

A VIEW ON LESBIAN NARRATIVE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MALINDA LO

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Abstract:

Lesbian narratives are widely esteemed in the contemporary scenario with its nuances. The novelty of lesbian literature lies in its focus on the isolated and troublesome lives of homosexual women, their emancipation from socio-political yardsticks and integrity with the so called 'heterosexual society'. Women who adopt a lesbian identity share experiences that form an outlook similar to an ethnic identity as homosexuals, they are unified by the heterosexist discrimination and potential rejection they face from their families, friends and others as a result of homophobia. As women, they face concerns separate from men. Malinda Lo co-founded 'Diversity in Young Adult', a website and book tour to promote and celebrate diverse representations in young adult literature.

Key Words: *Lesbianism, lesbian literature, queer studies, homophobia.*

The word 'lesbian' is derived from the name of the Greek island of Lesbos, home to the 6th century BCE poet Sappho. Her poetry reflects the topics such as women's daily lives, their relationships and rituals. She focused on the beauty of women and proclaimed her love for girls. Later the word lesbian appeared in several works. However the meaning of the word changed to describe erotic relationships between women in 1870. The term lesbian is treated as a medical term or as a form of insanity or as a neurological disease. The lesbian identity was considered as a significant social problem in most western societies. The work of Krafft-Ebing and Ellis was widely read, and helped to create public consciousness of female homosexuality. Lesbian began to describe elements of a subculture. They are often classify themselves as having an identity that defines their individual sexuality, as well as their membership to a group that share common traits.

Queer studies is a field of study which is now approved as an independent entity in the academic arena. It is identified as the study of issues relating to sexual orientation and gender identity usually focusing on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer questioning, and intersex people and cultures. Among these, lesbian studies are concerned with the issues of gender and identity of a lesbian a homosexual woman who is romantically or sexually attracted to other women. The concept of lesbian, to differentiate women with a shared sexual orientation is a 20th century construct. With second wave feminism and growth of scholarship in women's history and sexuality in the 20th century, the definition of lesbian broadened, sparking a debate about sexual desire as the major component to define what a lesbian is.

Women who adopt a lesbian identity share experiences that form an outlook similar to an ethnic identity as homosexuals, they are unified by the heterosexist discrimination and potential rejection they face from their families, friends and others as a result of homophobia. As women, they face concerns separate from men. Lesbians may encounter distinct physical or mental health concerns arising from discrimination, prejudices and minority stress. Political conditions and social attitudes also affect the formation of lesbian relationships and families in open.

The lesbians are facing many issues in the thick of heterogeneous human community. Many public figures openly acknowledged their homosexuality and bisexuality and it is due to growing social

acceptance but also concede that only a certain kind of lesbian slim and elegant is acceptable to mainstream culture. The pressure of sexual activity between women as necessary to define a lesbian or a relationship continues to be debated. Familial and political orientations imposed certain restrictions on them which resulted in the labelling of lesbian as 'outcasts'. Although they are treated as third category, they are frequently portrayed in literature, films and television programmes that often shape contemporary thought about women's sexuality.

Coming to literary field, in addition to Sappho's accomplishments, literary historian Jeannette Howard Foster includes *The Book of Ruth* and ancient mythological tradition as examples of lesbianism in classical literature. Camilla and Diana, Artemis and Callisto and Iphis and Lanthe as examples of female mythological figures who showed remarkable devotion to each other, or defied gender expectations. For ten centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire, lesbianism disappeared from literature. *Lives of Gallant Ladies* by Brantome in 1665, John Cleland's 1749 erotica *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* are examples of French and English depictions of relationships between women. *The girl with Golden Eyes* in 1835 by Balzac and *Mademoiselle de Marpin* by Theophile Gautier were early works of Lesbianism. Until the publication of *The Well of Loneliness*, most of the major works involving lesbianism were penned by men.

Major women writers like Charlotte Charke, Margaret Fuller, Katherine Mansfield, Amy Lowell, Virginia Woolf and Gale Wilhelm wrote popular works that had lesbian relationships as themes in the 20th century. Later the focus of lesbianism is shifted from erotica for heterosexual men to works written by and for lesbians. Serious writers who used lesbian characters and plots included Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* in 1973, Dorothy Allison's *Trash*. In addition, a group of artists deviate from the usual tradition and perceived a new outlook by culminating lesbianism with fantasy which marked a new phase in lesbian literary world.

These writers propagated new narrative techniques giving emphasis to imagination and fantasy. Such novels are a braid of fantasy plotlines and characters with a middle aged setting. Elements like myth, fairylands and fairy princes, chivalry, magic, etc. are a major part of these novels. Novels like *A Journey of the Heart* (2010) by Catherine M Wilson, *The Exile and the Sorcerer* (2006) by Jane Fletcher, *Ash* (2009) and *Huntress* (2011) by Malinda Lo, *The Dark Wife* (2011) by Sarah Diemer, etc. are some of the lesbian fantasy literary works that enable the writers to achieve an irretrievable position in the mainstream literature. Among these writers Malinda Lo is the most quoted and celebrated novelists who fearlessly acknowledged the sexuality and the identity of lesbian community through similar storylines and characterisation.

Malinda Lo is an American writer of young adult novels including *Ash*, *Huntress*, *Adaptation* and *Inheritance*. Born in China, she is an immigrant living in United States from the age of three. After completing her master's degree from Stanford University, she made a member of the faculty of the Lambda Literary Foundation's 2013 Writer Retreat for Emerging Voices. Lo began writing for the culture blog 'AfterEllen' in 2003 and at one point serves as the managing editor.

Her first novel *Ash* was published by Little Brown Books for Young Readers in 2009. It is a young adult fantasy lesbian novel. It is a reworking of the *Cinderella* fairytale that reimagines the title character, Ash as a lesbian teenager.

The next novel *Huntress*, published in 2011, is an adult fantasy novel centering on the story of two girls - Taisin, a gifted student well on her way to become one of the best sages of her generation and Kaede, her fellow student who is anything but talented in the mystical arts.

Adaptation is the novel which is a step away from the usual fare. It is a young adult science fiction novel in the near future. It was a grab-bag of treats, mixing a diverse cast led by a young queer woman, a theme and structure riffing on the X files which is a television programme and a fast moving plot driven by conspiracy, action and more than a little bit of teen romance.

Inheritance is a 2013 science fiction, a wonderfully gripping and heartwarming piece. It is the

follow up book to the cryptic near but not quite apocalyptic X- files homage of a novel. The story revolves around Reese and David who are not normal teens - not since they were adapted with alien DNA by the Imria, an extraterrestrial race that has been secretly visiting Earth for decades. It is actually a sequel to *Adaptation*.

Malinda Lo co founded 'Diversity in Young Adult', a website and book tour to promote and celebrate diverse representations in young adult literature, with fellow young adult author Cindy Pon. Diversity in Young Adult highlights books with characters of colour, LGBTQ characters, and disabled characters and collects data on the number of books with diverse characters and authors that are published annually. Starting in 2012, Lo has periodically published analysis of the diversity in *Publishers Weekly* and *New York Times*. Her 2013 analysis showed that fifteen percent of the *New York Times* bestselling young adult novels feature main characters of colour, twelve percent featured LGBT as main characters and three percent had main characters with disabilities.

She wrote many short stories such as *One True Love* and *Good Girl* in 2012, *Ghost Town* in 2013, *The Twelfth Girl* in 2014, *The Cure* in 2015 and some selected non-fiction such as 'A letter to her sixteen year old self' in *The Letter Q: Queer Writer's Notes to their Younger Selves* in 2012 and an article "Here We Are: Feminism for the Real World". She wrote articles for After Ellen.com like "Notes and Queries", "Back in the Day" which are monthly columns. Malinda Lo contributed to *Tremontaine*, the prequel to the *Riverside Series*.

Malinda Lo captures some of the base savagery that cuts through the original brothers Grimm *Aschenputtel* tale (German version of Cinderella) and manages to infuse the story with a feminist and romantic love story aimed at the Young Adult reader. Her works speak honestly of lesbian women folk explicit their identity, sexuality and familial ties. She critically analyses the problems faced by the lesbian community as a minority group in the society. More than that she also made an expedition through the psychological dilemmas that went through by such women. She made alienation, depression, oppression from majority communities and reaction to this oppression as the major themes of her novels.

Her novels are an amalgam of fantasy and reality where she brought into some amazing imageries to unravel the life of lesbians. Nature and the depiction of its ravishing beauty is a recurrent element in her novels. Fantasy elements like fairyland with fairy princes give a mystic touch to the novels. She approached her novels with surprising and divergent narrative style. Her eloquence in writing enables her to achieve a dignified fame among the contemporary American novelists. Almost all works of Lo received well-acceptance and accolades. She won several awards for her contributions to the literary world. Among her works, the most popular one is her first novel *Ash*.

Ash, published in 2009 is a mixture of fantasy and real worlds. Being a young adult fantasy lesbian novel, it re-imagines the title character, Ash as a lesbian teen using the narrative of *Cinderella* fairy tale. The novel revolves around the familiar story of the titular character Cinderella, her father recently married, and lamenting the misery of her new life with step mother and step sisters. The twist arrives when Ash falls in love with the king's respected Huntress Kaisa, after she has made a commitment to dark fairy prince Sidhean.

Lo is not interested in the romance of Ash rather in her personal growth and her ability to choose and bargain for herself. While the generic outlines of the story - girl orphaned, abused and rescued cohere to the broadest plot of *Cinderella*, the details and the thematic freight stand apart. Ash is a victim of abuse. From a very young age she knows nothing of being loved or cared for. The setting that is the world depicted in *Ash* is richly realized and Ash herself is a quiet girl having the sorts of adventures that quiet girls dread and dream of in equal measure. The World is somewhat like our middle ages but differs too especially in terms of gender.

It is a beautiful subversive fairy tale, but the protagonist's attraction towards another woman is not what makes the story so astonishing. Rather the book sets itself apart from recent young adult novels

through its contemplative pace, subversion of gender roles, and sad, lovely and dream-like descriptions. At its heart *Ash* is a book about what it means to read and love fairy tales, and what it might mean to have the opportunity to live in one. The book has been approached with positive reviews by readers and critics. In an article in *Publishers Weekly* it is noted that *Ash* should “establish Lo as a gifted storyteller” (6).

Ash's eventual relationship is a great example of what should become the trend: queer characters in Young Adult who don't have to suffer through awkward coming out scenes in print. One who reads will benefit from Lo's choice to make her world a place where confident and skilled lesbians occupy prominent positions of leadership. Malinda Lo's *Ash* is not just a lesbian love story, a fairy tale or even only a reworking of the *Cinderella* tale but a delicious blend of these genres that combines them in unexpected ways.

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