
The Quest for an Identity in Shani Mootoo's *Valmiki's Daughter*

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The perception of homosexuality as unnatural or even as an illness pervades modern imagination and homosexuality as a result is frequently punished with imprisonment, fines, or corporal punishment in several regions of the world.¹ Most shockingly however is the fact that in the year 2007 seven countries including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Mauritania, northern Nigeria, Sudan and Yemen still considered consensual sexual acts between adults of the same sex as punishable with capital punishment.² In light of this brief exploration, it is not surprising that the social practice of homoerotic love and its representation in literature, film and other media has commonly been considered indecent and disturbing. This was also the case when in the late 1980s the Chicana critic and poet Gloria Anzaldúa published her autobiographical book and poetry collection *Borderlands / La Frontera*. However, Anzaldúa's volume has become a classic with a lasting influence on the intellectual landscape around the world. Although Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* addresses the very specific context of the Chicana woman and the borderland of the Texas-U.S., Southwest/Mexican border, her general observations touches a sore spot and reflects a widely felt discomfort of many lesbians, gays and straight people concerning psychological, spiritual and sexual borderlands that are reflective of traditionally organized gender perspectives and the denial of homosexual or lesbian life. In *Borderlands* Anzaldúa bellicosely writes: "As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races)" (102). Anzaldúa's radical formulation of borderlands anticipates new identity formations and ways of being in the world on the level of gender which only few years later has often been labelled hybridity or transculturality in postcolonial criticism.³

Shani Mootoo's latest novel *Valmiki's Daughter* (2008) can be read in this tradition. Her fictional transcultural space builds upon tolerance and an all

embracing humanity going beyond restrictive, gender normative perceptions. In her text a great variety of consensual forms of love between adults are presented. Homosexuality is, for instance, fashioned in relation to the equally contested and even more ambiguous theme of bi-sexuality. The tension created by such an open conceptualisation of love and desire is explosive and relevant to recent representations of lesbian, gay, and bisexual love and their evoked transcultural and lesbian imaginative spaces. Against this background this essay interprets literary constructions of transcultural spaces as a major site where human beings search, fashion and negotiate different perceptions and expressions of space and sexual identity. Finding and positioning oneself within society is a struggle that often brings pain to both the searching individuals as well as to their families. The experienced pain is often turned into a creative force opening up societal structures and thereby rendering them more flexible. In order to demonstrate this negotiation at work, this essay will focus on representations of homosexual and bisexual life worlds and how Mootoo imagines an alternative literary cartography outside the normative order in *Valmiki's Daughter*.

Ever since the publication of her first novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) Shani Mootoo has become a powerful voice in the postcolonial literary scene. Having started out with the collection of short stories *Out on Main Street & Other Stories* (1993), Mootoo has also produced an impressive volume of poetry *The Predicament of Or* (2001) as well as a number of videos and paintings which have been shown and exhibited internationally. Being a perpetual diasporic who had left Ireland at the age of three months and Trinidad at the age of nineteen, Mootoo feels most at home in her Canadianness, which to her, is open to varied interpretation.⁴ Whereas commonly Canadianness connotes mainly national identity, it seems as if Mootoo reads more into this category of national belonging. "in Canada," Mootoo writes "one has a place to run to and you can actually exist like you are on an island because everyone around you doesn't know you or ask your background" (Calixte and Phali). Obviously to Mootoo Canada offers a great freedom to evoke a more autonomous personal space which consciously departs from that of the family and community to successfully imagined homosexual life worlds in general and lesbian love in particular.

In her previous novels Mootoo has fabricated imaginary islands such as Lantanacamera in *Cereus Blooms at Night* or Guanagaspar in *He Drown She in the Sea* as fictional backdrops against which the respective story unfolds. Vivian M. May suggests viewing Mootoo's non-specific, imaginary islands as "particularly useful when writing about the conjoined histories of trauma and exile in diasporic contexts" (98). There is no doubt that such imaginary geographies may offer a

great potential to invent new literary worlds outside given normative orders; more recently, however, the writer tends to think in plainer and simpler terms in order to get closer to the “real” world. This creative endeavour also explains why her family saga *Valmiki’s Daughter* is set in the “real” locations of San Fernando and Trinidad. And although her new novel is once again refining the topic of same-sex love which has granted the author her international literary success, Mootoo now attempts to find a more reduced language which already shows not only in the overall creation of the plot of *Valmiki’s Daughter* but in particular the fabrication of the fictional setting in San Fernando. In an interview Mootoo remarks:

The landscape parts where the events are happening like the San Fernando landscape is extremely blatant, to the point of me almost being tedious. I hope that the ordinary reader will pick it up and inquire, why she is doing this, why she is going on and on and on about this. They read because they want that question answered, they know it will be answered.⁵

Mootoo’s mapping of San Fernando and her detailed description of Trinidadian landscape draws out her intense longing to fictionally present her notion of the island as she constantly revisits it in her mind. Accordingly, her novel opens after the prologue with the following description:

If you stand on one of the triangular traffic islands at the top of Chancery Lane just in front of the San Fernando General Hospital (where the southern arm of the lane becomes Broadway Avenue, and Harris Promenade, with its official and public buildings, and commemorative statues, shoots eastward), you would get the best, most all-encompassing views of the town. You would see that narrower secondary streets emanate from the central hub. Not one is ever straight for long. They angle, curve this way then that, dip or rise, and off them shoot a maze of smaller side streets. (7)

As cartographies and landscapes are constantly invented and reinvented throughout the novel and are therefore not stable but in process, the novel brings home to its readers that the mapping strategy deployed in the text is a verbal and an imaginative one. Yet, the narrative mapping of well-known places as well as the bustling streets of San Fernando triggers chains of thoughts and images. It is this mimetic concoction of “real locations” and somewhat “exotic place” that fuels the reader’s imagination. As the British postcolonial scholar Graham Huggan has argued, “the process of matching map to text, or text to map, involves the reader in a comparative that may bring to the surface flaws or discrepancies in the process of mimetic representation” (22). This is how a creative friction emerges emphasizing the gap between a mimetic approach to landscape and a fictional reality which do

not always fully correspond to each other. Yet, Mootoo feels comfortable evoking a certain uncertainty on the side of the readers because such narrative manoeuvres enable her to imagine and showcase uncompromised stories. The stories reflect Mootoo's unmistakable cosmopolitan stance without denying what her characters have to leave behind in order to reach their objectives. And it is true that to some extent the characters' abandoned dreams and hopes represent also a diasporic longing. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to read her novel as dwellings in nostalgia, rather her writing departs from the past taking its characters to the present in order to prepare the ground for a critical negotiation of the self in the light of memories.

I cannot help it who I love. I do not love a man or a woman. I love this person or that one. And when I love that person nobody else exist. (231)

This honest, innocent yet shocking confession by the side character Anick describes in a nutshell Mootoo's thematic of her latest novel, *Valmiki's Daughter*. Mootoo's eternal quest for love beyond real life's traumatic injustices, gendered identities and class distinctions finds voice in Valmiki's and his eldest daughter, Viveka's disconsoling life-experiences. The protagonists' individual plights raise disturbing questions about the inflexible societal construct of gender and identity. Dr Valmiki Krishnu, a renowned physician and a respected upper-class citizen in the Indo-Caribbean community in Trinidad resided in the prosperous residential neighborhood of Luminada Heights in San Fernando, in an apparently happy family with his wife, Devika and two daughters, Viveka and Vashti. Yet, appearances are deceitful; the two main protagonists, Valmiki and his daughter Viveka, are forced to lead a double-life, keeping their sexual orientation and gender identity in the closet for such sexual preferences would turn both instantaneously into outsiders to the conservative Indo-Trinidadian community of San Fernando. The double-life forced on them raises challenging questions about the societal construct of gender and identity in general and its perception in contemporary Indo-Caribbean communities in particular. In an article on the construction of gender in Caribbean societies Kate Young wrote in a pioneering anthology concerning gender questions in the Caribbean:

The concept of the social relations of gender and its use as an analytical tool does not escape this tension between structure and individual agency. At one level it does suggest that men and women are both 'produced socially' (that is independent of their own wills); that the relations between them are socially constructed, reinforced and sanctioned; and that men's greater social agency is derived not from their individual but from their social attributes. However ... in complex, modern industrial societies such categorical relations are fragmented by other hierarchies, notably class and gender. (95)

The conditionality between how a person is situated in the world, his or her geographic and social location, and the respective construction of social and gender identity is crucial to Young's argument. And especially in the last decade or so, Young's picture has become even more complex considering modern diasporic life with its inherent emphasis on mobility, flexibility and multiplicity of roles. Hence, literary constructions arising from such diasporic modernities increasingly focus on individual histories that go beyond national boundaries. It is this particularly cosmopolitan stance which has lastingly changed the outlook on life of many living in diasporic or transmigrant conditions. In this context Ulrich Beck convincingly argues, "the human condition has itself become cosmopolitan" (*Cosmopolitan* 2). Beck has a point, indeed, when he observes that "cosmopolitanism has ceased to be merely a controversial rational idea, in however distorted a form, it has left the realm of philosophical castles in the air and entered reality" (2). Besides its discursive reality cosmopolitanism has become part of modernity. Following this line of thought Beck states:

Cosmopolitanism has been deeply associated with idealism. But the real world speaks the language of realism, that is nationalism. At the beginning of the 21st century this has to be turned upside down: nationalism is becoming unreal and idealistic, cosmopolitanism stands in for realism in a world, which has become cosmopolitical in its core. ("Cosmopolitanization" 12)

Beck's lucid observations underline the importance of conceiving space and place from a different angle. He demonstrates how concepts of cosmopolitanism and transculturality relate to modernity and modern conditions of life. Life, therefore, has also been thought in terms of transculturality which implies movement across different geographical and national borders well as connections between individuals, communities, institutions and nation states. It combines individual everyday experiences and practices on a local level with perspectives and behavioral patterns of transnational, diasporic communities. Such creation of transcultural spaces can only be fully explored when social relations such as class, race, and gender are reconsidered. Generally speaking, diasporic and transcultural literature may therefore be considered a good basis for describing lesbian imaginations and bisexual love because it affords a perspective which challenges static conceptualising already through its own materiality.⁶ Mootoo emphasises the pleasure she gains from inventing ideal worlds beyond any normative order:

The first delight in writing, for me, is the invention of stories, situations, events, where I can impose my own vision of how things would be in my ideal world. My ideal world is not void of the lower states of existence, that is, of anger, hellishness, hatred, greed, etcetera. But in my ideal world these states are out-smarted, or

given the slip by good, truth, beauty and innocence. Writing itself is a way of giving the slip to the traumatic aspects of my own life-experience. It is a way of re-ordering a world in which many aspects of my own self have been denied or injured. This re-ordering, in my made-up worlds of fiction, does not attempt to pulverize “bad”, but is a way of “permission”. Permission to exist as a woman, a woman of colour, as a lesbian, within—not on the out-side of—the everyday world of society. (Mootoo, “Shani” 110)

Mootoo negotiates movement in light of the discrepancy between diasporic and familial spaces. With a creativity deeply rooted in transcultural imagination, her work is confident enough to challenge given norms and social constructs. In this way she seeks to map out a space of belonging—belonging in the sense of a wholehearted embracing of humanity—which is commonly denied to non-normative individuals. She thinks space as open, thoroughly transcultural realm that is indulged in a sensuousness which evokes myriad tastes, smells, colors, textures, and voices. To this lively transcultural sphere her conception of the local, familial space in *Valmiki's Daughter* builds a harsh contrast. In her work local spaces are often characterized by many limitations that not only hinder the characters' development right from the beginning of the novel but also remain difficult to overcome throughout the story. This might then also explain why many of Mootoo's protagonists, and here we include Tyler of *Cereus Blooms at Night*, struggle with the strictly normative order set by the closely knit Indo-Caribbean society since the space dedicated here to homosexual and bisexual people is rather limited. Leaving seems therefore the only option left to those who do not seem to fit in. In *Cereus Blooms at Night* the transvestite Tyler's suggests,

Over the years I pondered the gender and sex roles that seemed available to people, and the rules that went with them. After much reflection I have come to discern that my desire to leave the shores of Lantanacalara had much to do with wanting to study abroad, but far more with wanting to be somewhere where my “perversion,” which I tried diligently as I could to shake, might be either invisible or of no consequence to people to whom my foreignness was what would be strange. I was preoccupied with trying to understand what was natural and what perverse, and who said so and why. (*Cereus* 47-48)

Similar to Tyler, Valmiki and his daughter Viveka feel a longing for personal freedom beyond societal norms. It is the same deliberation that gnaws at the latter too. Choosing the urban, affluent Indo-Trinidadian middle-class as a narrative backbone, with a particular focus on a generation whose life has still been affected by the bleak horrors of indentured labour,⁷ a denial of intimacy between partners (Metha 186), and an overall neglecting of homosexuality,⁸ it does not come as a

great surprise that the older generation, embodied by Valmiki and his wife, all too readily sacrifice private happiness only to uphold an elite status. Yet, as much as Valmiki tries to suppress his yearning throughout the novel, his daughter Viveka seeks to break free. The emerging dialectics generates an intergenerational space of negotiation in which gender and sexuality are presented as limiting and liberating forces at the same time.

In an Indian sub-continental context, the novel's title is particularly striking because the name Valmiki evokes a mythical resonance of Adi Kavi or "first poet" who penned the Indian epic Ramayana. But in a conversation with Shani Mootoo, she reveals that her Valmiki does not reverberate this specific Indian allusion but rather transports a particularly Trinidadian connotation:

To me Valmiki is a big name, a full name with right amount of syllables; the Valmiki I know is a big fellow, a big, strong, powerful wealthy fellow and the name has an upper class sound in Trinidad, so it is the sound, the right sound for him. But it does not have anything to do with the god Valmiki. Imagine if I had that layer on top of the title, how pedantic that would be. Valmiki is a good sounding name.⁹

What is important to acknowledge is the ambivalence which Mootoo lays into the naming of her protagonist. While Valmiki, as Mootoo suggests, is an eminent name the character carrying it is too weak to stand up for his own homosexual wants and needs. Accordingly, he fully accepts the limitations and restrictions placed upon him by the social expectations of acting like a "true man" and the family patriarch. Here, the theme of double life emerges and his name astutely emphasises the gap between Valmiki's two lives. As a respected man, namely a "doctor, boss, lover, husband, father" (30), Valmiki can only lead the life he really longs for in his phantasies, phantasies which carry the face of Tony Almirez whom he had loved twenty years ago when they were medical students together in Scotland. Although Valmiki has not seen his lover for a long time, their past "was indelibly etched in Valmiki's body and mind" (26). Nonetheless Valmiki has eventually decided against a life with Tony, desperately opting for the role Trinidadian society has held in stock for him:

He tried to picture himself with a woman, he and she walking side by side, she pushing a pram with a baby on it. There was no face to this woman and the baby was always substituted—his mind insisted on the joke—with a dachshund pup in a baby bonnet. It was not the kind of joke that made him laugh, but cringe. (67)

His final choice, however, leaves Valmiki dashed. His desperate feeling of being trapped on the island and in this particular relationship and society is to some

degree echoed in the emotional states of other characters, too. Valmiki's patient Anick, a young French woman, for example, could be seen as a kind of a reflector figure; she describes her desperate situation as follows:

Is like a prison living in this country. The doors and windows in your own house—in your own house!—always lock, you cannot go outside in your own yard, you cannot even go for a drive. Is crazy, this place, no ... I want to run. I want to be free, to run free like a lion, to be curious ... I just not in my skin in this country. (177, 180, 181)

Valmiki, who has chosen for himself a life in denial and inner migrancy, supports his patient Anick in her attempts to break free. Listening to Anick who is in fact also leading a life in migrancy since she exchanged her life in France for an existence in an unhappy marriage on a remote island, Valmiki realises that not medicine but proper company will cure Anick. He introduces her to Viveka as he thinks that "Such a well-groomed, feminine woman would do his daughter a lot of good. They already shared a number of interests" (183). The first meeting of the two women marks the starting point of an intense cross-cultural lesbian love story. Yet, their love has no future since the unusual friendship cannot unfold in the San Fernando's parochial social space. Haunted by familial and Trinidadian societal strictures both Viveka and Anick are eventually forced to conform to some permitted regularities. Anick urges Viveka to relocate to Canada—either to Toronto or Montreal or Vancouver—where she believes to find a thriving community of people like the two of them. There, Anick thinks it will be easier to disappear in the unknown crowd helping them to reinvent themselves. But Viveka is practically cautious. Her pessimistic utterance reflects her defeat:

How far is away, Anick? We'll never get far enough away. You know Nayan [Anick's husband] will find you wherever you go, easily, and even if I leave this place my own parents will still suffer publicly and privately because of what I am. Going away won't solve a thing. (335)

The sense of loyalty or responsibility towards her family and to the society at large and the crushing news of Anick's pregnancy put an end to the women's love relationship. Viveka's deep disappointment bore similarities with that of Pria, the South Asian butch protagonist in Mootoo's video *Wild Woman in the Woods* (1993) as Pria goes to visit her lesbian friend who happily shows her engagement ring to her. As Valmiki realises his daughter's painful predicament, he is deeply hurt thinking that he might be the secret source of Viveka's unusual inclination, for it is he who has introduced Anick to his daughter. Yet, the ceasing of Viveka-Anick relationship is not merely a ceasing, as Mootoo prophesies to her readers,

“Implicit in an ending is a beginning—destination rendered futile. In any case, as the saying goes, wherever you go, there you are. There you are” (363).

Mootoo’s search for identity is neither confined to a distinct national identity nor is it marked according to socially stipulated categories such as race, class and gender. Mootoo’s home lies in a utopian world, where ideal merges with reality and there Mootoo feels “comfortable being uncomfortable” (Calixte and Phali). This utopian world to some degree has come into existence already much earlier, as for instance in *Cereus Blooms at Night*,¹⁰ and represents Mootoo’s ongoing deep negotiation with discourses of human rights and justice. Reinvention and rewriting strategies are often used as narrative tools by Mootoo, however, she does not understand herself as being agenda driven, or an activist fighting for a specific societal goal. Through her writing as through any other form of creative expression Mootoo in fact seeks to invent an alternative world:

I am interested in fixing things and making them beautiful. Suddenly I can see the possibilities in how you can use words and I get trapped in that. I can see the possibilities of fixing the landscape that no longer belongs to me but it is my landscape and I am so surprised when I go back to Trinidad since the landscape has changed so much. I can fix it and I fall into the trap of exoticising my own landscape.¹¹

Mootoo’s permission for her being in the world through her writing and especially in *Valmiki’s Daughter* crafts out a place of belonging that embraces love and humanity irrespective of gender constructs. In a discussion on Shani Mootoo’s video works, Richard Fung, a Trinidadian-Canadian video-artist, suggests that Mootoo’s creative oeuvre is “the process of unravelling and weaving together the complex strands of the self [where] she touches on issues of identity that are particularly topical” (Fung 162). As a 10-year-old girl whose immature poem ended with the line “Man loves man, man loves woman, woman loves woman” (Mootoo, “Shani” 108) to much familial consternation, Mootoo comes a full circle with *Valmiki’s Daughter* where she is confident enough to challenge the given norms of the world order. It is her way to fix the imperfections of everyday life, to break up tight social constructions, and to imagine ways of being in the world beyond normative orders.

Notes

¹ See, for instance, Terry Goldie’s critique in “Queerly Postcolonial.” For a discussion of the representation of same-sex love in Indian literature see Sissy Helff and Vera Alexander, “Lesbian Imaginative Spaces in Indian Fiction: Transgressions and Transculturality,” in *Muse India*, and for a more detailed discussion see James Neill, *The Origins and Role of Same-Sex Relations in Human Societies*.

² See International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (LIGA), “World Day against Death Penalty.” Having said that, it is also essential to acknowledge that especially in the last two decades many societies have changed their attitude towards homosexuals and as a consequence also have started recognising same-sex unions as marriages. Denmark pioneered in recognising same-sex unions in the form of registered partnerships in 1989 and twelve years later the Netherlands firstly granted same-sex marriages. See Neill, *The Origins and Role of Same-Sex Relations in Human Societies*.

³ For a philosophical approach to transculturality see Wolfgang Iser’s pioneering work, “Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today.” For a discussion of the various terms in literary and cultural studies with reference to Shani Mootoo’s poetry see Sissy Helff, “The Missing Link: Transculturation, Hybridity and/or Transculturality?” in *Literature for Our Times*.

⁴ In a summary of the last century of Indo-Caribbean writing Jeremy Poynting has emphasised the importance emigration had to many Indo-Caribbean authors as well as to the development of distinctively local literary scenes, such as the Indo-Caribbean Canadian one, of which Shani Mootoo is a representative.

⁵ Shani Mootoo’s quotation is extracted from an interview conducted by the authors in Frankfurt, Germany on May 20, 2010.

⁶ For a definition of the transcultural novel see Sissy Helff, “Shifting Perspectives: The Transcultural Novel.”

⁷ For a discussion of South Asian indenture labor and its representation in literature in light of diaspora see Vijay Mishra’s “The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora.”

⁸ Brinda Metha makes the following observation concerning homosexuality in general and lesbian love in particular in Indo-Caribbean political discourse: “Lesbian love constitutes a thorny issue in discussions of sexual morality, by either remaining invisible in official discourses or by being openly criminalized by oppressive sexual legislation, in the form, for example, of the 1986 Sexual Offence Bill in Trinidad and Tobago” (202).

⁹ Shani Mootoo’s quote is extracted from an interview conducted by the authors in Frankfurt, Germany on May 20, 2010.

¹⁰ For a discussion of *Cereus Blooms at Night*, see, for instance, Heather Smyth’s “Sexual Citizenship and Caribbean-Canadian Fiction,” Coral Ann Howell’s “A Shared Queerness: Liminal Identities in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*,” Mary Condé’s “The Flight from Certainty in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*,” Sissy Helff, “Desired Exotica: Gendered Spaces in Queer West Indian Diasporic Fiction,” as well as Roberto Strongman’s “Development of Same-Sex Desire in Caribbean Allegorical Autobiography.”

¹¹ Shani Mootoo’s quotation is extracted from an interview conducted by the authors in Frankfurt, Germany on May 20, 2010.

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