

THE REALITY OF THE THIRD SEX IN AIMEE DUC'S *ARE THESE WOMEN?*

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In this essay, I try to analyze the reality of the third sex and lesbianism in Aimée Duc's novel *Are These Women?* within the context of the cultural and sexual revolution in Germany, which then spread to other parts of the world like France. The novel is about women from different parts of Europe who left their home to receive higher education in Switzerland, which was the only place where women were not denied the right to higher education. The protagonist Minotchka is a strong woman who does not give up on Marta after going through agony. To analyze this breakthrough in lesbian literature, I aim to discuss views of some sexologists of the early 20th century such as Hirschfeld and Freud on the issue of homosexuality, especially lesbianism. Forel, for example, believed that mothering instincts are inherent in all females and heterosexuality should be encouraged by preventing girls from intimate contact with the same sex such as sharing the same bed (Forel, 1908). This is a good example of how lesbianism was viewed in the early 20th century by the society, against which Aimée Duc fought in her novel *Are These Women?* On the other hand, Hirschfeld and Ulrichs acknowledged the fact that hermaphroditism was inherent in all human beings, which is to say all human beings are the result of a sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. So, they wanted to prove that homosexuality is not a pathology, which was the common idea of the doctors at the time (Dickinson, 2014). There were also others, like Paul Nacke, who first believed that homosexuality resulted from a pathology, but later changed their view after visiting Berlin's homosexual scenes in 1904 (ibid). Duc's novel is in a way a brave response to all of these contradictory views on homosexuality, especially lesbianism.

Keywords: Female sexuality, German sexologists, Lesbian movements, Feminist literature, Lesbians in higher education.

Introduction

The main argument of this essay is to show how Aimee Duc in her novel published in 1903 brings up the issues faced by feminist lesbians in support of their cause and challenge theories that are biased towards males. As feminists, lesbians had three main interests; 1) education reforms 2) expanded work opportunities 3) women's suffrage (Faderman and Eriksson, p.xii). Aimee Duc's women characters are upper-class members of the third sex and are more concerned with attaining their goals in the public sphere than getting involved in sexual or romantic love. In the second half of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, the widespread idea was that if a woman wanted to move from his father's house for university education, she would be condemned as having masculine attitudes and frowned upon. Duc's women acknowledged that they belonged to a third sex, a different category not just because of their sexual desire for the same sex, but because their socio-political status was automatically lower than a

straight woman. So, they were fighting both for women's and lesbians' civil rights. Also, the fact that Duc's novel does not end with a hysterical outcry of a lesbian woman who commit suicide, but ends in rejoice on the return of the lover shows to the reader that Duc challenged the idea that female homosexuality is a pathology. As will be described more in detail later in this essay, sexologists and doctors at the time held that same-sex desire in women was a medical condition and thus can be cured. However, Duc's woman characters show that their condition is congenital and even if they marry a man, they are not going to be converted to heterosexuality. As a result, Duc's novel depicts the reality of the third sex with respect to the socio-political background of the time. In my opinion, the whole novel is an answer to all the discussions about sex, gender, equality and women's liberation movement. In this novel, she answers many questions that were raised in the early 20th century on gender and homosexuality challenging some of the male dominant ideas on homosexuality. In this essay, first, movements between 1870's and the turn of 20th century in Germany are described. Then, research done by Swiss and German sexologists on male and female homosexuality are presented. Their theories are discussed and contrasted throughout the essay. Finally, the essay is concluded by reiterating how Duc challenges male-dominant theories about female sexuality through her non-hysteric and strong female characters.

It was a time of cultural revolution in Germany which spread to other parts of the world like France. Homosexual movements together with civil rights movement gained momentum until the outbreak of WWII and its aftermath. There were three different women's emancipation movements in the 1870s, 1890s and 1920's (Lybeck, 2008). The leaders of the first movement were from upper-class families who went to Switzerland for university education because at that time women were denied university degrees in Germany. The movement in 1890's helped challenge the conventional heterosexual reproduction expected of women and helped the third sex define a new sexual identity for themselves. The term "homosexual" started to be used in the beginning of the 20th century. Sexologists such as Hirschfeld together with others helped define a new sexual identity for the third sex (ibid).

1870's witnessed a breakthrough in print media and cultural production in Germany (Dickinson, 2014). From that time onwards, entertainment business expanded and homosexual movement benefitted from this newly gained freedom. However, before long this golden age experienced contempt from the conservative bodies and in 1909 the editors of the magazine "Der Volkswart" were irritated by the fact that texts about sexual perversion were easily accessible to public because they had been translated from Latin to German (ibid).

Research on Female and Male Homosexuality

Such oppositions from public led sexologists to write against the common view about lesbians and homosexuals in general. For example, Forel, the first Swiss sexologist, wrote a book called *The Sexual Question* in 1908. The aim of this book was to inform doctors that homosexuality was not equal to sexual perversity and that it was not a medical condition that could be or needed to be fixed or corrected. He distinguished between male and female homosexuality. According to Forel, male homosexuality is congenital and men cannot be seduced to inversion by adopting "vicious habits" later in life. If he has homosexual tendencies, this is due to his genetic disposition and under no circumstances -however favourable they may be- can he develop homosexuality later (Forel, 1908). However, he argued that it was possible for girls to be seduced into lesbianism if conditions were favourable. He believed that mothering instincts are inherent in all females and heterosexuality should be encouraged by preventing girls from intimate contact with the same sex such as sharing the same bed. However, in "Are These Women?" it is apparent that this is not applicable in reality. Minotchka suffered for three years after he got married to a man (she says, "I wasted my time"). Similarly, her lover Marta married a soldier, however later just to regret and return back to Minotchka.

Likewise, Iwan Bloch distinguished between genuine homosexuality and pseudo-homosexuality in "The Sexual Life of Our Times" (1907) He argued that women's liberation and civil rights movement gained them masculine characteristics by building solidarity among them and thus leading them to

homosexuality (Dickinson, 2014). On the other hand, Hirschfeld and Ulrichs acknowledged the fact that hermaphroditism was inherent in all human beings. All human beings are the result of a sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. So, they wanted to prove that homosexuality is not a pathology, which was the common idea of the doctors at the time (Dickinson, 2014). Paul Nacke was one of those who first believed that homosexuality resulted from a pathology, but later he changed his view after visiting Berlin's homosexual scenes with Hirschfeld in 1904 (ibid).

At the time, diffusion of faulty second-hand information, especially about female sexuality, was one of the problems that women's emancipation movement faced (Dickinson, 2014). In the novel, we can see a good example of this when one of the gentlemen says "concerning the question of college,[...] mental work, the strenuous higher activity ruins the nerves of women. Just look at all the hysterical women" and Minotchka protests by saying "You judge merely as a layman. You merely repeat what you have heard." This is similar to the argument that homosexuals are perverted or pathological. However, when doctors actually observed closely and more scientifically, some changed their minds and started to talk in favour of the proponents of the liberation movement. To give an example, in his earlier publications, Freud argued the inferiority and the neurotic nature of women. He thought libido was masculine. According to Freud, girls develop penis envy during the first 5 years of their childhood and they have to overcome this situation in a healthy way. In addition, women repress their sexual desires, due to which they are of hysterical nature (Mitchell, 2000). However, later these views were met with objection from Betty Friedan (*The Freudian Mystique*, 1963) and Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*, 1960). As a result, Freud made a U-turn and said men were also hysterics, and he acknowledged that humans are "psychologically bisexual" (Mitchell, 2000 p.51).

Another distinction that was made between man and woman, which can also apply both to heterosexuals and homosexuals, was between psychic love and sexual love. Forel argues because of their active sexual desires, men are not capable of pure psychic or platonic love, but women are. Actually, he purports that lesbianism first starts as motherly, or sisterly compassionate solidarity, and turns into sexual love. That is why when their lovers abandon them, they tend to fall into despair and commit suicide (Forel, 1908). In "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in Woman" (1920), Freud narrates the case of a young girl of 18 who attempted to commit suicide when she was rejected by her lover and caught by her father when she was with her prohibited love. Freud expected to encounter a memory in her childhood that could give way to her neurosis or hysteria and resulted in lesbian tendencies, but he found none. So, then we can argue that it was a common view among sexologists and psychiatrists that although male homosexuality was the result of hereditary disposition, female homosexuality may result from hysteria or end in hysteria because of the psychic nature of their love. However, men do not necessarily make psychic bonds, so they can just be satisfied with sexual love, and they don't have to suffer from hysteria or pathology as a result.

It can accordingly be argued that doctors and sexologists at the time thought that male homosexuality was not a pathology, but female homosexuality was; thus the latter can (and perhaps should) be avoided, cured and changed into heterosexuality through treatment or rehabilitation. In that case, this is a rather pessimistic scenario.

How Duc Challenged Male Dominant Views on the Third Sex

Are These Women?, written in 1903, is a breakthrough in the sense that it is only of its kind that depicts lesbian love that ends happily. "The rest of the lesbian fiction of the period was written largely by men and often presented lesbians as sick or confused or sinister or all three" (Faderman and Eriksson, 1980 p. xvii). In that sense, this novel might be a counter-statement against Freud's and other male sexologists' arguments of the time that female homosexuality is a pathology or that ends in hysteria. Although Minotchka was abandoned by Marta when she married a soldier, she did not attempt to commit suicide or behaved "hysterically". Also, the last sentence of the novel justifies the optimistic nature of the novel; "And they walked arm in arm toward the city, out into the bliss of spring and of their lives"(p.23).

Although the novel is critical of many things, it also supports some of the ideas of some sexologists. For example, Forel put forward that female sexuality is more of a compassionate and platonic love. However, maybe this is not due to the fact that psychic love precedes sexual love. This might be due to the political aspect of the emancipation movement. In the novel, we can see this very vividly. First of all, they are all fighting for a feminist cause. Before they are lesbians, they are activists and even the desire to have equal civil rights as men come before their lesbian love for each other. Accordingly, they have to stand and fight together until their rightful place in society has been acknowledged by the male dominant patriarchal society. "Active participation in the nation and the public sphere required the constant assertion of desirelessness or a uniquely masculine ability to control one's desires and channel them responsibly." (Lybeck, 2008). In the novel, there is no instance of sexual intercourse between two females, but rather there are intellectual and fierce discussions on the emancipation movement and they demand equality with their male counterparts. This is apparent especially in Minotchka's arguments with Dr. Laum against the merits of marriage and those in favour of the right to education and career. Early in the novel she says "marriage is a terribly dangerous venture even for normal people [...] and therefore marriage suffers shipwreck in so many cases." She argues rather than being forced to marry, girls need education to support themselves financially. Also, she gets into fierce arguments with two male strangers at the concert and beats them with her assertive statements.

Lesbianism and Bodily Love

Sex reformers challenged the Christian sexual theory that dictated the sinful nature of lust and sexual desire (Dickinson, 2014). According to the old morals, sexual activity was the deed of the evil and thus was prohibited. One of the goals of the sex reformers of the early 20th century was to replace this old view with a more positive outlook. They considered it harmony between body and soul. They "held that health, happiness, and individual and social well-being was not a product of self-discipline and self-denial, of the suppression of the anarchic, egoistic, or destructive vital energies, rather it was a product of the release and engagement of creative vital energies-including sexual energies (ibid, p.198). Although the novel does not depict any sexual scenes, in the novel there is a criticism of the old Christian sexual theory. When Marta's soldier husband dies, she returns to Minotchka and says "I have never been anything but a friend to my husband. He wanted to be my companion, my comrade", which suggests that they did not have any sexual intercourse and according to Marta this was a murder of her soul because her soul belongs to Minotchka. When she married a soldier, she suffered from self-denial and suppressed her life energy, but when they are reunited with Minotchka, she reconciles with her life energy and thus sexual energy again.

Change and Emancipation in Duc's Novel

Finally, I would like to mention a slightly different character Pierette and her role in the novel. Unlike other female characters in the novel, she does not come from an upper-class family who can support her education. She is not a *Bildungsbürgertum* (Lybeck, 2008) but has ideals of the *Bildungsbürger* culture. She is an actress described by Duc as "timid and seemingly without energy." She is an important character because she is willing to change from a weaker character from the lower class into a *Bildungsbürger* by "teaching French and giving piano lessons" (p.15) In that sense, I think she is the symbol of change. I believe she is the representative of the women that Lybeck points out by saying "For them [emancipated women] emancipation and modernization were strongly shaped by their adoption of the ideals of the *Bildungsbürger* culture in which they had been educated. Even though many of them did not come from the *Bildungsbürgertum*, they had absorbed its emphasis on self-cultivation, ethical responsibility, spiritual orientation, and a belief in reconciliation for the good of the whole." (Lybeck, 2008, p.39). Pierette wants to contribute to the education sector in Germany by teaching French and music, thus contribute to German culture. In addition, Pierette is an important symbol of the women solidarity. She asks for Minotchka's help as the leader and the strongest member of their community to

help her become an active member of the society as a teacher. Solidarity has been seen as a masculine feature, but it is also very common in emancipated women and Duc presents this in her novel in many instances.

Conclusion

Duc's novel is a critique of mainly male dominant views (both educated and uneducated) in many aspects. It argues especially against the Freudian understanding of sex. Like his many other contemporaries, Freud at first believed that homosexuality was abnormal, child-like, self-directed and immature (Mitchell, 2000). He linked it to the phallic stage of life, where the infant learns to masturbate. To him, every stage is critical and one may be stuck with one stage forever if they cannot go through it in a healthy way (ibid). Thus, he calls homosexuality as being stuck in the phallic phase, which can result in hysteria and pathology. However, not any one woman in Duc's novel is child-like or immature. To the contrary, all are self-reliant, independent, strong and responsible. For example, Marta is strong enough to ask for Minotchka's apology even after she forsook her. Similarly, Minotchka had enough willpower to continue her life the way she wanted even after deception (she decided to move to Paris to start a new life). Pierrette is strong enough to demand a better life for herself and make a career shift (from actress to teacher)

The discussions that Minotchka has with Dr .Faum and the two male strangers at the concert about education are reminiscent of those feminist articles of the 19th century such as Otto Peters' The Right of Women to Earn a Living and Betty Gleim's Education and Instruction of the Female Sex. Peters argues for university education for girls. She says (p.18) “ [...] At an age when all the intellectual abilities begin to unfold, when we first comprehend the proper love of scientific interests, when we first are able to realize how necessary it is to acquire knowledge[...] –at such an age female education is considered complete.” Minotchka's female friends emigrated from Germany to Switzerland for university education and throughout the novel, there are discussions on women's education. However, there is one difference between these articles and the novel; it seems that the arguments for the education of the women actually support marriage and suggest that it is actually good for the marriage if the woman is educated. “Education is further reproached for preventing the woman from fulfilling her occupational duties as wife; it can be shown, however, that education promotes these duties” (Gleim, 1810). On the other hand, in the novel, Minotchka agrees with the argument that “an educated woman is not fit for marriage”. (p.16) She says “that is exactly why we won't marry.”(p.16) So, Minotchka is totally rejecting the idea of marriage mainly because she belongs to the third sex, a different category.

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