www.TLHjournal.com Literary Herald ISSN: 2454-3365
An International Refereed English e-Journal
Impact Factor: 2.24 (IIJIF)

The Queer Modernist Poetics of H.D., Gertrude Stein, and Amy Lowell

Turni Chakrabarti
Research Scholar
Department of English
University of Delhi.

Abstract: In recent years, queer theory has allowed us to view with a new lens the works of Modernist artists whose queerness had been erased by heteronormative and patriarchal criticism. H.D., Getrude Stein, and Amy Lowell were poets who used Modernist aesthetics in order to showcase as well as celebrate their queer subjectivity. This paper attempts to show how, during the Modernist period, H.D., Gertrude Stein and Amy Lowell wrote poetry that was radical not only in terms of form but also in terms of their content. For years, the queerness of their poetry was either dismissed as unimportant, or erased for being too dangerous. This erasure of their lesbian subjectivities had resulted in a very limited understanding of their poetic projects. The queer reclamation of their poetry has allowed us to comprehend how they created poetry that subverted the phallocentric conception of erotic desire.

Keywords: Modernism, queer poetics, heteronormative, desire, subjectivity.

www.TLHjournal.com Literary Herald ISSN: 2454-3365
An International Refereed English e-Journal
Impact Factor: 2.24 (IIJIF)

The Queer Modernist Poetics of H.D., Gertrude Stein, and Amy Lowell

Turni Chakrabarti
Research Scholar
Department of English
University of Delhi.

"... we're a queer lot
We women who write poetry"
-Amy Lowell (Galvin 26).

The queering of Modernism, as defined by Laura Doan and Jane Garrity, is "an interpretive act" (Bradshaw and Dettmar 542) that involves the process of trying to study Modernism through the lens of queer theory. The development of queer theory resulted from the denaturalizing of the concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality. Arising from the works of theorists such as Michel Foucault, Eve Sedgwick, and Judith Butler, queer theory enables us to go beyond the traditional conceptualizations of sexuality, and encourages us to challenge the hegemonic notions of normative desire by recognizing that sex, gender, and sexuality are not rigid fixities, but continuums. In recent years, queer theory has allowed us to view with a new lens the works of Modernist artists whose queerness had been erased by heteronormative and patriarchal criticism. H.D., Getrude Stein, and Amy Lowell were poets who used Modernist aesthetics in order to showcase as well as celebrate their queer subjectivity. This paper attempts to show how, during the Modernist period, H.D., Gertrude Stein and Amy Lowell wrote poetry that was radical not only in terms of form but also in terms of their content. These three poets brought together the aesthetic revolution of Modernism and their own radical sexual identities to create poetry that challenged subverted the false coherence of heteronormative structures.

The last decade of the nineteenth century can be seen as the starting point of the Modernist movement. Thinkers such as Marx, Nietzsche, Saussure, Darwin, Freud and Einstein, among others, were very influential in questioning and partly dismantling many of the pillars of stability that supported the pre-Modern subject. It was a period of great crisis, and this sense of utter chaos and inherent instability was reflected in Modernist art. There was a major break in the contemporary cultural practices, and many critics prefer to use the term 'modernisms' to highlight the different ways in which the changes manifested themselves in art and culture. Modernist art has been defined as "the tradition of the new" (Childs 2). This paradoxical phrase tries to capture the numerous contradictory impulses that characterise Modernism. There arose a need for change in aesthetics in order to cope with the changing world, and it was this need that characterized Modernist poetry, as is made clear by Ezra Pound's emphatic cry of "Make it new!" In his letters to Harriet Monroe, Ezra Pound writes about the need to formulate a new poetic idiom. He was not vying for general popularity; In fact, he writes to her that "Good art can't possibly be palatable all at once..." (Pound 12).

This Modernist sense of chaos and instability also greatly impacted the way gender and sexuality was understood. The Modernist Age saw a crisis of gender and sexuality because of a number of reasons, including the development of sexology that had begun in the nineteenth century, as well as the rise of feminist thought that challenged the traditional ideas about gender roles. It was in the year 1892 that the words heterosexuality and homosexuality first entered the English language, through the translation of "*Psychopathia Sexualis*, by the Austrian sex researcher, Richard von Krafft-Ebing" (Bristow 4). The very term 'sexuality', in fact, as Bristow asserts, "...is historically contingent, coming to prominence at a time when detailed attention was increasingly turned towards classifying, determining and even producing assorted sexual desires" (5). Nineteenth century sexologists saw homosexuality as an abnormality, and lesbians were seen as "congenital inverts, neurotics, products of a failed civilization" (Faderman). The lack of understanding about female sexuality and desires, as well as the importance placed on a woman's ability to reproduce meant that lesbians were viewed as unproductive and perverse members of society who had "...failed to bear the proper fruits of womanhood" (Bristow 43).

In her essay titled *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,* Adrienne Rich brings attention to what she refers to as "the bias of compulsory heterosexuality" (Snitow, Stansell, Thompson 178). It is because of this inherent bias that female homosexual desire is "perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent, or simply rendered invisible..." (Snitow et al 178). Rich further asserts that the forces "by which male power manifests itself are... easily recognizable as [also] enforcing heterosexuality on women..." (185). She gives numerous examples across times and cultures to prove her point. She demonstrates how these forces can be both physical and psychological- "the chastity belt; ...erasure of lesbian existence (except as exotic and perverse) in art...; idealization of heterosexual romance and marriage..." (185). It can be seen through the examples given by Adrienne Rich that patriarchal and heteronormative forces work together in order to control female desire and channel it towards reproductive ends.

In the Modernist period, a number of queer women writers were trying to express themselves by working around these restrictive notions in order to create a different narrative about alternative forms of female desire. The year 1928 became an extremely significant year for both Modernist writing and queer literature, as it saw the publication of a number of noteworthy books: *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf, *Extraordinary Women* by Compton Mackenzie, *Ladies Almanack* by Djuna Barnes, *The Hotel* by Elizabeth Bowen, and most importantly, *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall. Queer women writers were trying to create what Roffman calls "a modernism of their own" (183) by using Modernist literary techniques to express their queer subjectivity. This paper focuses on how three American Modernist female queer poets- H.D., Gertrude Stein, and Amy Lowell- were trying to create "a highly nuanced discourse of female erotic desire" (Simpson 37) that could lead to the surfacing of a different kind of female sexual symbology- something that was independent of the traditional phallocentric conceptualization of sexuality.

Hilda Doolittle (1886-1961), better known as H.D., was an American queer Modernist whose poetry had been brought into the literary limelight by Ezra Pound himself. In a letter to Harriet Monroe, Ezra Pound championed her writing as one of the best examples of what Imagism was trying to achieve. He described her work as "...objective- no slither; direct- no excessive use of adjectives, no metaphors that won't permit examination" (Pound 11). H.D. had been exposed to "the Harlem Renaissance as well as to expatriate Paris, to anti-

Americanism in London and anti-Semitism in Vienna" which led to the creation of H.D.'s own kind of modernism, which Susan Friedman refers to as a "modernism of marginality" (Collecott 73).

H.D. had turned to Sigmund Freud's method of psychoanalysis to better understand and express her queerness. In a letter to Bryher, her lover and creative collaborator, she writes that Freud had finally identified her as "that all-but extinct phenomenon, the perfect bi... I no longer HIDE" (Collecott 79). Over the years, there have been numerous attempts to ignore H.D.'s bisexuality and focus only on her relationships with Ezra Pound and Richard Aldington in order to neatly fit her work into a heteronormative framework. However, the richly transgressive nature of her poetry resists such narrow classifications. For example, her poem *Oread* breaks the boundaries between land and sea, inner and outer, masculine and feminine. It celebrates coexistence and liminality through the use of Imagist precision and economy of expression. The importance of H.D.'s legacy when it comes to Imagism as well as queer poetics cannot be overemphasized. She was influenced by the queer poetics of Sappho, and went on to influence other queer Modernists, such as Amy Lowell.

The poetry of Amy Lowell (1874-1925) demonstrates how Modernist innovation of form, combined with the dynamic exploration of queer sexuality can create a unique poetic idiom. She is perhaps best remembered for her involvement in the publication of three anthologies of *Some Imagist Poets*, and her quarrel with Ezra Pound over the Imagist movement. Eventually, Pound moved away from what he had termed Amygism. Amy Lowell was not at all shaken by his renunciation. Rather, in one of her letters to Louis Untermeyer, she wrote about Imagism: "The name is his; the idea was widespread" (Galvin 23).

Amy Lowell used Imagist poetic techniques to give voice to her queer subjectivity. It was after she read H.D.'s poetry that she identified herself as an Imagist poet. Like H.D., Lowell was greatly influenced by the poetic and queer legacy of Sappho. Lowell's earlier love poetry that she wrote for her life-long partner Ada Russell used coded language so that the lesbian content would not be blatant to all her readers. However, as time progressed, the degree of self-censorship gradually decreased, and her poetry became increasingly more obviously erotic. In her poem *Aubade*, Amy Lowell uses striking imagery to draw focus on the process of discovering the body of the beloved. Lowell often used nature imagery to link the ideas of fertility and fecundity with non-reproductive female desire. She begins by comparing the beloved to a white almond that is trapped in its covering of green husk.

"And fingering the smooth and polished kernel
I should see... a gem beyond counting" (Lowell)

The image of the gem has been used by many women poets to denote female sexual pleasure. In fact, as Kathryn Simpson points out in her essay *Pearl Diving: Inscriptions of Desire and Creativity in H.D. and Woolf*, the 'gem' in queer poetry was a "clitoral metaphor" (37) that celebrated same-sex desire between women as well as female creativity that was not limited to reproduction. The undressing or un-trapping of the beloved is linked to the removal of the veil of shame that lesbian existence had to usually hide behind. The lovers are finally free of the shame that society imposes on them, and they can revel in their shared understanding of each other's desires.

In the poem titled *The Weather-Cock Points South* (published in 1919) she uses language that is free from unnecessary verbiage. As suggested by Ezra Pound in *A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste*, she uses no "superfluous" adjectives. (Rainey 95). The poem is an example of how she uses her Imagist techniques to challenge prevalent patriarchal ideas

about ideal femininity. The image of the white flower, in Victorian as well as Romantic literature, usually denotes ideal, virginal femininity. It has its origins in sentimental and excessively ornate Romantic notions of the feminine. Lowell, by using the phrase "Burnished by moonlight" (Galvin 30) completely transforms the way the flower is visualized. It no longer remains a static symbol of delicate femininity. The intense eroticism of this poem is enhanced by its stylistic economy. Lowell's radicalism stems from the fact that she uses traditional nature imagery for describing and celebrating desire that was non-traditional and considered deviant.

Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) was deeply committed to the Modernist goal of making it new. She was not just a Modernist innovator of poetic language, but also a champion of Modernist art. Even though Stein never made any efforts to conceal her lesbianism in her public life, there have been many instances where her lesbian subjectivity has often been quietly ignored and completely disregarded by critics. For many years, a significant quantity of the critical reading of her work had fallen victim to all the "heterosexist assumptions operating to erase the significance of lesbian existence in modern literature" (Galvin 37). While some critics remained silent about her sexuality, others often placed her relationship with her life-long partner Alice Babette Toklas within the heteronormative framework, by establishing Gertrude Stein as the 'man', the husband, and the masculine artist, and Alice Toklas as the feminine wife-Muse figure. This heterosexist usurping of the far more complex dynamics of the relationship between Stein and Toklas has been questioned by recent critical studies. There have been concerted efforts to reclaim the queer subjectivity of her works, leading to the re-reading of her poetry with a non-heterosexist gaze.

While her coming out story, *Q.E.D.*, did not show much Modernist innovation of style, her later work was marked by a continuous creating and re-creating of poetic techniques in an effort to capture her own changing subjectivity. Her innovations in form cannot be separated from the queerness- she sought to create a style that would allow for a multiplicity and fluidity of meaning. She understood that language could be deeply patriarchal, and her free-flowing prose and poetry that often showed an "aversion to punctuation" can be seen as her desire to at least partially break free from "patriarchally entrenched linguistic consciousness" (Galvin 39). In fact, as Galvin writes, "by eschewing grammatical structuring with its privileging of the noun-verb phrase and its insistence on temporal closure,..." she was making language more democratic and non-heirarchical. (39).

One of Stein's most significant poetic works that celebrate both Modernist poetics and a queer existence is her poem *Lifting Belly*. The title phrase, "lifting belly" is repeated throughout the poem to with various differing connotations. Meanings overlap and create a complex and celebratory tribute to Stein and Alice Toklas' domestic and erotic journey together. It is a celebration of the female body and of their lesbian existence. The image of the lifting belly may also signify a symbolic pregnancy- female productivity is linked with the idea of female literary creativity, because what Stein and Toklas create together is poetry. While the poem is probably a dialogue between the two lovers, the lack of any quotation marks or names blur the lines between subject and object, poet and muse. Stein refuses to be bogged down by these extremely constricting dualisms of the lover and the beloved. *Lifting Belly* does not make any effort to demonstrate a dichotomy between spiritual love and erotic pleasure. She writes, "Lifting belly seeks pleasure/And she finds it altogether" (Galvin 48) while also stating that "Lifting belly is full of love" (Galvin 47). This poetic experiment

allows her to use the fluidity of form to create a fluidity and multiplicity of meaning. Form and content coalesce to give the reader an account of Stein's unapologetically queer sensibility, and the poem ends with a note of jubilation about the creative process: "In the midst of writing there is merriment" (Galvin 49).

H.D., Gertrude Stein and Amy Lowell created a radical Modernist poetics of their own. For years, the queerness of their poetry was either dismissed as unimportant, or erased for being too dangerous. This erasure of their lesbian subjectivities had resulted in a very limited understanding of their poetic projects. The queer reclamation of their poetry has allowed us to comprehend how they created poetry that subverted the phallocentric conception of erotic desire. Their poetry resists fixities and celebrates the transgressive and the liminal with the help of Modernist aesthetic innovations.

Works Cited

Bradshaw, David, and Dettmar, Kevin. *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006. PDF File.
Bristow, John. *Sexuality*. New York: Routledge, 2011. Print.
Childs, Peter. *Modernism*. London: Routledge, 2008. PDF File.
Faderman, Lillian. *Love Between Women in 1928*. Web. 24 October 2015.
< http://lodestarquarterly.com/work/281/>
Collecott, Diana. *H.D. and Sapphic Modernism 1910-1950*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Web. 14 November 2015.
Galvin, Mary A. *Queer Poetics*. London: Greenwood Press, 1999. Print.
Lowell, Amy. *Aubade*. Web. 26 October 2015.
<http://www.sappho.com/poetry/a_lowell.html>
Pound. Ezra. *The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound* **(**1907-1941). ed D. D Paige. New York: New Directions Books, 1971. Web. 24 October 2015.
Rainey, Lawrence. *Modernism: An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005. Print.
Roffman, Karin. *From the Modernist Annex: American Women Writers in Museums and Libraries.* Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2010. Web. 26 October 2015.
Simpson, Kathryn. *Pearl-Diving: Inscriptions of Desire and Creativity in H.D. and Woolf*. Journal of Modern Literature 27.4 (Summer 2004): 37-58. Web 27 October 2015.
Snitow, Ann, Stansell, Christine, and Thompson, Sharon. *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*. New Delhi: Aakar Books, 2009. Print.
Summers, Claude. *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage.* New York: Routledge, 2002. Web. 25 October 2015.