



Compromised Queer Identity and Unlabelled Relationships in Shani Mootoo's *Valmiki's Daughter*

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ABSTRACT: This article traces the marginalisation of transsexual identities in the Indo-Caribbean culture through Shani Mootoo's most recent work *Valmiki's Daughter* published in 2009. Shani Mootoo is an Indo-Caribbean writer who explores 'otherness' in almost all her works challenging homophobia, xenophobia and all other forms of discrimination imparted on an individual. Her work explores cross dressing, lesbianism, bisexual, transsexual relationships looking for acceptance and finding a space for themselves in the community.

KEYWORDS: Valmiki's Daughter, Shani Mootoo, gender identity, queerness, Indo-caribbean literature, lesbianism, transgender, sexuality

Mootoo explores the conflict between Indo-Caribbean culture and Queer identities in her novel *Valmiki's Daughter* (2009). In the novel Dr. Valmiki Krishnu, a prominent physician and a respected upper-class citizen of Trinidad's Indo-Caribbean community, lives with his wife, Devika, and daughters, Viveka and Vashti, in the affluent Luminada Heights neighborhood of San Fernando. They look like one happy Krishnu family but looks are often deceptive. The two main characters, Valmiki and his daughter Viveka, lead a double life where they keep their sexual orientation and gender identity hidden. Revelation of such sexual orientation would make them both outsiders in Trinidad's conservative Indo-Caribbean community. Their forced double life raises challenging questions about the social constructs of gender and identity and their perception in contemporary Indo-Caribbean communities.

Mootoo does not use any explicit transsexual words in her work, which is in contrast to other Western queer culture authors who write about sexualities and gender identities in a straightforward

manner. Her intricate descriptions of desires and bodily discomfort pertaining to her character's homosexual inclinations are intangible. It is her intention to highlight potential barriers in Caribbean culture relating to sexuality. In addition, she intends to make complicated identities that might be otherwise oversimplified in Western queer culture as a desire to maintain the novel's hyper-realism. *Valmiki's Daughter* is a novel that emphasises on the realities of Trinidad unlike the mythical island of Lantanacamara created in Mootoo's first novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996).¹ In the section "Your Journey" of novel every minute detail from the aroma of roasted peanuts to the established skin colour of the beggar is outlined for a visitor of San Fernando, Trinidad.

"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." (Mootoo 7)²

In this light it might appear that *Valmiki's Daughter* portrays and supports homophobic elements of Caribbean culture and however it is actually actively challenging and questioning the cultural norms of Caribbean by examining the reason behind them. Mootoo's refusal to use Western vocabulary to explain sexual identity for the characters of Valmiki and Viveka in her novel, in

¹ Mootoo, Shani. *Cereus Blooms at Night*. London: Granta Books, 1996

² Mootoo, Shani. *Valmiki's Daughter*. Toronto: House of Anansi, 2008. Print.



Evelyn O'Callaghan's³ opinion, not only represents the novel's hyper-realism, but also reflects Mootoo's political goal of supporting queer identities in the Caribbean. O'Callaghan illustrates through works of other eccentric Caribbean writers such as Rosemary King and Makeda Silvera and the challenges she confronted when attempting to claim their queer identity in a Jamaican setting. Silvera's grandma still pronounces that lesbianism is "a white individuals thing" (Silvera 346) on the other hand King battles with exploring the boundaries between her queerness and her Caribbean-ness. She talks about circumstances when her neighbours saw her queerness as her being "contaminated" by Western values and not raised Caribbean sufficient (King 121).⁴

Sexuality and gender identities of the characters in the novel are largely shaped by the western ideology of race, language and social class. On the construction of gender identity Kate Young writes "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. In complex, modern industrial societies such categorical relations are fragmented by other hierarchies, notably race, class, and gender." (Kate 95)⁵. An obsession with "white" is depicted in a number of instances when Viveka as a child envisions herself as a boy named Vince with blond hair and blue eyes an incarnation of her dead brother or the two women (Miss Russell and Anick) she expresses her attraction towards them. White depicting her ideation towards western beauty. Valmiki too uses relationship with his white patients to veil his own homosexuality. Similarly, social class plays an important role in how the characters can reveal their sexual inclinations but never in an explicit manner. For example, Saul has easier time in having relationship according to his sexual desires as compared to Valmiki who has to constantly hide his true nature behind the several affairs with his white patients to escape the critical eyes of Trinidad elites. Since, livelihood of Saul's family depended on these relationships his wife accepted them as a necessity and not tolerance.

The word 'homosexual' is only expressed once in the novel that too in the thoughts of a heterosexual character Devika (Viveka's mother) never aloud. Even on her discussion with Devika, Saul's wife who has known about the homosexual relationship of her husband never uses any transsexual word. Therefore, race influences the form of the character's desires, social class forms their expressions and language limits their clear depiction in works of Caribbean writers. The denial of presence of queer identities among them in the Caribbean culture makes it difficult for themselves to form an understanding regarding queerness. The homosexual feelings among the characters are no less intense for each other just because they do not have an explicit vocabulary to express like in the case of Viveka-Anick or Tony-Valmiki. Stephen Hong in his review of *Valmiki's Daughter* appreciates this lack of proper terminology by quoting that the novel by "destroying any unitary understanding of sexuality as either gay or straight, heterosexual or homosexual. . . [and expressing] that sexuality is a truly fluid register which are only contained [sic] when societal expectations emerge" (Hong 243).⁶

The lack of label allows Viveka to explore her gender identity. Throughout the novel Viveka tries to shape her identity encountering different situations. Her journey begins by a strong belief that she is an incarnation of her dead brother thinking of herself as a boy named Vince where she tries to adopt masculine features by changing out of her dress and wearing her brother's pyjama or using socks to mimic penis. After meeting Anick she wants to adopt a more feminine side of herself when she thinks of doing cardio to look more feminine and less masculine. Mootoo tries to portray different gender identities like non-binary, queer, transgender, lesbian etc through one single character of Viveka. Mootoo does not identify the characters of Valmiki and Viveka under one single domain because they have both heterosexual sexual and homosexual relationships owing to different situations and cultural acceptability, by putting them under one label would have only confused the readers. Therefore, readers now focus on emotional incapacity of the locale in

³ O'Callaghan, E. (2012). Sex, secrets, and shani mootoo's queer families. *Contemporary Women's Writing*

⁴ Silvera, Makeda "Man Royals and Sodomites: Some Thoughts on the Invisibility of Afro-Caribbean Lesbians." *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian*

and Gay Writing from the Antilles. Ed. Thomas Glave. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2008. 344-54.

⁵ Young, Kate. "Notes on the Social Relations of Gender." *Gender in Caribbean Development*. 1988

⁶ Hong Sohn, Stephen. "Rev. of Valmiki's Daughter by Shani Mootoo." *LiveJournal* Aug. 2009. Web. 14 July 2011.



which these characters reside which has deeper socio-political meaning and toxic socio-cultural environment in the Indo-Caribbean culture than the mere vocabulary issue.

Yet, there are a few drawback since Valmiki can never be in a homosexual relationship with any of the men he loved and Viveka has a constant pressure of accommodating her complex gender identity within the elite section of Trinidad representing societal oppression on the LGBTQ community of real Caribbean culture. As Anick describes her desperate situation to keep her identity concealed in the lines: “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.”(Mootoo 177). The inability of acceptance in the Indo-Caribbean society and Viveka’s full expression of her gender identity by taking the flight to Canada in search of more acceptable community thus becomes deeply symbolic.

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