

LGBT WRITING IN SAMUEL DELANY'S *THE MOTION OF LIGHT IN WATER*

Dr. Milind Shivaji Desai

Asst. Professor,

Mohanrao Patangrao Patil

Mahavidyalaya, Borgaon

Abstract:

LGBT people and their cultural history date back to the ancient civilization. It has been covered from many centuries. Now in recent decades, it has been into limelight, bring into mainstream by LGBT writers. Most of the LGBT writers recorded their own sex, intersex, instances of homoeroticism, and sexuality in almost all cultures across human history. Many eminent African-American writers identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender (LGBT). During 1980's, the writing of LGBT is in a range of literary forms, including performance poetry, realist fiction, and speculative fiction.

Black LGBT writers like Alice Walker, Essex Hemphill, and Assotto Saint, Samuel Delany, and Jewelle Gomez produced non-realist texts that question the unfolding the new literary form. Between 1982 and 1991, a great number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) African American writers published and performed work in the late twentieth century. Black LGBT writers remarkably published during 1982 to 1991 known in the United States for issues of gender, race, and sexuality.

The study throws light on the conditions under which the first movement of openly LGBT African American writers managed to emerge a new literary genre. The current study portrays the contemporary conditions of LGBT writers and their non-fictional literary art, especially in Samuel Delany's *The Motion of Light in Water* (1988). However, *Zami* and *The Motion of Light in Water* also tell stories about "legendary" African American LGBT writers.

Keywords- *African-American Literature, Queer Theory, LGBT writing etc.*

Introduction: LGBT stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender and the term LGBT is accepted in 1990's. LGBT people and their cultural history date back to the ancient civilization. It has been covered from many centuries. Now in recent decades, it has been into limelight, bring into mainstream by LGBT writers. Most of the LGBT writers recorded their own sex, intersex, instances of homoeroticism, and sexuality in almost all cultures across human history. Many eminent African-American writers identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual,

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The study throws light on the conditions under which the first movement of openly LGBT African American writers managed to emerge a new literary genre. Black LGBT writers' used almost all the forms—including autobiography, biomythography, the epistolary novel, performance poetry, science fiction, and the vampire novel. Joseph Beam's anthology *In the Life* (1986) emphasized the importance of a "black gay" identity and racial identity. In *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), Audre Lorde identified as both a "gay girl" and a lesbian one. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) is an award-winning text that interjected sympathetic and redeeming portraits of black lesbianism and black female bisexuality into a cultural milieu distrusting of bisexuality, homosexuality, and African American sexuality in general. The current study portrays the contemporary conditions of LGBT writers and their non-fictional literary art, especially in Samuel Delany's *The Motion of Light in Water* (1988). However, *Zami* and *The Motion of Light in Water* also tell stories about "legendary" African American LGBT writers.

Delany's *The Motion of Light in Water* experiences his life, childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. Most of these memories deal with his simultaneous development as a black man, a gay subject, and a science fiction writer. Jeffrey Tucker explains that *The Motion of Light in Water* represents "the convergence of postmodernism and the African American autobiographical tradition" (154). Unlike postmodernisms that disavow the existence of a subject with a stable identity, the black postmodernism explored by Delany "neither essentializes nor annihilates identity, whether racial, sexual, or otherwise" (155), according to Tucker. Rather, Delany's black postmodernism acknowledges both the benefits and costs of proclaiming a stable identity in writing.

The memoir narrates Delany's development as "a black man," "a gay man," and "a writer" as mutually constitutive. For example, Delany explains that he initially began writing stories as a means of documenting his "masturbation fantasies" (16). He says these fantasies were "grandiose, homoerotic, full of kings and warriors, leather armor, slaves, swords, and

brocade” (16). As a literacy narrative, this one depicts Delany coming to writing as a means of clarifying and detailing his burgeoning same-sex desire. His same sex desire leads to increase the interest in fantasy and science fiction.

At critical points in *The Motion of Light in Water*, Delany imagines possibilities and potential for black homosexual community of the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s rather than proclaiming its assured existence. Just as Lorde looks for a history of black lesbian antecedents in *Zami*, Delany considers the importance of role models to black gay men in *The Motion of Light in Water*.

Tucker writes, “Perhaps nothing cultivates the image of Delany as a [science fiction] legend as much as his acquaintances with other cultural legends. *The Motion of Light in Water* portrays a man who was acquainted with musician Jose Feliciano, spent a morning in his high school’s detention office with Black Power activist-to-be Stokely Carmichael, served W.H. Auden and Chester Kallman a shrimp curry dinner, and once, as a child, sailed a model boat with Albert Einstein” (2004:158). Delany also includes stories about his marriage to poet Marilyn Hacker and his experience as a folk singer performing with Bob Dylan. Delany’s “legendary” status is thus achieved through his position in the star system of twentieth-century cultural icons.

Delany also considers himself as a sexual legend. In addition to the aforementioned shirtless photograph of Delany in bed that accompanies *Motion*’s preface, Delany includes several instances of men and women remarking on his apparently irresistible sexual attractiveness. “When you were 17, 18, you were simply a dish,” a white female friend of Hacker’s tells him. “You were smart. And you were nice. We knew you were queer ... but what did that mean back then? When we were 17, the three of us used to spend hours talking about how we were going to get you into bed” (104). This story positions Delany as desirable especially to white women, who perhaps feel safe divulging their attraction to him because Delany was “queer” and therefore a version of black masculinity that was somehow more accessible and even safer than other black masculinities.

Essex Hemphill famously insisted, “It is not enough to tell us that one was a brilliant poet, scientist, educator, or rebel. Whom did he love? It makes a difference. I can’t become a whole man simply on what is fed to me: watered-down versions of Black life in America. I need the assplitting truth to be told, so I will have something pure to emulate, a reason to remain loyal” (1992: 64). Hemphill insists that the often-silenced sexual lives and practices of important African American figures should be exposed and openly discussed. Delany narrates himself as both a legend and a sexual subject who shares details about his sexual life and

thereby becomes “something pure to emulate” for black gay readers. And yet, as stated, Delany’s life in *The Motion of Light in Water* is not reproducible given the extraordinary amount of celebrity and celebrity acquaintances he enjoys.

Delany’s participation in science fiction culture may have actually allowed for the frank sexual narration that occurs in *The Motion of Light in Water*. Georgia Johnston explains that exploring sexuality and imagining alternative sexual formations for living beings has long been a convention of science fiction. However, she notes that it has not been a convention of autobiographical writing. She says that “generically-defined discourse systems” (50) encourage readers to expect and accept sexuality in science fiction as part of a created world, as opposed to sexuality in the genre autobiography, where sexuality, because of the genre, when brought to the fore, becomes an unexpected yet integral part of the text... Delany himself writes that “The sight of genitals when you don’t expect them—in a public place, say—astonishes” (*Times [Square Red, Times Square Blue]* 22), and his use of sexuality within autobiographical cultural criticism is similar textually to that bodily exposure (2011: 50-51).

Conclusions: Delany’s work in *The Motion of Light in Water* to narrate his career as a writer and his experiences as a so-called sexual deviant simultaneously is an attempt to fuse together intellectual and bodily pursuits that have frequently been deemed inconsequential to one another, especially when it comes to LGBT people.

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