



Research Paper

## Queer Representations in Indian Dalit Art works breaking Boundaries (Poetry, Cinema and Paintings)

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*“Desire is not always or only about sex. Sexual intercourse does not exhaust desire because our desire always exceeds the physical acts of sex(Menon)”*

Prof. Madhavi Menon

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**Abstract** - The following proposal will work on presenting an analysis of various Indian Art works such as “Mandakini Patil: A Young Prostitute” a poem by Namdeo Dhasal, Firea movie by Deepa Mehta and The Ganja-Mahua Myth a painting by Venkat Raman Singh Shyam on the basis of connotations of “Desire” presented by Professor Madhavi Menon in her text called *Infinite Variety: A History of Desire in India*. The presented work will try to analyze the various forms of Desire presented in these works and the way they break all the boundaries of class, caste, gender and sometimes even ethnicity. The text will actively try to demonstrate how the relationships presented in the text are oppressed by the Indian social structures in their own ways but Desire as an emotion in the form of Art allows them to “escape control”.

### Key words

Desire, Caste, Gender, Class, Language

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### Research Questions

What is the state of Dalit Queer literature in India and how does the representation work?

What allows Desire to “escape control” and resemble with Art?

What are the social forms of controlling one’s individuality?

What are the multiple dimensions of Desire when it comes to caste, class and gender?

### Methodology

Methodology used in the presented work shall be somewhere close to content analysis. The information used in the paper shall be purely text based provided by various scholars and theorists. The primary source in dealing with the questions revolving around Desire shall be *Infinite variety: A History of Desire in India* by Prof. Madhavi Menon.

## I. Introduction

It is a truth undeniable that Menon also proposes in the first chapter of her book, “[India]... is a country that is deeply homophillic even as it is often superficially homophobic(Menon 10)”. This is to propose before the analysis and examination that the subject understands Homoeroticism in the sense of presence of “Desire”. Any character, story, plot, life that includes the role of desire can be understood as homophillic as desire is what helps minorities (be it sexual, physical, caste, class or gender) to breakthrough social barriers. Since desire has already been pronounced as something that “always exceeds the physical acts of sex(Menon)”, it can further be stretched to be understood as something that is all pervasive and quintessential to any basic human emotion. In order to support this argument, think of any human being that lies in the material realm, there is a constant need to exceed and achieve the former. Let us take for instance the Theory of Evolution by Darwin that states the “survival of fittest(Darwin)”; what is it that allows and provides one with power to defeat the other? The presence of desire to be “the fittest”.

Another instance could be taken from a minority group where every action performed by them is an effort to achieve recognition and fight against the social structure. This need to reach certain recognition is also

governed by Desire. Therefore if one is to encapsulate desire in words, it will not only be difficult rather against the basic idea of its understanding itself since “Desire is something that escapes control(Menon)” and need not be defined rather understood in multiple dimensions and possibilities.

### **Review of Literature**

*Criminal Love? Queer Theory, Culture and Politics in India-* R. Raj Rao writes about the gender dynamics and the impacts of Culture and Politics in India. The text highlights the life of Queer people’s lived reality against the cultural and political norms and the theories set by them. The particular work only presents the struggle of Queer community against social structures but seems unsuccessful in presenting what provides them with power to fight against them.

*Gender, Sex and Sexuality(2013)-* Gerda Siann has presented a deep evaluation of the three entities that are primarily governed by and distinguished by an entity called Desire. “Gender” can be defined as a spectrum that offers multiple options for a human being to express themselves, “Sex” can be defined as the biological order one is assigned at the birth and “Sexuality” is a complex phenomenon that one chooses to express. Sexuality can be understood as the display of an amalgam of Gender and Sex that is primarily affected by social structures. This work gives a deep insight in the world of Desire as the definition of these important terms seem productive in the world of Queer literature but does not pluralize the use of it.

‘Caste, Life narratives, Visual representation and Protected Ignorance’(2017)- The mentioned essay by Y.S. Alone featured in the book called *Caste and Life Narratives* by Charu Gupta gives a deep insight into the use of language and how language intermingles with Desire to “encompass all possible expressive means and capacities”.

*Gender and Caste(2003)-* Susie Tharu in her essay “The Impossible Subject:Caste and Gendered Body” explains the friction that lies between these two social understandings that humans are placed in. This text is important as it highlights the struggles of Dalit Queer representation in literary culture. The text also examines how the two entities work in opposition to each other in the patriarchal social order. The mention of this literary texts shall be fruitful as it highlights the important facts revolving around the impossibilities of the subject of Caste and Gender.

### **Relevance**

The presented work will try to examine and create parallels between already established in-depth examinations of Art representations and Queer theories. The deliberate intention is to present Desire (a Queer idea of emotion) as a power to breakthrough and fight against the norms of Gender structure, Caste and Class Structure etc. There lies a deliberate attempt to stand against the alienation of Queer community as they are also governed by a common principle called Desire.

### **Multiple faces of Desire in Different Forms of Art**

The understanding of Sex, Sexuality and Desire for the society lies somewhere in the middle of the understanding of liberals and the understanding of law. Liberals understand sex, sexuality and Desire as an emotion that breakthrough all the obstacles and enters into the realm of Gender fluidity where as Law gives it a form of rigidity that can only be understood inside boundaries. The following section of work shall provide multiple examples where Desire and its ability to morph into multiple emotions can be highlighted.

The given study of the presence of Desire in its multiple possibilities can best be understood in the form of Art where Art can be seen in the form of Poetry, Cinema or Painting. The first subject under the examination can be the poem by NamdeoDhasal called “MandakiniPatil: A Young Prostitute” in which Desire allows the subject to cross the boundaries of Class structure. The subject of the poem is a young prostitute the poet intends to present a “collage” of. The subject of the poem(Mandakini) comes from lower class. The poet intends to use “Desire” as a power to change into the other. The evidence for the particular circumstance comes from the lines,

“your hair, your clothes, your nails, your breasts  
I feel as my own...(Dhasal)”

Where, the subject takes the form of other and vice versa. The ability to morph into the body of other is induced by this strong catalyst called Desire. Keeping in mind the possible understanding of Desire according to Menon which follows as

“It exists across what we now classify as sexual identities, subjects and objects, human and non-human, historical periods, geographical sites, street foods, and religious texts. Desire is surprising: it can strike us at moments when we least expect it to. Desire travels: it cannot be contained within strict boundaries. Desire is multiple: it resists being pigeonholed into this or that thing. But across its multiple definitions, desire is related to a shiver of pleasure, a shock of pain, an intensity of recognition.”(16-17(Menon))

Another crucial piece of art that highlights the implication is a painting from *The Ganja-Mahua Chronicles* presented by Navayana. A similar idea is formed in the *Ganja-Mahua* chronicles where the interchangeability of partners sharing Desire can be highlighted.

“I wrap your name in mine  
I’m mixing weed with wine  
I’m the dot, you’re the line  
I’m the name, you’re the sign”(168(Shyam))



*Ganja-Mahua myth*, Gond art by Venkat Raman Singh Shyam, Navayana, 2017

The painting depicts two plants of different Genus and families called Ganja and Mahua which should not be drunk together. The painting serves as an anthropomorphic representation of both the plants which are presented as rebirth of two lovers from different castes (Brahmin girl and Chamar boy). The painting appeared as a reference to the graphic book named *Ganja- MahuaChronicles* that depicts the struggle of Gond art community and caste struggle that runs between the communities. “In contrast to superhero comic books, graphic novels are more serious, often[not necessarily]non-fiction, full-length, sequentialart novels that explore the issues of race, social justice, global conflict and war with intelligence and humor”(Christensen227). According to Ruth Vanita, “In seven verses(saptapadi) central to the Vedic marriageritual nowhere mention Procreation” but, if procreation is not what Desire is about, What is it about? It certainly possesses the ability of “recreation”. Recreation of one’s identity i.e. physically, spiritually, emotionally etc. In case of the *Ganja Mahua Myth* it is visible as there lies a recreation of Desire for your loved one outside the Caste structure. The folklore of both the characters taking rebirth in order to follow up their Desire is evident of its ability to Recreate and mould into multiple forms and lives.

Third art piece that one can make the object of Desire analysis is a 1996 film called *Fire* by Deepa Mehta starring ShabanaAzmi and Nandita Das. It is the story of two lesbian women whose Desire for each other flourishes when their husbands choose celibacy and mistresses over their wives. The story ends with both the women meeting at an abandoned place after one of them almost dies in a house fire. The fire here symbolizes the social structure of gender where two women are not supposed to fall in love with each other and are restricted to stay together. There is a section in the film where Sita(Nandita Das) pronounces to her lover/beloved Radha(ShabanaAzmi), “There is no word in our language to describe what we are or what we feel for each other(Dasgupta 656) though it speaks in the film through what Vicinus Martha calls it “metaphoric language of the family”. This in its most probable sense could be understood as Desire, a fluid idea that does not fit into Gender social structure<sup>1</sup> rather escapes control and flourishes outside these rigid boundaries.

In order to mention what has been brought forth so far, the idea of Desire is something that fails to be recognized in one single way. The representation of it also depends on the counterforce it is supposed to be contained by. The multiple social structures that intend to withhold Desire and provide it with frames of rigidity may be seen as the counterforces. Where in the first art piece it’s the interchangeability of bodies that allows it to move across the Class structure, in second art piece i.e. *Ganja Mahua* myth painting it’s the anthropomorphic

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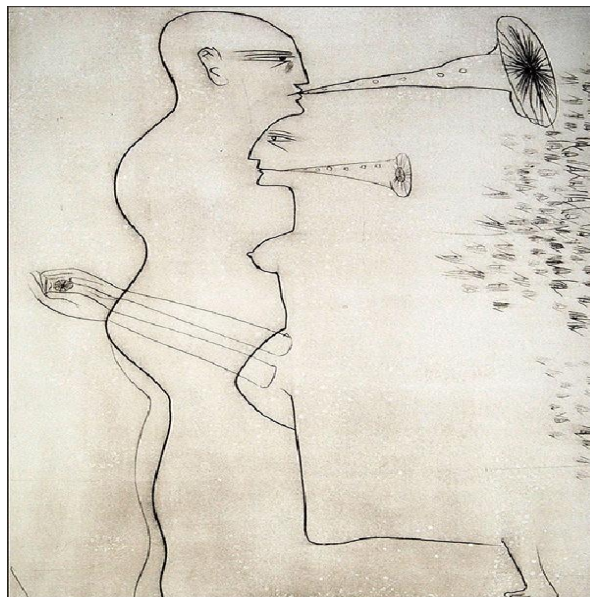
<sup>1</sup>Gender Social structure- The Rigid Structure provided by society that only allows heteronormative reproductive relations where only two people of opposite sex can indulge in sexual activities.

ability that allows them to portray their Desire for each other against Caste structure, thirdly it's the idea of Desire against gender structure.

### **Social Structures as Obstacles of Desire**

In her book's introduction, Menon proposes an idea while talking about India, "This is a country that is deeply homophillic even as it is superficially homophobic (Menon 10)". Forms of male and female homo-sociality sanctioned by Indian culture make homoeroticism visually and spatially difficult to isolate" (Choudhury) This needs to be pronounced hereby before presenting supporting arguments that "homophillic" here stands for a category that allows the free flow of Desire in Social Structures and not only as a Queer term that highlights the community. At this juncture one could raise the question of where does exactly homophobia lie and how is it maintained throughout the ages? Desire is repeatedly presented in Menon's work as that which goes against the ideas of Caste, Class and Gender structure. Desire is a multi-dimensional free flowing idea that possesses the ability similar to that of water that can take any shape and form. India is a superficially Homophobic country that restricts homoerotic, inter-caste, inter-class relationships but historical evidences provide the reality to be against it. "In ancient and medieval India, Krishna and Arjun from the great epic *Mahabharata* were often referred to as 'two Krishnas'" (Kidwai, Same Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature) indicating a bond of friendship that goes beyond marriage and procreation, and is socially accepted and admired as well. This explains, to a certain extent, the idea of hypocritical understanding of Desire in India where at one point its piety is admired and on the other side, it is restricted for its ability to breakthrough. In this particular section, similar parallels have been created where one is accepted and the other is restricted thus, highlighting the hypocrisy of Indian understanding of Desire. It is this hypocritical nature of Social structures where each one structure binds with the other in order to form a rigid impenetrable layer.

The following part of the paper shall try to present various obstacles that Desire is supposed to fight in order to flourish. If Social structures provide various obstacles then Desire has its own way of fighting it through various art forms such as Language, Paintings, sketches, films etc. Some of the examples include a painting by Savi Sawarkar called *Freedom to Devadasi* where Devadasi<sup>2</sup> is trying to escape the embrace of a Brahmin representing what Michael Tartakov calls, "Brahmanical hegemony (147)". In this dry point art, a Devadasi is visible that is escaping the holds of social structure that restricts her Desire. Her hands escaping the embrace of amanholding something that looks like flame or small spark, can be seen as a metaphorical representation of Desire that is escaping the holds of structurality.



*Freedom to Devadasi* by Savi Sawarkar. Dry point 54.5cm x 37cm, 2001

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<sup>2</sup>Devadasi in India is an age-old phenomenon that revolves around the idea of young women serving to Gods and Goddesses.

When it comes to fighting against the caste, class and gender structure, Desire uses various tools for its fulfillment, be it the “fractional desire (Menon Chapter 3)” where one takes the form of other or the Recreation where anthropomorphic representations take place. As Y.S. Alone puts it, “ Expressive urges are manifested through language where language need not only mean only an accepted notion of language, but may encompass all possible expressive means and capacities(145)”; and in case of artistic(painting) representations and visual representations, Tartakov pronounces, “Caste life narratives and their visual manifestations contradict such hegemonic thinking and positions(147)”. Thus, Desire has the ability to travel across phases of time, structures and life.

### **Desire and its resemblance with Life and Way of Art**

Desire as mentioned before, fights and travels against time and era through Art that Artists portray. Gond artists understand Art as a way of life and present the following understanding

“I’m just a dot, but every dot is a circle in itself, every dot is the end, every dot the beginning, every dot is the beginning of a word, of a letter of the alphabet, the beginning of every beginning, the beginning of nothing, of everything, the beginning of a stroke that ends in a painting, the beginning of a note that ends in a song, and every circle is the coming together of several dots, where every dot can think it is a circle, and that it began the circle and gathered other dots around it (GMC-42)”

Art travels through multiple ages and eras with the Artists, that practices it. Desire is an independent idea that can be seen as an amalgam of Emotion (of subject as well as the Artist’s) and Art that is presented. In simpler words, one can take the example of Ganja-Mahua myth by Mr. Shyam; the art highlights the struggle of Dalit lover with his Desire for upper caste beloved and the Artistic Desire to document it through his Art. The linear structure that connects Art, Artist and lore is the string of Desire where it takes multiple forms from “Desire to be with lover” to “Desire to portray the lore” to “Desire to present Art”. Desire is similar to what Borges’ history of Tlön presented in Ganja Mahua Chronicles argues i.e. “a vast and systematic fragment of the entire history of an unknown planet.”(GMC-39)

Similarly in case of Cinema and the film that here has been chosen, works as this Art that portrays life in each scene that is captured by the cinematographer. The film chooses scenes from the everyday world such as kitchen chores, picnic days but let us choose the poster of the film in order to be more precise. The poster depicts both the women again engaged in a daily household chore(drying clothes) and the colors of the clothing is similar to that of fire. Now, if one sees fire as the social construct that they escape at the end in order to be together, the cloth drying can be seen as the crucial scene as it depicts this presence of Desire against Gender structure of society.

Thus, if one tries to understand Art, Artist and the portrayal of Desire in it, one needs to understand it in the presence of life as the singular string that attaches all these ideas together. This means there is a pinch of life in all these ideas and the portrayal of it (be it through actions, emotions, language and words, motifs etc.) is what strengthens the artistic amalgam of emotion and Art called Desire.

## **II. Conclusion**

In order to go through and bring together ideas that have been mentioned so far, let us revisit it in parts where the Desire can be seen as abstract idea that never originated but already existed and was all pervasive like other human emotions. The way Prof. Menon portrays it, makes the understanding of it a little explicable, with her extensive knowledge of homoerotic and homosexual relationships in Indian History. The way this study takes the idea of this Queer emotion is by giving it names according to its functions and reciprocating abilities. The sheer idea of using three Art forms (Poetry, Cinema and Painting) is to show how quintessential this idea of Desire as an emotion is, but repeatedly fails to be recognized due to its free flowing and camouflaging abilities. The way it merges with other emotions to work against its counterforces as Social structures<sup>3</sup>. In order to find similarities between all three Art works that have been chosen, there is a similarity of fighting but the one thing that is making them fight against social structures is the emotion called Desire.

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<sup>3</sup>Social structures against Desire’s ability to breakthrough such as Gender structure, Caste structure, Class structure etc. and its ability to perform under these structures.

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