



A STUDY OF RUTH VANITA WITH AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL LENS FOR A CRITICAL REFLECTION OF HER LIFE

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research paper is to shed light on the autobiographical elements in the works of Ruth Vanita. Because a close observation of her works shows that her personal life has impacted her literary contributions to a great extent. In almost all her works there are autobiographical elements both direct as well as indirect. She is a Lesbian herself and it is a fact known to the world that she is married to a woman namely Mona Bachman. She tied the knot with Mona Bachman in the year 2000 and they are happily married since then. She is out and open about her same sex relationship with Mona Bachman and she works tirelessly to create awareness in India about same sex relationships and often demands equal respect and rights for people belonging to LGBT community and that's why she is also known as a famous Lesbian and gay studies thinker and activist in India. In her works Ruth Vanita brings forward the issue of same sex love and desire primarily in Indian Subcontinent. She provides a panoramic view of the narrative around same sex relationships in India from ancient times to the present times through her works. And this mindset of the advocacy of same sex relationships is shaped by her own sexuality in the early years of her life she felt attracted nor towards men but women and at that time it was a bigger taboo than it is today. But she acknowledged her sexuality and stood up for it and opted to marry the love of her life a woman Mona Bachman. And from then onwards she devoted her life towards making India a better place for LGBT community because she understood the pain, suffering and humiliation that people belonging to LGBT community face in life because she has experienced it first hand because of being a Lesbian. And in her works she tries to explicate her personal experiences as a Lesbian in a fictional manner. And that is why majority of her work is autobiographical in nature.

Keywords : Lesbian, Sexuality, Same-Sex relationships, Marriage and Autobiographical

Ruth Vanita is an Indian writer, LGBT activist and a renowned thinker of Hindu philosophy. She primarily specializes in the study of gender and sexuality studies in Indian and Western context. She was born in Yangon, Myanmar (Burma) in 1955. She is currently serving as a professor in the University of Montana. Earlier she also taught in Miranda house college of Delhi University as an English lecturer. She is also the co-founder of a magazine titled as *Manushi: A Journal about Women and Society* and it is India's first feminist magazine. It is dedicated to Feminism and gender activism. Ruth Vanita was brought up in New Delhi. She comes from a conservative middle class family. Growing up she took part in religious services and read Bible everyday. Vanita herself revealed that while growing up she wasn't allowed to do a lot of things like she wasn't allowed to wear trousers and wasn't allowed to even watch television. And was also not allowed to wear any sort of accessories such as jewellery items or ribbons and even putting

any kind of make up was prohibited in her childhood. Because her parents strictly wanted her to devote her life to God completely. And Vanita says she never felt frustrated or suppressed in her household because according to her we often tend to take for granted our family especially it is observed in today's generation and as a result majority of the youth is anxious, depressed and lost nowadays because they have lost connection with their roots and religious things are considered as a thing for old people to indulge in but Vanita says in her childhood it was not the case she always obeyed to her parents and was even very curious to explore her religious things in depth and as a result now she is well versed in King James version of Bible and has appreciated its artistic beauty alongwith religious verses many times. Every evening she used to read it. She says the way it is written has fascinated her. Ruth Vanita credits her mother for her inclination towards writing especially poetry. Vanita says she fell in love with poetry because of her mother. As while Vanita was growing up in order to get rid of household stress and struggling between daily personal and professional tasks her mother kept on reciting poems throughout the day to stay motivated and feel less exhausted. And not just poetry she also used to read the famous novels from Victorian era and told their stories to Ruth Vanita. And in this manner she became Vanita's inspiration for becoming a writer and today she's a renowned literary figure. And she credits her mother for the same. Ruth Vanita said she still remembers every story and poem that her mother taught her while growing up and they are extremely close to her heart. Also not many people know that Ruth Vanita was diagnosed with an eye disease and the doctors advised that she should be immediately removed from school so her mother homeschooled her after eighth class. And at that time it was a very courageous move because people pressurized her parents to remove her from school and get her married. But her mother despite facing harsh comments and criticism from all around decided to homeschool her daughter in the best possible manner. And Vanita believes that this homeschooling might be a reason for her being an introvert. She calls books her bestfriends and she calls herself an avid reader. About her reading habit she mentioned that when there are no books to read she starts reading random stuff around her like labels of things in her room. And reason behind the development of this habit of hers was the tight budget of her family in her childhood days she didn't have enough money to buy books often so she used to read books that belonged to her parents primarily her mother. Because she was extremely interested in reading. So this was a brief idea of the fact that how Ruth Vanita became a writer. Now alongwith becoming a writer there is an another significant aspect of her life which is very important to understand. It is the fact that she is a Lesbian. Because Her works and sexuality both are intertwined. And it is not possible to understand her as a writer without shedding light on her sexuality and personal life as in most of her works she talks about same sex love and tries to create awareness about the rights of LGBT community. Some of her most famous works are *Memory of light; love's Rite : Same sex Marriages in Modern India*, *Gender, Sex and the city : Urdu Rekhti Poetry in India and Dancing with the nation : Courtesans in Bombay cinema*. Also she is the co-editor of *Same sex Love in India : A Literary History* and has translated many works of fiction and poetry from Hindi and Urdu to English, most notably *Chocolate : Stories on Male-Male Desire* By Pandey Bechan Sharma and *Ugra*. In her works Ruth Vanita majorly sheds light on various narratives around same sex love

primarily in India. She brings forward the issue of same sex desire and provides a panoramic view of same sex relationships in India from ancient times to the present times. She kind of tries to trace the evolution of same sex love over a significant period of time in Indian context. Like in her famous work titled as *Love's Rite : Same Sex Marriage in India and West* she discusses the issues that surround homosexual unions. In this work she argues that why the refusal by society or authorities mean that a same sex marriage is not a marriage. She believes that when a couple decides to tie the knot irrespective of their gender the marriage is a marriage and it is as sacred and normal as heterosexual marriages because it is not harming anyone in anyway it is a union of two lovers and why does their gender matters it is merely a case of personal preference of individuals. Even her own marriage was an unofficial ceremony in New York. Later they had a reception in Delhi. And Vanita herself revealed that it was first public reception of a same sex marriage in Delhi at that time and her family was extremely hurt by this step of Ruth Vanita. They felt it brought shame to the family. But she said that though initially her family wasn't happy with her decision but gradually they bonded with her wife. And now Vanita has a son with her wife who's named Arjun. And they are happily married for over two decades. Vanita believes that blowing it out of proportion is not the right way to deal with it and this is what she told her parents when they were against her marriage with a woman. Further in this work she delineates the history of recognition of same sex love in ancient India and says that same sex love and relationships are deeply rooted in Indian Culture. In this work the writer talks about the cultural and legal inferences of same sex marriages in India and the west.

In another work titled as *Queering India : Same Sex love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and society* she yet again provides an understanding of same sex love and the concept of same sex Eroticism in Indian culture and society. It is a collection of essays published in 2001. The collection focuses on pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial gay and lesbian life in India to provides a comprehensive look at this otherwise neglected topic. She traces the journey of same sex Eroticism in different phases of time to understand the journey, scope of evolution of same sex relationships in our country. In this work through essays a wide range of topics are covered such as films, literature, popular culture, historical and religious texts and legal implications on same sex relationships in India. The essays cover wide range of controversial topics such as Deepa Mehta's famously controversial movie *Fire* which is based on lesbian love and relationships in India. Also a case of same sex love and murder in colonial India is also discussed in this work and also there's a discussion on the take of scriptures on same sex love and desire. Basically through this essay collection the author makes an ambitious attempt to change the way people perceive gay and lesbian life in India. Further in her very famous and latest work *Memory of Light* which is set in the Nawabi era of Lucknow in 1700's where the Courtesans and artists are getting ready for the 50th birthday celebrations of the king. The story is told from the perspective of a courtesan named Nafis who resides in a kotha. She is not good looking and also is never interested in the routine activities of the Courtesans like singing and dancing due to which she is the least popular courtesan. However she is fond of Poetry and loves reciting poems. She is well versed in Ghazals and a lady namely Chapla Bai who is a dancer by profession loves her poems. Chapla Bai is from

Kashi and the book follows the love affair of Chapla Bai and Nafis so as how their love for poetry blossomed into a romantic relationship between the two. The book also showcases many relationships between the characters in a beautifully artistic manner. And it is written in such a manner that while reading the readers almost get transported to that kotha in Lucknow. Also praiseworthy amount of research has been done before writing this work as we find the discussion of many historical figures of that time and many familiar ghazal verses are also there in the book. Overall it is safe to say that it is a masterpiece. It has the power to both educate the readers about same sex relationships as well mesmerize them. By this brief analysis of her works we can say that her focus remains the same in all her works which is to talk about the same sex relationships in India. And her own sexuality makes it easy for her to shed light on the depth of same sex desire and love because she herself is married to a woman. Her happily married life is itself a testimony to the fact that love has no gender no age no restrictions no boundaries. It is what it is and happiness is Supreme. Everything else is secondary if two people are happy together no one has a right to question that relationship. Because after all it's an individual choice.

Ruth Vanita also said that Indian Cinema according to her is highly heterosexual. And this heterosexual approach of the Cinema according to her is a big reason behind the spread of heterosexuality as being the norm. Because as we see in majority of the films and songs and even in daily soaps heterosexual relationships are shown a male hero with a female heroine. And Cinema as a popular medium of communication and advertising facts, ideas and things in society is somewhere to be blamed for the mistreatment of homosexual people. Because audience catch from the movies as we often see people copy things they see in the movies similarly Indian audience is used to seeing heterosexual relationships in the movies so much so that they believe that it is the only normal and natural kind of relationship and everything else is abnormal and a taboo. Because in the movies love affair between a man and woman is glorified and majorly focused. But with time the way society is changing Cinema is also evolving we see nowadays movies and web series are being made on homosexual relationships. Few of the most impactful Indian films on LGBT community are *My Brother... Nikhil*, the film is about a Nikhil who is suffering from HIV and it showcases so as how he is sidelined and mocked by people around him as well as government authorities for his sexuality. Next movie is titled as *Memories in March* it is based on a gay love story set in middle class Bengali society. Then comes a movie titled as *Margarita with a straw* it follows the story of a specially abled Lesbian woman. Then a movie titled as *Aligarh* by Hansal Mehta is also a seminal work in this field . It is based on the real story of a professor getting suspended from Aligarh University for having sex with a man. Likewise there are many films based on the theme of same sex relationships and the hardships that come with making bold choices in life. The movies are *Badnam Basti (1971)*, *Fire (1996)*, *Iratta Jeevitham (2017)*, *Nagarkirtan (2017)*, *Moothon (2019)*, *Geeli Pucchi (2021) etc.* So cinema and society are both slowly evolving and awareness is getting spreaded in the society to normalize same sex relationships with time.

Ruth Vanita while commenting on article 377 in India said that she and many other LGBT activists were tirelessly working from years for this to happen. And now she would like to see marriage equality being practiced comfortably in India which was once merely a far fetched dream for her.

Because she says that she has witnessed many heart wrenching incidents where same sex couples either got married and if they couldn't then they committed joint suicide. And she says that she will discuss in detail about these couples in the forthcoming edition of her famous work *Love's Rite*. She says that her inspiration behind expanding her work and research on the concept of same sex love is the people that reach out to her and say that because of her so and so work they gathered the courage to own their sexuality and pursue their desires. She further says that the most crucial work of her career according to her is *Same-Sex Love in India* because it talks about same sex marriages in India and helped many young couples in coming out from the shackles of convention and shame regarding same sex relationships. They became fearless and drew inspiration from this work and stood for their rights.

CONCLUSION

A detailed observation of Ruth Vanita's life and works somehow proves the fact that no one can explicate something more clearly and honestly than someone who has been in a particular situation. Ruth Vanita understands the suffering, mockery and humiliation of LGBT community because she herself came from a strict middle class family background and faced a lot of challenges in her life when she recognized that she is a Lesbian and things became more challenging when two decades ago she decided to marry a woman so she very well understands the problems of LGBT people especially in Indian society where there is still lack of awareness about the concept of Queerness and people are still laughed at for being in love with same sex partners. And that is why all her works either in classical style or via modern storytelling method work as a flag bearer of equal rights for LGBT community. On every platform Ruth Vanita fearlessly talks about how LGBT people deserve equal rights, love and respect in society and is hopeful that someday there will be no need of this advocacy of LGBT people as they'll get the same respect that heterosexual people get in the society without having to ask for it. Therefore in order to understand Ruth Vanita as a LGBT activist and Gender studies writer it was important to shed light on her personal life. Because her work has the essence of her life and they both can't be understood as two different entities.

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