THE REPRESENTATION OF THE LESBIAN BODY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE*

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Abstract

In this essay, we examine the representation of the lesbian body in two contemporary Indian pop cultural products: Shobha Dé's bestseller novel *Strange Obsession* (1992) and Karan Razdan's Bollywood film *Girlfriend* (2004). We argue that rather than challenging and undermining the hegemonic modes of representation of lesbian women, both works deploy, and manipulate for dramatic effect, a repertoire of visual/textual stereotypes that have long been associated in misogynist and patriarchal imagination with perceptions of lesbian women as sexual abjects and heterosexual partners as victims of their insanity.

Keywords: homophobic discourse, male gaze, *Girlfriend*, *Strange Obsession*.

Resumen

En este ensayo, analizamos la representación del cuerpo lésbico en dos textos culturales de la cultura popular contemporánea de la India: la novel *Strange Obsession* de Shobha Dé (1992) y la película de Bollywood *Girldfriend* de Karan Razdan (2004). Argumentamos que, en lugar de desafiar los modos hegemónicos de la representación de las mujeres lesbianas, ambas obras despliegan y manipulan con efecto dramático un repertorio de estereotipos visuales y textuales que se han asociado con percepciones misóginas y patriarcales de las mujeres lesbianas como abyectas sexuales y sus parejas heterosexuales como víctimas de su locura.

Palabras clave: discurso homófobo, Mirada masculina, *Girlfriend*, *Strange Obsession*.

> We must think that what exists is far from filling all possible spaces. To make a truly unavoidable challenge of the question: What can be played?
>
> *Michel Foucault's* "Friendship as a Way of Life" (1981)

Within a context of denial as to the presence of lesbian relationships in the heteronormative environment of Indian society even today, it is my intention to examine that experience, using two heterosexual voices representing the lesbian abject: ShobhaDé's popular bestseller novel *Strange Obsession* (1992) and Karan Razdan's Bollywood film *Girlfriend* (2004).[1] I will focus on how the authors pretend to construct lesbian imaginative spaces, as they exploit the sensationalist aspects of lesbianism, seeking scandal as a tool of publicity. Both works share successful marketing strategies while manifesting traditional conceptualizations of gender and heteronormative models of women's identification. In the two works analyzed here, lesbianism is linked with insanity, dramatized by a bisexual love triangle which finally reinforces the conventional male-female relationship as the only acceptable one. Even though both works have been reviewed as unique creations for their depiction of lesbian relationships, rather than challenging and undermining the hegemonic modes of representation of lesbian women, *Girlfriend* and *Strange Obsession* deploy, and manipulate for dramatic effect, a repertoire of visual/textual stereotypes that have long been associated in misogynist and patriarchal imagination with perceptions of lesbian women as sexual abjects and heterosexual partners as victims of their insanity.

Girlfriend and *Strange Obsession* portray two single women who are aspiring models and are caught, unwillingly, in a tormented relationship with their same-sex 'best friends' in Bombay. These mannish female characters happen to be paranoid, manifesting a violent obsession towards their innocent villa-mates whenever the latter try to initiate a heterosexual relationship. Both love triangles construct a task-roles continuum: the naïve, feminine and vulnerable femme (Sapna in *G*, and Amrita in *SO*), the possessive and sexually dominant butch —the only one who is presented as a lesbian and seems to have an obsessive compulsive disorder— (Tanya in *G*, and Minx in *SO*), and the superhero (Rahul in *G*, and Rakesh in *SO*). In the end, the butch is condemned to fail both as a woman and as a lover and, as Shameem Kabir suggests, "must be punished and destroyed" (3). The lesbian, with her 'unhealthy' obsession, violently dies so that the femme is liberated and can live a happy and conventional heterosexual marriage.[2]

Given that a speaking subject occupies a place of power and authority, s/he requires an ethical involvement in the representation of 'others.' Razdan and Dé, in their powerful position as writers, reinforce dominant ideologies and disown their lesbian protagonists by dismissing them as mentally disturbed, thus denying any

REVISTA CANARIA DE ESTUDIOS INGLESES, 73; 2016, PP. 45-56

* The author wishes to acknowledge the funding provided by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (Research Project "Bodies in Transit", ref. FFI2013-47789-C2-1-P) and the European Regional Development Fund for the writing of this essay.

[1] From now on references to *Strange Obsession* and *Girlfriend* are given in abbreviations (*SO* and *G*).

[2] In spite of all the similarities, *Girlfriend* is not a filmic adaptation of the novel *Strange Obsession*. The writer/director has claimed in an interview with Jha (2004) that the script is completely original.

viable form of lesbianism in contemporary popular culture. When responding to right-wing condemnations of *Girlfriend*, Razdan declared that he did not mean to promote a message of support for lesbians, he just believed Indians should accept them. On the other hand, Shobha Déhas been acclaimed by many literary critics and journalists as the Indian creator of the New Woman, emphasizing in her novels free and independent female characters.[3] The New Woman emerged during the period of economic liberalization of the 1990s, signified by and celebrated for her sexual openness as opposed to the sexual conservativeness of previous decades. In the case of *Strange Obsession*, it has been argued that lesbianism can be interpreted as a protest against male hegemony in an effort to completely free female characters from dependence on men. On first sight, both works seem to be sensitive to queer desires (erotic captures in the film and detailed description of same-sex intercourse in the novel), but eventually they affirm the inevitability of heterosexuality: *SO* and *G* continue to portray women who are policed and disciplined by the dictates of heterosexual patriarchal marriage.

1. DESIRE FOR THE LESBIAN BODY: VOYEURISM AND THE MALE GAZE

Sapna and Amrita are the objectified females seen through Tanya's and Minx's masculine gaze and the (male) spectator's/reader's gaze. They are fetishized as the perfect product of beauty (they are young supermodels) which alleviates the threat posed to the (male) spectator/reader by the figure of the butch. Razdan and Dé attempt a reversal of the male gaze when in *G* Tanya is gazing at Sapna, the object of her desire, while Sapna is in the bathtub and Tanya peers through a half-open door at her, or when in *SO*, Minx tapes Amrita naked many times with a video camera, while living together, and for example commands: "Lie back the way you were and play with yourself—use the flowers and fruits. Go on—don't you have any imagination?" (186). But both authors fail, as their attempt at showing a possible instance of a female gaze and desire is "almost exclusively understood in male (and commonly heterocentric) terms [and can't] be transformed so that it is capable of accommodating the very category on whose exclusion it has been made possible" (Grosz quoted in Sue Thornham 118). This can result in what Jagger points out to be "co-option of existing power relations and regulatory ideals rather than actually challenging them or their basic premises" (105).[4] Moreover, Tanya's and Minx's desire can only be accommodated when they are 'cross-dressed,' and therefore their access to pleasure is through 'masculine identification.'

[3] See, for example, Chaudhary (2013), Vats (2012), Rafiuddin and Parab (2013), Chauhan (2011), Kumar (2012), and Saraladevi (2013), among many other articles and reviews.

[4] Butler suggests that lesbianism is not wholly unique and to a certain extent it cannot be freed from being modeled upon heterosexuality (1993: 310).

Girlfriend is addressed to a male target audience, which is bombarded by erotic lesbian scenes absent of subversion; Razdan used female homosexuality for exploitation to serve sensational ends. The erotic sequences appear as the imaginings of the two seemingly straight protagonists. The first time we see Tanya's desire for Sapna is when Sapna is in the bath-tub and Tanya is the voyeur. Sapna's body then functions on two levels, firstly "as [an] erotic object for [Tanya] within the story, and [secondly] as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium" (Nair 54). The second time we see a seduction scene between Tanya and Sapna is through the process of flashback during their college days, vividly described to Sapna's boyfriend Rahul and thereby to the audience. This love-making sequence is visibilized through what turns out to be the phobic imaginings of Rahul, as he wakes from this 'nightmare' and decides to 'rescue' Sapna from such 'danger.' In *SO*, as in any pop novel, violence and sex seem to go hand in hand. And although Amrita does not approve of their relationship, she leaves her weak nature in the hands of her 'butch' friend. The erotic scenes are described in heterosexual terms and do not discomfort nor challenge the reader, as what is being narrated in these two passages is how a woman's body responds to pleasure:

> Minx had taken each one of her toes into her mouth and was massaging them with her tongue, while her hands reached between Amrita's legs and touched her with teasing, rhythmic stabs. She felt her legs open almost voluntarily, as Minx climbed upon her, straddling her slim hips with her own, covering her breasts with her hands, cupping the nipples and circling them repeatedly till the ached with a sweet pain. Amrita had never known anything like this ... never. She moaned with pleasure as Minx brought her to a peak, again and again, starting where she'd left off each time she felt Amrita's body going slack under her. (136-7)

> Her thighs spread a little to allow Minx's hands in. She felt her nipples stiffen as Minx's tongue circled them maddeningly her toes moving down between her legs, teasing the wet grotto there, as her big toe moved rhythmically against the point of maximum pleasure, manipulating it incessantly, till Amrita felt her body shuddering with the intensity of the sensation (...), as Minx kept up the pleasure and with her other toe tickled her breasts and nipples. A small scream escaped from Amrita's mouth. (156-7)

It is interesting to note that every aggression is followed by a nonconsensual but unopposed sexual encounter, scenes which "ended up with a contrite Minx making love to Amrita, followed by giant-sized bouquets and an expensive gift" (194). Minx is described in 'masculine' ways (even highlighting her absence of breasts due to plastic surgery) and Amrita is feeling but not seeing, which seems to imply the misogynist idea that a woman can always get pleasure "begging for more" (157), no matter how badly she is physically treated or verbally abused as a "bitch" or a "whore" (193). This reminds us of Kakar's idea that according to the traditional view of Indian women, they need to be protected "not from external danger but from the woman's inner, sexual proclivities" (18). This is, in fact, a sadomasochistic relationship such that after having been abused, "Amrita's body, soaked and relaxed, began

to respond to Minx's pleasuring" (156). Amrita suffers from the two sides of Minx: the generous one who offers gifts such as an air-conditioner (59), a luxurious apartment (174), a green-eyed black cat (184), an Art Deco bracelet set with rubies and diamonds (191), an eternity band crafted from a string of exquisitely-cut marquises linked by tiny emeralds (140), a diamond ring (20), silk undies (32), long-stemmed roses (117), and the sadist who offers a dead piglet (23), and a frozen heart (31), injuring Amrita's friends, and setting Amrita's pubic hair on fire and pushingan object inside her till she passed out (214-5). We can highlight here that having an expensive and fashionable taste in gifts is a signifier of the stereotypical lesbian identity. In her analysis of *SO* as an intertext of Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Helff notes that Dé uses the literary motif of butterflies and its connotations of imprisonment and abuse. When Amrita moves into Minx's impersonal flat high in the sky, a perfect hiding place for producing a porn movie with the intense moments between the torturer and her victim, she finds tons of books related to butterflies (137).

Another sexually explicit passage takes place after Minx tells Amrita she performed a goat sacrifice at the Kali Mata Mandir to thank the goddess, for which Amrita responds with disgust and rejection: "it was a mistake...the whole thing was mistake. And I'm sorry but I don't love you" (155). As expected by the reader, Minx transforms her anger into a sexual assault on Amrita who "crossed one arm over her breasts and stuck her hand over her pubis. Minx gripped her wrists and dragged her arms away, exposing her completely" (156), then getsAmrita into a warm, perfumed bath with her, where they finally have sex. The passage is described as a human sacrifice performed in the temple. According to tradition, the goddess Kali grants powers to those who sacrifice a virgin's body to her with the condition that the victim had to be willing, had to know what was happening, watch the knife, and not stop it. It is not surprising that Dé chooses this sacrifice so that Minx is attributed the brutality of the only female divinity associated with blood (and the only one represented to be dark and therefore ugly). Minx's body is often described as being abominable in contrast to Amrita's sweet and fair complexion. The evil versus good (butch-femme) corresponding to the beast and beauty is another trope used by Dé. Minx's appearance is 'masculine.' Her flaky, mottled skin gives Minx a reptilian appearance, with close-set, grey-green eyes that never seemed to blink, with lank, cropped hair that looked listless and dull, or the mouth set in a severe line, like a gash carved by a blunt knife (43). The reader knows that this ugly masculinized character is capable of committing evil acts as well, as for example, what she did to another model, Lola: "It wasn't just an acid attack—the poor girl was carved up nicely. Her insides were minced with a switch-blade shoved through her vagina. Only a sadist would mutilate an innocent young girl like that. Who will marry her now? Her chances are permanently destroyed" (97); or when she says: "You will move when I command you to. Right now, you are my slave, let me feast my eyes on you" (187). Minx clearly represents the lesbian abject, following Kristeva's definition as somebody who "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior" (4).

At the end of the novel, we find an explicit and detailed description of the sex scene between the newlyweds, violently forced by Minx while she recorded it: "Amrita knelt and took Rakesh's penis between her lips. [...] climbed over him, slipping in his erect penis easily, smoothly. [...] The two of them climaxed just as Bolero reached its crescendo" (290). We can clearly see here how Minx reproduces the heterosexual gaze as if in a porn movie, as she even says "I feel like I'm back in school watching all those dirty films" (290). Dé is popular for her pornographic writing style, which has given her a reputation of taboo-breaker.

2. THE L-WORD: ACTING (AB)NORMAL

Films like *Girlfriend* and novels like *Strange Obsession* are rife with stereotypical depictions of what constitutes a lesbian and "relegate lesbian desire either to the realm of the (immature) pre-Oedipal or to the status of the merely imitative ('I'm looking, as a man would, for a woman' (...) [and] risks leaving the structures of heterosexuality (and perhaps heterosexism) untouched" (Thornham 123). This is exemplified in the characters Tanya and Minx who hate men because they were abused by them as children, and so became boys trapped in the body of girls. Thornham, quoting Kristeva, argues that the notion of the 'boy trapped in the body of a girl' has important implications. It alludes to the conception of a lesbian as "I'm looking, as a man would, for a woman" (122), thus rendering lesbianism as an imitative model. Lesbianism then comes across as a reductive concept which can be conflated with other completely different issues, thus bringing about a general misconception with regards to the definition of a lesbian or lesbian identity.

Both texts rely on child abuse to justify Tanya's and Minx's lesbianism as if there is always something in a lesbian's background that could explain her homosexuality. In *G* the reason for her being lesbian is articulated when Tanya tries to stop Sapna from going to stay with her prospective mother-in-law, recounting the tale of a childhood horror. In that shot, looking vulnerable for once, Tanya confirms she was physically abused by her father and sexually abused by a neighbour. This justification for her behavior again confirms the most ludicrous and ill-informed stereotypes about lesbians. She is also shown to be obsessively jealous and harbours deep hatred for the opposite sex because she was abused as a child. She gradually metamorphoses into a stalking and predatory psychopath who unleashes homicidal violence on Rahul. According to the ostensible logic of the film, Tanya's psychopathology emerges not from her being a rejected lover but from being a lesbian. Further, she is lesbian because as a child she was abused. Tanya then is the typical caricature of a lesbian that constantly perpetuates negative stereotypes about female homosexuality. This idea finds fuller expression as the film moves towards its climax. In a sequence that marks the birth of the psychopathic killer, Tanya cuts off her hair to shed the last vestiges of femininity, as it were, while confronting Rahul, "Yes...I'm a lesbian, a man trapped in a woman's' body!" Her transformation into a defeminized lesbian psychopath is accompanied by a bodily aberration. And with that, she confirms to a lot of insensitive, misunderstanding, prejudiced people that

this is all a lesbian stands for. The ludicrous definition goes down really well judging by the amount of murmured approval in the theatre.

Tanya's hatred for the opposite sex has echoes of the reasons given by Minx in *SO*. So strange is the obsession of Minx for Amrita that when her pursuit of Amrita fails, she fabricates an emotional story, projecting her own father as a rapist and villain to gain Amrita's confidence. Minx declares that her father raped her when she was thirteen and that her mother rejected her for considering her a pervert. Minx and Tanya are so violent, not because of any individual thing, but just because they are lesbians so their relationship acquires a tinge of fairly widespread perversion. In the popular imagination, love between women is associated with disease, dementia and tragedy. In the twentieth century literature and films with lesbian protagonists, we often encounter tortured, unhappy characters who fantasize about suicide, and who, as 'deviant' subjects, are expected to be a danger to themselves or others. By connecting child sexual abuse, criminality and lesbianism, the film and the novel mark homosexuality as psychopathology whose visible symptoms are a predatory obsession with women and homicidal hatred for men. It is almost always assumed that a woman who likes other women is the result of having been abused in childhood and therefore hating the opposite sex, and this automatically nullifies lesbianism as a sexual orientation in its own independent right as a choice made by women who are lesbians.

The definitions offered in the film and in the novel about lesbianism are extremely problematic. Lesbianism becomes perverse, marginal and cursed. Dé seems not to be very clear about it, since the same character claims that she is not lesbian at all when accused by Amrita of being "weird. Abnormal" (32), reason enough for them never to be friends. Here, Minx responds: "Abnormal? [...] You think I'm a bloody lesbian, don't you? [...] I'm not a dyke. I'm not kinky. [...] It is not sexual. I don't wish to go to bed with you" (32-3), while when talking to Karan, she firmly asks: "And what is abnormal about mine? Just because I am a woman does it mean my love is inferior to yours? Or to any man's?" (237). Amrita continues labelling Minx as an abnormal woman: "You say 'I love you' to me as if it's perfectly natural for one woman to say it to another. I think it's abnormal. You are abnormal. I don't know what you're looking for in me, I have already told you I'm not made that way. I don't like women" (60). But then Minx justifies her having become "like this" (62) in appearance and in behaviour, which is obviously an abused childhood Amrita is forced to hear with disgust: "Why does it make you sick? Why should it? Because I belong to the same sex? Is that my only sin? You find it sickening to accept my love [...] There is nothing abnormal about my feelings for you" (62), or in this dialogue:

> don't you like what I do to you? Doesn't it make your body feel good? [...] It's wrong. I hate myself for it. [...] Why? Because of some stupid guilt-complex? Why should it be all right for you to get screwed by scum like Rover...but not loved completely, totally and thoroughly by me? Just because God made me a woman instead of a man? [...] Yes, yes, yes, dammit. That's reason enough [...] I feel such shame (159).

The masculine characters in the novel never believe Amrita is a lesbian. Karan, the photographer, refers to them as "you and that lesbian friend of yours" (93). The journalist Partha says, "I won't call her a lesbo. The correct term these days for them is, I believe, people who practise alternative sexuality" (164), suggesting "you should get her to see a competent psychiatrist" (164) and that she—Amrita—should "consider seeing a therapist" (164) to cope with the terrible situation she is going through. It is also a male character in the film who suggests Tanya's homosexuality needs medical treatment. Sue Thornham theorizes that there is a tendency, during the course of the narrative, to replace [the woman's] point of view with that of an authoritative masculine discourse. This discourse, most frequently the medical discourse, diagnoses the female protagonist's 'symptoms', by subjecting her to the 'medical gaze', and then proceeds to restore her to normality/passivity by 'curing' her (53). The basis for medical treatment for homosexuality is also recorded in Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, where the "psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized" (43) and "an entire medico-sexual regime took hold of the family milieu" (42). This meant that "the sexual domain was (...) placed under the rule of the normal and the pathological" (67) where the pathological domain called for "therapeutic or normalizing interventions" (68). Although "[t]he experience and representation of lesbianism in India have much in common with those in the West" in today's time period, it must be notedthat such a discourse on the medicalization of (homo) sexuality is specific to nineteenth-century Europe. Following the colonial rule in India, the medicalization of homosexuality in the country was a result of conforming to Victorian rules and regulations (Vanita 246). And although homosexuality is no longer proclaimed abnormal in official scientific and medical texts, it is rejected for not being considered to be something 'natural' or at least 'conventional.' The LGBT movement in India has been fighting against the pathologization of sexual preference, but there are certain cultural productions which categorize lesbians as perverted in their deviant bodies and psyches.

Both works share the stereotype associated with lesbians, that if one is a lesbian then she is mentally unstable and in need of treatment and psychological counselling that can medically 'cure' and 'correct' the behaviour.[5] Minx in *SO* is labeled as a dangerous person, a maniac and a psychopath (163). In *G*, Tanya is portrayed as a dangerous breach of nature and tradition that must ultimately be eradicated. Their overt sexualized nature is also a threat to the hetero-patriarchal order, and therefore they need to be put back in their 'correct' place.[6] Both characters

[5] The Naz Foundation has reported many cases in contemporary India.

[6] The women's wing of the right-wing nationalist Group Shiv Sena, MahilaAghadi, filed a petition to ban *Fire* on the grounds that if "women's physical needs get fulfilled through lesbian acts, the institution of marriage will collapse" and that the "reproduction of human beings will stop." (Praveen Sami, "Furore over a Film" Frontline 15.26, 19 December 1998–1 January 1999. www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl1526/15260430.htm. It is interesting to note that this group in based in Maharashtra, where both Déand Razdan are located.

accidentally die in the end, by their own hands, no one directly responsible, which implicates that for the authors nature also opposes homosexuality. "Poetic justice" is meted out to them.

3. CONCLUSION

More than lesbian narratives, *G* and *SO* share a homophobic discourse in order to support mandatory patriarchal heteronormativity. The visibility of queer life and same-sex desire in the film and in the novel, however, does not lead to any significant gains in terms of equal rights, as they do not challenge the normativity of heterosexuality. Tejal Shah, a journalist and human rights activist wrote a letter to Razdan after the movie's release, protesting such a homophobic portrayal of lesbianism. This piece shows the damaging, pervasive and persuasive effects of a medium such as popular cinema. She wrote:

> Every time I hear of another lesbian suicide, another girl who hanged herself for being teased about her 'best' friend, another *hijra* woman raped in police custody, another woman sent for shock treatment and aversion therapy to cure her of her homosexuality, another couple put under house arrest by their parents when they find out about their same-sex love, I will think of this film and I will be reminded of the power that Bollywood wields in creating a mass consciousness of one sort or the other. In this case, it will be a conscious, articulated, homophobia (*Countercurrents.org*).

While this is not to say that the audience/reader is passive in engaging with such texts, it brings out the grim realities faced by lesbian couples in the context of this dialogue. Thus, the belief that any transgression of female sexuality has violent and punitive consequences is reinforced and re-affirmed. It also shows the extent to which cinematic and literary texts become overdetermined as carriers of 'dominant' ideologies and hence take on a larger-than-life significance where contentious issues such as homosexuality are concerned. On the one hand, the competing struggles of different groups in power can be seen as struggles over the regulation of women's bodies and sexualities and the extent of their visibility at different locations. On the other hand, it also goes to show how identities become fixed by particular ideologies and discourses at a point in time, "however unsuccessfully, temporarily or contradictorily" (Jackie Stacey quoted in Thornham 87).

According to Michel Foucault, power does not necessarily assert itself through mechanisms of repression, censorship and denial. Power also works positively to construct identities of certain subjects. For example, he says that a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty and "psychic hermaphrodism" made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of "perversity"; but it also made possible the formation of a "reverse" discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or "naturality" be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same catego-

ries by which it was medically disqualified (*Discipline and Punishment* 101). Many theorists have discussed the process of speaking for and representing others. These practices of representation are directly tied to the production of knowledge and power and are thus ethical and political. The fact that representations of lesbianism in Indian popular culture are disallowed is quite clear in the work of the authors analyzed in this article. This is the only public face of lesbian desire, a monolithic description of the lesbian community that falls into the easy stereotype. The lesbian body is not represented with responsibility in the popular texts under scrutiny in this article, as they appear inside the hegemonic cultural and societal constraints. As Sukthankar suggests, lesbians "were utterly dependent on the mediation of those who offered to speak for us and interpret us" (xxiii). These popular cultural productions propagate homophobic constructions of lesbianism, as they are reproducing the heterosexual patriarchal cliché in which same-sex relationships are demonized within the conservative standards of the Indian society. Furthermore, they were produced and are consumed within the parameters of heteronormativity and reinforce a plethora of stereotypes which are not resisted by the voyeurist public. Even with the work done on the decriminalization of homosexuality in India, what remains to be changed in light of Foucault is the cultural perception of the queer subject as deviant, marginal, pathological or even demonic.

Reviews sent to author: 18 May 2016
Revised paper accepted for publication: 30 May 2016

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