



Ali Smith's Girl Meets Boy: Exploration of Homosexuality

Ramesh Prasad Adhikary

Assistant Professor, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu
M.M. Campus, Nepalgunj, Nepal

Corresponding Author: Dr. Ramesh Prasad Adhikary
Email: rameshadhikary29@gmail.com



Article Info

Article history:

Received 28 April 2020

Received in revised form 5
May 2020

Accepted 10 May 2020

Keywords:

Queer theory

Homosexuality

Heterosexuality

Gay

Lesbian

Abstract

The present research paper is the extensive analyses of Ali Smith's seminal novel Girl Meets Boy by applying Queer Theory as a tool. As a qualitative research, this paper is the study of queer behavior of characters of the fiction which questions over the established heterosexual social conceptions. The authoritative concept of heterosexual bond has been challenged with the idea of queerness or homosexual bond. The character Anthea and Robin cross the social life of heterosexuality and got the freedom physically and sexually in their lesbian love. As revolutionary characters, they question over the dominant narrative of heterosexuality and create a new test for readers. This fiction portrays the myth of sexual minorities in a new way. Their sexual behavior portrays shifting notion of sexuality because of awareness of gender biasness. It also proves that the identity is cultural construct and the characters have created distinct identity going against the so called socially established sexual behaviours.

Introduction

Ali Smith, a modern Scottish author, playwright, fiction writer and journalist who was born in 1962. She lives in Cambridge with her Sarah Wood. She won the "Whitbread Novel Award" for her popular and best seller novel *The Accidental* in 2005. Her novel *Girl Meets Boy* was published in 2007. She has crafted different texts like *The Seer* (2006), *The First Person* and *Other Stories* (2008) and *The Book Lover* (2008).

This research work is based on the homo-social behavior of her novel *Girl Meets Boy* (2007). It is her retelling of Ovid's tale of the girl-boy Iphis from his *Metamorphoses* (9.666-797). In it, Ali Smith tries to show the fluid gender roles as seen throughout *Girl Meets Boy*. The characters behave as either they are of "male" or "female" at the same time.

The issues of homophobia are presented by Ali Smith in the *Girl Meets Boy*. She also presents social responsibility a bit different feeling of falling in love. In the novel Ali tries to present that gays and lesbians are not only submissive, but they can have the life of their own with freedom of physicality and sexuality. They go against the heterosexist cultural and social norms through which they are considered inferior and lower status. And also they been have deprived and suffocated in the heterosexual established norms. Her major two characters Smith, Anthea and Robin revolt against heterosexist norms. They raise the rebellious voice about female infanticide and women inequality at workplace, wage discrimination, abortion of girl fetus, homosexual activity and same-sex marriage. They want to make equality between genders and want to gain political, economic and social equality in their personal lives.

In the plot of her novel, Ali Smith portrays the concept of the sex, sexuality and gender issue of her time. She defines culture and society in a new way; and posits her notion that gender is the concept of social construct which is made to link with the biological difference of sex. She also presents how society exploits them by making rigid social rules who don't fit to the made category. The gay men and lesbian are socially out cased and they are made to keep silent.

The objective of the study is to present how female characters of the *Girl Meets Boy* revolt against the heterosexual social authority and culture. Mainly, the female characters, Imogen, Anthea and Robin, have challenge the contemporary conservative male superiority and heterosexist society. So this study deconstructs the patriarchal norms and values of heterosexual culture of society. They challenge the society by involving in love, sex romance, sex and marriage with their same sex which is prohibited in the patriarchal society or in heterosexist society.

Literature Review

The novella has been interpreted and analyzed by different critics. It grabbed the attention of critics as having deviant issue of the society. Some of them analyzed the novel from inter-textual analysis with Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, some others have interpreted it with Marxist, socio-economic, cultural perspectives. It is a retelling of a myth from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. She was a famous gay Scottish novelist who openly writes about love, sex and gender from her own perspective. She has presented her real experiences of life taking the myth to confess her lesbian feelings. As her character who likes to marry with her homosexual partner in the novel, Smith also lives with her partner Sarah Wood, as it was a challenge to heterosexist society.

The novella *Girl Meets Boy* is about love and rebellion against established norms. It is related to sexuality queer people, especially of women. Queer is rejection sexual social norms. The critic Calorine (2012) says:

In Smith's hands, the story of the Greek lovers Iphis and Ianthe, who are brought together both because of, and in spite of, the sameness of their sex, jumps straight out of classical mythology. Nobody else in the series has managed to carry through the sense and timbre of the original work while at the same time energizing and making entirely necessary the original story. Let me tell you about when I was a girl, our grandfather says,' is *Girl Meets Boy's* opening line - and off we go. (Para 1)

Here the critic shows the Smith's idea of gender volatility which is merged identity within the intrapersonal sexuality. The novel is about the modern issues of the world of queer, quest for identity, and so on.

Another critic Stuart Kelly (2007), posits that the novella is about sexuality of gays and lesbians:

Girl Meets Boy is a joyful, experimental work. Smith deftly employs all kind of linguistic tricks to paint her characters. Imogen thinks almost entirely inside brackets when she is shocked by her sister's lesbianism, as she juggles causes, signs, anxieties and conflicting emotions - (There are so many words I don't know for what my little sister is), (Gay people are just the same as heterosexual people, except for the being gay, of course). (Para 5)

This quote shows that phallogocentric passion of the people can't be changed at once. It takes a time to be changed. The main protagonist of the novel Imogen cannot even think about the homosexuality openly in the beginning .

According to the critics of Kirkus (2007), the novella revolves with gender boundaries and raises the issues of gender sex and sexuality of gays and lesbians:

Robin is a girl, as was Iphis, the Cretan teenager who passed as a boy, fell in love with Ianthe, became betrothed to her but panicked over the question of satisfying her sexually after the wedding. [...]. For the other sister, boy (Paul, a colleague) meets girl (Imogen) after a trip which has revealed Pure's not-so-spotless ambitions for global domination. Paul first shows Imogen some new, bold, feminist graffiti, and then takes her to bed. (Para 2nd)

These lines show that the book deals with the issues of the gender, identity and humanity of people who are living in the age of twenty first century but they are repressed and dominated in the sense of the gender issue.

The poststructuralist queer theorists Judith Butler believes in the fluidity and instability of gender categories. Butler (1999) speaks against the social view on sex:

If the bounding, forming and deforming of sexed bodies is animated by a set of founding prohibitions, a set of enforced criteria of intelligibility, then we are not merely considering how bodies appear from the vantage point of a theoretical position or epistemic locate at a distance from bodies themselves. (55)

Here, she speaks against traditional view of the body and sex and she apparently stands in the side of changing nature of the body and sex.

By reviewing the various assumptions and interpretation of critics, the present researcher has applied the queer theory to analyze the novella in a different way. It is a unique method that tries to capture the issues of homosexuality; and the issue is untouched by the afro-mentioned critics.

Theoretical Framework: Queer Theory as a Tool

The novella *Girl Meets Boy* presents the burning issues of Queer, Lesbian and Gay which are socially excluded from the main-stream of learning. The characters of the fiction challenge the stereotypical images of phallogentric society. The whole text is about the homosexuality and marginalization of queer. The queer theorist, Judith Butler (1993) posits the idea about queer as, "the term "queer" emerges as an interpellation that raises the question of the status of force and opposition, of stability and variability". Again he says, "queering might signal an inquiry into (a) the formation of homosexuality." From this it is clear that queer theory expands its focus to encompass any kind of sexual activity or identity i.e. inequality between sex, gender and desire. It is related with bisexual, lesbian and gay subjects.

In her book *Critical Theory Today*, Tyson (2006) defines the queer theory, as it "is based on the insights of deconstruction and is relevant to issues of heterosexual identity as well as to issues of gay and lesbian sexual identity" (322). It means queer theory is to reform the concept heterosexuality and, to respect to homosexual behavior.

In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler (1999) argues, "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very, expressions that are said to be its results (33). She rejects the idea that those acts that identify a person as a woman reflect an internal, feminine essence. Rather social forces pressure us to behave either as men or as women, and the belief that there exists an internal feminine identity is then the result of those repeated behaviours. Butler is against distinction drawn by previous feminisms

between biological sex and socially constructed gender. She asks why we assume that material things (such as the body) are not subject to processes of social construction themselves.

The book, *Critical Theory Today* by Tyson (2006) makes the definition clear as:

For queer theory, categories of the sexuality cannot be defined by such oppositions as homosexual/heterosexual. Building on deconstruction's insights into human subjectivity (selfhood) as a fluid, fragment, dynamic collectivity of possible —selves, queer theory defines individual sexuality as a fluid, dynamic collectivity of possible sexualities. Our sexuality may be different at different times over the courses of our lives or even at different times over the course of a week because sexuality is a dynamic range of desire. (335)

In the context of the liberation of same sex marriage, some gay men rejected marriage as an institution; others wanted same-sex marriage legalized.

Poststructuralist queer theorist Judith Butler believes in the fluidity and instability of gender categories and suggests that we should discard gender categories altogether. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues against any set notions of a binary division of 'man' and 'woman' based on essential qualities and draws on the theories of Foucault to argue that humans are simply social products organized by societal discourses and power relations. She put a similar argument as in *Gender Trouble*, where she wrote, like Foucault, that, "power can neither be withdrawn nor refused, but only redeployed. Indeed, in my view, the normative focus for gay and lesbian practice ought to be on the subversive and parodic redeployment of power rather than on the impossible fantasy of its full-scale transcendence." (158)

Butler (1999) furthermore argues that the presence of power dynamics is not same as what the heterosexist think. She argues:

The presence of so-called heterosexual conventions within homosexual contexts as well as the proliferation of specifically gay discourses of sexual difference, as in the case of 'butch' and 'femme' as historical identities of sexual style, cannot be explained as chimerical representations of originally heterosexual identities. And either can they be understood as the pernicious insistence of heterosexist constructs within gay sexuality and identity. The repetition of heterosexual constructs within sexual cultures both gay and straight may well be the inevitable site of the denaturalization and mobilization of gender categories. The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy. (41)

Here, gender is an unstable category; that one becomes a gender through these discursive practices Butler terms 'performativity' in her text *Bodies that Matters* (1993). It means gender and sex are as the social construct through the performance and heterosexuality itself is not a natural category but rather a system built up by repeating over and over. Indeed, those acts must be repeated because the task is never fully complete; we never quite achieve success at being a man or a woman:

This 'being a man' and 'being a woman' are internally unstable affairs. They are always beset by ambivalence precisely because there is a cost in every identification, the loss of some other set of identifications, the forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses. (126)

Gender identity of Lesbian is always presented as monolithic and homogenous. But now, it seems gender equality and all have equal right. All norms, values and traditions are imposed for gay men and lesbian in society they but the marginalized people are raising their voice for equality.

Textual Analysis

In the fiction *Girl Meets Boy*, Smith presents her characters who dare to go against the heterosexual orthodoxy of their society, who have the homosexual feelings. This research presents the idea that how homosexual people are physically, politically, culturally, socially exploited because of rigid orthodoxy of heterosexist society. Since 1980's gays and lesbians are fighting against the discrimination but, is still marginalized and stigmatized in the society.

The two sisters of the novel *Anthea and Imogen* are the narrators were aware about the norms of sexuality. *Anthea*, twenty-one years old, tries to make her place in society and defining her social identity. She desires for freedom in the orthodox society. *Iphis* (*Imogen*) had to adopt the stereotypical female role of her mother from childhood, but had consciously rejected. The mother was a like with the nature of her sister *Anthea*. *Imogen* acts as the patriarchal man wants. She creates her identity as the expectations of men like her father. and internalized it and made the mould of her identity. She feels disgusting for her sister's act of homosexuality.

In the text, *Ali Smith* shows the ambiguities of gender. *Anthea* is a woman, but she continues her life living with the female character *Robin* by wedding. It indicates that she would be able to continue living her life with *Robin* as a 'male' despite her biological sex as female. To see it from a postmodern perspective, it subverts the traditional concept of sex, gender and sexuality. According to the traditional view of sex, it is categorized and judged as a sexual relationship, the sexual orientation of the two partners than the roles assumed in the text, the sex of same sex. The fiction wants to show the independency of females and free insight as males; they raise the voice against the suppression is the insight of this research. As *Ali Smith* raises the issues of millions of girls killed or aborted for not being boys in the patriarchal society. The female characters of the novel are revolting for the above mentioned issues. It shows that women of this age are not submissive and fragile; they are revolutionary and self-dependent. With the eyes of heterosexist lens, sexual relations are defined as an encounter between two opposite sex partners. Male plays the active role and the submissive role can be taken by a woman.

The fiction, *Girl Meets Boy* is a modern version of *Ovid's* myth with modern perspective of queer tone. The fiction is set in modern Scotland and is essentially a new story. It is told from the perspectives of two sisters, *Anthea* and *Imogen*. The myth of *Iphis* and *Ianthe* is featured as a story within the story. The novel deals about the childhood of two girls. It also portrays the difference between the two girls as they listen to their grandfather's story. The elder sister *Imogen* shows her disinterest with grandfather but younger sister, *Anthea*, listens to the story well. One adopts the homosexuality and other's the heterosexuality. One sister desires the continuation of the tradition and other needs the break of the tradition.

Anthea and *Robin* are rebellious characters who economically and socially powerful. *Anthea* and *Robin* challenge the patriarchal norms to get equality between two sexes and makes resistance for their sex through sexually motivated activities. They try to get their freedom, individuality and selfhood. In the novel they create their self identity and individuality by blurring the rules and regulations, norms and values constructed by patriarchy. The protagonists of the novel spend their time gaining pleasure of sexual experience and free sex with same sex. In heterosexual society men do not care about female body desire, so that women taken sex as a burden. They think sex is only for male pleasure and entertainment.

Anthea and Robin are tortured for their activities as they display their sexual activities and, they have been arrested by the police. They were tortured physically and sexually. Imogen, the sister of Anthea bail for them they have changed their view as per their need. Their revolutionary nature adopts homo-social bond and setting the same sex marriage. The conservative heterosexual culture cannot allow such freedom and live colorful life to such lesbian. They rebel and change their same sex love into marriage. Anthea and Robin are not such characters who passively accept each and every dogmas of the society. Here society means the patriarchal society where the culture of males is dominating. Males are free for his every activities, where as women are not.

Girl Meets Boy presents a lesbian love story and goes against the heterosexual social norms. Robin Goodman has a gender neutral name. Her last name Goodman might be an allusion to her androgynous nature of her. Anthea's name has a similar meaning as Ianthe's, being associated with flowers. The difference in love between Anthea and Robin is significant.

The lesbian love is against heterosexual relationship. The relationship between Anthea and Robin is characterized by an unusual balance and mutuality. There is no role differentiation. After falling in love and having marriage with Robin she gets new experience for Anthea. Through love, the mystery of Anthea's identity is resolved, independent of socially and medially prescribed role models. Robin embodies an androgynous ideal which combines the best features of both genders. The masculine role of Robin is mixed with her beauty. Masculinity does not dominate her beauty. People's expectations regarding gender role has been subverted, as the assigned role for female by patriarchy was not fulfilled. It means the heterosexuality is not a natural category but rather a system built by repeating over and over by the society.

Anthea and Robin have realized a sort of utopian vision of female identity, as self-defined, self-loving, and woman-identified. Physical sensuality plays an important role in the portrayal of the love between Anthea and Robin. The phallogocentric myth claims that lesbian love is asexual and that there cannot be any sex without penetration. But this concept is challenged by the fiction.

The climactic excitement of sex, with ecstatic and fantastic images chasing each other with ever growing pace shows sensuality and sexuality portrayed in Girl Meets Boy. It is different from the patriarchal and heterosexual conception of society. Sensuality transcends the physical realm and affects body, mind and soul in equal ways. In fact, sex is not only thought relation of penis and vagina, but a feeling. Anthea's and Robin's bodies and minds are fused together.

The story of Girl Meets Boy presents a utopian love or a 'lesbian love' which works as the liberating force in the life of the two lovers. This can be seen as a conscious reaction to the negative and resigned view of lesbian love that is featured in the myth of Iphis. By re-writing Classical myths, the writer writes about gay people. Water imagery is a trope in feminist theory and literature as a metaphor for gender fluidity. Girl Meets Boy, being a lesbian retelling of a classical myth, can be read as a fictional account.

Butler (1999) as a queer critic objects the definitive categorization of gender and challenges society's need for definitive categories. As Butler (1999) rejoices for the revolution:

I . . . came to understand something of the violence of the foreclose life, the one that does not get named as 'living', the one whose incarceration implies a suspension of life, or a sustained death sentence. The dogged effort to 'denaturalize' gender . . . from a strong desire both to counter the normative violence implied by ideal morphologies of sex and to uproot the pervasive assumption about natural or presumptive heterosexuality' (Butler xx)

Anthea, falling in love with a girl proves liberating, but not causing an identity crisis. Falling in love with Robin gives new world experience for Anthea. As she says: “Now I had taken a whole new shape. No, I had taken the shape I was always supposed to, the shape that let me hold my head high. Me, Anthea Gunn, head turned towards the sun (Smith81).

Anthea realizes that she can be so much more than herself when she is love by same sex lover. It makes her feel challenging the heterosexuality. Anthea and Robin want to challenge the society by taking bold determination and rejection of those norms and values which are for the domination of other sexes in the heterosexual society. They want to challenge that society. It is said that sex is the secret subject matter, it only limited in the heterosexual society. Imogen, who somehow represents heterosexual society, can only accept some tradition.

Butler states that society controls gender categories; and thinks that one can describe a man as having feminine attributes or a woman as having masculine attributes. As Robin says: “It’s easy to think it’s a mistake, or you’re a mistake . . . when everything and everyone you know tells you you’re the wrong shape . . .” (Smith 97) Butler (1993) says that:

It is of course always possible to argue that dissonant adjectives work retroactively to redefine the substantive identities they are said to modify and, hence, to expand the substantive categories of gender to include possibilities that they previously excluded. But if these substances are nothing other than the coherences contingently created through the regulation of attributes, it would seem that the ontology of substances itself is not only an artificial effect, but essentially superfluous. (Butler 34)

But society uses gendered binary language. Subverting this language, Smith has done is certainly a good start at breaking down these gender adjective and assumption in it.

Some lesbian literatures are more political in nature. They connect lesbianism to resistance to patriarchy. But, *Girl Meets Boy* is primarily a love story, Robin and Anthea are feminist political activists, painting feminist slogans that highlight the statistics of domestic violence, wage discrimination at work and female infanticide. Female resistance and strength could be seen throughout the novel.

Traditionally, sex is taken a biological fact or as a guilty secret. It is hard for women in misogynistic society to allow themselves the pleasure of sexual fantasies. In order to challenge the dominant sexual ideology of society, feminists have to attack sexism as the source of male power rather than attacking sexual material as representative of male sexuality. In this novella sexuality is taken as the power of male, the main character questions over gender roles in literature from which reader can see many gender injustices and also the power hold by economic self dependent. But now, female fetuses are killed because not being of boy.

The pathetic condition for the female fetus in this world is shown through the line indicate that the view of phallogocentric world's view of human being. It should be change because to provide equal justice to both male and female.

In heterosexual society, males easily expose their sexual passion; but women are not allowed to evoke sexual subject matters openly. If they openly expose the sexual subject matter, patriarchy called them as a prostitute or whore. Though, sex is physical need for both males and females. Every rules and regulations are made by males which might be loveless, a kind of passionate desire for sex. They use female like a commodity and exploit the passion of female. Knowing the fact that sex is personal subject matter, in society no one questions about the relation of male with other women; but women should listen various questions which are raised by patriarchy. Women are behaved like servant in husband’s home, they are compelled

to prepare food, feed to family members, care them and fulfill their husband's desires. They have to sacrifice their whole life to make males happy.

Modern marriage is an eternal, biological and psychological relationship between a male and a female joined as husband and wife. It is guided by the social norms, values, and laws. Marriage is taken the precious gift of god and bond of two souls, and couple is considered two sides of the same coin. There should mutual understanding between couple to run the life smoothly. The last part of the novel is titled as "All together now", to show the gender norm of the heterosexist society.

The last chapter of the stories guides individual persons to struggle with real life or to struggle to make life better. The whole analysis of the texts shows that queerness of the characters and their way of accepting the sexual orientation, their coherence with the mainstream society, and their feelings towards their sexual identities reveal the queer sensibility in the text.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the novella by a famous lesbian writer presents the issue of homosexuality as a resistance against the social authoritative norms of heterosexuality. The resistance of homosexuality is projected in the fiction through its the revolutionary characters. It creates a new issue, test and assumption for the readers about homosexual behavior. The role of homosexual character in the novella proves homosexuality as similar to heterosexuality. The writer successfully presents the sexual minorities, with the disproved myth about queer. Human sexual desire is based on social and cultural phenomenon as it is the culturally constructed issue. By applying the queer theory as a tool, the fiction is analyzed as novel having the burning issue of present world issue. The same sex lovers are in search of their identity in relation to social norms and expectations within their lesbian love story. The main character's way of their life, their emotion, feeling and revolution are the major attentions of the fiction; which are measured under the light of queer theory.

References

- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies That Matter*. New York, Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1999). *Gender Trouble*. New York, Routledge.
- Calorine. J. (2012). *Portrait of a Woman*. Available form: <http://portait-of-a-woman.blogspot.co.uk/2012/06/girl-meets-boy-ali-smith.html>.
- Foucault, M. (1978) *The History of Sexuality*. trans. R. Hurley, New York.
- Kirkus. (2007). *Book Reviews Ali Smith*. Available form: <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/ali-smith/girl-meets-boy>.
- Kelly, S. (2007). *Sex is as a hit and Myth Affair*. Available form: <http://scotlandonsunday.scotsman/review.id=1786962007>, 10 Nov.
- Ovid. (1717). *Metamorphoses*, Translated by Sir Samuel Garth, John Dryden, et al.
- Smith, A. (2011). *Girl Meets Boy*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Tyson, L. (2006). *Critical Theory Today*. 2nd ed. New York, Rutledge.