

Experiments with Love: Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land*

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Abstract

The paper attempts to review Janice Pariat's "Boats on Land" from the book of the same name and understand how a lesbian relationship between two girls in the story leaves lasting impression on the minds of individuals and could contribute to bring about drastic changes in their personalities and perhaps even alter their view of relationship. The paper will also attempt to understand lesbian relationships in the light of their general non-acceptance in society and examine how these experiences, nevertheless, become important as they lay the foundations of love and lead to acceptance of one's sexual orientation.

Keywords: Sexuality, rebellion, lesbianism, love.

The story "Boats on Land" by Janice Pariat in the book by the same name is subtly suggestive and rambling in its outline. The narrator's reluctant journey to the tea estate in Chanbari, Assam forms a part of an indelible experience of the teenager's life. Confusion in love and the demand of acceptance in love form major milestones of a teenager's experience. Initially, the reader is left in a slight doubt about the nature of the relationship that exists between the girls but as the story unfolds the nature of the relationship becomes clear. The experiment becomes a surprising opportunity for self-discovery and an intimate interaction between two very differently endowed individuals. One of the girls is a "castaway" of Loreto College, Calcutta, while the other plans to study medicine at Lady Hardinge at Delhi. There is a gulf in their interests and their geographical locations and this is coupled by an ultimate realization that the twain can never meet. This is one factor that takes them so close and yet so far from coming to terms with their relationship. The fact is that the bond that they share cannot be lasting and both have to return to their

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worlds; one sullen and the other wishful. However, the experience becomes a part of the collective consciousness of both the girls while they are on their journey of experimenting and finding love. The teenager experiments with love and also fears unrequited adoration. These experiences lay the foundations and could, in a sense determine how other relationships could work or not work for that matter. .

On the story “Boats on Land”, Janice Pariat in an interview said that it started as a story about a relationship between a boy and a girl and it felt wrong. She said that she couldn’t find the right narrative voice. Then she read “Once in a Lifetime” by Jhumpa Lahiri where the writer used the third person narration and brings in the ‘you’. That evening she sat down and rewrote the story. It became a story about two girls and it just felt right. She says, “Gender is such a construct” (Narayan 2012).

The relationship of the girls in the story is one which is based on a unique interdependence between two individuals with natures that openly appear to vary. It is also a relationship of unequal power and control. Lesbian relationships are marked, at times, by one partner taking on the role of a man and the other performing the role of a woman, an attempt, probably at the balancing of gender roles. In the relationship of the girls, the twenty-something is bold and outspoken and leads her partner to the discoveries of the body and the soul. In a study conducted by Gavin and Furman, they found that both individual characteristics and the “match of individual characteristics” were important correlates of relationship harmony (Furman and Gavin 1996). So their individual characteristics somehow seem to get fused into a oneness where they become extensions of one another. The girls go to the Brahmaputra and see the river in all its glory. The two girls are also bound together in their communion with nature; the large swathes of the river and the green expanses of Assam in its perennial fecundity. The imagery of the dragonfly and the reference to its life span is metaphoric and almost prophetic. The opening lines seem to predict the future of the relationship.

“I can measure our days together by the number of times we went to the river. Ten in fourteen days. Which by most accounts is not long, yet a dragonfly, you told me, may live only twenty-four hours, and if we were dragonflies we would have spent ten lifetimes together” (Pariat 181). “They go together in the dead of the night to an open field when the flower beds disappeared into inky darkness. They dissolve into the darkness. At night,

the field could have been a shimmering body of water... We lay in the field, undiscovered in our kingdom of weeds” (191).

Janice Pariat gently looks at nature in all its abundance and placidity. The beauty of rain soaked Shillong and the luxuriance of green Assam create a beautiful combination in Pariat’s landscape. The two become a potent combination and act as a reflection of states of mind of the two protagonists. Nature acts as active agent and adds colour to their growingly effervescent and yet doomed to be transient relationship.

Teenage years often become zones of conflicting emotions of love on the one hand and of torment on the other. The teenage years of the young girl in the story is filled with the expectations of love and excitement as it usually is. In the anglicized, Christian dominated town of Shillong, lives of urban teenagers are marked by reasonable freedom and an intermingling of the sexes. The young girl thinks of this long-haired boy called Jason while she ruminates on the exciting trips to Police Bazaar to eat momos at Peking Restaurant and ice-cream buns at Floury’s, all the while pretending not to notice the boys. “More than the culinary delights though, it was a chance to meet boys, walk past them as though we didn’t care they were watching...” (182). These are the grand plans of the summer vacations, which of course are to be thwarted by bigger policies of the family. A visit to Chandbari in Assam changes many things in the enthusiastic life of this teenager. The quest for love and the constant journey of experimentation on this path often leads many a teenager to new understanding about love, their bodies, physical relationships and acceptance of the self, which maybe a fairy tale for some and a story badly ended for others. At the end of the story while there is a sense of loss when the girls part there is also an accompanying feeling of fulfillment and a feeling of self discovery.

Both the teenagers in the story are unnamed protagonists; one riding high on the tide of teenage dreams of boys and unending ramblings; the other wounded emotionally from the recent loss of her mother to suicide. The latter is the daughter of a tea-estate Manager in Assam who has everything that she can ask for. Her friend from Shillong marvels at her house and house-help. Staying in the Assam bungalow gives her a sense of luxury. She feels that there are invisible hands that are lurking in the house and that do all the work. Beds were made and rooms were cleaned by invisible hands while they were at breakfast. The girl from Shillong as if not fascinated enough by all this meets her “new friend” who fascinates her

in the most unexpected way and lets herself be led. The latter is rebellious and does not care about the opinion of her step mother and her father, even though they are constantly vexed at her behavior.

Teenage attitudes towards sexuality are largely determined by the atmosphere of the home and they also develop largely on the information percolated by peers. Parents are the major contributors in making the atmosphere at home conducive for teenagers. Although the transition to greater independence is the hallmark of this developmental phase, parents clearly have a role and exert significant influence in the choices young people make about sex. Similarly, peers are significant knowledge disseminators in matters of sex. Teenagers are most likely to seek sexual information from their friends (61 percent). (Parents, Peers, and Pressures: Identifying the Influences on Responsible Sexual Decision-Making).

The teenagers in the story appear to share a diaphanous sexual relationship and derive a sense of deep comfort from each other. “Although youthful homoeroticism has been documented by artisans, poets, and historians for thousands of years, it was not until the early 1970s that American scientists—primarily medical researchers and mental health professionals - began systematically studying a newly recognized clinical group they classified as “gay youth.” (Meyer and Northridge 2007). These studies have subsequently brought about a wider understanding of gay youth and their worlds, which are often confined and secretive. In “Boats on Land”, the second girl, probably due to the loss of her mother some years back becomes rebellious and withdrawn. She is “always retreating into her brooding reclusive self” (83), the narrator comments upon her friend. She surprisingly changes from the morbid brooder to an excited young girl, exultant and expectant in her new found love. Their behavior changes after both of them have a bath together in the bathtub of the sprawling ancient bungalow. The narrator celebrates the newness of the relationship. “The next day, the world was washed anew” (89), she remarks. There are signs of frequent physical contact; ‘shoulder grazing arm’, ‘breath on neck’, ‘hand trailed over mine’, “Every gesture, I thought was triumphant and added something unforgettable to our lives.” Even after their first encounter when “she undid the buttons of her nightdress” (195), the next day the same brooding girl was disarmingly charming “not just to me but even to my parents whom until now you’d largely ignored”. The brief physical encounters give them a sense of revived reinvigoration.

Lesbian and gay relationships sometimes prove to be extremely difficult because of the view that society takes of such relationships. The girls in the story are afraid of their growing affection for each other. The process of declaring a homosexual identity is often referred to as “coming out”. It can start with homosexual fantasies or dreams, with the realization that one is attracted to people of the same gender, with a feeling that one is different from one’s peers or even with a sexual experience (Kaufman 2008). The confusion that a homosexual faces gets infinitely complicated due to societal stigma, lack of knowledge and few opportunities to mingle with teens of a similar orientation.

The lifestyle and environments of bungalows of tea estate managers in Assam is luxurious and grand. The old English style houses, the battery of servants and comfort in the loneliness of a secluded tea estate is unusually attractive. She is amazed at the speed and the silence at which work gets completed in the house. “beds were made and rooms were cleaned by invisible hands while we were at breakfast, towels changed twice a day, dirty laundry magically reappeared in a neatly folded, ironed pile, meals and fresh fruit juice were ordered at the touch of a bell”(186). The environment seems to be magical to the young teenager. On the other hand, the other girl lives in this very same environment but it holds out no attraction to her at all as she is lost in solitary ramblings. She is a perceptible embarrassment to her parents who constantly present the excuse of her dead mother for her wayward behavior. Her step-mother is a stylish Mishing tribal lady whose turn out makes the other girl feel embarrassed about her own mother, which is a typical teenager trait. “Your mother was a tribal Mishing lady, with chic shoulder-length hair and flawless skin. She was dressed in a floral-patterned kurti and dark green pyjamas. I wish my mother was in something more appealing than a crumpled jainsem (a traditional Khasi dress)” (184). For a teenager there is more to it than mere embarrassment. It is almost mortification and hurt for a teenager who up till now (throughout childhood) viewed her parents as people to be fervently emulated but now they end up as anachronisms, unable to keep up with fads and fashions of their children.

The milieu of Chandbari generates feelings both nostalgic and salubrious. It is in this environment that the girls get swept into a relationship of ease in which no questions are asked and no pretensions are to be masked. Both the girls in the story are unnamed protagonists. Is it their universality or their particularity for which they remain unchristened? The second girl is

rebellious even though she is past her teens. She secretly smokes cigarettes and moves around in crumpled clothes. She wore slippers, a few sizes too large. Even in the cold, she wears a T-shirt and rolls up her jeans when she goes to the river. In the words of her friends she has an “old sadness” and the old sadness has a “stench”. Her mother had committed suicide and there is no mention in the story about the reason. The girl broods incessantly and remains sullen in the company of her “new” mother and her exasperated father. She roams near the river, looks at the dragonflies and laughs at her companion’s conventional choice of profession. “Is that your greatest dream to be a nurse?” (190), She asked her friend even though we earlier have learnt that her desire is to study medicine and become a doctor.

The subject of lesbian relationships especially among teenagers is a delicate subject which requires sensitive handling. The path of sexual discovery is difficult enough and when it is straddled by lesbian tendencies, the going gets even tougher. The discovery of such feelings often gives rise to feelings of guilt for being attracted to one’s own sex. In “Boats on Land”, the two girls are drawn into a relationship which, they naturally find very difficult to come to terms with. “Regardless of whether romantic relationships do or do not displace a friendship, it seems likely that the experiences in friendships and romantic relationships may influence each other (Furman and Shaffer 2003). Furman and Shaffer go on to add that both forms of the relationships entail “intimate disclosure, support seeking and giving, and mutuality”.

The friendship that the two newly found friends develop influences them in deep ways. The moroseness faced by one and the nervousness faced by the other give way to an acceptance of themselves and of one another with all the flaws that teenagers would naturally possess. The two friends here have a profound impact on one another and they look forward to their meetings which are mostly secret conversations by the river. It is not unknown how friends during adolescence have a great impact and influence on one another - friendships influence everything from choice of clothes to choice of careers and it has an impact on other relationships too. Friends influence adolescents in many ways and even “risky or problem behaviour” forms a part of this influence (Adams and Berzonsky 2003) Interpersonal relationships among teenagers illustrates that the process of adolescent development involves “dynamic, mutually influential exchanges between the developing youth and significant others” (Lerner, Lawrence

and Steinberg 2009). The girls in question influence each other significantly and even the parents of the girls are able to see the change.

For the two girls to part after the brief but eventful holiday is immensely difficult, so much so that the host's daughter disappears the morning they left, leaving her parents to apologize, as always. And when the other girl goes back to Shillong, she is filled with loneliness and an inexplicable empty feeling. "We passed the sweeping blue waters of Barapani, shimmering coldly in the sunlight, and I felt a great sense of emptiness - as though it had been drained and all the world lay hollow like a lake" (199). Towards the end of the story she secretly declares that she thought of her, her hands, her face and "folded them up, our secret lives". The relationship that they shared is not one that can be openly discussed with friends over endless gossip. When she returns, Sarah one of her close friends updates her on all the gossip while she was away and as expected, all the gossip is about heterosexual relationships - her crush on twin boys, someone being kissed behind an umbrella and Jason, waiting for her return. Even though their story comes to an abrupt end when the journey to Shillong materializes, there is a lurking feeling that the relationship would carry its repercussions in the lives of the protagonists long after the separation took place. Experiments in love form a part of a teenager's life and if it is a same sex relationship, the experiment would have a long lasting impact on the lives of the individuals. The impact of the bond emanates from the fact that the relationship was in a sense taboo and yet it was allowed to flower. There is a lingering sense of nostalgia and loss but at the same time a sense of satisfaction too.

"There were traces of you littered all over the bungalow as though you were a visiting ghost. Occasionally, I'd catch the lingering smell of cigarette smoke even though you were nowhere around. Once, I found your slippers on the veranda, discarded under a chair" (Pariat 188)

The experiments with love in *Boats on Land* help two individuals on their journey to self discovery. Chandbari becomes a little microcosm of a world that the girls would have liked to inherit forever. The rebellious reticence of one and the coiled up coyness of the other coalesce into a new relationship that abounds in happiness and security. Even though the girls would have to go back to their former lives, the tale of love that the relationship spins leaves a taste of quiet rebellion and a "not so small" fortress taken.

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