

Out of Lesbian Bond, Heterosexual Bound as A Metaphorical Suicide: A Lesbo-Anomic Reading of Shobhaa De's *Snapshots*

Dipak Giri

Ph. D. Research Scholar, Raiganj University (West Bengal)
(dipakgiri84@yahoo.in)

Abstract

*Anomie in sociology is a condition that distances an individual from prevailing social standards or norms. An anomic state of mind suffers social alienation and self-distancing. When an individual becoming victim of anomie, prefers the path of suicide, such individual deems to be called anomic and such suicide is looked upon as anomic suicide. Emile Durkheim first brought Anomic suicide up to public discussion in his ground-breaking book *Suicide*, originally written in French *Le Suicide* in 1897. Anomie plays a major role in gay-lesbian study since the majority of people belonging to a gay-lesbian community are by and large anomic. Trapped between societal demands and individual choice, people of gay-lesbian community undergo anomic suicide, either in a real or metaphoric sense. In this respect, lesbian characters in Shobhaa De's *Snapshots* are to a large extent anomic. None of the lesbian characters in this novel are seen committing suicide. Still they appear to us the best exemplary figures of anomie who undergo anomic status and commit suicide in metaphoric sense.*

Keywords: Anomie, Heteronormativity, Lesbian, Metaphoric, Suicide

A condition of instability arising out of a breakthrough of social norms or values is called 'Anomie', also spelled as 'Anomy', 'which was first popularized by Emile Durkheim in his study of *Suicide*, originally written in French *Le Suicide* in 1897. According to

Ransome, 'Anomie' is "a state of limbo and uncertainty that critically undermines the individual's sense of security and well-being" (59). It is completely opposite to 'Synnomie', also spelled as 'Synnomy' which, according to Freda Adler who coined the term after Durkheim's 'Anomie' is "a congruence of norms to the point of harmonious accommodation" (57). An individual undergoing anomic state of mind often experiences a sense of social alienation and self-estrangement leading to suicide which may come in both real and metaphoric senses. An anomic state of mind either commits real suicide facing death or leads metaphoric suicide living in life-in-death condition. Durkheim in his book *Suicide* chiefly concentrates on 'Anomie' along with his study on sociological factors as regards suicide rate in different communities. In his research findings on suicide rate in different communities, Durkheim finds suicide as the outcome of rupture that comes to pass when one loses one's link to the society. In his words, "Anomy, therefore, is a regular and specific factor in suicide in our modern societies; one of the springs from which the annual contingent feeds. So we have here a new type to distinguish from the others. It differs from them in its dependence, not on the way in which individuals are attached to society, but on how it regulates them. Egoistic suicide results from man's no longer finding a basis for existence in life; altruistic suicide, because this basis for existence appears to man situated beyond life itself. The third sort of suicide, the existence of which has just been shown, results from man's activity's lacking regulation and his consequent

sufferings. By virtue of its origin we shall assign this last variety the name of *anomic suicide*.” (Durkheim 219).

Anomic suicide is an accepted fact among gay-lesbian communities in both real and metaphoric senses. Either a real suicide attempt or metaphoric suicide in life-in-death condition is very common in gay-lesbian community. “Gay and lesbian...face problems in accepting themselves due to internalization of a negative self image...Gay youth face extreme physical and verbal abuse, rejection and isolation from family and peers. They often feel totally alone and socially withdrawn out of fear of adverse consequences. As a result of these pressures, lesbian and gay youth are more vulnerable than other youth to psychosocial problems including substance abuse, chronic depression, school failure, early relationship conflicts, being forced to leave their families, and having to survive on their own prematurely. Each of these problems presents a risk factor for suicidal feelings and behaviour among gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual youth.” (Gibson 110). As regards anomic suicide in gay-lesbian community, David Kleitsch et al. observe, “anomic suicide...may be in response to the marked changes that result from, for example, being excluded from family life or having to adapt to life in a new, unfamiliar social milieu.” “Durkheim’s theory applied to gay men and lesbians illustrates how the extensive and diverse alienation reported may lead to suicide. Diverse groups of gay people have not yet successfully decreased alienation or suicide” (Saunders 1). Since lesbians categorically belonging to the second gender for being women are doubly marginalized, the rate of such suicide is more commonplace among them than gay homosexuals.

Anomie in most cases comes out due to conflict of belief systems, as observed by Jeanne N. Knutson, “anomie...stems not from a lack of rules, but rather, from conflict between the directives of two belief systems” (146). Caught between homosexual orientation and heterosexual norms, a lesbian becomes anomic which alienates her from her family in particular and society in general. Thus, “anomie is a

mismatch, not simply the absence of norms” (Star). Caught between universal heterosexual norms and individual homosexual preferences, Lesbian characters in Indian fictions are by and large anomic. Trapped between the forces of traditional heterosexual choice and individual homosexual preference they can neither become true to their self nor accept the normative tradition of heterosexual marriage and child rearing. They either commit suicide or live metaphoric suicide in life-in-death condition. The same spirit of non-compliance is very true among lesbian characters in Shobhaa De’s *Snapshots*. Lesbian characters in this novel are victims of social alienation and self-distancing for their homosexual orientation. Though none of the characters in both these novels commit suicide, they still come to the category of anomie leading metaphoric suicide since they can neither meet to what their family in particular and society in general demands from them nor they can come true to the expectation of their self which, trapped between the social and individual preferences, become split into two halves or in other word, fragmented between self and other.

Shobhaa De’s *Snapshots* is a story of six school friends- Aparna, Reema, Noor, Surekha, Rashmi and Swati who meet together at Reema’s house when they become grownups after a long time to share their experiences as regards their past and present life. In the course of their conversation, we come to know that Surekha is a lesbian who is leading anomic life for being her homosexual orientation. She has been in love with her lesbian partner Dolly ever since her school days but due to familial and societal pressures, she is forced to accept heterosexual marital bond with Harsh Shah with whom she is unhappily passing her marital life. “There was little”, Surekha and Dolly “didn’t know about one another; menstrual cycles, pre-menstrual headaches, anxieties big and small. Surekha did most of the talking, using Dolly to pour out her daily frustration, minor bickering with her mother-in-law, major fights with husband, arguments with her child’s class teacher, defiance from old servants, even dissatisfaction with her sex life. Surprisingly, Dolly was not jealous. She didn’t consider Surekha’s husband a

rival. He was merely the man who paid all the bills and demanded his conjugal rights periodically. She knew Surekha hated having sex with him – detested every coupling. But both of them were practical enough to realize that that was the ticket to keeping the marriage going. Besides, as Surekha often told her, ‘What is there? It doesn’t cost anything. I open my legs mechanically and stare at the clock on the wall across the bed. It’s all over in about six to eight minutes. ‘Dolly’s dependence on Surekha was more profound. Surekha was her crutch, her sanity, her love. There was nothing she wouldn’t do to make Surekha happy. And Dolly undertook her little tasks unhesitatingly, ungrudgingly, unreservedly. There was little in life for her beyond Surekha” (De 169).

The relationship that Surekha and Dolly presents is a celebration of lesbian relationship. In this connection, Simone de Beauvoir’s observation in her epoch making book *The Second Sex* is noteworthy: “Inversely, a woman who wants to enjoy the pleasures of her femininity in feminine arms also knows the pride of obeying no master...the association of two women can take many different forms; it is based on feeling, interest, or habit; it is conjugal or romantic; it has room for sadism, masochism, generosity, faithfulness, devotion, caprice, egotism, and betrayal; there are prostitutes as well as great lovers among lesbians” (Beauvoir 431). The life of Surekha and Dolly in each other’s embrace appears to us as true as Beauvoir’s well noted observation. They appear to us two halves getting completeness only when tied together as observed by our third person narrator “inextricably intertwined” (De 170). “Dolly and Surekha were like a well-adjusted, happily married couple. There was no passion to deal with any longer. Just enough physical familiarity to provide regular comfort” (170). Though the kind of relationships that Surekha and Dolly share is based on lesbianism, Surekha is never found ready to accept it. She dares not to acknowledge it even privately before her friends. She is by and large homophobic besides anomic as it becomes evident in her conversation with her friends in the narrative. When Noor recalls how she has caught Surekha and Dolly

one afternoon having “their hands up each other’s uniforms” and “kissing on the lips” (163), Surekha vehemently protested. When Noor starts becoming bolder with Reema as regards to Surekha’s relationship with Dolly in spite of Surekha’s objection, Surekha tries to cover up the relationship in the garb of friendship, “It’s nothing like that. What is there to know? We are still friendly, what’s wrong? Can’t two women be friends?” (164).

The condition of lesbians in the society of Surekha and Dolly is such that they always have to camouflage their sexual orientation since here they are not supposed to show liberal attitude in regards to their sexual preference. Since society looks upon lesbians as mentally deviant, they hardly could gather courage to declare their true self in regards to their sexual orientation. Both Surekha and Dolly, as observed by our third person narrator, are “intense, mutually-dependent camaraderie” (170). Though, however, in spite of being in lesbian relationship for years together with the other and the fact being crystallized as an open secret, ironically, Surekha never confesses it. That it has been a known fact not only among their friends circle, but also among their familial circle, becomes evident in Noor’s words: “Let me tell you that’s not all. And that’s not what Dolly’s family thinks. They blame you for Dolly being unmarried. They say you broke up all her relationships” (164). This matter is also up to Surekha’s mother-in-law as affirmed by Noor, “But isn’t it true that she comes over for afternoon naps very often and your mother-in-law throws fits?” (164). Surekha all the time wears the feigned mask of ignorance. Here Surekha appears to us anomic leading symbolic suicide in metaphoric sense, one who is false to self living metaphoric suicide becoming other on familial surface in particular and societal surface in general.

Similarly, Dolly is also anomic. The only difference between the two friends is that Surekha sacrifices her self on the altar of heteronormativity accepting the heterosexual marriage but Dolly remains unmarried rather openly refusing to come upon the decision of her family. Dolly has ever been loyal to her relationship

with Surekha ever since her school days. Even after Surekha's marriage, she keeps her visiting on at Surekha's in-law's house, though she is taken in rather indifferently by Surekha's mother-in-law. "As for Dolly, she'd committed herself to looking after Surekha's eternal well-being a long, long time ago. It was the only real commitment in her life. The one thing that kept her going" (170). Dolly has even given up the prospect of settlement in Singapore for Surekha's sake. She has found a lesbian partner there but only for Surekha's sake, she postponed his journey when everything was almost settled. The condition of Dolly is more pathetic than Surekha since Surekha can throw dust into the eyes of many camouflaging her heterosexual marriage publicly and homosexual relationship privately but Dolly, being unmarried hardly can escape from being labeled as lesbian. Noor is true when she says to Surekha, "Just because Dolly is unmarried they'll label her a lesbian. You have a good camouflage. You can hide behind marriage. But for Dolly it must be very difficult" (166).

Both Surekha and Dolly in Shobhaa De's *Snapshots* are lesbians by their sexual orientation but they can hardly find a source of outlet for their suppressed desires. They appear not fit enough for a hetero-normative culture while being forced to lead a life of confinement within a society which is totally blind to their urges and feelings. They are mismatch to the hetero-normative culture and are largely anomic. Neither of them commits suicide -though symbolically dead being entrapped into the adverse normative bearings of the society in which they live. Since their sexual orientation remains suppressed, they are already leading a dead, frozen life, which is a symbolic suicide. As Durkheim points out, the extreme rise of individuation in modern societies may produce an endless sense of loss in the mind of an individual: "...unlimited desires are insatiable by definition and instability is rightly considered a sign of morbidity... to pursue a goal which is by definition unattainable is to condemn oneself to a state of perpetual unhappiness" (Durkheim 208-9). Thus, lesbian characters in Shobhaa De's *Snapshots* are truly anomic for having been



distanced from the attainment of their desired goal.

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