A Lesbian by Any Other Name is Just as Gay: Labels in *Valmiki’s Daughter*

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IN SHANI MOOTOO’S NOVEL *VALMIKI’S DAUGHTER*, the author explicitly explores conflict between Indo-Caribbean and queer identities. Yet, in contrast to many Western authors who write about queer sexualities and gender identities, Mootoo never uses the words gay, lesbian, or bisexual in her novel. Instead, her descriptions of her characters’ conflicting experiences with their sexual orientations and gender identities are expressed less concretely through intricate descriptions of desire and bodily discomfort. Western queer authors could cry out against Mootoo’s exclusion of words like gay in her novel, declaring that her work contributes to queer erasure endemic in Western media. But Mootoo’s choice is a deliberate one that not only points out potential stumbling blocks in Caribbean culture regarding sexuality, but also makes accessible complicated identities— influenced by such seemingly disparate factors like race and class—that might be oversimplified in Western queer culture.

It would be easy to argue that Mootoo’s primary reasoning for not having her characters use queer terminology in defining their identities is a mere commitment to the hyper-realism of the novel. In Mootoo’s “Your Journey” sections, she outlines everything there is a for a visitor to know about San Fernando, Trinidad—from the smells of roasted peanuts and unwashed men (Mootoo 9) to the most predominant skin colors of the street’s beggars (10). Indeed, in contrast to Mootoo’s first novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night*, which is set on the fictitious, dreamlike island of Lantaracamara, every detail of *Valmiki’s Daughter* highlights the realities of Trinidad—the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Within this context, it would be possible to claim that *Valmiki’s Daughter* depicts and espouses the homophobic aspects of Caribbean culture. Yet this analysis would fail to take into account that Mootoo is, in fact, actively confronting and questioning the cultural norms of Caribbean culture by investigating the reasons behind their existence.

In Evelyn O’Callaghan’s eyes, Mootoo’s refusal to use Western terminology to define sexual identity is not only representative of the novel’s hyper-realism, but also belies Mootoo’s political purpose of promoting queer identities in the Caribbean. O’Callaghan turns to autobiographical writings of Mootoo and other queer Caribbean authors, like Makeda Silvera, when analyzing *Valmiki’s* portrayal of queer erasure. Silvera describes the difficulties she faced when trying to claim her lesbian identity in a Jamaican context. Although her family and community was full of “man royals” and sodomites” (Silvera 345), her grandmother still declared that lesbianism was “a white people ting” (346). Critic Rosemary King also struggled with navigating the boundaries between her queerness and her Caribbean-ness. She describes situations when her neighbors might declare that she was “contaminated” by Western values or not raised Caribbean enough (King 121). So, it is no wonder that Western terminology is inaccessible to the Krishnu family, since it is so firmly grounded in influences that post-colonial Caribbeans are still trying to escape.

Mootoo does not shy away from confronting how Western thought—particularly that related to race—might influence her characters’ sexualities and gender identities. As a child, Viveka envisaged herself as a blond-haired boy with blue eyes named Vince (Mootoo 110)—a bastion of strength and stoicisim within herself who “would not let her” cry (168). The two women she has expressed attraction towards—her gym teacher, Miss Russell, and Anick, a French woman Viveka’s age married to a local boy—have been white. In this way, Viveka’s desires, whether they are focused on the people she is attracted to or her gender identity, are shown by Mootoo to be strongly shaped by lingering ideas of Western beauty. Viveka’s full expression of her own identity goes against ma-
jor cultural norms and ideas behind post-colonial Trinidad, making her eventual flight to Canada deeply symbolic. However, in the novel, Caribbean culture still does not outright reject the white Western woman as an ideal to strive for—Valmiki has overt affairs with his white patients to mask his own homosexuality, and Nayan’s marriage to Anick is portrayed as being partially motivated by the status a white wife would bring to him. The place of whiteness in Valmiki’s Daughter is just as complicated as the ideas of gender and sexuality it explores; it would be foolish to underestimate its influence on the character's words and deeds.

Like race, social class influences how the characters in Valmiki’s Daughter can express their gender identities and sexualities, but not always in clear-cut ways. From the perspective of Valmiki, his lower-class lover, Saul, has a much easier time having sexual relationships with other men than Valmiki. Saul’s hunting friends and his wife know and accept Valmiki and Saul’s relationship, while Valmiki goes through the motions of affairs with women to mask his true nature from the judgmental eyes of the Trinidadian elite. However, the comments of Saul’s wife prove that this acceptance has more to do with necessity than increased tolerance; since her husband does not leave “a mark on her body” and provides for her, some sexual deviancy can be excused (Mootoo 125). While a person of Devika’s class would lose social standing if she left her husband because of his homosexuality, someone like Saul’s wife could lose life and livelihood.

Similarly, Viveka’s social standing also affects the ways she can express her sexuality and gender. Devika forbids Viveka to play on the volleyball team—and thus show off her strength and masculine love and skill for athletics—because their family’s social standing is too high for her to mix with Trinidadians from lower classes (48). Yet Viveka’s class also gives her the means to seek out the reportedly more tolerant social circles in the north of the island (360). While race influences the form of the characters’ desires, social class forms their expression, and both—while not easily understood—are key in an analysis of identity in the Caribbean.

The Krishnu family—particularly Devika and Valmiki—are forced to work with the lacking terminology that is available to them. The parents dance around concerns about their daughter Viveka’s identity and Valmiki’s own with words like “thing” (Mootoo 64) and “aberration” (120). The word homosexual is only mentioned once through the course of the novel, and only in Devika’s thoughts—never aloud (129). Even the wife of Saul—the man that Valmiki is having a not-so-secret affair with—skirts around language that would explicitly describe the nature of the relationship between the two men, despite the brazenness with which she publicly discusses the affair with Devika (124-5). The refusal of Caribbean people to confront queerness in their own midst only makes it more difficult for them to discuss and understand. The lack of terminology for Mootoo’s queer characters with which to articulate their identities does not make their experiences any less rich or meaningful, however. Valmiki still longs for his college lover, Tony, and struggles not to call this man whom he ultimately rejected so many years ago; the passion that Viveka and Anick have for each other is no less intense because they do not have labels for themselves or their relationship.

This freedom, despite—or perhaps because of—a lack of identity labels, has led reviewer Stephen Hong to praise the novel for “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” (243). This fluidity is perhaps most obvious in regards to Viveka’s gender identity and expression. As a child, she alternately imagines herself as the boy Vince and as an incarnation of her dead brother, Anand; there is one evening where she changes out of her dress and wears her brother’s pajamas (169). Viveka even recollects one experience where she takes a sock from her father, balls it up and shoves it in her pants to mimic a penis (160). As an adult, however, her identity seems to shift planes depending on her situation, even as she feels like “Anand’s spirit lived inside her (286).” Often masculine of center, Viveka prefers to wear her “uniform” consisting of the least feminine dress she owns (Mootoo 87-8) or her father’s old kurta in lieu of more feminine attire (192). However, she does express a desire to look more womanly after she first meets Anick, considering doing cardio to become “less barrel-like, less
muscular... more shapely (200).” Initially, Viveka only understands why heterosexual encounters can be satisfying by viewing them through a decidedly male lens—imagining herself as her male friend while looking at a female friend (107) and even initially sees herself as a young man when she starts to have sex with Anick—this first time with Anick triggered “the strongest sensation of that sort Viveka had ever known—of not being female (322)”. Eventually, Viveka sees her feelings not pertaining to men or male identity, but “hers and hers alone” (323). This description highlights how individual Viveka’s feelings about her identity are, grounded not only in her race and class but in the specifics of her family, her childhood. Certainly, some labels might fit her identity, but one word alone could not encompass all its nuances.

The lack of labels helps clarify gender and sexual fluidity in ways that Western labels, with all their baggage, cannot. If Mootoo tried to apply Western terms to Viveka’s identity—like genderqueer, transgender, or nonbinary—it would take away from the individualism, the privacy, of her gender experience. The terms themselves might even only confuse readers, Western or otherwise; they are new and abstract enough that they could easily be met with confusion or objections from people who define a word like genderqueer differently than Mootoo might. This lack of effectiveness also applies to the sexual identities of both Valmiki and his daughter. Since they have both had heterosexual experiences despite preferring homosexual relations, readers could easily get distracted by trying to fit the characters into their conceptions of bisexuality or homosexuality and lose track of Mootoo’s deeper points about the complexity of identity. Instead, the reader gets to focus on the emotional complexity that ensues from the characters’ conflict with the unaccepting locale, which has deeper socio-political meaning than quibbles about vocabulary ever could in the Indo-Caribbean context.

Mootoo’s refusal to use Western labels to describe her characters’ identities not only contributes to her hyper-realistic style, but also to a revolutionary understanding of queer identity. Mootoo is careful to acknowledge the toxic socio-cultural climate that makes it impossible for members of the queer community to assign themselves a letter of an ever-expanding initialism, but there are still underlining positive aspects to this narrative that are impossible to ignore. Because the characters in Valmiki’s Daughter are forced to work outside of Western labels for their identities in the effort to rebuild after Trinidad’s colonial past, their identities remain private and unique to themselves and themselves alone. Western readers may benefit from these more complex notions of identity, as current Western narratives ignore how the nuances of particular socio-cultural backgrounds influence identity formation. Representations of gender and sexuality in this novel bring to light these factors and invite the reader to explore how these formulations can apply to themselves, or even on a grander, global scale.

Yet the downsides of this culture are of course impossible to ignore—Valmiki could never be in a public relationship with Tony or Saul, Anick must stay with a husband who loves the status she brings him more than the woman she is, and Viveka faces constant pressure to make her multilayered gender identity and presentation more digestible for her upper-middle class Trinidadian bubble. The situation in Trinidad for LGBTQ people as represented in Valmiki’s Daughter is an incredibly complex one, a story of small freedoms as much as one of societal oppression. Mootoo presents a story that reflects the rich intersections of identity experienced by queer Caribbean people. To try and argue that the absence of labels from her novel is only good or bad, subversive or unenlightened, is to do not only her writing, but the intricacies of real Caribbean culture, a grand disservice.
Works Cited


