

Sexual Identity and Gender Ambiguity: Rereading of Elizabeth Bishop's Poetry

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Abstract

The lesbian is never with us, it seems, but always somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind, a wanderer in the dusk, a lost soul, a tragic mistake, a pale denizen of the night. – Terry Castle, The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Sexuality and Modern Culture

The name and work of Elizabeth Bishop dots English literature and her “the art of losing” is one of the most well-known lines of the language. However, collections of Bishop’s works are queerly difficult to lay hold of and her life remains even less discussed. Bishop was extremely private about her sexuality and eroticism; as Brett C. Millier, her biographer has remarked that she did not write about it or apparently did not talk about it. Steven Gould Axelrod, a professor of English at the University of California, recently argued that Bishop’s Cold War poetry offers a contrasting ideology to the compulsory heterosexuality of the epoch. In fact, while Bishop might not have composed obvious anti-Cold War lines, her poetry is outlined by a lesbian perceptibility that opposes the culture’s construction of both sexuality and gender. This paper purports to examine Elizabeth Bishop’s seemingly underrated and yet nuanced poetry with a specific focus on homosexuality to create a poetic home. Home, in this sense, offers security for a displaced lesbian, moving from filial to amorous love, as well as literary home for a poet who struggled for critical recognition. Further, juxtaposing the familiar with the bizarre, Bishop situates her speaker in a construction of natural and artificial boundaries that break down across her geology and represent lesbianism through multiple female figures that permeate her poems to convey the alienness one experiences for being homosexual.

Keywords: Homosexual, Lesbianism, Gender, Sexuality, Performativity

Introduction

Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979), was a twentieth century American poet, short story writer and a prolific letter writer, popularly known as “female poet” or “Lesbian poet”, though she did not consider herself to be so. The winner of Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1970, Elizabeth Bishop, was perhaps one of the finest four or five American poets of her time. Bishop didn’t follow the way of other writers like Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell and Adrienne Rich and grow confessional, and this is what makes her all the more broadly esteemed. In contrary to confessional poetry, fueled by the will to confront, reveal and explore, Bishop’s poems are regarded as works of reticence and introversion. The poet herself is often viewed as aloof and shies, maintaining privacy in her life and works and always being protective about her sexuality. She wished to cover up her private life in her writings yet they are so personal, that’s what paradoxical about it. The problem of homosexuality in Bishop’s readings is explicit. Marshall found it remarkable that being a shy alcoholic, Bishop carried shame about many aspects of herself but she never seemed ashamed of her lesbianism. It seems like Bishop has traveled in a “world of women”. She went to girl’s high school and women’s college, and it seems that she was more comfortable in women-heavy places. In spite of the fact that she was never ashamed of her sexuality, her homosexuality was a carefully kept secret in her lifespan as the social pressures always try to subjugate any kind of deviance. This suppression of her sexuality actually comes out in her poems, providing them the force and intensity. By reading her poems through the lenses of lesbianism, the progression of her homosexuality is revealed.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this paper is to explore the gender perspective in some selected poems of Elizabeth Bishop, which emphasize on the lesbian criticism. It tries to find out homosexual elements by a careful reading of these seemingly underrated yet nuanced poems of Elizabeth Bishop and explore how explicitly she dealt with the theme of lesbianism and her urge for same-sex love. It also deals with Bishop's question about a coherent sexual identity and gender ambiguity, especially through "Exchanging Hats", "In the Waiting Room" and "It is marvelous to wake up together".

Elizabeth Bishop is an American poet, known for her witty, polished and descriptive verse. Her first book of poetry was *North & South* published in 1946. One of the reasons that she didn't get much critical recognition during her lifetime is because she didn't like to give her poetry public readings, publishing one slim book of poetry only once in a decade. May Swenson, a contemporary lesbian poet of Bishop, said about Bishop that, "She is not known to the public for anything but her work". Described as "writer's writer" by John Ashbery, Bishop achieved canonical status with a whirlwind of critical interest and the foundation of Elizabeth Bishop Society. Bishop refused to publish her works in all-female poetry anthologies, which made other female authors, related to this women's movement, think that she was against this movement. As Kathleen Spivack, a student of Harvard, who was close to Elizabeth Bishop in the 60s, stated,

I think Bishop internalized the misogyny of the time. How could she not... Bishop had a very ambivalent relation to being a woman plus poet---plus lesbian - in the Boston/ Cambridge/ Harvard nexus... Extremely vulnerable, sensitive, she hid much of her private life... She internalized many of the male attitudes of the day toward women, who were supposed to be attractive, appealing to men... (28)

However, Bishop denied this as she said in an interview with *The Paris Review* that she still considered herself as a 'strong feminist', but it is just that she didn't want to be judged on the basis of her gender or sexual orientation, rather she preferred to be appraised for the quality of her writing.

Bishop's published works are carefully personal and ambiguous, with a conscious effort to conceal its less obvious subjects. When she was eight years old, her father died and when she was a toddler her mother was committed to a mental hospital. Parental instability and alcoholism affect the poet's background. It might amaze the casual readers to perceive that Bishop had several same-sex lovers during her lifetime. According to Brett Millier, her biographer, Bishop had at least eight such relationships, among which the most well-known is her sixteen-year partnership in Brazil with Lota de Macedo Soares, which she started at the age of forty. It is at that time when it first seemed possible for her, as Miller writes, to rethink "... questions of lifestyle and identity, specifically of a lesbian lifestyle as it might relate to her public and private identity" (237). After the death of Alice Methfessel, her late-in-life

partner, in 2011, it becomes easier to chronicle Bishop's life, when a trove of the poet's letters was released. Marshall in his new biography of the poet *A Miracle for Breakfast* reflects,

I think that Alice and Elizabeth were both looking for someone and they found that someone in each other. And they found a kind of equality in energy and commitment and devotion, despite the age difference, and the difference in capabilities professionally. (69)

Elizabeth Bishop's works are extensive and thought provoking. Her writings for the most part have been associated with the themes of travelling and displacement. Her books like *Questions of Travel* (1965) and *Geography III* (1978) are essentially devoted to this subject, which can likewise be discovered scantily in her other works. Her poems also deal with themes like death ("First Death in Nova Scotia"), loss of childhood innocence and incompleteness ("In the Waiting Room"), Alcoholism ("The Prodigal"), Nature ("The Bight" ; "The Fish") etc. However, the subject matter of sexuality and gender, if not all that obvious in her poems, still remains as an important key to understand Bishop's works. 'The body' remains tantalizingly elusive in many of her poems, an elusiveness which proves both seductive and at the same time frustrating. Within an epistemological and ontological framework, Bishop's poetry of the body explores the crossing point of sexuality and gender with ways of being and knowing. The aim of this paper is to find out homosexual elements by a careful reading of some select poems of Elizabeth Bishop and explore how explicitly she dealt with the theme of lesbianism and her urge for same-sex love. It also deals with Bishop's question about a coherent sexual identity and gender ambiguity, especially through "Exchanging Hats", "In the Waiting Room" and "It is marvelous to wake up together".

This paper proposes the gender perspective in these selected poems of Elizabeth Bishop, which emphasizes on the lesbian criticism. Gender is a category which is related much more to what one does than to what one is - it is something what one identifies as, not one's biological sex. Gender criticism and studies is based on the premise that, while sex is determined by anatomy, gender-masculinity or femininity are personality traits and behavior can be largely independent of anatomy, and is a social construction that is diverse variable and dependent on historical circumstances. Thus, gender criticism analyzes differing conceptions of gender and sexuality and their role in the writing, reception, subject matter and evaluation of literary works.

Bishop's "Exchanging Hats", published in 1979, mirrors the social taboo of gender roles and crossdressing. In quite a straight forward manner it deals with the subject matter of gender-ambiguity and a deeper meaning of fashion. This poem is paradigmatic of something that Judith Butler calls as "gender trouble". Although some author suggested that, "Bishop uses the theatricality of verse to simultaneously unveil and disguise her unorthodox identity." (Lombardi, 65). The poem dramatizes and

complicates the performativity of gender constructions, as its ambiguous lyrical voice moves from identification to separation in relation to the "uncles" and "aunts" addressed to in this verse. The first straight forward element to introduce the theme of gender and sexuality in this poem is the title itself. "Exchanging Hats" can be interpreted as "Exchanging sexual roles". Throughout the poem the poet uses various kind of metaphors, as the "uncles" and "aunts" are presented trying to wear hats, usually associated with the opposite sex - "uncles" wears "lady's hat" and aunts the "yachtsmen's cap" - feminine aunts play the role of women, who try to look cute by wearing "yachtsmen's cap", drawing the attention of others by "screeching" but "such caps may not be worn next year" - this may suggest that these negative thoughts on gender ambiguity and identity crisis will seize to exist.

In the poem the poet talks of the complexities of 'costume' and 'custom' of the society: "we share your slight transvestite twist / in spite of our embarrassment/ costume and custom are complex." (04-06) Judith Butler's theory of gender identity consists mainly the relation between gender and dressing up - "custom" and "costume". The main point of her argument is that gender is not a social construction, rather, a kind of show, a performance we stage, thus impossible to essentialize. She says:

Acts, gestures and desires produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.(Butler,136)

Although in this poem, the lyrical voice addresses mainly the two "uncles" and "aunts", in line no 17 it speaks to an uncertain 'you': "or you who don the paper plate / itself, and put some grapes upon it / or sport the Indians feather bonnet..." (17-19). The gender of this 'you' is not mentioned and which suggests an ambiguous act of transvestism: it wears a "paper-plate", "grapes" and "the Indians feather bonnet", none of which is a traditional hat. The established heterosexual models are becoming more complicated by the act of wearing these kinds of hats, as the "you" is the paragon of gender generality: there is no reference of male or female, he or she, blurring totally the sexual roles.

One of the most remarkable and debatable poems of Elizabeth Bishop on lesbianism and realization of lesbian identity is "In the waiting Room". It is generally read as a poem about a young girl realizing her identity as an individual. According to Joanne Feit Diehl, this poem explores the self-relation to other. At the time when this poem was written lesbians were considered the odd persons of society- the deviant - they could not live freely or openly. Thus the realization of a young girl that she is more drawn to woman than man would have been very troublesome and embarrassing thing. It is like

compulsory, at that time, for one, to be heterosexual, and a girl would have been expected - unless and until she is ready to be branded as a "spinster" - to grow up to marry the opposite sex. The youth of the girl would consist of being "in the waiting room" of heterosexuality and for a lesbian heterosexuality might seem violent - a source of pain rather than of pleasure.

The girl in the poem reads National Geographic while waiting for her Aunt Consuelo in the waiting room of the dentist's chamber which "was full of grown up people" (8). The magazine contained various kind of photographs which signify the impending change and explore her psychology. She "carefully" studies the photographs which draws her attention at once. She sees the photographs of African women with exposed breasts. She has a very strong reaction to the photograph of the black naked woman. She says that this picture horrifies her: "Their breasts were horrifying." (31). But still she can't help herself from looking at those pictures. It may be their difference from herself or her concern about the changes that her body will undergo with her maturity, that horrifies her. But at the same time, it might also be possible that she was attracted to the woman in sexual way. Her reaction to her Aunt's cry "oh!" from the inside of the dentist's chamber, is also noteworthy. "Suddenly, from inside,/ come on oh! of pain/--Aunt Consuelo's voice--" (36-38). The girl imagines herself as if she is experiencing a painful situation which drives her to cry "oh!". That sound of "oh!" is quite similar to the sound of "O" and as suggested in King Lear; it may refer to the opening of the vagina. If the dentist be imagined as a figure of a painful heterosexual experience, which the girl doesn't want to have---that allusion make some sense because the heterosexual sex is a kind of torture for a lesbian. Again, she knew her Aunt was "a foolish timid woman" (42) and this kind of thought may raise in her because she considers a woman, who submits herself to a man, i.e, to heterosexuality, to be so. And she is proud that she is not the one of that kind. Her expressions show her preference for women over men.

Another best known poem of Elizabeth Bishop, "It is marvelous to wake up together" is deeply personal one. This poem was not published during her life-time, but discovered after her death among her personal paper. Apparently the poem may seem as deeply personal one, but if one reads it carefully, can understand the tone is more of a discussion of romance. The poem seems to be written during the time-span when she was in relationship with the Brazilian architect Lota de Macedo Soars. Thus if we consider it as a personal one, it is obviously about her queer relationship with her partner. The first lines of the poem focus on the image of the rain falling with the waking up of the couple: "It is marvelous to wake up together / At the same minute, marvelous to hear / The rain begin suddenly all over the roof." (01-03) The sound of the falling of rain on the roof, also can be contrasted by the relationship. The coupling of the romantic atmosphere and erotic love is an obvious choice but Bishop intensifies it through her excellent

power of observation. The line 'as if electricity passed through it' (05) can be compared with the passion and thrill of physical love which the lovers felt. Her mastery of imagination leads her to give the analogy between the electricity and the electrified pleasure of erotic love. Keeping away from the trap of cliched metaphor, she doesn't compare human eros to lightning however goes the opposite route, starting with the larger world and envisioning a literal storm that both shares its warmth and contrasts the power of hissing rain with the "light falling of kisses". The poet mingles the physical world of reality with the world of imagination. It is noteworthy that the lightning is "grounded" but the couple "imagine dreamily". Furthermore, the picture of the house as a "bird-cage of lightning" in the subsequent lines turns into a rich image of Jekyll-and-Hyde nature of love: intimate and inclined to ensnare. The zeal of 'Marvelous' exposes the strong emotions and deep feelings that Bishop edited out of most of her published poems. Indeed, marvelous and a fitting last gift from one of the world's best twentieth century poets.

Conclusion

Thus, to conclude, Bishop's poems not only highlight the "troubles" we are facing in gender performativity, but it also suggests the transgression of identity custom, the regulatory powers which control the flux from one to another gender, that decides what we can go through gender limits. The lesbianism in Bishop's poetry thus can be evident in playing with strict gendered identity, severe indictment of heterosexuality and the celebration of her lesbian identity. The paper tries to explore these themes in

three of her poems though there are other poems in which the same issues can be evident, for example "Roosters", "One Art", "The Gentleman of Shalott", "Crusoe in England", "Insomnia" etc. Therefore, the personal life Bishop has a clear reflection in her poetry that make her position as a poet unique and laudable.

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