



Interrogating Desire in Contemporary Literature: Iterations around Gender and Its Relationship with the Culture of the Digital Realm

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Abstract

Concerns around desire and its murkiness inside contemporary literature mirror anxieties that are distinct to conversations that are happening online. Instead of attempting to structurally demystify these anxieties through fiction, the market calls for more books that intentionally blur the lines of morality so that these stories permit even as they punish. This paper would argue this thread in recent books by authors ranging from Lillian Fishman to Miranda Popkey and their multiple iterations of women's sexuality through the lens of establishing a political conversation by way of portraying relationships that mirror larger societal concerns. By problematizing the genre of the auto fiction, I would also invoke their contrast with the works of Annie Ernaux and her distinctly French matter-of-fact approach to articulating desire. In way of doing that, I would talk about the influence these books have on the larger literary culture and what that says about the future of literature dealing with similar themes of female desire, as predicted by the likes of affect-theorists Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai. Even though the argument is built primarily through American literature, they encompass a larger trend of cultural conversations as reflected in digital platforms like Tiktok and Instagram where books are marketed primarily through their proclivity to appeal to the underlying anxieties and the sentimental susceptibilities of young female readers. This, in turn, influences iterations and priorities of contemporary feminism as observed in these digital realms. As we also encounter more of these disillusioned complex female characters in media, the inclination is towards dissociative assimilation with problematic desire as the agencies of these women tend to push and pull according to what is digestible.

Keywords: Sexuality, Contemporary Literature, Feminism, Auto Fiction, Digital Realm.

Introduction

“If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infinity of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field- that is, language and a finite language- excludes totalization. This field is in fact that of free play, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions.” (Derrida, 1978)

-Jacques Derrida, “On Structure, Sign, and Play”

If there is anything that the proliferation of the digital realm has been testimony to, it's been the leaps and bounds that cultural criticism has taken and continues to take due to the act of consuming and analyzing culture having become very much an intrinsic part of having a digital

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footprint. Taste, its curation, and its recognition in a niche, is a behaviour that is often ubiquitous with forming a parasocial relationship with an identical consumer of the said mediums of culture. Everyone's a critic and a cultural voice in the digital space. As a result, the desire for assimilation and relatability in your apparently unique opinion or personal relationship to a cultural object has almost always driven the kinds of conversations that happen online, be it in favour of discourses being explicitly sold for virality of a discourse object or even when no explicit selling is a pre-requisite. It is either this, or the desire to contradict to mass opinion either in favour of sincere articulation of alternate modes of discourse or just for the identity marker of a contrarian. During a time when most decisions of media, politics, culture, etc are swayed and influenced by the digital realm to an unimaginably large extent, these conversations, thus take on a bigger role than they were originally intended as. An opinion that used to remain confined to the niche spaces of say a Tumblr page or a Facebook group has now attained the ubiquitousness of general opinion due to the sheer amount of digital enmeshment. With the pervasiveness of these spaces, the shapes that they take on are thus often more grotesque than could be initially perceived or gauged to be while in the thick of the moment of their ongoing occurrence. The significance of the internet or digital culture with our topic at hand is total because it has begun and could end there. This totalization of an aspect of the culture is what this discourse is built on.

Sex and gender is a discourse that plays a major role in shaping what kinds of selves get to exist and how they get to exist together, be it out in the real world or in the digital realm. However, instead of letting desire exist in all its unruliness as has been advocated for in all the centuries of scholarship on it, the attempt has been towards an orthodox assimilation and canonification. This obsession with projecting correct desire in the digital realm has had some disastrous effects on its literary and cultural representations. Desire and its articulation, for the self and for the world, will forever remains a murky field of explication. As Lauren Berlant has explained, Desire,

Constructs and collapses distinctions between public and private: it reorganizes worlds. This is one reason why desire is so often represented as political: in bringing people into public or collective life, desire makes scenes where social conventions of power and value play themselves out in plots about obstacles to and opportunities for erotic fulfillment. (Berlant, 2012)

The need for contemporary discourses on desire to be increasingly articulated over and over in various forms, solely on the basis of transgression or counter-transgression, diminishes its inherent liminality. What it does, instead, is create pockets of marketable discourse commodities or easily digestible pockets of information in this content landscape regulated by the attention economy. This is not only a setback but much graver in its consequence in this late-capitalist digital space which values all objects in terms of fulfilling the currency of attention and consumption, robbing them of their revolutionary potential. Desire, thus, also becomes an ideological consideration. As soon as it extends to a realm as fraught with tension and uncertainty as the cyberspace, it becomes cultural capital to be hoarded and used when the transaction of discourse presents itself. As Gayle S. Rubin has correctly formulated,

The realm of sexuality also has its own internal politics, inequities, and modes of oppression. As with other aspects of human behaviour, the concrete institutional forms of sexuality at any given time and place are products of human activity. They are imbued with conflicts of interest and political manoeuvre, both deliberate and incidental. In that sense, sex is always political. But there are also historical periods in which sexuality is more sharply contested and more overtly politicized. In such periods, the domain of erotic life is, in effect, renegotiated. (Rubin, 2012)

The Digital Realm and Contemporary Literature

This paper is, perhaps naively, attempting to record the patterns in a phenomenon that is far from slowing down or being duly acknowledged for its increasing structural precariousities. I have here tried to map the ways in which it has been weaponized, consciously or unconsciously, by market forces as an easily digestible product of consumption with respect to the demands of the digital world and its literary appetite. What I have also attempted to do is to analyze the ways in which social media rhetoric has entered the realms of literary production in the era of the internet novel, and what that means for our literary culture of the digital age in terms of a relentless policing of the representation and manifestation of desire in it. To pretend to disavow from heterosexuality only to use it as subtly subconscious wish-fulfilment, as tends to happen in some of the texts I hereby analyze, only strengthens it as a discourse object. This gives it ammunition to be consumed as ‘queer canon’ while also making its covert commitments amply clear. Thus, I want to problematize the role desire plays in these books of not only invisibilizing the status quo of heteronormativity, but furthering it by weaponizing its subversion to ultimately establish it yet again.

In a media landscape of the representation of female-hood and desire as the one that is currently persisting, literary figures like Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf have naturally emerged as quintessential literary heroes to be beckoned at the drop of a hat. The reclamation of female rebellion had deeply impactful consequences in literature but it has been bastardized in contemporaneity. Here, Virginia Woolf and her articulations of “nihilistic femininity” (Banerjee, 2015, p. 119) seem particularly relevant in terms of its evolution to its present day counterpart. In a book called *Modern Feminism and the Culture of Boredom*, Allison Pease looks at Woolf’s *Voyage Out* through the lens of boredom as political commentary:

On one level, Woolf protests...women’s difficulty in achieving meaning in the male-formed world and presents boredom, often quite humorously, as a side effect of this confrontation. On another level, however, Woolf presents boredom much in the way that Martin Heidegger described profound boredom in his 1929–1930 lectures on the *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, as an indeterminate mood that undoes all interest and possibility and in which time becomes an empty, yawning expanse. (Pease, 2012)

The steady rise of the genre of the autofiction in this decade has also been unprecedented but far from being unpredictable. What else is so perfectly befitting to not only the age of a relentless cultivation of a personal brand but far more importantly, to the constant surveillance of personal histories as morally indefensible markers of identity? Authors, their modes of conduct and their specific registers of personal experiences are far more interesting than the work that they produce. Thus, autofiction lends a lore to provide the missing piece in a piece of fiction i.e. scandal, that is either unconsciously cultivated by authors themselves from the messiness of their source materials, or is created later by overenthusiastic readers. It is natural, therefore that since identities wringed out of these representations get grouped under large umbrella terms in the digital realm, that the production of art be also marketed towards these grouped identities not by the artists themselves but by sellers and marketers. This trend has been developing far and wide in platforms like Tiktok and Instagram, with hashtags like ‘sad girl’, ‘unhinged girl’, ‘cottage-core girl’, ‘goth girl’ etc that have been trending not only in recent years but some for years on end. It is not only easier to be called an ‘unhinged girl’ than account for the intricate issues that make one adopt such an identity in the first place, but it is deeply resonating with unsuspecting users of these platforms that adopt and are used as bait to develop these phenomena in the first place. This is not least true when it comes to questions of desire, romance and sexuality and their subsequent representations in books and media. Consequently, books with protagonists that adhere to these identities in ways big and small have been embraced by these readers that are unsurprisingly, mostly women, and the literary market is thus proliferating with popular books that have protagonists that are either acting out

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their latent anxieties and desires, or have unaddressed underlying mental illnesses. Instead of accounting for the numerous nuances that come up from a closer reading of trauma, abuse, power dynamics, familial dynamics, mental illnesses et al, what matters online is the overarching persona. This teleological method of representation has given rise to the popularity of books that have complex issues at its core, books like *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, a novel about a deeply troubled woman taking sleeping pills to dissociate and attempt to sleep for a whole year, *My Dark Vanessa*, a harrowing novel about sexual abuse, and a cascading watershed in this field that almost takes triumph in making its readers cry with its relentlessly brutal narrative of prolonged exploitation and abuse, *A Little Life*, etc, but are valued only for their superficial commentary on some abstract idea of the modern day ordeal.

Evolution of Gendered Desire

The dehumanization of personhood with respect to sexuality is not a foreign concept when we historicise its representation in literature. Feminist criticism, time and again, has addressed this in terms of the evolution of the agencies of women and what it meant for the realization and recognition of the stifling structure of patriarchal heteronormativity. Adrienne Rich's groundbreaking essay, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' documents the ways in which heterosexuality is constructed as the 'natural' destination for all women, in patriarchal and feminist discourses alike, and the coercive means by which this destination is imposed, both discursively and materially. Her assertion that "heterosexuality, like motherhood, needs to be recognized and studied as a political institution" (Rich, 1981. p. 22) rings especially pertinent in our present predicament of the digital realm. Even though this essay has been reified in contemporary times to evolve into manifold articulations of political responsibility ranging from lesbian separatism to searing Transphobia, the original argument remains pertinent with regards to the institutional oppression of women. Rich asks why "such violent strictures should be found necessary to enforce women's total emotional, erotic loyalty and subservience to men" (Rich, 1981, p. 33) and in doing so establishes heterosexuality not simply as a sexual relation but also as a power relation. Power, however, fluctuates with respect to the transmogrification of capital and the catalysts that lead that change. The advent of radical feminism and the political posturing of sexuality in the digital realm that were the fruits of the efforts from lesbian separatists like Rich had a sway in swinging the pendulum in directions that have been predictably harmful to marginalized gender identities and sexualities that use queer spaces to completely shut out masculine identities under the garb of creating 'safe spaces' free from men. In a landscape such as this, any investment, sexual or otherwise, towards the masculine is regarded as shameful or even actively harmful. A similar proposition was laid out in instances by Kate Millet in her groundbreaking book of the time, *Sexual Politics*, which in many ways paved the way for these discourses and has been regarded as inspiration in its ideological investment, as she had said:

Should one regard sex in humans as a drive, it is still necessary to point out that the enormous area of our lives, both in early "socialisation" and in adult experience, labelled "sexual behaviour," is almost entirely the product of learning? So much is this the case that even the act of coitus itself is the product of a long series of learned responses - responses to the patterns and attitudes, even as to the object of sexual choice, which are set up for us by our social environment. (Millet, 1980)

The contemporary novel is a novel of the character. Not a character with a body which would make it a social creature with its own history and a spatiality of existence, but a character as projection, wish-fulfilment or thought experiment. When it comes to this character's desire, thus, it is laid in service of the character to pursue as it wishes, but within a gambit of thinly prescribed codes of maintaining the character's effusive non-temporality. This relegation to the

consciousness instead of situating a character in a real world resonates greatly with Freud's idea of narcissism, which sees a withdrawal of libido investment from the outside world and a reapportioning of those emotional resources to the inside. He comes to these ideas by stating something with a great deal of intuitive sense:

It is universally known, and we take it as a matter of course, that a person who is tormented by organic pain and discomfort gives up his interest in the things of the external world, in so far as they do not concern his suffering. Closer observation teaches us that he also withdraws libidinal interest from his love-objects: so long as he suffers, he ceases to love. (Freud, 1991)

In formulating the way this impulse manifests, he comes to the conclusion: "The libido that has been withdrawn from the external world has been directed to the ego and thus gives rise to an attitude which may be called narcissism." (Freud, 1957, p. 75) Even though this paper is an exercise in reparative reading instead of a paranoid one, the contemporary novel has a problem – that of the mimetic desire. The anxious interiority of its characters seem to be dictated by the mores of a culture that is surveilling and relegating their desires and instincts so they turn their interior monologue into a neurotic alibi generating machine. Ultimately, it seems to be interested in sentimental resolutions to complex questions of desire to enhance marketability than any real engagement with real defamiliarization. One might argue that novels can exist even when they're merely meditating on complex ideas instead of coming to a neat approximation. However, the issue lies with the attempt at radical posturing that is now a feature of digital media driven discourse object. It is pertinent to ask here, as critic Natasha Lennard had asked:

But by treating sex as a political project of rupturing preconditioned desires, might we end up reducing each other to experimental objects for our own self-development? And more to the point, such an approach treats sex *acts* as techniques of self-construction, as if the simple meeting of certain bodies serves to subvert and reorganize desires. (Lennard, 2017)

Performative Moral Desire in Contemporary Literature

Topics of Conversation by Miranda Popkey is a classic example of a work that uses its dissociative feminism, an appropriate term grown out of the passivity of modern day politics, as a searing tool to establish its articulation of desire expressly so as to neither fully condemn nor endorse its heteropessimist narrative. The protagonist often deconstructs her previous encounters with men and the gray areas of their encounters while simultaneously musing on how *problematic* and yet how desirable it would be "to be in someone else's power ... to be in fact prevented from making *all* decisions," (Popkey, 2020, p. 31) an appeal she concludes has "something to do with being chosen, something to do with release of responsibility." (Popkey, 2020, p. 31) As author Elisa Gabbert mentions in her review of the book commenting of the function of intoxication in the narrative:

The alcohol serves an enabling function, allowing women to admit to shameful wants or shameful acts, to entertain their most taboo thoughts (those 'less acceptable and so less accessible'), to give up control and then absolve themselves partially of blame. The narrator drinks in part to give others permission to drink: in Fresno, her baby asleep in the other room, she pours a third glass of wine to help encourage a friend to explain how 'it happened.' (Gabbert, 2020)

It is one among many novels that have come out in the recent past that have attempted to disavow from heterosexuality as a performance either by including a latent queerness in its characters while consent and power remain blurrily vague, or by a performative nihilism or

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dissociative participation in heterosexuality, from Lillian Fishman's *Acts of Service* and Alyssa Songsiridej's *Little Rabbit*, to Revan Leilani's *Luster* and Naoise Dolan's *Exciting Times*. Asa Seresin's observation in her famous article "On Heteropessimism" holds true, thus, as she had so finely theorized:

Collectively changing the conditions of straight culture is not the purview of heteropessimism. In this sense, heteropessimism actually reinforces the privatizing function of heterosexuality, even as it is mass distributed through culture as a viral meme. Under a heteropessimistic rubric, women might not view themselves as competing with one another within the cutthroat dating "market," but in metabolizing the problem of heterosexuality as a personal issue the possibility of solidarity remains foreclosed. (Seresin, 2019)

In most of these novels, the individual is responsible for answering for the viability of her desires and in doing so, becomes a mimic of the anxious author persona. Perhaps nowhere is this vast and anxious interiority of mimetic desire more blatant than in Caroline, the narrator of *Little Rabbit*. It is not enough for a narrative to hold itself together through the choices the characters make unless they are perhaps capable of making a political statement about their actions and choices. Caroline's queerness here acts as blanket that lets her escape any judgement her desire might bring forth just as if a character's self-awareness is enough credential to dutifully redeem them of any moral failing. As New Yorker critic Katy Waldman wrote of *Exciting Times*:

"I was a horrible person," Ava laments at one point. "I was living in one person's flat, fucking someone else without telling them..." Yet, because Ava *knows* what she's doing and feels conflicted about it, Dolan still presents her as superior to her peers, who are vapid and doltish. After concluding that it would be "ungrateful" to refuse "a mythologically beautiful girlfriend and a nice apartment to share with her," Ava winds up keeping both the girlfriend and the luxury, having earned them, apparently, through the moral work of feeling bad. (Waldman, 2020)

Conclusion

Instead, where these novels are concerned with making sure the discourse of desire in the narrative has aligned with the demands of the market in approximating radical potentiality, the fiction of someone like French memoirist Annie Ernaux's, in sharp contrast, is a discourse with her own self in building an authentic personal history of the said desire. Even as Ernaux recognizes the temporality and mutilation that her desire is causing, it is realized in relation the thing itself instead of outside forces of correction. Incidentally, her relationship with Simone De Beauvoir influenced much of her writing. If, for Beauvoir, one is not born but rather becomes a woman, one does so within the confines of historical, cultural, and economic systems determined by patriarchal, misogynistic apparatuses of power. Thus, the lives of women are circumscribed by design through conditions of psychic as well as socioeconomic objectification. Faced with a roster of tyrants beneath whom she will be forced to kneel, woman—in Beauvoir's notion of the heterosexual contract—is smarter to choose to abnegate herself before the beloved. That is, if the decision between a hated patriarch and an idol to whom one's devotion must, by necessity, be slavish can be said to be a choice, woman may "overcome the dependence to which she is condemned by assuming it." (Beauvoir, 1953, p. 85) As Ernaux writes in *Simple Passion*, for most of the duration of her affair with her lover, she does "nothing else but wait for a man" (Ernaux, 2002, p. 46); the remainder of her life is no more than a "means of filling in time between two meetings." (Ernaux, 2002, p. 5) She grows anxious at the possibility of straying beyond the walls of her home—she could miss his

call on the landline; her existence is for him; all other meaning passes into nothingness, into the static of the nonbeing. Ernaux, thus, suggests that, indeed, the personal is political—not in the contemporary bastardization of the phrase in obeisance to superficial classification systems of identity, but in the sense that the dream of a better future will never be borne from the belly of power, out of the people, apparatuses, and institutions that delimit the boundaries of the possible world. The personal is political, rather, inasmuch as any better world to be had we must dream up ourselves. To end on a hopeful note by invoking the great Audre Lorde:

Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, or the merely safe. (Lorde, 1978)

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Bio-note

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