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Research Article




Plasticity of Identity: Exploring Gender and Sexuality in Sachin Kundalkar's *Cobalt Blue*

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Abstract

This research article examines the theme of plasticity of identity in Sachin Kundalkar's novel, *Cobalt Blue*, with a specific focus on gender and sexuality. Utilizing a queer theoretical framework, the study investigates how the characters in the novel navigate their identities in the face of societal expectations and personal desires. Through close analysis of the text, the article explores the fluidity and complexity of identity construction, challenging fixed norms and categories. Kundalkar's work portrays characters who defy traditional labels, embracing a spectrum of identities that transcend conventional boundaries. This study contributes to the field of queer studies by highlighting the novel's role in facilitating discussions on diverse gender

and sexual identities. By acknowledging the plasticity of identity, this research article promotes understanding, empathy, and acceptance, fostering a more inclusive society. It emphasizes the transformative potential of literature in shaping conversations about identity and expanding our notions of gender and sexuality.

Keywords: Plasticity of Identity, Queer, Bisexuality, Homosexuality, Identity crisis, Relationships

Introduction:

“...the whole world can be plasticized, and even life itself”.

—Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

“Plastic is a versatile and ubiquitous material that can be moulded and shaped into almost any form, has played a transformative role in shaping the modern world. Its ability to take on various shapes and configurations has revolutionized numerous industries and aspects of human life, and it plays a significance role in enhancing our existence and facilitating numerous aspects of our lives. From the moment we wake up until we rest at night, plastic has woven itself into the fabric of our daily activities, providing convenience, safety, and efficiency. In Sumana Roy’s a short story *Untouchability*, where she shows how untouchable is plastic when, as Mrs. Chakrabarti screams, “the world’s become plastic, space has become plastic, time has become plastic?” (Roy, 23). Plastic sexuality allows for individual erotic preferences to be molded according to one’s needs and desires.

Anthony Giddens, in from *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, first introduced the theoretical concept of “plastic sexuality”, highlights that “Plastic sexuality can be moulded as a trait of personality and thus is intrinsically bound up with the self” (Giddens, 2). According to him, Plastic refers to the adaptability of erotic expression, encompassing both personal choices and the influence of social norms. Referred to as “flexible sexuality,” is argued to emerge in the context of social transformations in late modernity and postmodernity (Giddens, 47). It contrasts with the characteristics associated with modernist sexuality, which is perceived as fixed by biological or societal norms. Additionally, it can serve as a means of defining individual identity and may be utilized to express radical sexual demands. Heather Davis notes that “in addition to the outright transformation of the normative signs of gender, exposure to plastic chemicals has also been shown to affect behavior” (Davis, 238). Ranjan Ghosh writes that, “Like geo-queering as evidenced through altplastics, does the body “queer” up? Do the plasticizers bring abnormalities in human bodies resulting in transformation of gene expression with physiological disruptions and imbalances that closely connect with the interests of transgenderism and bisexuality? This I call “slow sexuality,” a teleology that has its own modes and temporality of progression—plasticized sexuality” (Ghosh, 179).

Bisexuality is a sexual orientation characterized by emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to both males and females. Individuals who identify as bisexual are attracted to people of their own gender as well as those of a different gender. This attraction can vary in intensity and preference from person to person. In the scientific language of sexual orientation, “bisexuality encompasses both heterosexual (different sex) and homosexual (same-sex)

attraction or behaviour.” Bisexuality is a significant aspect of the diverse spectrum of sexual orientations within human society. People who identify as bisexual may have experienced different forms of attraction throughout their lives, and their feelings and experiences are valid and deserving of respect. According to Fritz Klein, bisexuals were mostly treated as “an invisible and non-existent group” (Klein, 89) and he insisted that the deep silence on bisexuality needs to be broken. His advocacy initiated a discourse that remains still relevant today, and found in the bisexual emancipation literature with a similar lack of acknowledgement and invisibility.

For a deeper understanding of bisexuality, it is essential to approach this identity from a queer perspective, acknowledging its differences and individuality. Both terms carry significant political and academic influence, yet they defy simple or singular definitions. Queer identity takes on various meanings within academia and culture; it can serve as an adjective for homosexuality or effeminacy, or it can also be used as a derogatory noun. Additionally, it references living in a manner that deviates from the ordinary or socially accepted norms. April Callis writes about queer as an identity was expanded in a bigger way in which all non-heteronormative individuals could find their place. “Queer also became an identity category in itself. Individuals who wanted to label themselves with a non-label, who wanted to be fluid or inclusive in their stated desires or who wanted to challenge hegemonic assumptions of sexuality described themselves as queer” (Callis, 215). Seidman explains queer theorists argue that heterosexuality and homosexuality are binary social constructs that arise in certain historical contexts, rather than being inherent and universally recognized sexual orientations. Homosexuality is described as “an identity to expose the deeper contours of the whole society and the mechanisms of its functioning” (Seidman, 216). Heterosexuality is, therefore, “queered” through this branch of thought, as it loses its status as the original or default sexuality and it becomes just one side of a binary in which each aspect gains meaning only in relation to the other. As Wilhelm Stekel, a psychoanalyst, describes that “all humans are bisexual and there is no exception to this rule” (Stekel, 72). Havelock Ellis believes that the origins of sexual life are hidden in bisexuality, while he acknowledging that all humans behave to express their sexual identity through either heterosexuality or homosexuality. He describes “the point that all men and women started as bisexuals and gradually felt more enchanted by one sex or the other. He further diagnosed the statement that bisexuality as identity becomes dubious in the study of sexuality” (Ellis, 217).

Cobalt Blue is a delicate queer love story, originally written by Sachin Kundalkar in Marathi in 2006 and later translated in 2013 by Jerry Pinto. It narrates the poignant journey of a brother and a sister who both find themselves falling in love with their newly arrived paying guest. The novel delves into themes of sexual awakening, love, identity crisis, and the challenging of societal heteronormativity. And this Indian novel challenges societal norms and delves into the fluidity and plasticity of identity, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality. Kundalkar’s work offers a nuanced portrayal of characters who navigate their desires, experiences, and identities in a world that often imposes rigid expectations. The novel is set in Pune, India, and unfolds through two distinct narrative voices. The first voice belongs to a character named Tanay, is a young man who studies English literature and gets wooed by his college professor, and renting out a room in his family home to an unnamed male paying guest,

while the second voice comes from his sister named Anuja, who is fond of playing hockey and is enthusiastic to become an environmental activist and later also falls in love with the same tenant. Amidst the emerald hues of Kochi, a Marathi Brahmin family lives in a large terraced house shaded cobalt blue that believes in tradition and values. They are greeted by a paying guest with no name, no caste, no religion of his own; He is a seeker. Through these dual perspectives, Kundalkar skillfully explores the intricacies of love, sexual desire, and self-discovery. In the division of binaries and non-binaries, all of the characters avoided acknowledging that the paying guest was actually a bisexual person. It is written in the background of 1996's society, and is based on the heterosexual viewpoint, where homosexuals and lesbians are accepted but bisexuals are either not present or are treated poorly. Although only the younger generation was constructed in this acceptance.

As the paying guest befriends Tanay, their relationship blossoms into a love affair, perhaps because the guest perceives the fluidity of sexual attraction as a seamless journey. In a society where acceptance is sought, embracing a homosexual identity proves more manageable than navigating the complexities associated with bisexuality. In Kerala, the Joshi family, hailing from a Marathi Brahmin background, upholds values of integrity, ethics, solidarity, and embraces select gender performance roles. Their household becomes the setting for a captivating tale involving a mysterious man, bringing forth intense emotions of love, romance, affection, and intricate sexual connections in the lives of Tanay and Anuja. *Cobalt Blue*, a Marathi novel skillfully translated into English by Jerry Pinto, intricately explores the journey of two estranged siblings, each with their own history of failed relationships across contrasting genders. Set within the seemingly orthodox backdrop of a Marathi family, an unexpected union takes shape. Delving into the memories of Tanay and Anuja, this novel delves into the endurance of a family that is well-versed in one another's hobbies, professions, and preferred cuisines, yet remains oblivious to the innermost emotions of their son and daughter. Through Tanay's monologues and Anuja's journal, the story unravels the intricacies of fear, exhilaration, intuition, and concealed sexuality that shape an individual's life, offering intricate details and intimate glimpses into their psyche. Through their secret thoughts, the enigmatic paying guest, who occupies a place in their hearts, reveals their hidden bisexual identity through clandestine musings. This narrative crafts a dual character portrait of the same individual, leaving both siblings perplexed and unable to fathom the reasons behind his departure, as their limited understanding fails to grasp the complexity of his being.

The paying guest handed over the rent to Mr. Joshi, but what he gave to Tanay and Anuja went far beyond monetary transactions. Interestingly, Tanay, a gay man, after a casual encounter thinks that the paying guest as the eternal companion in his romantic journey. This novel depicts Tanay's ultimate betrayal and his subtle vengeance, as he deliberately avoids engaging in conversations with Anuja, withholding information about her well-being and whereabouts. "I don't know how you managed it; an intense relationship with me, an attraction to Anuja, and then to elope with her? To live somewhere else" (Kundalkar 23). Tanay's anguish and fury lay bare the stark reality of a society, both homosexual and heterosexual, that conveniently disregards other sexualities and identities. The term "bisexual" remains absent from the novel, never uttered by any character, as if it does not exist. The unnamed character's

compassion, identity, and sexual orientation revolve solely around the romantic attraction between man and woman. In this narrative, Tanay's character carries a profound tragedy, contrasting with Anuja, who, despite her harrowing breakdown, finds herself undergoing medication and mental therapy.

Tanay experienced a profound emotional impact as his deep connections with the paying guest caused his heart to melt, particularly when their souls intertwined through shared sorrow and grief. "midnight in the window, just you and me. Even then you didn't cry. At these times, I felt I should be your mother, your father, your brother, your friend, everything. But you had long reached the point at which you decided you would never cry again" (Kundalkar, 12). Tanay possessed a strong and inquisitive desire to uncover every aspect of the paying guest's life. He longed to discover that whether he was in love with someone or not, or how he managed to stay alone in his life? He had a multitude of questions in his mind, and felt an eagerness to find answers. Soon, they began openly sharing their experiences and forged a deep and profound connection with each other. This newfound intimacy brought immense joy to Tanay, and he found himself on cloud nine. He even dreamt of having permanent relationship with him. Both of them actively engaged in the secret gay meetings where they could freely express their emotions and sexual desires. They developed a warm and friendly connection like Aashish and Samuel, "who were another gay couple in the queer community". In fact the experience turned out to be incredibly powerful and emotionally charged for both of them. But when the Paying guest betrayed Tanay's trust and ran away with his sister, Anuja, Tanay finds himself reflecting on the memories and moments they shared together. He said, "Don't worry about it. Sometimes, I don't understand Samuel at all. There are these phone calls that go on for hours on end. And if I'm with him, he goes into the next room. I just look at him. What can I say? 'For hours on end, I sat in that upstairs room, staring at you while you went about your life, unaware of my attention. You would be squeezing paint out of tubes, hanging your clothes out to dry, wiping your stained hands on your T-shirt, blowing on the milk as it bubbled over, lifting vessels off the hotplate, or sucking on a singed finger. I'd be staring at you and thinking, I should ask, I should ask, I should ask: do you want to be in a stable monogamous relationship for the rest of your life? Even if we're not going to have children, even if we don't have to worry about guests, even if we're going to end up sleeping on two single beds, separated by a table on which there's a copper vessel containing water, I want us to be together" (Kundalkar, 26-27).

Tanay carries deep imprints of the paying guest in his mind, adapting to a life shaped by those memories. In the context of an Indian middle-class family, a housewife aspires to maintain the unity of her entire family. But, what happens when she experiences solitude in the afternoon? She encounters the shadows of contemplation and struggles with anxiety during the afternoon hours. Likewise, in the case of Tanay, when he perceives a sense of betrayal by the unknown paying guest, he also experiences a profound sense of solitude and mourns the absence or departure of his beloved. Unlike the spouse in the Indian family, the mysterious man is not expected to return at the end of the day, which makes Tanay feel akin to a housewife towards the enigmatic figure. Tanay reminisces about his early childhood as "the best time because it is where you enjoy time without seeking pleasure in the bodies of others. When you are looking for a relationship, the process weakens you. You feel you have to bear with whatever

the other person wants. This is one of my basic beliefs about human nature” (Kundalkar, 51). Through his love for painting, literature, cooking, and his relationship with the paying guest, Tanay’s existence blossomed. Initially, the novel may be perceived as LGBTQ-themed when it was written in Marathi language. But Kundalkar himself says about the theme that he kept in his mind about the novel, “Thank fully, no one calls it a gay novel anymore. That term is so passé. Now about 12 years later, I feel the brother and the sister are not two people but masculine and feminine sides of the same person. And the book is thus, in turns, a feminine and a masculine monologue” (Goodreads). While the gay aspect of the novel cannot be ignored, *Cobalt Blue*’s inerent value lies in the broader psychological foundations of its characters.

The paying guest displays a vibrant and dynamic personality, exuding confidence as he embodies masculine characteristics in his relationships with both Anuja and Tanay. Remarkably, he maintains a consistent pattern of behavior with both individuals, treating them in a similar manner. In Western literature, the discussion around sexual orientation is often overlooked, as individuals tend to view identities or orientations in a limited manner (Goob, 18). The concept of sexuality is seen as separate from the sexual relations and practices that exist across cultures. This creates a substantial gap in contemporary portrayals of sexualities in literature as seen in *Cobalt Blue*, where the rigid politics of binaries versus non-binaries lead to the paying guest’s identity becoming obscured either to Tanay or to Anuja because of societal stigmatisation of his sexual orientation. Society needs to shift its focus not only on identity politics but also on sexuality politics. Many bisexual individuals are often wrongly categorized as either gay or lesbian, which highlights the attention given to trivial issues related to identity construction and its social and political consequences.

Cobalt Blue underscores the way of critical bisexuality studies urging readers to embrace and explore “integrate the concept of bisexuality to think critically about where it has emerged from and how its origin continues to shape contemporary debates” (Callis, 220). According to Goob’s *Concepts of Bisexuality*, many homosexual partners seek a masculine partner for physical intimacy, similar to Tanay’s immediate attraction to the mystery man when he sees him coming out of the bathroom, his strong muscles and bare body wrapped in a towel captivating Tanay’s gaze. Tanay says, “After a bath in cold water, you would wrap a towel around yourself and sit on the low wall, bringing with you the smell of soap. It was you who broke my habit of going straight down for breakfast after bathing and getting fully dressed” (Kundalkar, 2). The novel hints at the possibility that the paying guest might be deliberately exploring his sexuality by engaging with both Tanay and Anuja intimately. “Thus, some homosexual men may intentionally misrepresent themselves as bisexual to increase their sexual appeal to potential sexual partners” (Goob, 55). Few researchers, Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor conducted notable studies on bisexuality, with a particular focus on gender dynamics. Their research revealed that bisexual individuals tend to conform to “traditional gender norms in their relationships with both men and women. This finding posed a contradiction to scholars expectations, as bisexuals deviate from the social norm of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ while also defying conventional gender prescriptions” (Weinberg, 57). Bisexuals tend to interpret institutionalised gender scripts in a manner that shares similarities with other sexualities rather than adhering strictly to typical gender traits.

In *Cobalt Blue*, the mystery man embodies conventional gender norms, projecting a strong and dominant masculine identity. He firmly embraces the concept of control and exhibits a rigid attitude of supremacy. Both Tanay and Anuja's decisions are disregarded, as he adamantly insists on shaping their behaviors towards him. Compulsory heterosexuality and conventional gender norms have given rise to a perplexing situation regarding performativity. Bisexual individuals often choose to present themselves as cisgender in their social interactions while maintaining diverse sexual orientations. The paying guest also demonstrates a strong sense of certainty about his flexible gender, bisexuality like plastic during sexual encounters. When he is with Anuja, he openly exhibits his masculine nature, monopolizing conversations and avoiding questions, and this inclination is sometimes evident in their sexual interactions as well. Similarly, he performs masculinity with Tanay when interacting with him, whether during their gay meetings, friend gatherings, house parties, or sexual encounters, always maintaining a dominant position. For bisexual individuals, their preference for the opposite gender becomes apparent in intimate situations, and they often seek partners of the opposite gender for relationships. The concept of their partner's bisexuality holds little relevance to them. Instead, they may look for a partner who is willing to embody the gender traits opposite to what they desire to perform during sexual intercourse. Bisexuals do not conform to society's binary view of gender; instead, they believe in a "solidarity of gender," where each person can accept their partner beyond conventional feminine or masculine traits. This non-normative approach to sexuality plays a significant role in shaping their relationships.

The paying guest's behavior towards Tanay and Anuja exhibited marked differences, surprising the readers with his varied gender expectations. His actions provided clear explanations, revealing that his inner child had experienced a lack of emotional connection during childhood. After his parents' tragic death in a plane accident, he had to live with his maternal aunt and uncle, but unfortunately, even there, he endured the miseries of an isolated child facing mistreatment from his uncle. This entire incident aligns well with Fairbairn's theoretical framework, where he claims that "the relationship with the internalised object is accompanied outwardly by thumb sucking, masturbation, excessive feeding or drinking, homosexuality or incest" (Judd, 7) which highlights the essential role of affection from both mother and father figures or close relatives in nurturing a child's development. The lack of such affection can leave lasting impacts on a person's character and life trajectory, rooted in the trauma they experienced during their formative years. So he exists in a loveless void, his enigmatic demeanor creating both detachment and closeness in his interactions with Tanay and Anuja. The inner child within him withdraws from all relationships, including those with his Seema Maushi, friends, and any other companions. During this time, he becomes intimately connected with just one person: 'himself', he finds solace in his own company, secures a job, earns for himself, and lives a self-reliant life. His bisexuality emerges as a result of his isolation from familiar figures such as his parents, aunt, and uncle. This separation drives him to seek love and companionship from Tanay and Anuja. In Kundalkar, *Cobalt Blue* opens up a captivating world of societal dynamics to its readers, delving into the profound sufferings and psychologically traumatic experiences of the siblings as they become entangled with an enigmatic, non-existent figure. This legendary novel beautifully portrays how sufferings and

obstacles give the shape to human character, and make him to a rediscovery of his true strength and power.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Sachin Kundalkar's *Cobalt Blue* stands as a powerful exploration of the plasticity of identity within the realms of gender and sexuality. Through the lens of queer theory, the novel challenges fixed notions of identity, disrupts societal expectations, and opens up possibilities for a more inclusive and fluid understanding of desire and love. By presenting characters who navigate their gender identities in non-binary and fluid ways, Kundalkar emphasizes the transformative potential of self-discovery and self-acceptance. The novel subverts heteronormative expectations, highlighting the limitations they impose on individuals' expressions of desire and love. It invites readers to question societal norms and explore alternative narratives of desire and intimacy. The intersecting identities portrayed in *Cobalt Blue* further accentuate the complexity and fluidity of identity. The characters' experiences are shaped not only by their gender and sexuality but also by factors such as caste, religion, and cultural expectations. This emphasis on intersectionality underscores the importance of considering the multiple dimensions of identity when examining its plasticity. Throughout the novel, Kundalkar emphasizes the significance of love and desire in shaping one's identity. The characters in *Cobalt Blue* challenge the binary understanding of sexual orientation and embrace a more expansive understanding of desire that transcends societal categories. By doing so, they reclaim agency over their own identities and resist the limitations imposed by social constructs. In the end, "Cobalt Blue" serves as a testament to the ever-evolving nature of identity and the transformative power of love and desire. It invites readers to question fixed categorizations, challenge societal expectations, and embrace the fluidity and plasticity of identity. Kundalkar's exploration of gender and sexuality through the lens of queer theory inspires us to reimagine and redefine our understanding of identity, paving the way for a more inclusive and accepting society.

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