
LESBIAN CONTINUUM IN THE SEVEN SISTERS

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INTRODUCTION

The term 'lesbian continuum' was suggested by Adrienne Rich in her seminal essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." As Rich defines it, lesbian continuum "includes a range—through each woman's life and throughout history— of women identified experience, not simply that a woman has had or consciously desired genital experience with another woman" (Rich 18). The lesbian continuum thus refers to a whole range of female relations of—mutual help groups, friendships and institutions and sexual relations. The essay is an attempt to reinforce the personal and political bonds between women. Rich thinks of the word lesbian as implying more than a sexual attraction and physical act, but an emotional and strong bond between women. She challenges the notion of women's dependence on men as social and economic supports, as well as adult sexuality and psychological completion. The essay is a breakthrough as it breaks the common assumption that most women are heterosexual by birth. Rich challenges the established sexual assumptions made by the society. Society regards heterosexual relationship as the norm and any intimate relationship outside it is considered to be unnatural and deviant. Rich's essay helps one to look at all the familiar arguments from a new perspective. She suggests that since the child has the first erotic bond with her mother, there is a possibility that the natural sexual orientation of both men and women be towards women. According to Rich, "idealisation of heterosexual romance in art, literature, media, advertising and so forth," sends out the "subliminal message" that sadistic heterosexuality is more 'normal' than sensuality between women" (207). The present paper attempts to examine the element of 'lesbian continuum' in Margaret Drabble's "*The Seven Sisters*"

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The Seven Sisters (2003) tells the story of Candida Wilton, a divorced woman, who arrives alone in London without much money. This novel provides an excellent study of relationships of women with other women. It gives the portrait of friendship and how it brings sudden transformation in the lives of these seven women. Candida gathers up six travelling companions —women friends from childhood, from married life and after. She maps out the journey she has long dreamed of. She discovers herself along the way and finds true friendship in other women. This novel portrays how women bond with other women against the institutionalised practices based on the assumption of heterosexuality in the manner suggested by Rich. Rich invites the women to see ‘the lesbian’ in themselves even though they may sleep with men. The term ‘lesbian continuum’ implies that heterosexuality is the enemy which embodies male dominance. Rich shows the continuity between identification experiences with each other that all women have had and the resistance that they put up against male patriarchy. Candida herself has been the victim of the patriarchal system. In her essay, “The Origin of the Family,” Kathleen Glough has enumerated the characteristics of male power and “men’s ability to deny women sexuality or to force it upon them; to command or exploit their labor to control their produce” and how the males “control or rob them of their children” Candida too has been a victim of the patriarchal ideology in the similar fashion. She feels that her husband is responsible for the estrangement with her daughters, she says, “Andrew alienated my three daughters. He seduced them and stole their hearts away” (20). She stops writing at this point and does not say much about her family. She seems disenchanted when she writes about her family and looks forward to writing about her school friends. She says, “tomorrow I will write about friends from St. Anne’s. The prospect fills me with a slightly unhealthy excitement” (21). The “unhealthy excitement” hints at her passion for her friends. She is clearly more inclined towards her friends than her family. She is never seen to make any efforts from her side to make truce with her estranged daughters. She enjoys her new routine at the Health Club and seeks liberation by finding her own space. She says, “if I break my routine I will die. I must measure out my days correctly, as I promised myself I would, or liberation will never be mine” (21).

Candida’s experience in a heterosexual relationship has not been good. She infact abhors her relationship with Andrew. She often compares her relationship with her husband and her friend Julia. She clearly prefers her relationship with the latter, as it is a more pleasing experience in every aspect. Andrew always made her feel unimportant about herself and now with Julia she felt more confident. The narrator tells how she enjoyed Julia’s company more,

“it is good, surprisingly good, to be sitting here in a hotel bar in North Africa, peacefully, comfortably, with her old friend Julia Jordan. It is much better here than it had been sitting watching television alone of an evening in Holling House, while Andrew delivered a secular sermon about the visually impaired and disability allowances or went through his papers in his study” (205). It is also learnt through the course of novel that Candida never enjoyed sexual intimacies with her husband. It seems that it is hard for her to admit this fact openly. It is revealed much later in the novel in the chapter which she initially purports that it is written by her daughter. She feels that her daughters have misunderstood her throughout and blamed her for their separation. She imagines her daughter saying, “it was my mother’s frigidity that drove my father into the arms of other women. I don’t suppose she ever slept with him, after Martha was conceived” (257-58). Ellen also claims that her mother was an “emasculating woman” (266). Candida fears that her own aversion to sex must have affected the sex lives of her daughters. She expresses her fear through her daughter’s point of view, “she has frozen up my sex life, that’s for sure... she neutered me. And I don’t think Isobel has much fun in bed” (266). Later she confirms all the assumptions about Candida’s which she believes must have been made by her daughter. She says:

Ellen is right, I have always been afraid of the male organ. It has never seemed to be an attractive object, in any of its states, erect or dormant. Female genitalia do not attract me much either, although to me the female body is beautiful. My Health Club is full of beautiful naked women.” (277)

After divorce she moves on. She does not care to find out about Andrew and Anthea. At no point does she show any remorse and regret for her failed marriage. Candida feels much more excited and hopes that the boredom of her life will eventually come to an end. She looks forward to start a new life. Since she has nothing much to do, she starts writing diary like she used to write in her younger days, filling it with the smallest of details. The novel is divided in three parts in which the first part is “Her Diary” in which she is the narrator of her own story. To fill in the emptiness of her life after her divorce and after her children are estranged she relocates to London. There she takes a class of reading Virgil’s *Aeniad* and when that building gets converted in to a health club, she joins it aimlessly. This gives her the opportunity to make several new friends and find her way out of the sad ending of her marriage.

Because its very existence seemed so anachronistic and so improbable. Because I thought it would keep my mind in good shape. Because I thought it might find me a

friend. Because I thought it might find me the kind of friend that I would not have known in my former life. Already I was wary about making friends with a kind of person who would want to be friends with a person like me. (10)

She discovers the pleasures of solitary living and the power of hegemony over her own time. She spends her time in writing a diary. As it happens, the new regime and her new friends mean everything to her. Nowhere in her diary does she feel repentant over a failed marriage or estrangement with her three daughters. She reminisces a lot about her school days and the time spent with her friends. She recalls various interesting incidents several times. Julia, her school friend, has always been in touch with her and talks fondly about her. Throughout the novel she tells various anecdotes about her friends more than she discusses about her family. It is quite evident that the narrator has always shared close bonds with her female friends right from her childhood. She was close friends with Janet and Julia in her schooldays. Though she reproaches Janet, she is still close to Julia. She tells, “Janet has been cloyingly sympathetic about my divorce, which all too clearly delighted her, and asks me from time to time to go to stay with her” (24). Janet is now widowed and stays with her daughter and son-in-law. Janet too never had a happy married life as she was often beaten up by her drunk husband. Janet has been constantly visiting Candida’s mother. There appears an effort on part of Janet to revive their old friendship but apparently Candida dislikes her clingy behaviour and suspects some “selfish reasons” for it. She feels intimidated over her openly expressing delight over her divorce “she still calls me by my school nickname, which annoys me” (24). In the beginning of the novel, Candida tells how all her friends shared the common habit of writing diary. She reveals:

We wrote about our young, trivial, daily hopes, our likes and our dislikes, our friends and our enemies, our hockey games and our blackheads and our crushes and our faith in God. We wrote about what we thought about Emily Bronte and the dissection of frogs. I don’t think we were very honest in our diaries. Blackheads and acnes were as far as we got in our truth-telling in those days. (3)

In addition to it, she also shares the intimate moments that she has spent with friends. This was the time when all girls used to listen to Julia’s adventures and escapades with much interest. She tells:

I used to sit in Julia’s narrow bed with her during these sinful episodes, with my arm around her and my feet tucked up under her thin tartan rug. We were close. I held on

to the very flesh of her sinfulness. I was one of Julia's best friends, though I was never quite sure why" (27).

Candida is open to the idea of lesbianism. She says, "lesbianism and troilism are just fine." This also becomes evident when she shows her acceptance to any lover that her daughter might have chosen. She does not mind if her lover is a male or a female.

I believe she has a lover. Or a partner, which, I gather, is the modern word for lover. I don't know what sex or what nationality this person may claim, and I don't ask. (46)

Candida has always been dependent on others throughout her life. She has not even slept alone ever. This is the first time ever when she gets the opportunity to live independently. She says:

In my adult years I had not had much experience of sleeping alone. I had moved from a dormitory in a girl's boarding school to a small bedsitter off a busy corridor in a women's college and then, after a short interlude teaching French in another girl's boarding school, I had moved into the marriage bed. (50)

After the separation she becomes an "object of gossip and pity and contempt." She is divorced and estranged from her family but interestingly enough she is still in touch with her friends from school. The society pities her but she seeks an opportunity in this separation, "Now I live trapped beneath an enclosing grey gloomy London canopy. It is better so. In this trap is my freedom. Here I shall remake my body and my soul". She further says, "nobody could guess at the relief I might be feeling. Nobody knew of the exhilaration I felt when I realized that I would not have to live Andrew for the rest of my life. Nobody knew of my secret delight in his public guilt" (19). She breaks away all kinds of ties with her husband. She wants to be self dependent and is hesitant to receive any monetary help from him after separation. She expresses her dilemma:

Part of me thinks that I ought not to be taking any money from Andrew at all, let alone thousands of pounds a year. I know that the law doesn't see it that way, nor do my so called friends, but I feel diminished by living on his money. I wonder if that's a feminist feeling. (95)

To her luck, Candida unexpectedly inherits a little fortune. This lifts her from near poverty and she starts thinking of how to spend the money. She contacts friends from school, Suffolk neighbourhood and the classmates from her adult education class, and she plans an adventure trip retracing the steps of Aeneas from Carthage to Naples. The trip to Italy that she organises with six of her female friends gives her the opportunity to make bonds with them which she

had desired for a long time. The seventh sister is Valeria, the Italian tourist guide. The choice of Valeria is random and arbitrary one. The trip turns her into a new person, who is more confident and less docile. This is where she becomes a close friend of Anais. Candida likes Anais and even feels jealous if she gets close to any other woman or man. The way she feels possessive about her appears a little creepy. The chapter where Candida impersonates her own daughter and gives her version of story, she imagines many events. She even suspects that Anais and Mrs Barclay have an affair. The whole chapter is a reflection of her own thoughts and all her insecurities are surfaced. The extent to which she likes Anais becomes evident when writes an imaginary conversation between her daughter and Anais. She is quite confident that her daughter Ellen would also have liked Anais as much. She says, "I wouldn't mind sharing a joint with Anais one day. I like Anais" (256). She admits:

A pang of unreasonable jealousy shot through me at the thought of Anais going to the Coronet without telling me. Had she been accompanied by another friend? I could hardly ask, it would have sounded mad. I know Anais has lots of other friends, and that I am nothing special to her. I am lucky that she bothers with me at all. (115)

There have been a multitude of examples where women have formed support groups. Candida was one of those lucky women who had the support of her friends and she felt quite proud about it. She imagines her daughter to admire her for ability to make good friends even at this age. She says, "my mother fell amongst friends. I can't work out whether this was luck, or whether, sociologically, the odds were in her favour. There are a lot of nice and middle-aged and elderly women about, at loose end, and they are good at setting up little support groups for themselves" (267). Thus, there is a strong female comradeship among the women in this novel. All these women show a strong resistance to the enslavement by the heterosexual society. These women establish their lesbian existence in the sense that they exist and even experience a rich life without bonding with men. In the light of Adrienne Rich's definition of lesbian continuum, the women in this novel evidently exhibit the elements of lesbian continuum.

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