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Transgressive Spatialities: Mapping Identity and Liminality in Contemporary Queer Narratives from Assam

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Abstract

From Descartes' *cogito* to the postmodern fluidity, the notion of identity has acquired newer dimensions. Identity remains an important rhetorical resource for non-heterosexual people. Butler's notion of gender as *performative* has been fundamental in this discourse on the queer people who debunk compulsory heterosexuality as a given. An exploration of the spaces that the non-heteronormative people occupy is pertinent to understanding the lived realities of these people. Using the Foucauldian notion of *heterotopia*, this study tries to understand the liminal and all kinds of alternative spaces that they inhabit which is intense and disruptive. They are also sites of resistance and transgression. In Assamese literature, the heterosexual ideology dominates the hegemonic knowledge production spaces. The non-heteronormative people occupy the spaces in crevices, and peripheries and cannot claim a distinct positionality. Queer narratives from Assam reflect a new direction in this regard. The Narratives under study by Moushumi Kandali, Aruni Kashyap and Panchanan Hazarika present how these narratives from Assam present the lived realities of the queer population and how they explicate the spatial dimension of the same-sex desire, and in the process how they negotiate the ontological authenticity of the non-heteronormative people to form their identity.

Keywords: Spatiality, identity, queer, gender fluidity, narrative

With the proliferation of the discourses on identity, the postmodern stance on it as something 'in flux', and the Butlerian notion of gendered fluidity and performativity, the queers have emerged with a malleable identity that exists beyond the gendered binary. The term 'Queer' has been used as an umbrella term to denote a range of sexual and gender identities that are not "straight" and do not conform to the dominant heterosexual practices. Queer studies emerged as an academic discourse in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It brought in a political stand of both solidarity and defiance that challenged the mainstream heterosexual discourses and denied subjugation of the sexual minorities. In the initial years, the term 'queer' was used for the lesbian and gay populace; but over the years it has encompassed all the non-heterosexual people who expose and challenge normativity. The term 'identity' has been a rhetorical resource for these non-heterosexual people. Through these resources, they evoke some kind of discourse that questions the politics of power and dominance. As 'queer', each individual goes through different lived realities. However, recognition of one's sexuality, coming out and making that sexual identity public, creating a bond with members of a similar community and facing societal pressure are some of the common experiences of the queer people. The queer identity is shaped by histories of rejection, abjection and subjugation by the dominant patriarchal power structure. Being pushed to the periphery, the queers prefer fluid possibilities of gender and sexuality by debunking the false notion of

compulsory heterosexuality. They celebrate the fluidity of body and sexuality and challenge the hetero-patriarchal repression. However, the body of the queers becomes a potential site of negation of identity as per the norms imposed by the heterosexist society. Heteronormativity, with its repressive measures, forces the queer people to go through subjugation and exclusion. This in turn traumatises these marginalised people while negotiating their space within a homophobic society. Thus, for the queers, who inhabit outside the binary structure, their identity lies in the liminal space.

The liminal space provides its subjects opportunities to redefine their identity and also to subvert the dominant notions upheld by society. As the identity of the queers is not permeated with socially constructed norms, the liminal space provides them the necessary power to restructure and negotiate their identities. This brings forth the fluidity of the queer identity. Anzaldua (2002) posits, "This liminal space of identity can be 'unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition . . . lacking clear boundaries —the person is in a constant state of displacement'" (p.1) Thus, the queer people feel a sense of estrangement when they enter the structured spaces of gendered binary. They navigate their identities and due to this perpetual navigation, a permanent space cannot be realised. However, this movement into new spaces opens up a new epistemological horizon before them that empowers the queers and this new knowledge and power are distinctly their own. But the pertinent question here is, how is a queer space defined? In the words of Ebmeier and Bovermann (2018),

A queer space is any space that enables its occupants to perform queerness. Such a space allows for the visibility of queerness. . . Instead of inverting hierarchies and enacting a reversal of the normative order, these places attempt to negotiate and perform alternatives. (2018, p.288)

Thus, the queer space is engraved by the sexual minorities and it "purportedly enables the visibility of sexual subcultures that resist and rupture the hegemonic heterosexuality that is the source of their marginality and exclusion" (Oswin, 2008, p.90). Giving a new dimension to the spatial discourse on the use of space in society, Foucault introduced his concept of *heterotopias*. In his 1967 lecture "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias", Foucault described heterotopias as a space both 'existing' and 'non-existing' that fall between real and utopian spaces. These are spaces that are "othered", places that are outside and yet connected to all other places. In his *The Order of Things (1966)*, Foucault described heterotopias as discursive, a space thinkable only in language; but in "Of Other Spaces", heterotopia has been presented as a physical space for bodies to dwell, as "counter sites" such as asylums, prisons, gardens, colonies, cemeteries, brothels and boats. Heterotopias encourage a reordering of the social structure which is an essential counter-hegemonic locus of resistance. Angela Jones (2009), in her essay titled "Queer Heterotopias: Homonormativity and the Future of Queerness" describes,

Queer heterotopias are material spaces where radical practices go unregulated. They are sites where actors, whether academics or activists, engage in what we might call a radical politics of subversion, where individuals attempt to dislocate the normative configurations of sex, gender, and sexuality through daily exploration and experimentation with crafting a queer identity. (p.2)

Thus, the queer heterotopias provide a space for the non-heteronormative individuals to create their own space where they can live, and walk about in an empowered state by being free from all kinds of marginalisation and dominance.

With the emergence of spatial literary studies, scholars have delved into the representation of spaces in the varied zones where fiction meets reality. Queer people have been denied representation and kept out of all kinds of documented space in history and literature. In most mainstream literature and other spaces like films, theatres etc, the queers are deliberately marginalised, made fun of, ridiculed and so on. Thus, these images of the queers dominate the mindset of the people of the heterosexist society. Through her notion of gender performativity, Butler subverts the ontological status of the heteronormative gendered regime and posits that such disciplinary power produces queerness as abnormal. But the pertinent question is what is normal or natural? Who decides what is normal or natural? This kind of idea needs to be addressed when we talk of queer people. And here comes the importance of the queer narratives, where issues on identity, spaces, and lived experiences are addressed. Therefore, an exploration of the spaces that the non-heteronormative people occupy and their literary representation is pertinent to understanding the lived realities of these people. Literature is nuanced and it can explore the complex experiential realities of queers and present the politics behind such experiences. But the point to ponder here is how are the queer spaces projected and reclaimed in the literary texts? Has there been any effort to construct alternative spaces for the queers as they are kept out of the ambit of the binary gendered spaces? To challenge the heteronormative construction of space, literary representation and reclamation of queer spaces are the need of the hour. In mainstream literature, the queer figure is in the periphery, in the crevices. The naturalness of the dominant heteronormative discourses could be challenged by queer narratives by making spaces for a newer understanding of gender and sexuality. Queer narratives can bring these intangibilities into the social fabric and spread awareness for a positive change.

In Assamese literature, heterosexual ideology dominates the hegemonic knowledge production of spaces. The nonheteronormative people occupy the spaces in fissures and cannot claim a distinct positionality. Queer narratives from Assam are a timely intervention in this regard. They portray the lived realities of queer people. These narratives reflect a new direction in the process of an all-inclusive society. Thus, a proper study of these narratives is highly warranted. The queer narratives can challenge the heterosexual spatial deployment that is found in the mainstream narratives and prevalent dominant socio-cultural practices of a society. Instead of inverting hierarchies and enacting a reversal of the normative order, these places attempt to negotiate and perform alternatives. These narratives present how some kind of queer space and identity emerges as a site of contestation and resistance with an underlying awareness of divergence. The texts under study are the fictional narratives by Moushumi Kandali, Aruni Kashyap, and Panchanan Hazarika. In these narratives, the narrators project a queer dimension to one's identity and the spaces that they occupy in society while presenting their experiential realities. The strife for visibility and societal acceptance is a perennial issue for these people living in the interstices of the social structure.

Moushumi Kandali's story "Tritiyattar Golpo" (A Tale of Thirdness) published in 2007 is one of the finest narratives written with a queer theme. The story has a queer Professor as its protagonist and it narrates the trauma, the societal non-acceptance, the suffering, the loneliness that the

protagonist goes through and the struggle he makes to challenge the societal norms and also his embarking on a journey to break the gender stereotype. All these issues are portrayed in a poignant tale where the professor is always attracted to the thirdness. This narrative presents how the queer persona is not accepted by society and is ridiculed, tortured, targeted, sidelined, marginalised and his very private space of a home is invaded. The narrator, narrating the living story, talks of the change in the Professor's appearance when he internalises homophobia and behaves in a specific way desired by society and his face transforms:

. . . his face would look like the digital conversion of Tutankhamen's death mask. Was it a face or death-in-wings? Faces change according to variations in context. And we have to wait for life to teach us this simple, common truth, practically known to everybody. (Phukan, 2021, p.284)

Through this facial transformation, the professor exposes the pain and humiliation that the queer folks undergo, and at the same time, it is also a kind of dissent at the overarching patriarchal metanarrative. It reflects how the non-heteronormative people are forced to follow the dictums of society. Butler's notion of gender performativity, the "stylized repetition of acts", that must be performed to achieve a particular gender is explored here. Specific socially constructed corporeal acts are to be performed continuously which create a certain gendered identity as per the socio-cultural norms. The Professor's non-conformity has led to his wearing the metaphorical mask of Tutankhamen. This metaphorical mask of Tutankhamen that the Professor wears is a kind of resistance, a rigid blockage towards the multifarious norms prescribed by the heterosexual society. However, his inner being transformed him into his own self where he prefers to be a woman, a dancer, and a mother. His fluid identity gets reflected when the narrator finds him transformed into a seductress on stage and the narrator exclaims,

I saw a braid flow out of your head, two breasts bloom on your masculine chest, breasts firming in eager anticipation of touch. . . you had generated such an incredible phenomenon- three doors on three sides— on the right, door of the known, on the left, the door of the unknown, and in between, there was another door — the door of perception- you had advanced, slowly, to the third door in the middle- on you walked— oh, that was the first time I had seen you — and on the same day, I had seen two of your faces..... (Phukan, 2021, p.285)

To this, the Professor replied, "One day you will see my third face". This makes the narrator question his obsession with "thirdness":

Third! Third again! Third —third— third— why was he so obsessed with the third number — the number three? He preferred a hotel room with the number 3. He was fond of cubism. His favourite story was "The Third Bank of the River". Shivas's third eye. The three-dimensional representation — the reality of the third world. . . (Phukan, 2021, p. 285)

Thus, the professor's fluid self, transcending the societal space to a third space, is an act of transgression where he could perform his fluid gender. Chris Jenks has defined transgression as "to go beyond the bounds or limits set by commandment or law or convention, it is to violate or infringe...[a] reflexive act of denial and affirmation" (2003, p.2). Transgression, for the queers, is an

act of challenging the heterosexual power structure and at the same time, reclaiming their own space. It is also a liminal space that encourages fundamental reordering.

Professing gender fluidity, the text critiques the stereotypical notions of gendered identity as per the patriarchal norms. The very notion of motherhood has been questioned. To be a mother, one does not need to be a woman. As the narrator opines,

Oh, how uselessly are we trapped in our stereotyped definitions— we think motherhood is only for women. But motherhood is only a concept— who says it is defined by gender, physicality? One does not require a womb to be a mother—all one needs is a womb of sensitivity and emotion. That is why that scrap of life sleeps in his lap—born to him—Mahadevi grows in his womb of emotion. (Phukan, 2021, p.289)

Here, the narrator projects mothering as an alternative to the oppressive institution of patriarchy. An intervention into the institution of motherhood needs to begin by questioning the very categories of experience and power (Kawash, 2011, p 979). Thus, the professor's desire to conceive Akka Mahadevi and to have her as his child is fulfilled, albeit metaphorically. And the last lines give the story its ultimate thrust,

One day, one day Mahadevi will tell the people around her—pour her heart out to the trees and earth and wind— “You see that man—sailing away in the boat in solitude on those deep water—he is my mother.... (Phukan, 2021, p.290)

The story tries to bring forth the very notion of gender fluidity and that through their performativity they can claim their own identity. Following Enders, Angella Okawa (2015) opines:

In a world that prefers binary identity, those whose identity lives in this in between space feel pressure to claim one end of polarity and reject the other. Rather than being a transitional space, the liminal is, for these individuals, a permanent home. (p.3)

Thus, the metaphor of sailing through the river towards the third bank is the protagonist's journey to the queer space that is an emancipated, alternative space where the hegemonic heterosexist discourses cease to regulate bodies and identities. This is a queer heterotopia where individuals can explore and experiment with their desires. The boat, for Foucault, is the quintessential heterotopia as it is in a mobile state, it is real yet ephemeral and beyond surveillance. As Foucault (1986) postulates,

Boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea. . . The boat has been for our civilization the greatest reserve of the imagination. (p. 27)

Thus, Foucault indicates that heterotopia has the potential to generate alternatives to the existing spaces that regulate the societal structure. Only within the heterotopic space of the boat, the Professor can experience the imagined departure and the thrill of sailing away. Here, solitude is overlapped with a sense of companionship and the present becomes heterochronous with a projected future.

Aruni Kashyap's story "His Father's Disease" (2019) narrates the tale of Anil, a gay persona who lives with his mother when the insurgency problems were at its height in Assam. At the beginning of the story, Anil is shown as indulging in a sexual union with his partner and when his mother

Neerumoni comes to know about his gay identity, she could not accept it. She wept and thought that 'he has acquired his father's disease'. (p.118) She was a witness to this kind of gay sexual encounter of her bisexual husband Horokanto with her own brother Nilambor. Thus, she relates Anil's gay sexual orientation to her husband's bisexuality and opines that it is a disease. This is a common negative belief against the people of the queer community that affects their mental health to the extent that they isolate themselves and live within the closeted space. Anil's construction of an outhouse for himself is some kind of architectural space, a heterotopia, that the queer people inhabit which is an intimate, comfortable space. Any kind of discrimination like homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, etc. is prohibited there. This is what Foucault talks of when he postulates that there is a transition from 'heterotopia of crisis' to 'heterotopia of deviation'. (1986, p.25) Anil goes through a crisis situation within his home space where his mother nags him continuously and he finds the home space constricted and traumatised. Thus, he moves to the outhouse which stands for the heterotopia of deviation. The closeted space of the outhouse is an emancipated space for Anil. Home could be a place where they experience homophobia and this is evident when his mother does not accept his gay identity. Thus, this kind of narrative exposes the myth of a safe home. The queers experience the home space as a place of surveillance and discipline. Anil faces a dual paradigm, where he is familiar and close to the centre of power when he is politically involved and is going to be the future village headman. On the other hand, he is made to feel that he does not belong to the mainstream because of his sexual orientation. His gay identity has been exposed and made a weapon to force his absence within the public space. In the depiction of this queer space, the story explores the erotic dynamics, its potential for grappling with the mainstream spaces and the consequent liminality. Anil's sexual relation with Promod, the effeminate young man and Anil's sex partner, exhibits this erotic dynamics within the space of the outhouse. Again, Anil's sexual experiences with Gurmail project his encounter with the mainstream space. The final burning of the outhouse and Anil's suicide delineate the outhouse as a liminal space that is not fixed and a temporary abode. Anil carves a space for transaction in the context of his homoerotic desire played out within the enclosed locus of the outhouse. The outhouse becomes a metaphoric representation of the sexually hierarchized home space.

Anil's straddling within these spaces makes his identity contingent, unfixed, and yet "there". This societal non-acceptance comes in the way of the queer populace while they claim their queer identity. They feel alienated and strive for a positionality as they inhabit in the interstices. In the words of Shinsuke Eguchi (2011):

Prior to coming out, individuals must have access to information about homosexuality and gay identity. The social stigmatization of homosexuality is a barrier for individuals in the process of adopting homosexuality as a way of life. (p. 40)

This social stigmatisation makes Anil hide his gay identity and he builds the outhouse as a space for liberation. This could be a strategy of resilience too at his disposal to cope with the challenge of heteronormativity and the social stigma attached to his gay identity. Though Anil never told his mother about his physical needs, towards the end he told her about it:

He had built that house to carve a space of his own. It had implicitly told his mother what his 'male needs' were. And now, in front of the burning house, he was telling her that he loved Gurmail. (2019, p.131)

Anil saw his mother howling and mumbling something he did not understand and at that spur of the moment he went inside the burning house and neighbours woke up to an unusual smell of burnt human flesh. This suicide or annihilation of the self under societal pressure is a sad yet harsh reality among the queers. Rod Cover (2012), citing the research carried out by various agencies like, Queer activist and medical professionals, opines that they

effectively re-figured sexuality-related suicide as a social fact in Durkheim's terms by suggesting that social intolerance and homophobia were internalised, thereby leading to self-hatred and self-destructiveness . . . It brought an epistemic shift of opinion from the idea that homosexuality was essentially abnormal, instead introducing the ways in which a number of factors were causal in the suicides of gay men, including shame resulting from blackmail and exposure, pressures around coming out and closetedness, isolation and ostracism" (p. 38)

Thus, Anil's suicide is a result of the social stigma associated with his gay identity. His revelation to his mother, who, as a representative of the heterosexual social structure, is never ready to accept his gay identity, and finally the burning down of the outhouse, an alternate space of all kinds of possibilities and experimentations. The outhouse is not a discursive site. Rather it is a physical one, a space both integral to and removed from the social order. And its demolition has crushed all his wishes to have his own space and his identity.

Anil's disinterest in the election process and his constant fear of being killed made him stay within the house. Through this rejection of his entering into the public space, Anil addresses his liminality and challenges the propriety of the dominant social order. All the traumatising experiences like Anil's imprisonment, and the attack on his life, have a deep impact on his interior landscape. And he enters into a heterotopia of crisis. His suicide might be termed as a heterotopia of deviation where he embarks on a journey beyond life and all kinds of bindings. Thus, in a way, his death is a way of resistance too. Anil chooses to resort to a radical way of subversion of the dominant and in the process, he kills himself.

Panchanan Hazarika's short story collection *Andharotkoi Udaax Botahotkoi Swadhin* (Depressed than darkness, liberated than the wind) has several stories that portray the experiential realities of queer people. He tries to expose the societal pressure, stigma, violence inflicted on the queers, the politics of exclusion, loneliness, rejection that the queer people experience. In "Sironton", he shows how Violina, a Lesbian girl is not accepted by her peers. Being students of Gender Studies, researching 3rd Wave Feminism, these friends yet cannot accept her. This exposes the hypocrisy of heterosexual society. Queer people have to face the politics of exclusion and cannot claim an equal space in the mainstream discourses. Their visibility is ridiculed and thus critics have vouched for a shift of the politics of visibility to the politics of recognition which acknowledges identity on the basis of gender, sexuality, and other markers.

Hazarika's story "Joloj Jibon" (Fluid Life) presents the fluidity of one's identity. The narrator speaks about his fluid existence, the multiple selves that we carry within us, the body's needs and desires, and his search for the truth of life. He feels he floats in these nuanced paradigms. When his friend says that not being able to publicly express one's sexuality could also be a reason for committing suicide, he protests. And then he longs for a living river where his fluid life could clasp him. The water body is represented as an alternative space that both forms and challenges the protagonist's

sense of identity and belongingness. Thus, the space that he longs for is a queer space that would provide him solace as it might be a safe refuge to explore his sexuality and fluid identity. This space is an indefinable space, a temporary and yet fluctuating zone governed by lawless forces, where the protagonist can be in his elements. This kind of performance reveals a kind of convergence of spatial and fluid identity formation.

The title story from the collection *Andharotkoi Udaax Botahotkoi Swadhin* (2020) narrates the story of Chandrabala, the educated, progressive mother and her three children, Uddipta, Lopa, and Ujjiban. The mother is very much involved in her children's lives and she tries to help them solve their problems, and takes their side when they face any problem from their father or society at large. But when she comes to know about her son Ujjiban's sexuality, who declares that he is gay, it was like a storm for her. She had to go through many phases of tests and tribulations. The mother introspects:

Ujjiban is attracted only towards men— she possesses the required sensitivity and awareness to accept this truth. But Ujjiban is not a character from a story or a film. He is her son, the son of her own flesh and blood. He is the son of her and Uttam's. (2020, p. 90)

Ujjiban's gay identity is evident in his gait and his behaviour. He is ridiculed by his friends and teachers at school. The public space of school does not provide him with a sense of belongingness. Even, the home space is not conducive for him. Uttam, his father curses him and commands him, "to behave like a boy as he is born a boy". Thus, Uddipan was bereft of any comforting space where he could perform his sexuality. He always lives within the restrictive, disciplinary space. But his association with the Art teacher provides him with a liberated space, where he can come out of his shell and become his own self. As his mother states,

Uddipan became very close to this man who is double his age. She found it surprising. Yet, Debaparasad, the Art teacher could bring him out of the cocoon of loneliness-depression-self-absorption. And she is ever grateful to him. (2020, p. 92)

Thus, Uddipan's experience in the metro city of Delhi gives him the much-required space of freedom and his whole personality undergoes a transformation. From a naive individual, he becomes self-reliant and courageous. He has understood the heterosexual power politics and he realises that his gay identity is as natural as any other gendered identity. This socially constructed notion of heterosexuality is critiqued by Binnie (1997) and she postulates: "Space is not naturally authentically "straight", but rather actively produced and (hetero) sexualised." (p.223)

The very notion of inclusion and acceptance is something that queer people are denied by society. As they do not conform to heteropatriarchal norms, they are singled out and positioned in the margins. These liminal spaces could be re-appropriated and restructured by creating a space where the queers can perform their sexuality and gender. The experiences of Urban Delhi provide Ujjiban with the required acceptance and space and he comes out of his closeted space and declares his sexuality even to his mother. This creation of a heterotopia helps the queers force the heteronormative society to recognise the queer bodies and sexualities as viable on their own terms. And Ujjiban's mother accepts his sexuality with élan. She tells him:

Ujjiban! I belong to a different era. You belong to a new era. But who will understand you if not me? I am your mother.... Is there anything that a mother does not understand?

However free, rebellious emancipated a time could be, is not the time born out of a womb of old time? Doesn't the hand holding the progressive light that herald the new time born from the darkness of the womb? (2020, p. 94)

And Chandrabala shivers with a yearning to be free from the clutch of the age-old conventions and a love for the future where there will be equality of sexes. In this kind of social change, a change of mindset of people is needed. Social change occurs slowly. Literature can play a pivotal role by bringing awareness and arousing empathy and sensitivity among people. These existential realities bring forth the nuances of the lives of the queer people and we can envision that a day will come which will open up a new vista where people belonging to all sexualities bask under the same sky.

The spatial deployment of the queer people within the framework of mainstream society has changed its trajectory in the contemporary discourses on queer studies. Scholars have come up with new perspectives on the notions of queer identity and space. Kath Browne (2006) argues that queer is more than the LGBT population and it ought to consider how queer can be something other than "an overarching term that describes sexual 'dissidents'" (p. 886). Brown postulates that the 'gay' or 'lesbian' spaces normally do not transgress the normative sexual identity politics. It should extend the norm and not transgress or challenge it. Thus, by queer Brown means "operating beyond powers and controls that enforce normativity". (p. 889). She goes on to state that queer inquiries should question the ideals of inclusion and "entail radical (re)thinkings, (re)drawings, (re)conceptualisations, (re)mappings that could (re)make bodies, spaces, and geographies" (p. 888). Thus, Brown opines those queer geographies should transgress boundaries such as hetero/homo, man/woman in order to go beyond normativity that will render space fluid. This fluid notion of space would surely be a harbinger of a new world order where the dominant power structure would cease to operate and a new dawn will usher in where the queers will have their own subjectivities. The spaces that they occupy will transgress all prevalent spatial boundaries and provide them with the identities that they envision in the days to come.

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