

READING OF GIRL MEETS BOY, A REVISIONIST NOVEL BY ALI SMITH TO STUDY THE POSSIBILITY OF LESBIAN RELATION BETWEEN IPHIS AND IANTHE ELIMINATED IN OVID'S METAMORPHOSES

Dr. Savita A Patil

Professor and Head,

Sydenham College of Commerce and Economics,
Fort, Mumbai

Jaishree Premkumar

Research Scholar,

University of Mumbai,
Kalina, Santacruz

Abstract

The story of Iphis and Ianthe in Book IX of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is unique because it is believed to be the only known mythical tale from the classical Greco-Roman oeuvre that speaks about female same sex desire. The story is also unusual because as against most of the two hundred and fifty stories from *Metamorphoses* depicting love in terms of its destructive power invariably ending in a tragedy, Iphis and Ianthe's love story ends happily after the metamorphosis of Iphis' biological sex. Ali Smith, a postmodern revisionist writer however, disagrees with this Ovidian ending which took recourse to metamorphosis of biological sex change of Iphis to let her live "happily ever after" with Ianthe. Through her revisionist novel *Girl Meets Boy* Smith therefore revisits the Ovidian mythical narrative to explore the possibility of same sex relation between Iphis and Ianthe. The focus of this paper is thus to read Smith's revisionist novel to analyze how Smith has explored the possibility of lesbian relation between Iphis and Ianthe eliminated in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*.

Key words: Revisionist novel, metamorphosis, lesbian relation, biological sex, mythical tale

Brief Introduction of the Source Text and Revisionist Text :

The *Metamorphoses*, written in the eighth CE by Ovid is a compilation of around 250 hugely diverse mythical stories in chronicle order from creation of the world to the death and deification of Julius Caesar. The distinguishing feature of Ovidian magnum opus is that though hugely diverse, all the stories are seamlessly woven together through a connecting thread of metamorphosis or transformation. Book IX of *The Metamorphoses* depicts one such discursively constituted metamorphosis of Iphis. The story of Iphis and Ianthe begins with a beautiful girl named Iphis raised as a boy by her mother because Iphis' father had given clear instructions to

his wife to kill the baby if it was a girl child. Other than Iphis' mother only her nurse was aware of the deceit. When Iphis turns thirteen, her father arranges her marriage to Ianthe, a girl equal in age and beauty to Iphis. Ovid then shows predicament of Iphis who recognizes her homosexual passion for Ianthe as unnatural and monstrous as per dominant heterosexual norm prevailing at the time. The Augustan era poet then resolves this conflict by intervention of Deus ex Machina in the form of goddess Isis who transforms Iphis into a young man so that s/he could possess his beloved Ianthe.

Published in 2007, *Girl Meets Boy* is a revisionist novel by Scottish writer Ali Smith. Smith's novel is part of Canon Gate myth series and is considered to be one of the best books of 2007. Smith's revisionist novel, while acknowledging Ovidian mythical tale through intertextuality, also transforms it as per the changed historical context. Smith's revisionist novel changes the temporal setting to twenty-first century Inverness and also introduces lesbian love between Anthea and Robin, the present day Ianthe and Iphis. It is through the first-person narrations of Anthea and Robin that Smith challenges the canonical text and explores the possibility of lesbian love between Iphis and Ianthe by examining gaps and silences in the canonical text, study of which this research argues is important in order to understand the alternate version of Ovidian myth silenced under the impact of Augustan Patriarchy.

Study of Lesbian Love in *Girl Meets Boy* Portrayed by Smith :

Smith strongly feels that "Great books are adaptable; they alter with us as we alter in life, they renew themselves as we change and re-read them at different times in our lives" (*Artful* 31). As a twenty-first-century reader, Smith accordingly retells the Ovidian epic tale by re-visioning it in the era driven by the corporate and media industry to point out their role as ideological state apparatus by naturalizing binaristic sex/gender/desire matrix. Twenty-first-century technomediated Inverness, the residence and workplace of Imogen (Anthea's elder sister) and Anthea thus becomes the setting of Smith's revisionist novel. The novel is divided into five chapters which are alternately narrated by Anthea and Imogen, the two protagonists from Smith's novel. Another striking feature of Smith's revisionist novel is the clever use of five disparate yet linked quotations by E. M. Forster, Joseph Roth, Kathy Acker, Judith Butler and John Lyly to make her readers understand Anthea (present day Ianthe) and Robin's (present day Iphis) desire to escape prison house mythical history of gender.

After their grandparents' death Imogen comes to stay in their house in Inverness and also persuades Anthea to join her. Imogen not only succeeds in convincing Anthea to come to stay in their grandparent's house but also secures a job for her as a "Creative" at Pure, a multinational corporation where she herself works as one of its chief Creatives. According to Anthea, after coming to Inverness, something about Imogen had changed, though at that time she was not able to understand the change. At the insistence of Imogen, Anthea tries to fit herself into the corporate culture at Pure, but soon finds out that she could not let her "self" be taken away by the corporate ideologues. Not wishing to displease Midge, Anthea however, reluctantly continues working at Pure till one day while going to work she gets intrigued by a graffitied billboard:

Matchmake.com. Get What you Want. In smaller writing at the bottom, Get what you want In the First Six Weeks or Get Six Months' Free Membership.

It was a massive pink poster with little cartoon people drawn on it in couples... they were wearing uniforms or outfits and holding things to make it clearer what they were. A Nurse (female) and a Policeman (male). That was one couple.... The difference between male and female was breasts and hair.

Underneath the Get What you Want line someone had written, in red paint, in fine calligraphic hand: DON'T BE STUPID. MONEY WON'T BUY IT.

Then, below, in a kind of graffiti signature, the strange word: IPHISOL.

(31)

Through Anthea's narrative Smith points out how the contemporary technomediated world has become a new ideological state apparatus with its various forms such as online networks, advertisements and multinational corporations and which through all these forms represents and consolidates individuals' identity and desire based on its heteronormative sex/gender/sexuality matrix. The fundamental change in Imogen which Anthea, though notices, but is not able to decipher is later in the novel revealed to be about Imogen's self-indoctrination as an "intelligible gender" as per the heteronormative gender script of capitalist patriarchy.

Spurred by the rebellious act of IPHISOL Anthea decides to commit career suicide by giving provocative suggestions to Keith, the boss of boss when he seeks her inputs on marketing of Highland bottled water, his latest venture in the international market. After willful ruination of career, in her agitated state when Anthea goes to drink water and looks out of the office window, she sees that everybody down at the gate was watching a lad up a ladder who seemed to be doing some kind of maintenance on the Pure sign and then signing as IPHISOL. Intrigued by the lad's action and also eager to be out of the office she was just fired from, Anthea runs down the stairs. For the first time she comes face to face with IPHISOL and gets confused by his/her gender identity, which however, soon becomes insignificant to her as she exclaims, "My head, something happened to its insides....He was the most beautiful boy I had ever seen in my life. But he looked really like a girl. She was the most beautiful boy I had ever seen in my life"(45).

By letting her readers know Anthea's instinctual love for Robin aka IPHISOL (graffiti provocateur), Smith lets her readers understand that love does not and need not always follow binaristic sex/gender/sexuality matrix. When Anthea first observed Robin, the graffiti provocateur, she did not have any doubt in her mind about his sex/gender identity. Robin's gender performativity assured Anthea that she was describing a rebellious boy to her readers. But, as that rebellious boy comes down the ladder Anthea feels puzzled about the boy's identity because he also looked like a girl and therefore in her exhilarated state she describes the boy/girl as the most beautiful boy she had ever seen in her life. Smith's Anthea then confides in her readers that it was love at first sight for both her and Robin, her genderqueer social activist. For Smith's Anthea, "It had been exciting, first the not knowing what Robin was, then the finding out....She was so boyish it was girlish, so girlish it was boyish...I had simply never found anyone so right. Sometimes this shocked me so much that I was unable to speak"(84). At the beginning of the novel Anthea is described as a twenty-one year old girl who "was tired of having to be anything at all"(23) now tells her readers "I had not really known I could be so much more than myself. I had not known another body could do this to mine"(81) thereby clearly indicating her ecstatic state after meeting her genderqueer lover.

In Ovidian mythical tale though there was mutual attraction between Iphis and Ianthe, Ianthe is shown to be completely unaware of Iphis' subversive gender performativity. In other words, though Iphis' gender performativity subverts the heteronormative notion of sex/gender binary, Ianthe is shown to be attracted to Iphis because she had mistaken her to be a biological male. In Smith's revisionist novel however, though Anthea (Ovidian Ianthe) initially mistakes the graffiti provocateur to be a boy because of her culturally defined masculine clothing, even after

feeling confused about the biological sex of the graffiti provocateur, Anthea's feelings about the boy/girl remain unchanged. Indeed, unlike Ovid's Ianthe who is shown to have fallen in love with Iphis not for Iphis' subversive gender performativity but for mistaking Iphis to be a biological male, Smith's Anthea exhilarates in the subversive gender performativity of Robin.

As a child who had enjoyed listening to and also firmly believed in her grandfather's perspective on the importance of understanding gender fluidity, Anthea had found herself confused and unfit in the world where online networks, advertising and corporates in their role as ideological apparatus were trying to indoctrinate individuals into accepting the binarized sex/gender norms. Eventually, it is through Robin that Anthea realizes that if gender is not tied to sex, "either causally or expressively, then gender is a kind of action that can potentially proliferate beyond the binary limits imposed by the apparent binary of sex"(Butler *Gender Trouble* 152). Indeed, *Girl Meets Boy* along with "being a lesbian retelling of a classical myth, can be read as a fictional account of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*" as Smith's Anthea and Robin trouble "received notions of gender and sexuality and demonstrate the fluidity of gender categories espoused by queer theorists"(Ranger *An Intertextual Analysis of the Novel* 27)

Explanation of Ovidian Metamorphosis of Iphis' Biological Sex by Smith:

As their relationship becomes intimate, Robin feels it important that Anthea understands the complexity of their relationship. Robin was aware that even in the present era they will be questioned on their presumably unnatural relationship, especially because it was between two females. Robin therefore thinks it appropriate to revisit the story of Iphis and Ianthe as she feels that the Ovidian mythical tale which revolved around the theme of unnatural desire is relevant even in the twenty-first century. Robin accordingly first narrates the Ovidian tale in its original form and then while revisiting it the second time analyzes it to understand Ovid's decision to metamorphose Iphis' biological sex to give a supposedly happy ending to the tale. Thus, when Anthea feels that maybe Ianthe liked Iphis not because s/he was a boy but because she was exactly the kind of boy-girl she wanted to be with, Robin tells her that though she too agrees with that possibility it is debatable. According to Robin, the story of Iphis was made up by a man who, though was very fluid in terms of honouring all sorts of love, with the story of Iphis and Ianthe he showed. He thus could not help "fixating on what it is that girls don't have under their togas, and it's him who can't imagine what girls would ever do without one"(97).

Robin strongly feels that Romans were not against same sex love or homosexuality. Rather, for them sexual identity of an individual was characterized by the idea of activity and passivity in the sexual act. In other words, "Roman sexuality was a structuralist's dream. The Romans divided sexual categories for people and acts on the axis of 'active' and 'passive'. Active has, in their scheme, a single precise meaning. The one normative action is the penetration of a bodily orifice by a penis.... Thus 'active' is by definition 'male' and 'passive' is by definition 'female'."(Parker *Teratogenic Grid* 48). Sexuality during Ovidian era thus was founded on the concept of penetrative performativity model in which homosexuality between two men was considered to be natural as well as accepted possibility because one of the men in this relation performed the role of effeminate or passive partner. However, homosexuality between two females was impossible as per this model because it was consummation without penetrative sex between two passive and equal partners. Indeed, through Robin, her genderqueer character Smith argues that it is important to historicize sex/gender/sexuality matrix in order to understand that compulsory heterosexuality during Ovidian era was not defined in terms of

impossibility of homosexuality per say but in terms of impossibility of homosexuality between females.

Conclusion :

This paper attempted to read Smith's revisionist novel *Girl Meets Boy* to analyze the possibility of lesbian relation between Iphis and Ianthe eliminated in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Accordingly, this paper examined Robin (present day Iphis) and Anthea's (present day Ianthe) lesbian relationship which challenges the naturalized heterosexual norm. Similar to Ovidian mythical tale wherein Ianthe's love for Iphis is presumed to be heterosexual because she is unaware of Iphis' subversive gender performativity, in Smith's revisionist novel too Anthea initially mistakes Robin to be a boy because of her masculine gender performativity. Similarity with Ovidian tale however ends here because after realizing Robin's queer identity Anthea does not feel alarmed or upset but instead instinctually falls in love with her and exhilarates in her own sexual identity. Robin then revisits Ovidian mythical tale to point out to Anthea complex homosexual Romanic model which approved relationship between two males but rejected the one between two females because it was sex without penetration. Both Robin and Anthea strongly feel that though there was strong possibility of same sex love between Iphis and Ianthe, it was eliminated by Ovid under the pressure of prevalent sex/gender/sexuality model.

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