



CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S WRITING: QUEST FOR IDENTITY

A FEMINIST STUDY OF THE NOVEL AMU BY SHONALI BOSE

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ABSTRACT

Feminist literary theories are the collective conversations- often contradictory, sometimes even heated-of feminist readers concerning the meaning and practice of reading, the intersections of subject formations such as race, class, sexuality, and gender, and the work of literature. What does the feminist critic mean when she says “women”? Biologically female persons? Individuals who have been socialized as “feminine”? does that socialization vary when we understand women as always already raced, classed, and sexualized, and by contradictory processes, which introduce differences within every construct of identity, so that there is no singular women reader, or singular black woman reader, or singular white woman reader, or singular lesbian reader? Does the invocation of “women” announce simply that the category of gender is at work, conceptualized in an “intersectional” model that focuses on the interlocking (not parallel) constructions of race, gender, class, and sexuality, in an encounter in which each term is determined and determining? Or perhaps “women” signifies sexual differences as it is figured by psychoanalysis or the critique of phallogentrism which aligns femininity with the divided subject and invokes it to herald the ruin of any concept of identity or identity-based reading. The last possibility raises the question of whether the practice of a “feminine” reading that abandons the myths of identity can be restricted to readers who are gendered as women in their social roles.



Feminist literary theory has successfully intervened in literary studies as a whole, recasting once commonsensical understanding of genres, the canon, and the aesthetic. The common ground between feminist literary theory and contemporary theoretical problematics such as postcolonial, poststructuralism, postmodern and queer theory is also critical; in fact, this intersection is central to feminist theory's interdisciplinary reach.

The genre of novel perhaps whose understanding has been most radically reconfigured by feminist questions. "What feminism did to novel studies" recounts feminism's emergence as a force that reoriented 'novelistic' reading. Linda Anderson, a researcher in her essay "autobiography and the feminist subject" looks at a genre strongly related to the novel, yet implicated in a unique way in feminist practice beyond the bounds of the strictly literary. She traces the "almost symbiotic" relationship between feminism and autobiography, pointing to the crucial role that autobiographical writing played in feminism's development as a "privileged space for women to discover new forms of subjectivity". The complex trajectory of feminist theorizations of this autobiographical space, from a field of feminine difference to conception of autobiographical memories as "interpretive devices", ways of interrogating the 'truth' of theory, rather than personal confessions. This is what I find in Shonali Bose's writings-the powerful impact of feminist literary theory on critical thinking about autobiography. Bose also discloses the ways in which autobiography interrogated feminism and became "the site for major theoretical debates about the subject" as questions of identity, difference, and the role of the reader autobiography became increasingly complex.

Talking about, interpreting and understanding contemporary women's writing in a period that has been characterized as post-feminist, post-colonial and post-modern means considering the ways in which gender is inflected by space, place, ethnicity and religion. In other words, examining the ways in which gender as one component of identity is being somewhat transformed giving way to a more inclusive multicultural sensibility.

Feminist analysis of popular culture intensifies the debate over whether popular texts merely reflect society or act as part of the process of mediation in social life. The status of these texts as shared cultural reference points that make visible ideologies, discourses and values is a major topic of feminist analysis. The variety of issues and problems that comprise the

contemporary women's writing, the quest or search for identity seems to be the most seminal. A new awareness that has crept in this literature is that life is always suspended in precarious balance and that is where any form of survival or the exploration of oneself becomes doubly necessary. The identity crisis is deeply related to human alienation, isolation and estrangement. The feeling of the diasporic identity mixed with the feeling of loss of one's background is directly related to the loss of identity and one's established personality.

The identity syndrome has emerged as a major theme in Black American, African, West Indian literature, notably in the works of Richard Wright, Ellison, Baldwin, Achebe, Alex and many others.

Approaches and Applications: Gender Ideology In Popular Fiction & The Question Of Identity

Shonali Bose in "Amu", discusses the mechanisms by which textual representations reproduce gender ideology through the use of different conventions. "Amu" is the story of Kaju, a twenty-one year old Indian American woman who returns to India to visit her family and discover the place where she was born. The story takes a dark turn as Kaju stumbles against secrets and lies from her past. A horrifying genocide that took place twenty years ago turns out to hold the key to her mysterious origins. Kajori Roy (Kaju) adopted as an orphaned three-year old, her attempts to delve into her forgotten childhood throw up a number of intriguing questions: Who were her birth parents? How did they die? How did her adoptive mother find her, and why did they then emigrate to America? Woven around this compelling central narrative are a number of other stories that unfold the complexities of family relationships, explore the dilemmas of diasporic Indian identity, and portray the rich mosaic of life in contemporary urban India.

The Analysis Of Popular Culture: Images Of Women/Images For Women

For a text to become genuinely popular and have significant collective meaning in complex social contexts, its appeal needs to be heterogeneous. It cannot, therefore, simply interpellate a single subject position; it must be accessible to multiple cultural identities. Across historical

moments, femininity will be made to mean in different ways, and those shifting meanings are contested.

The feminist analysis of text and fiction as taken up by Joanne Hollows in her research revolves around two themes – “**Images of women**” and “**Images for women**”. The first one being concerned with how stereotypes are created and misrepresenting the realities of women’s lives and of social change, thus sustaining patriarchal images and values. The second approach is equally convinced of the direct effect of the media and text on its audiences, but introduces the concept of “**Women as images**”. In the novel *Amu*, the woman as images becomes quite clear and vivid. Kaju, the protagonist can be cited as a clear example of a split personality and shows her journey from a divided self to a unified, integrated self. This split in her personality heals only when she discovers, towards the end in the novel, her personal identity and heritage gets reunited with the primeval past.

“But for now, Kaju and Kabir walked down the railway line into the distance, away from the words of the news report. Gently, almost sleepily, a blue train came chugging down the track beside them. Its rhythm was musical, even comforting”. This rhythm and sound used to haunt and disturb Kaju initially which had become comforting with her identity revelation.

The last lines of the novel “*A little boy ran along the train, intently flying his red kite. Kabir asked him if they could borrow it. As the sun set and colours ceased to be distinct, the three of them ran along with the train. Above them, the kite bobbed and soared, almost dancing*”. These lines depict the protagonists search for wholeness which is now achieved.

Kaju’s mother Keya Roy represents the intellectual woman “an independent, complex, determined person” and a woman of “serious interests”.

Shonali Bose, a contemporary Indian writer born on June 3, 1965 in Kolkata is known for her film and novel by the same name “**Amu**” which explores the suppressed history of the genocidal attacks on Sikhs in Delhi in 1984 but more than this it deals with the quest for identity and related trauma. Shonali’s short narrative films *The Gendarme Is Here* and

Undocumented and feature-length documentary *Lifting The Veil* have screened in festivals and other venues throughout the world.

“Amu” is her feature film debut which she had written, produced and directed. Amu released in India in January 2005 receiving popular and critical acclaim. It then went on to premier at the Berlin and Toronto Film Festivals amongst many other international festivals. Bose has won 7 National and International awards for Amu including the FIPRESCI Critics Award, National Film Award for best feature film in English and Gollapudi Srinivas Award for best first time director. The book Amu based on the screenplay which was released simultaneously with the film making her the first Indian to do so.

In 2012, she co-wrote *Chittagong* directed by her former husband Bedabrata pain (now separated) which is about Chittagong armoury raid of 1930. Bose (writer, producer, director) came up this year (2014) with *Margarita, with a straw* starring Kalki Koechlin, as a girl with cerebral palsy was premiered at 2014 Toronto Film Festival and the script won the Best Script Award at the Sundance Festival Writer’s Lab.

Coming back to Amu, the core of the story is actually based on the real experiences of Shonali. It is a brave, courageous attempt to reveal what happened in 1984, when several thousand Sikhs were massacred in what was a sanctioned move, if not a co-ordinated effort.

The beautiful lines in the beginning of the novel unravel the whole theme,

“She used to just stand and mother she knew, the mother she loved, the mother who had formed her. And she would also think of another mother whom she had never met, whom she had no face or name for; a mother she yearned to know. Her birth mother”.

Bose has carried forward the story so eloquently that she certainly isn’t lacking confidence in her story at any point of time. There is one quiet moment between Kaju and Kabir where Bose allows the scene to unwind quietly, without any superfluous material or music (in film). It is a fine moment, a poignant and strong one.

“Kabir sat down and took her hand. “Amu” he said in his quietest tone, saying her first name like an endearment. The sunlight glittered on the steel Kara around Kaju’s wrist. She looked him full in the face, her gaze settling deeply into his. There was no need for words, nor for tears. Only silence. Their shoulders brushed and their fingers intertwined, but nothing was said”.

The technique of flashback sequences are beautifully used-like the music of Gurdwara coming from a distance, the clutching sound of the railway tracks and the whistling of the trains

As Kaju’s voyage of self discovery takes her from the mustard fields of rural India to the killing fields of Delhi, the mystery of her past is unraveled in a searing climax. So much information is contained within such a short story which is very interesting and engaging. We always embody in our multiple shifting consciousness a convergence of traditions, histories and cultures coming together in time. This conception of selfhood necessitates always locating the individual within the intersecting grids of class, gender, and racial identity in each geographical location.

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