



ISSN: 0976-3376

Available Online at <http://www.journalajst.com>

ASIAN JOURNAL OF
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Asian Journal of Science and Technology
Vol. 08, Issue, 11, pp.6652-6655, November, 2017

RESEARCH ARTICLE

UNSELFING THE SELF: ESTABLISHING ALTERITY, TRANSCENDING POWER AND RESTRUCTURING EXISTENCE IN POLITICAL POETRY OF CHRISTOPHER SOTO/ AKA LOMA

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 28th August, 2017
Received in revised form
08th September, 2017
Accepted 11th October, 2017
Published online 30th November, 2017

Key words:

Queer Theory,
Transgender, LGBT,
Christopher Soto,
Racism.

ABSTRACT

The Lineage of Transgender studies has reached its culmination during the present era. Encompassing the living and the non living under a single roof with the understanding of the fifth world, has resulted in the realisation of the queer community as an inexorable task. This approach analyses the importance of the alternative sexual orientation and Gender identity. Transcending the huddles created as a result of colonialism in the cultural scenario with regard to the approach towards the LGBT(Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) is the understanding of the research objective. Tracing the critical confrontations encountered by the transgender throughout the ages in the social system, the formation of the Third Sex in the political perspective and the psycho-socio contour of the disruptive 'other' can be perused through the writings of the Queer Literary perceptions. The attempt to critically authorize the acceptance of the Transgender verbosity in the socio- cultural abode through the poems of Christopher Soto has resulted in the formation of a fresh encompassment of the 'wretched of the earth' the Queer community to the core of experience restructuring their existence in the social wilderness.

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INTRODUCTION

The realization of the existence of the third gender in the present living scenario is something inexorable. But the understanding that has to be created among the first and the second gender is more of a necessity rather than an awareness. The life and existence of such a group who were once recognized and had a higher level of existence especially during the pre colonial period and the decline of dignity and decorum during the colonial and period and in the later years has to be checked and research permitted. The attitude and concern about the LGBT((Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) in the present scenario and during the colonial screen and in the understanding of their existence . The interrogations regarding the role of LGBT during the colonial period and their cultural perspectives can be traced through the analysis of the post colonial age. This is an attempt to make the audience realize and feel the importance of their existence and to also know about the history of the lives of LGBT. Scientific conformation regarding the queer companions embellishes the awareness regarding their social, psychological, emotional, rational political, sexual

pronouncement. Transgender is an umbrella term which includes the subtle correlation of delicate role assigned within the concept of sexual orientation. Transgender includes people whose gender identity is opposite to their assigned sex. Transgender or the gender non conforming people are conceptualized as the third gender. Infrequently, the term transgender broadly includes cross-dressers or transvestites, homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual and asexual, acknowledged by their sexual orientation decisively shaping their sexual identity. Scientists believe that sexual orientation is caused by the complex interplay of genetic, hormonal and environmental influences. According to the American Psychological Association- Sexual orientation “ also refers to a person’s sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviours and membership in a community of others who share those attractions.” *Androphilia* and *Gynephilia* are terms used in behavioral science to explain about sexual orientation as in alternative to a gender binary conceptualization. *Ambiphilia* describes the combination of both *Androphilia* and *Gynephilia* in an individual resulting to bisexuality. Transgenders are non-binary or do not fall into the gender binary. Devdutt Pattanaik writes that myths “capture the collective unconsciousness of a people” this means that they reflect deep rooted believes about different sexualities that can prove to be odd to the social norms.

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American culture put a great emphasis on a person's social role within the social hierarchies and observes the self as fluid and pliable. These differing cultural perspectives have many implications on the indulgent of the self. Studies and survey prove that 8 million adults are lesbians, gay and bisexual (LGBT) and there are 700,000 transgender individuals prevail in US. The struggle for existence of the transgender in US had its roots since the 19th Century. It was in 1968 that the transgender were allowed to change their names but not sex by the US Government. It was in 1976 that post-operative transsexual were allowed to marry in their post-operative sex. In 1980, the transgender were officially classified by the American Psychiatric Association as having "Gender Identity Disorder". In 1987, originated the first transgender studies by Sandy Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Post-transsexual Manifesto"

Christopher Soto (aka Loma) is considered as a queer latinx punk poet & prison abolitionist and founded *Nepantla: A Journal Dedicated to Queer Poets of Color* with the Lambda Literary Foundation. The first chapbook "Sad Girl Poems" was published by Sibling Rivalry Press in 2016. Soto's yarns a relationship between Poetry and activism which proves to be long and complicated. The poems of Soto speak about the political issues faced by the Queer community of America. I understand that activism has repercussions. I understand that silence has repercussions too.

- Christopher Soto (Silence has Repercussions).

The social activism of Christopher Soto does not end within the poetic lines; rather it flourishes on the roads of uncertainty and helplessness. It is an under-spoken and un-addressed reality within the queer community that about 40% of homeless youth are LGBT according to the Williams Institute. In my dream world everyone could have access to food, safety, shelter

-Christopher Soto

As a part of social commitment Soto also addresses a conglomeration of controversial issues such as domestic violence, police brutality, the decriminalisation of sex work and drug usage, the failure of marriage equality and gay assimilation. Soto realises that it is a consciousness building effort and an attempt of creating community dialogue. The poet also substantiates through his activism that it is not an easy task to track the direct impact of social consciousness of a community. Soto assures with rage that:

Mediocre Bitches will Never Silence Me

-Christopher Soto

Objectivity of creativity, transcending the self, questioning the rights and privileges of a community, trapped between the dichotomy of power and resistance, Soto realizes that identity of a person is not fixed, it is flux and complex. No identity is static, it changes and differs creating the possibility of alterity of existence. Diversity of thoughts could be deciphered in the writings of Soto. Placed between the dichotomy of existence, the binary sexual conflict, the nullification of sexual orientation is irrevocable, through the deconstruction of the constructed self. The complex caricature of the mind of a

queer poet could be felt through the psychological juxtaposition, committed towards the societal reforms, abolishing the personal divergence of subsistence.

I actually have complicated feelings about diversity. I feel like it's really reductionistic... I try to pay attention to age, gender, race, etc. but there's always someone missing. The people who don't get considered in conversations about diversity are usually those with the least amount of access to publication-- incarcerated poets, homeless poets, working-class poets, etc. I think diversity is important but it has a lot of limits...

-Christopher Soto

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Transgender issues observed throughout the world are recognized to be in need of an immediate interference since the realization of the third sex has been confirmed by various nationalities only recently. The Government of India approved The Transgender Persons Bill, 2016, which explained stringent punishment including imprisonment up to 2 years for offences against them. Thus to study about the gender non-conforming people, those who opt for sex reassignment surgery, the transsexuals etc., is an inexorable attempt. The voice of the subdued oppressed, biased, threatened, subjected to violence and sexual harassment shall be heard for a better tomorrow.

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The question of self and voice, visibility and self-consciousness, of textual faces and textual substitute bodies apply to all poems, but they become unique and exceptional when it is uttered by a transgender. Emily Dickinson's poem, beginning with "I'm nobody-who are you?", churns the crisis of gender identity which can be perceived as complex and conflicting not only among the individuals but also influences the transgender people adversely.

I never saw that you did painting need
And therefore to your fair no painting set, (Shakespeare's sonnet 83)

Explains that a poet would have made a better face with words but it has to be realised that the poet felt the existence of a better face of his beloved so he avoided making a better face through words. It is observed that we need poetry when there is a need of a better face which can be created with the rush of words. It is there that we are in need of figuration; it is there that we experience the presence of the self which expresses innumerable facets of desolations. It can be the face of the inner person, the inner self projected. As Lee Mokobe, A South African poet quotes,

I asked Jesus to fix me,
And when he did not answer
I befriended silence in the
hopes that my sis would burn..
I was it.

The winner to a game the other kids couldn't play.

The identity crises that reign the psyche of the transgender could be realised through the plight of Lee Mokobe. Fixing the

identity is a task which results to a struggle among the transgender.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This heartbreaking new poem by Loma, written in the aftermath of Orlando, fuses love and outrage into a refusal of violence through the embrace of vulnerability, tenderness, passion. It centers the identity of queer people of color in the face of not just one isolated, horrific and horrifying tragedy, but in the ongoing history of what Claudia Rankine evokes with her chilling line “And still a world begins its furious erasure—” Since Sunday I have felt lost without wits to make sense of what has happened, is happening, with the news of this most recent event. Yet Loma’s words are a miraculous act of grace and solidarity that permit nearly everything that the media world would forget, ignore, repress.

—Adam Fitzgerald, Poetry Editor

Christopher Soto’s introspection on police violence and mass incarceration through the first chap Book - *Sad Girl Poems* is revolutionary and sad, he explores that he need not be living in the world of ‘them’. The ‘them’ which the poet refers to is the world that has been denoted of the transgender. The winner of “Barnes and Nobles Writer for Writers Award” of 2016, Christopher Soto calls out to “Rip away all the bullshit”. Soto is the poet giving us the day as which has awaited a poet to do, for a long time, as he quotes “you are an asshole if you read this book and are not destroyed and renewed.” Loma creates an alternative queer poetics defined by sugary but tortured solitude.

Soto declares in sad girl poetics that to be brown and queer is to be abject. “Brown queers don’t get white angel wings. Their wings are the color of abjection.”

Oppression of the community, more than the self is projected in the poems of Soto. The sense of social consciousness is triggered. The more you go away from you, the easier you place yourself at a point where you create and re create your identity. Soto realises himself as a part of the society and overcomes what other transgender is conscious about, by sensing the agony, physical torture and shattered psyche of the oppressed.

As in the poem *Self Portrait as Sonoran Desert*.

She coughs & Combs // the floor //
my chest [Shiv-shivering].
Inside the detention center—
[She is named] “immigrant” “illegal.”
She loses 15 pounds & Mental health & her feet are—
Cracked tiles // dirty dishes. This border—
is not a stitch [where nations meet].
This border is a wound // where nations part
(Self Portrait as Sonoran Desert - Christopher Soto)

Overcoming the social restrictions and the frame work which is structured by the society as a transgender is countered and nullified at the point of self. The poet objectifies the situation rather than being subjective, the making and construction of the person is as the one really is. Oppression of the blacks, as a part of racial discrimination, voicing out from the crowd

realising that Soto is one among the others in the community, is the conscious effort that has created the poet realize that the poet is not kept away, or finding a place for oneself, a space in order to be accepted, consciously being objective about the ‘I’ within and reaches out to the society for the other in order to meet a social cause.

Last time, I saw myself die is when police killed Jessie Hernandez...

Yesterday, I saw myself die again. Fifty times I died in Orlando.

There are another fifty bodies, that look like mine, and are

Dead. And I have been marching for Black Lives and talking about the police brutality

Against Native communities too, for years now, but this morning

I feel it, I really feel it again. How can we imagine ourselves

We being black native

Today, Brown people

How can we imagine ourselves

When All the Dead Boys Look Like Us?

(All The Dead Boys Look Like Me *for Orlando* Christopher Soto)

Triple layered existence, finding oneself as a part of the other, the other as the individual, struggling to be a part of the common, fighting for the rights of the social group which has kept the poet as the other. Thirdly as a transgender, who is seen nowhere in the common frame work of the society which is subjected to binary system of existence.

Yelling my ignorances // each fence erect // splooging!

Surveillance cameras // shaking // skinhead passports.

Border communities // patrolled // petroleum desires.

This sweet & cherry // boy-pussy // is a great machine

(Yes, I Hate America- Christopher Soto)

The poet is fighting against racism, struggling within the main stream construction, realizing the existence of multiple ‘other’ within. Complex in nature, fighting for the rights of a black, the other in a colonial context and then the realization of being the other, as a transgender in the multicultural society, celebrating the ideology of plurality in the post modern context the poet fetters away the decisive nature of self and reaches for the oppressed. The perception of a reading, away from the main stream, regarding the authoritative assumptions could be comprehended through the poems, where there is not only two reading of the oppressed and the oppressor, but with the reading of the third or with multiple readings of a single action introduced or perceived by the construction of the society.

In the morning

I’m awake & lonely

I clip my toenails into crescent moons.

Everything is legal

somewhere.

(Transactional Sex with Satan - Christopher Soto)

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