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Exploring the Queer' in Jewelle Gomez's Don't Explain'

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Abstract

Up till 1980's it was generally recognized that the western culture and its organizations were mainly constructed on three main axis – race, class and gender. All the critical enquiries in various disciplines in social science and humanities revolved around these constructs. In 1980s lesbian and gay studies brought in a fourth major category of analysis in literary and cultural studies – sexuality. Simultaneously, over the period of it gave rise to Queer theory. The theory has turned 'Queer' - a term which traditionally disparages homosexuality - into a proud banner. For Queer studies, human sexuality is always dynamic, fluid force. It's always changing and growing, and its boundaries are not always rooted in any one rigid definition or category as such. Jewelle Gomez is a one of the influential American writers and LGBTQ activists whose works have thrown light on the issues of LGBTQ women, especially the women of colour in America. 'Don't Explain,' a story by her that provides us some positive images of lesbians and a truthful depiction of some of the hardships they face in a heterosexual world. The present paper attempts to explore the term 'Queer theory' and in literary and cultural studies and the 'Queer' in Jewelle Gomez's story 'Don't Explain'.

Exploring the 'Queer' in Jewelle Gomez's 'Don't Explain'

Jewelle Gomez is a very influential American lesbian author. She has a prolific writing career as a short story writer, novelist, poet, critic and playwright. She has a vast experience of working in public television, theatre, as well as public activism and philanthropy. Her writing—fiction, poetry, essays and cultural criticism—has appeared in a wide variety of platforms, both feminist and mainstream. Her work focuses on women's experiences, particularly LGBTQ women of colour. She has authored seven books, among them the double Lambda Award-winning novel, *The Gilda Stories*. Apart from her writing career, she has been a very prominent activist for the rights of LGBTQ communities in USA, having served on various public bodies working in this field. She is also considered to be the "Aunt" of Afro-Futurism.

The present story for analysis is taken from her book *Don't Explain*, a collection of short fiction published first in 1998. In this collection of stories Gomez touches upon themes such as class race, gender hierarchy, racial and sexual identity, acceptance of Black lesbians in society, and eroticism. Gomez challenges what is considered to be 'normal' dominance in society in her stories with characters who overcome judgements and accusations by society and ultimately accept themselves and embrace their own identities. The story *Don't Explain* by her gives us positive images of lesbians and a realistic portrayal of some of the difficulties and hardship they have to face in a heterosexual and heteronormative world around them. The story is set in Boston, one of the cities in the northern states of USA in 1959. It is a simple tale of a middle-aged lesbian woman Letty who tries to come to terms with her sexuality but has difficulties to achieve so, because of the factors like 'internalized homophobia', compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia prevalent among the people around her. But, with the company of and in the community of some other lesbian women whom she encounters at the end of the story, she finally does seem to overcome this internalized homophobia about her sexuality. 'Don't Explain' throws light on the lives of lesbian characters a decade before the Gay Liberation

Movement, which had started in 1969, began organized political activities to gain civil rights for gay people in USA. At that time lesbians in America were given few or no civil rights. They could be beaten with little chance of protection from the police or the law system. In USA heterosexist individuals still often deny LGBTQ people some basic civil rights without having to worry too much about the law coming forward to stop them. The story, though portrays the picture of some sixty years ago, is still relevant to the present times because its exploration and positive portrayal of the lesbians for the better understanding of what we now call the Queer theory and the LGBTQ community issues.

In addition to being an interesting story 'Don't Explain' offers us an affirmative picture of lesbians—represented by the characters of Letty, Delia, Terry, Terry's friends, and the real-life character of legendary singer Billie Holiday—living in a heterosexual world. In order to analyze how Gomez's story fulfills this task, we shall try to examine: (a) its portrayal of lesbian isolation in a heterosexual world; (b) its positive depiction of lesbian characters free from the myths and stereotypes attached to it; and (c) its focus on the significance of lesbian community for the provision of emotional prop needed for an individual to come to terms with one's sexuality. In this analysis we shall be using some basic concepts from Queer theory like compulsory homosexuality, Homophobia, Homosocial activities, the women-identified women concept, Homoerotic imagery etc.

Lesbian Characters' isolation in a heterosexual world:

The events in the story are told through the eyes of Letty, the main character. She is a middle-aged unmarried woman of about thirty-five. Principally, she is a country girl of colour. from a village Burkeville in southern state Virginia. She has migrated to Northern part of America

– to a big city – Boston in 1952 for work. There she has been working in a bar as a waitress ever since. 'After Letty's mother died there has been no family to go back to down in Burkeville.' She is a person without a family. Though she has been working at the bar 411 Lounge for seven years, she doesn't seem to have any close friends as such, despite the fact that she works with women she likes and with whom she has a good deal in common. She is apprehensive and feels affliction and guilt about her sexual orientation and doesn't want to think about her past when she lived with lover Maxine. Letty clearly suffers from internalized homophobia, the self-hatred some LGBTQ people experience since, during their growth through adolescence into adulthood, they have 'internalized' or taken into themselves, or the homophobia pressed upon them by heterosexual and heteronormative culture (Frost and Meyer). She thinks she should not have the sexual feelings she has. This is evident when she, at the workplace, during a break is listening to her favorite song 'Don't explain' by Billie Holiday and she,

'Closed her eyes again for the few remaining minutes. The song was back in her head, and Letty had to squeeze her lips together to keep from humming aloud. She pushed her thoughts onto something else. But when she did she always stumbled upon Maxine. Letty opened her eyes. When she'd quit working at Salmagundi's and come to the 411 she'd promised herself never to think about any woman like that again. She didn't know why missing Billie so much brought it all back to her'(Gomez 11).

Taking into consideration Letty's internalized homophobia, she has reason to fear the women she thinks might be lesbians, as they might bring to the surface her own sexual feelings, which she is trying very hard to conceal. Worse still, they might come to know her non-heterosexual orientation, which she is trying to hide. On the other hand, she has reason to fear heterosexual people because if they learn about her secret, they will probably discard her, and

she might have to lose her job too. So, whether Letty thinks another woman is a lesbian or a heterosexual, she has reason to be wary and cautious about her dealings with them. That's why when she is invited by Delia, her colleague at the workplace, to her house to spend time at a get-together with her cousin and her friends she initially hesitates and tries to decline the invitation politely.

Even when Letty is by herself, she is afraid of her thoughts about her past and her former partner. The song 'Don't Explain' by Billie Holiday, whom Letty identifies as a lesbian and draws inspiration from, brings to her mind her hidden thoughts about her sexuality, 'She felt silly when she thought about it, but the melody gripped her like a solid presence. It was more than the music. Billie was her hero. Letty saw Billie as big, like herself, with big hungers and a hard secret she couldn't tell anyone. Two weeks before, when Letty had heard that Lady was dead, sorrow had enveloped her. A door had closed that she could not consciously identify to herself or to anyone. It embarrassed her to think about. Like it did when she remembered how she'd felt about Maxine' (Gomez 13).

The heterosexist society teaches a person that she must be heterosexual regardless of what she feels about her. It results into a compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 632). So is the case with Letty. If there wasn't such a pressure from the heteronormative society Letty would never feel the embarrassment about her liking and living with a same sex person. She perhaps might never have left Maxine so this compulsory heterosexuality has caused her alienation from Maxine as well as from her other would-be acquaintances.

Letty has attraction towards Billie Holiday, whom she meets one night when the singer visits the 411 bar with her band.

'She'd watched and listened, certain she saw something no one else did... Letty found reasons to walk up to the front—to use the telephone, to order a drink she paid for and left in the kitchen—just to catch the scent of her, the scent of sweat and silk emanating from her' (Gomez 13).

Letty believes that if she had made friends with Billie that night, it might all have been different. As she 'could have loved her enough to make it better' (Gomez 14). The death of the singer, with whom she could identify herself and 'the closing of the door' thus intensify her isolation from the society.

Delia and Terry, the cousins who have same sexual orientation as that of Letty, have to be careful about revealing their sexual identity as they are aware of the heterosexual world in which they live. Both women live together; Terry sometimes drops and picks up Delia from her workplace in her car. Letty never has a thought that they might be lesbian though she often travels with them in their car. Terry - 'She never spoke much. Not that she wasn't friendly. She always greeted Letty with a smile' (Gomez 13). Though the women evidently believe that Letty is a lesbian—that's why Terry asks Delia to invite Letty to meet their friends at their home—they also have reason to be apprehensive about allowing Letty into their secret. This is the reason they kept themselves isolated from her in a way and didn't invite Letty earlier. We see can see this in Delia's nervousness about inviting Letty to the get-together at her apartment. 'All the way uptown Delia explained that the evening wasn't a big deal and cautioned Letty not to expect much. "Just a few friends, hanging around, drinking and talking" (Gomez 15). Here we see Delia tries to make things, actually the homosocial activities, appear 'normal' Thus, the compulsory heterosexism and homophobia in the society are responsible for lesbian characters' isolation in the story.

Positive depiction of lesbian characters:

It has been more than forty years into the Gay and Lesbian studies. But some negative myths about lesbians that used to be generally accepted as truth and that still could be found circulating in our heterosexual society today include the false belief that lesbian people are somewhat sick or evil or both, abnormal with unfounded hatred of men, and that the primary force that drives them in life is the hunt of other women for the purpose sexual gratification only. The queer theory has disrupted such myths and beliefs. Many lesbian theorists argue that lesbian identity is not restricted to the sexual linings but also can consist of devoting the big chunk of one's attention and emotional energy to other women and having other women as one's primary source of emotional prop and psychological support. Looked at from this perspective, a lesbian is a woman-identified woman. In other words, a woman who identifies exclusively with women and whose principal relationships (which may or may not be sexual) are with women (Radicalesbians 4). The "woman-identified woman" defines herself without reference to male-dominated societal structures (Gianoulis 1). In the story we find this concept at work, as Letty's her emotional bonds are primarily with women (Maxine, Billie), and that women proves to be the primary source of her emotional support. (her new friends she encounters at the party.) With this we do find a positive depiction of story's lesbian characters—Letty, Delia, Terry, Terry's friends, and Billie Holiday—who combat the stereotypes leveled against the non-heterosexual people through their behaviour and action.

All the lesbian characters in the story are portrayed as human beings and not as sexual predators. Of course, their sexual urges have not been concealed, like that of Letty's for instance when she sees her idol Billie Holiday, 'She'd watched and listened, certain she saw something no one else did. Vulnerability was held at bay, and behind that, a hunger even bigger than the one for food or heroin' (Gomez 13). Here the hunger doesn't mean only of sexual urges, but it is also a social hunger, hunger of homosocial bonding, where the sexual orientation of the participants is of secondary importance. The humanness of lesbian characters in the story can be seen in the area of their attitude toward others, personal interaction with others – customers, owner of their bar, other workers, and their attitude toward their job. We find that Letty and Delia are enthusiastic waitresses who do their job with energy and treat customers with care. They are no men haters. Even at the get together the five women already gathered are playing cards and reveling in gossiping and laughter. It is just like any other social gathering and we don't find a single word of misandry.

We see many instances in the story of kindness and comradeship performed by the lesbian characters. For instance, the singer Billie Holiday after her performance in the bar 411 leaves a tip, not just for Henrietta, the head cook but for each of the waitresses and the bartender. The experienced Letty trains the young newcomer Delia 'how to balance plates, how to make tips, and how to keep the customer's hands on the table.' She did it voluntarily. She even gives cautious advice to her about how not to get into the mesh of the pimp Tip. She did all this not because Delia was a lesbian (it was only at the end of the story at get-together does Letty come to know that Delia is also of her kind), but because she was her fellow human being. Delia's cousin Terry has no qualms about giving Letty a ride home sometimes. The lesbian woman at the gathering engages in a lively conversation with Letty, a total stranger to her, about music of Billie Holiday. Sexual predators are not known for their acts of kindness, for their genuine sensitivity to the needs of others, or for their ability to be a good friend. So, all the acts of friendship, heartfelt kindness, and sensitivity toward people we see performed by Letty, Delia, Terry, Terry's friends, and Billie Holiday present a representation of lesbians that

gives a striking contrast to the image perpetrated by the false belief that lesbians are sexual predators and their primary aim is to prey upon women sexually. The significance and need of community for lesbian individual:

Letty, Delia, and cousin have all migrated from the conservative south states of America to the relatively liberal north, from the country to the city. Letty from Virginia and Delia from Anniston. One possible reason for such a move was high employment opportunities northern cities usually provided to working-class women of colour. Another dimension was probably the women's non-heterosexual orientation. A new, relatively anonymous city life would give them an opportunity to live as they chose, though not overtly in society. The larger, more diverse population improved the chances of finding other lesbians with whom they could relate, make friends and form a community of their own. The gathering of lesbian women at Delia's house explains the vital role lesbian community plays for the emotional sustenance and psychological support for these individual lesbians. This fact is well illustrated by Letty's transformation of internal homophobia into embracing her sexuality among the company of other lesbian women at the gathering.

'She poured slowly as the reality settled on her. These women were friends, perhaps lovers, like she and Maxine had been. The name she'd heard for women like these bursts inside her head: bulldagger. Letty flinched, angry she had let it in, angry that it frightened her. "Ptuh!" She blew through her teeth as if spitting the word back at the air' (Gomez 16).

these lines tell us that this change is positive in Letty. She feels 'at home' in the company of these women who are engaging themselves in homosocial activities like playing cards together, drinking, listening to music at gathering. Thus, the story illustrates that the homosocial activities, one of the basic concepts from the queer theories is at play in this transformation of individual. Homosocial activities are merely same-sex bonding activities. Like Going to the theatre, playing cards, repairing the car, cooking in kitchen, or any other shared leisure or work can be a homosocial activity if it is performed by two or more members of the same sex. The sexual orientation of the members is irrelevant in homosocial bonding. The important thing is the sharing of experiences that makes one feel closer to -'at home'- with members of one's own sex (Tyson 176). By means of a subtext beneath its heterosexual plot, this story does suggest that being a woman-identified woman is an emotional dimension that plays a vital role in women's lives irrespective of their sexual orientation.

Lastly, the song 'Don't Explain' by Billie Holiday, whom Letty and other lesbian characters in the story consider to be a part of their community, becomes kind of an emblem of lesbian community. It strengthens their bond of friendship and belongingness. This is a favorite song of Letty through which she always felt a strong emotional bond with the singer. And at the gathering she gets to hear this song, as a woman sitting on the sofa is listening to the song playing on record, with her eyes closed, just like she herself like to listen to this song, 'Letty stood in the doorway a moment before the tune began: Hush now, don't explain Just say you'll return I'm glad you're back Don't explain ...

Letty was stunned. She realized the song sounded different among these women: Billie sang just to them...' (Gomez 17).

Thus, the words of the song acquire symbolic meaning for Letty, whom it speaks of her return to the community and asks her not to explain it to anyone, as it not necessary. The last line of the story ' They listened to Billie together, for the first time' (Gomez 17). shows that the song has

helped create a bond between the two women, who hitherto were stranger to each other.

Conclusion

The story 'Don't Explain' sheds light on the lives of lesbian women in the sixties in America, using some elements from the Queer theory. It tries to combat negative stereotypes prevalent in society about lesbians through its positive depiction of lesbian characters. Letty, Delia, Terry, and Terry's friends have overcome obstacles to survive and prosper. They have accepted their sexuality and Letty too, at the end of the story, comes to terms with her sexuality and embraces her identity with a sense of self identity in the community of her fellow lesbians. They must continue to overcome still more hurdles if they want to survive and live respectfully in a world that oppresses and exploits them not just on the basis of their race, class, and gender (considering all the lesbian characters in the story are women of colour who belong to working class) but also on the basis of their sexual orientation as well. Surely, the emotional support and moral sustenance they've found in one another as a small community will continue to help them in their struggle to live respectfully in a dominant heterosexual and heteronormative world.

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