



Deviant Desires: Libidinal Facets in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *Weight Loss*

Rakhee Gahlyan

Research Scholar, Department of English, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra.

Gahlyan07rakhee@gmail.com

Abstract: On the compass of Indian Writings in English, Upamanyu Chatterjee has sculpted a definite niche for himself, as the master of ludicrous, 'the witty biographer of the misfit.' He comes across as unapologetic in dealing with the most 'weird and obnoxious' in equally contemptuous and ferocious manner. His novel, *Weight Loss* (2006) is a dark comedy. It was subsequently nominated by India International Centre Library, New Delhi for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award for 2008. The novel projects the life of unmorally crippled, unconventional, part fantasist part confused and total deviant, Bhola. He shares these qualities with the other protagonists of Chatterjee. The present paper throws light on the deviant desires of Bhola who has the perpetual wander lust for the meaning of life. The novelist displays the mental and manual endeavors of the Indian youth with all its demonstrations.

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Key Words: Heterosexual, Homosexual, Deviance, Libido, Gruesome, Queer, Misfit.

Introduction: On the compass of Indian Writings in English, Upamanyu Chatterjee has sculpted a definite niche for himself, as the master of ludicrous, 'the witty biographer of the misfit.' He comes across as unapologetic in dealing with the most 'weird and obnoxious' in equally contemptuous and ferocious manner. His novel, *Weight Loss* (2006) is a dark comedy. The novel projects the life of unmorally crippled, unconventional, part fantasist part confused and total deviant, Bhola. He shares these qualities with the other protagonists of Chatterjee. The present paper throws light on the deviant desires of Bhola who has the perpetual wander lust for the meaning of life. Just like the other protagonists of Chatterjee, Bhola is the product of hybridized and compromised culture of metros of India. He is intelligent, slightly obese and well-versed in literature and language. His sexual diligence is the thing that makes him stand apart. It gets so intense that this sexual inclination becomes the focal point of his life as well as the novel. His libido is his malady and his only obsessive ambition in life is to fulfill it. He mulishly struggles at his "weight loss" programme. It includes all kinds of 'weights' – physical, mental and emotional. He remains obsessed with two things in his life- running and sex which is the part of his weight loss programme. They grant him a channel to his astounding passions and help him 'to lessen the load of the lumber in his head' (33).

The driving and decisive force in pathologically deviant Bhola's life is sex. His attitude towards the people around him builds upon their sexual reciprocity. For him, sex is a depravity that makes him involve in all kinds of ludicrous debauchery with anyone and everyone from teacher to landlady to the roadside sadhus to the servants to falling "madly in love" with a vegetable-vendor and her husband. Nonetheless, there is some saving grace in the form of the ephemeral moments of guilt, shame, profound philosophical and ethical evaluation of his distressing state, and an inclination towards renunciation. He gets married and becomes the father of a girl child with the passage of time



in order to prove himself normal (heterosexual). It brings in a turning point in his gruesome life. He considers it as getting a new lease of life in many ways. Whenever he looks at his daughter, he experiences newer emotions which were so far unknown to him. These emotions are tenderness and love. Notwithstanding, his disintegrated past catches up and all his attempts to atonement are thwarted owing mainly to his own character flaw. The little precious moments of happiness in Bhola's life are short-lived and go down the drain leaving him even more depressed and demolished. The culmination of his sad and miserable life comes in the form of suicide that grants him final and much sought salvation.

Analysis: Upamanyu Chatterjee's novel *Weight Loss* is a 'bizarre tale of spirituality and sex'. It attempts to explore Bhola's life in the light of his spiritual degradation and obsessions with sex. The whole plot of the novel concentrates mainly on the character of Bhola. However there are variety of other characters in the novel like Dosto, Anin, Kamala, Moti, Titli, Mr. Anthony, Dr. David Tolaram, Miss Jeremiah, cook Gopinath, eunuchs, and Mrs. Manchanda. All these characters play an important role in determining Bhola's unusual sexual relations and his sexual orientation. As the plot of the novel further develops, Bhola finds himself guilt ridden due to social pressures and becomes obsessed with weight loss. It is from here the title of the novel originated. The title 'Weight Loss', is literally about Bhola's struggle with his weight and symbolically about his struggle with his sexuality. "Weight loss is more about shedding that baggage of ideas and concepts that are birthed by us knowingly or unknowingly, the usual cultural patterns that we find ourselves enmeshed in" (Nocaste).

Weight Loss is, undoubtedly, very unaesthetic in treatment of sex. It is not at all for the people with delicate sensibilities and high moralities as it takes an offensive course, though intentionally, to display the disgust and wretchedness of the protagonist's life. The fiction of Chatterjee exhibits such a potent representation of certain characters which readers cannot clearly demarcate into a particular sexuality. The boundaries are somewhat dissolved and stereotypical labeling over sexual identities have been challenged in these novels. Chatterjee's protagonist, Bhola seems to represent the theme of amorphous sexuality. He also displays the psychological journey of a person who is sexually interested in multiple characters of varied sexualities. At the same time, he represents diverse psychological and social aspects which, directly or indirectly, challenge the binary of gender and sexuality. The journey of Bhola not only helps in studying his psychological and sociological journey but also accords an in-depth insight into the two rarely discussed aspects of queer love i.e., Pansexual Sexuality and Gender Dysphoric Identity. The novelist has fearlessly discussed the characters' journey covering the tabooed areas of gender and sexuality in an explicit and fearless language.

It becomes imperative to discuss the queer theory before throwing light on the deviant desires of the leading character in *Weight Loss*. Etymologically, the term Queer has a German origin where it intends to mean "oblique, off-center" or in other words "deviant". Queer theory itself is derived from multiple critical and cultural perspectives which include feminism, post-structuralism, post modernism and gay and lesbian movements. Gender and Sexuality Studies form the core of queer theory. It challenges all set notions and norms of 'normal', defined and finite categories of gender



and sexuality. The main objective of queer theory rests on disrupting the binaries in the hope of destroying difference as well as inequality. It establishes heteronormativity as a norm. The term ‘queer theory’ was first used by Teresa de Lauretis in 1991 in her work titled *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities* published in one of the journals called *Differences*. She used the term to signify three basic interrelated elements i.e. refusal to recognize heterosexuality as the norm for sexual orientation and urges, refusal to consider lesbian and gay studies as one single entity, and establishing belief in the multiple ways in which race shapes sexual orientation. Earlier, homosexuality was perceived as a crime but eventually Queer theorists helped LGBTQ+ to come out of the closets of fear, remorse and inferiority.

The leading character, Bhola is portrayed in the novel in a highly uncustomary and peculiar manner because his sexual practices challenge the social norms and customs. He is aimless in his approach towards life and his desires are limitless. The novelist has portrayed his sexuality in an extremely bold manner. “Between the ages of eighteen and thirty-seven, when he died, Bhola had just eight sexual partners, four women and four males” (153). He can be considered as a queer character because of his uncertain and borderless sexuality. His sexual practices often confuse readers who sometimes tend to regard him as gay and at many other times as bisexual. A close analysis of the novel raises a question as to why his sexual identity is so invisible, and that, in spite of being so carefree, selfish and evil, why is it that he is perturbed by his own choices. It is also important to understand how his own dilemma in life swayed the life of people around him.

Various incidents in the novel unravel Bhola’s libidinal facets. He is sexually and sometimes emotionally bent towards several people in his life. In the very first chapter ‘Womanish’, a specific coincidence foreshadows Bhola’s interest in men. When Anthony thwacked mischievous Bhola on the ground, Bhola intentionally “pushed his knees into Anthony’s abdomen... Anthony turned over on his left, both hands cupping his testicles, knees drawn up; eyes shut” (4). After this incident “Bhola remained warm at the memory of having touched Anthony’s body” and his interest in men becomes evident (6). At another point, Anthony punishes Bhola by blowing a stick on his head, he goes to the school dispensary where he finds Dr. David Tolaram attractive. His interest in men becomes more apparent when he starts fantasizing about Mr. Anthony even after school. He decides to write anonymous letters to his sports teacher by cutting words from the ‘month’s supply of *The Statesman*’. He intends to write twelve letters to him anonymously, but the process of selecting and cutting words from *The Statesman* and then pasting them in an arranged manner in a letter form, restricted him to only three letters. Out of all the letters, the first letter shows that he was eager for Mr. Anthony’s affectionate attention. He even compares Anthony to god and himself to his slave. He puts it in this way:

I am a boy and you are my god. I saw you once and can’t get you out of my mind or body. I want to worship your strong manliness and feel your hard bum forever over my face. Please my god meet me on the 13th at 7pm at the North



Gate of the Centenary Stadium. I want to be your woman. From your slave.
(10)

Bhola feels dishearten when Mr. Anthony does not reach the address mentioned in the first letter. He expresses this disappointment in the second letter by declaring Mr. Anthony a ‘ditcher’. He states:

You did not come, you sexy ditcher (from ‘last ditch effort’ and ‘cropper’, both from the same headline over a report on the failure of some NATO legerdemain). You will torture me by not meeting me. I love it but I love your body even more. Please meet me on the 20th. (11)

This incident is the beginning of deviant desires in Bhola’s life. Mr. Anthony does not respond to any of his letters. Still, he writes a third letter to him hoping that he will reciprocate to his messages one day.

IT’S ME. IF YOU LOVE ME, WEAR YOUR BROWN PANTS TOMMOROW SO THAT I MAY KNOW. (11)

It remains unclear whether the letters ever reached Mr Anthony or not but these letters did prove Bhola’s strange attraction towards men. In spite of having interest in men, he felt insecure about his sexual preferences because he had no interest in women like the other boys of his age. “He was scared and ashamed of himself for not being aroused by women... about the naked female form divine he was curious without feeling for it any desire” (9). The primary reason behind his insecurity towards his sexual preferences is the social norms. He finds himself surrounded by people who consider man-woman relationship as pious and normal. He becomes uncomfortable by the very sense that unlike others he has not developed any attraction towards women. It is observed that society frames heterosexuality as legitimate. This biased attitude not only puts homosexuals into the frame of otherness but also questions their very existence in the society. That is why being non-heterosexual, Bhola gets scared of the fact that he is not attracted towards women, which is considered the norm of society. He feels blissful when he gets enchanted by his new class teacher Miss Jeremiah. His interest in Miss Jeremiah becomes apparent when he gossips with his only friend Dosto about how Miss Jeremiah keeps “her thighs twitched open and shut”. He further mentions that “I want her to close her thighs around my ears like that” (14). His gossips about Miss Jeremiah seem to be inappropriate, disgusting and erotic. It reflects lack of proper guidance in his life because both his father and mother were described as workaholics who had no time for their son. Hence, there was nobody to teach him properly about the sexual orientation. This resulted into his suppression of real identity and compelled him to go by the social norms.

According to the norms of the society, the primary aim of the sexual union is to reproduce and that is why queer love has always been considered as abnormal. Such reinforcement of norms not



only makes queers sad and frustrated but also compels them to hide their desires and true love interests. The question arises how do these repressed queers attain pleasure from their hidden desires? When queers discover the inability of openly practicing their sexual orientation, they become aggressive and revengeful. Sometimes they get adapted to odd behavior which gives them a certain kind of joy. The odd behavior in the form of aggression and hatred can be seen in Bhola's personality too. It is evident in the novel that he wanted to hide his sexual preferences from others throughout his life. As a result he starts acting weird to attain pleasure.. Out of revenge, he uses Anthony's photograph to clean his buttocks which results into his rustication from the school at the age of sixteen. Another incident which describes him as a frustrated individual is his telephone conversations with his class teacher Miss Jeremiah. It becomes a pattern for him that whenever he gets scolded by Miss Jeremiah, he used to anonymously call her in the evenings through his home landline and use inappropriate words and phrases like 'armpit', 'how is your armpit today' etc.

The vegetable vendors named Titli and Moti, both wife and husband respectively, are the other characters whom Bhola uses for the fulfillment of his deviant desires. Their description proves them to be poor, saddened and malnourished figures belonging to the lower class. Bhola never felt hesitant about the objects of his lustful desires. He never differentiated between the preeminent figures and the inferior ones. Even their sexuality and age were not a matter of concern for him. Almost every character of Bhola's sexual interest is introduced in the first chapter. For example an encounter with a Sadhu in April reminds him of the very first person of his sexual interest - the family-cook Gopinath. It mortified Bhola when his friends in the neighborhood called him [Gopinath] a eunuch. He fears that his friends might be able to discover his [Bhola's] interest in men.

Though, Bhola's interest towards Anthony, Dr. David Tolaram, Gopinath, and Miss Jeremiah proves him as bisexual. Still, he wasn't attracted to only males and females. Later encounters justify that he also fantasizes eunuchs. It was after his encounter with eunuchs that he couldn't keep his thoughts about them at bay. He starts smoking cigarettes as a guilt ridden person. His attraction towards eunuchs is very adequately reflected in the lines, "It was the third eunuch who held his attention. He was tall and rangy, in a dark green blouse and light green nylon sari pulled tight across his flat buttocks" (50). At the age of sixteen, when he encounters eunuchs at his home, they ask Bhola "No one Home?", at which he replies, "No, there's only me", and further murmurs to himself in English, "just daydreaming about being buggered" (50). The word 'buggered' here meant anal sex. Its use by Bhola at the sight of eunuchs proves that his past attractions were not related to bisexuality because he was not only attracted to male and female sexuality but to others like eunuchs also. So his inclination towards others reflects him as a Pansexual.

Bhola wastes his lifespan behind vegetable vendors Moti and Titli. He finds them attractive and remains worried about losing them. He manages to attain their address. He once writes an obscene letter and posts it to them at the given address. This obscene letter clarifies that he wants to befriend them so that he can caress them, sense them and someday, in his life, establish a physical relation



with them. He grows so infatuated with them that one afternoon he decides to go to their given address when they fail to show up. So he takes his bicycle and leaves for the given address – 14/443 Ambedkarpuri. Bhola feels extremely happy to be there in the midst of people with lower class. He has a certain kind of attraction towards the life of poor people because it gives him freedom to openly express his true self as compared to his own standardized rich life. Yet he fails to find the whereabouts of Moti and Titli at this place.

The protagonist even decides to take admission into M.K.M.Z.A.P. Graduate and Postgraduate College for the Sciences and Humanities to find them after their unanticipated disappearance. Nonetheless, when he leaves for the college, he decides not to fiddle away from his life by following his father's advice and to live according to his own set standards. He had always wanted to free himself from the shackles of various social pressures. During his childhood, he had applauded his friend Dosto's near elopement with his driver: "He wanted to quote some famous line to applaud his friend's courage and spirit of adventure, to salute him for having off to live out his, Bhola's, own fantasy" (36). He consummates his fantasy during college days through both Titli and her husband, Moti. Poor Moti never retaliated to such treatment because he was in dire need of money. Bhola, in spite of recognizing Moti's condition, continued to exploit him sexually. He explains how "seducing Moti took six pleasurable weeks" (134). He divided the money into six installments. He became obsessed with his body. In Moti's absence, he used to imagine him around and get aroused by it. His exploitative nature towards Moti is depicted when Moti "even tried half-heartedly, a couple of times—to refuse accepting payment, and an irritated Bhola had pushed the notes into the breast pocket of his shirt. Finally, when he had got used to the relationship, he accepted the money expressionlessly and without demur" (135). Bhola felt no regret about his behavior. He only wanted to fulfill his unfulfilled sexual desires. Whenever he used to daydream about Moti, he had no choice but to find him and treat him like a scapegoat. But when he felt enough "...he wished Moti to die, to disappear instantly and not return..." (141) because he felt ashamed of his sexual preferences.

When Bhola turns twenty-eight, he begins to get up with a feeling that he is overage and should get married. That is why he jogs every morning to keep away the dismayed thoughts of marriage. When his friend Anin's father accords him a choice in between his two daughters Kamala or Kaushalya (Anin), he starts wondering whether he should get married or not and if possible then to whom. During these doubtful moments he remembers his father's wrongly interpreted philosophy from an ancient text:

The choice of the bride is not left to the bridegroom.... Sexual desire is an impersonal force. A man can satisfy his need with any woman. Any biologically normal woman can bear the children of any biologically normal man. Considerations of caste and propriety are more important than fickle romantic love. To choose a girl because one desires her sexually is to invite trouble. (218)



These lines of Bhola's father not only picture the patriarchal influence over Bhola but also flash towards the societal norms and the way heterosexuality is favored. Culture and religion has always played an influential role in determining a person's fate. For social validation, people feel obliged to pursue all the rituals and unsaid customs of the society. When Bhola's father comes across his unusual sexual desires, he introduces him to the Hindu philosophy, where procreation is considered to be the main purpose of physical proximity. Bhola mentions, "People marry, you know, to complete the experience of the life cycle. Grihastha before Vanaprastha and Sanyasa. And if they don't, people like you will suspect them of being gay or something" (222). Through this statement, it seems that he wanted to marry only to fit himself into the so-called normal world. Although Bhola fulfills his sexual desires without any inhibitions but somewhere inside he longs for the normalcy constructed by society. Therefore, to uphold his pretentious heterosexuality, he marries Kamala, a divorcee. For him, Kamala was unattractive, yet he marries her to prove his heterosexuality in the society. He tries hard to live as a normal heterosexual husband but the impressions of Moti and Titli "... rather, stayed - with Bhola, a thick and slow heartbeat at the back of his head" (238).

Bhola "had had no wish at that time to get married, he liked living alone, a bisexual bachelor with some of the traits of a spinster" (211). In the novel, the chapter entitled 'Heaven' gives the idea about the married life of pansexual Bhola pretending to be normal. It describes Bhola's post marriage life with his wife Kamala which appears to be symbolic of his pretentious heterosexual life. Bhola openly states many a times in between the novel that he has no attraction towards his wife and has imprints of Titli, Moti, Gopinath, and eunuchs in his subconscious. He and his wife Kamala did not have any conjugal chemistry but he used to find his wife's voice pleasurable which he can endlessly listen to. Her voice becomes a source of joyful mornings for Bhola. Although at some points, it seems that he loves his wife but it was just the urge to portray his identity as normal. His quest for normal and universal can be assumed through these lines "... glad to get back home... Bhola wandered about the apartment and inhaled deeply the aromas of normalcy" (251). He enjoys his Grihastha stage of life. He feels calm in a neighborhood as normal as he has imagined living in. To enjoy all the stately affairs of a normal married man, he also decides to father a child with Kamala. For him the main motive behind having a child was to add another feather of normalcy in his life. He thinks that "... it would be nice to have a child, to father a warm, living thing that would be part of the commonplace joys of the ordinary world distinct and distant from that other distorted and arid universe" (253). He successfully keeps his libidinal facets hidden from others and acts and behaves as a heterosexual man. At the age of thirty-three, he is completely cloistered and nobody knows about his well-being.

However, he slits both his wrists because the long run depression has deteriorated his mental condition. While dying, he has hallucination about his daughter's face. The repeated strains caused by the compulsive social norms have wounded Bhola's psyche. Dangling between life and death, Bhola commits suicide in the heat of the moment. In the end, he tries to justify his pansexual desires through the cultural mythological tale of Ardhanarishwara. "These opposites may be perceived in the dual nature of human sexuality, for every individual is both male and female....Shiva ad Shakti, Krishna



and Radha, Buddha and Tara, and the bodhisattva Vajradhara and his Shakti Lochana” (143). Still, social norms have dominated his psyche so much that he feels that heterosexuality represents normalcy. The desire for legitimacy kills him because nobody counseled him about his pansexual orientation.

Upamanyu Chatterjee has very well used his advantage of being a novelist. He has boldly presented Bhola as a degraded human being but this novel can also be considered as an important piece of queer love. The author at various places tries to give account of Bhola’s life where he suffers various mental traumas like shame, discomfort, hallucinations which are often misinterpreted by several reviewers as the result of his inappropriate way of living. In reality, these are the secondary side effects of being under repression for a long time. The novel perfectly portrays a pansexual being that is unaware of his sexuality. The leading character is a perfect example of those queers who suffer in the hands of society, culture and norms as they are not educated enough. So, in spite of being claimed as ‘badly made porn’, this novel has its own social importance in the sense that it represents the psychological suffering of marginalized sexualities in rigid social and cultural settings.

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