibha* marks the influence of some of Gandhian ideas which are against embourgeoisement and simultaneously also establishes the bourgeois notion of the production of modern, individualised desiring subjects through the major characters of the novel, Dhimant and Vibha. Moreover, it is interesting to note that how the novel endorses major Gandhian ideas such as nonviolence and Satyagrah via Dhimant's character and on the other hand, the same novel problematizes Gandhian notion of femininity by exhibiting Vibha as a woman who does not confirm to that notion.

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