
Decoding the Sexual Identity of the Character Magnum in *Fairy Tales at*

***Fifty* by Upamanyu Chatterjee**

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Abstract: Upamanyu Chatterjee's novel, *Fairy Tales at Fifty*, is the story of twins Nirip and Anguli separated at birth. This paper explores the various aspects of the novel which help in identifying the nature of the sexuality of Magnum. Her character in the novel is shown as gender dysphoric, which means she doesn't feel coherent to her biologically assigned sex. The mismatch between her biological sex and social gender is the theme explored in depth in the novel. Magnum also faces *melancholic heterosexual identity*, which a person feels when he/she is unable to fulfill his/her desire with same sex object and as a result turn towards the opposite sex to fulfill that desire. Upamanyu Chatterjee used various elements symbolically to give better idea about Magnum's sexual quest. These symbolic elements are - tea pots and fountain pens, baby, motherhood and the significance of names, Magnum and Kamagni, assigned to the character in focus. This paper also explores how the feeling of motherhood ends Magnum's quest for sexual identity and she attains both feminine and masculine traits in the end. This end in her sexual quest leads to the concept of Ardhanarishwara, which

according to Indian mythical tale means attainment of both masculinity and femininity by Lord Shiva on the insistence of Goddess Parvati.

Keywords: Gender Dysphonic, Teapots and Fountain-Pens, Sexual Fluidity, Per formative Construct, Melancholic Heterosexual Identity, Kamagni, Magnum, Ardhanarishwara.

Introduction: Upamanyu Chatterjee was born in 1959 in Patna, Bihar. He completed his degree in English Literature from Delhi University. Later, he was appointed as an IAS officer in 1983. Being an IAS, he worked under the Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board as Joint Secretary and also balanced, with equal ease, his writing career. His writing style is unique which attracts both admiration and heavy negative criticism. Critics found his novels very distasteful and filled with freakish and gritty expressions but, on the other hand, his novels also contain the underlying meaningful messages to life. His stories need a diligent observation. About his ambiguous style of writing Dr. Nidhi Nema asserts:

Chatterjee subverts established norms; he is an interesting mix of intellectual and weird, instructive and pathetic, shocking and amusing, harshly critical but with a flash of sympathy. His novels exemplify his approach to the ideas of his time, and that happens to be extremely cynical.... They project the horrifying reality of disintegrating middle class family values in modern times.

His novels highlight the themes of dysfunctional family systems, moral degradation and sexual quest. His stories also have characters who are struggling with their sexuality. He playfully uses the symbolic language to show the dilemma in the lives of the characters. His novel *Fairy Tales at Fifty* discusses in detail sexuality of its characters, their quest for it and their struggle with the old age. Theme of sexuality is a serious issue to be discussed but Upamanyu Chatterjee presented it in a very light manner, under the setting of a fairy tale.

Sagarika Ghose claims that “it’s a magical, wildly imaginative – and often violent... drawing

from myth and fable, swarming with serial killers, ogres, voluptuous men-women combination, and hauntingly surreal..."The main storyline of the novel covers the life of twins Nirip and Anguli separated at birth which lead Anguli to live a life of a poor fellow and Nirip to become an heir of Pashupati's illegal empire. On the one hand, Anguli's story is of sexual quest which he fulfills with the murder of near ones. On the other hand, Nirip struggles with the dilemma of ageing.

The novel *Fairy Tales at Fifty* is not only about Anguli or Nirip but it has multiple folds. It is evident that Anguli and Nirip are the only characters that hold its plot firmly and make it bulky and interesting but side-characters also play a vital role. These side characters are mostly the women which equipoise the plot of the novel and lead readers to explore new themes. In a review published in *Business Line*, Indrapramit Das indicates toward one such theme. He claims that:

the women in their lives provide a vital counterweight. There is Nirip's mother.... Aptly she is the "witch" to Pashupati's "ogre". There is Anguli's "godmother", who turns out to be far more important than she appears. There is Nirip's half-sister Magnum, an unwanted daughter who longs to live as man, but can't coherently articulate her gender dysphoria within a viciously misogynistic family (and country, and world), becoming the butt end of a cruel joke played by the universe.

In the above lines, Indrapramit Das calls Magnum identity towards her sexuality as gender dysphoric. The term 'Gender Dysphoria' is quite new, so it is important to understand it. According to *American Psychiatric Association*: "Gender dysphoria involves a conflict between a person's physical or assigned gender with which he/she/they identified. People with gender dysphoria may be... uncomfortable with the expected roles of their assigned

gender.”A gender Dysphoric person feels difficulty in identifying itself with the sex assigned to him/her at birth.

Chatterjee has never presented his characters purely on the basis of masculine or feminine traits but they always seem to be on the continuum. This theme can be compared to the concept of Ardhanarishwara. It is an Indian mythical concept which supports the idea that a person has both masculine and feminine traits in him/her. Magnum’s character is also portrayed as multidimensional in depth. Magnum keeps on confusing herself between male and female sexuality. Proper analysis of her sexuality uncovers several thought provoking issues regarding sexuality and gender. She not only felt disconnected to people surrounding her but also felt uncomfortable with her assigned sexuality. “She revealed herself from Day One to be a fighter, a violent and vicious boy in a girl’s body”(149).

The novel also has many symbolic elements. Collection of teapots and fountain pens by Nirip symbolizes Magnum’s desire to be a man. These objects also express Magnum’s struggle with her sexual identity. These were the symbolic representations of Magnum’s sexual fluidity. Once “Nirip had bought a pair and then, feeling that he shouldn’t be seen drinking any fluid that issued from a dildo, gifted the teapots to Magnum, his half-sister, on her next birthday”(61). Magnum’s acceptance of rejected dildo looking teapots unveils her desire to be accepted as a man. “Very early in her life, she began to envy him all that he had and most of all his penis” (149). To have an acceptance in the eyes of her father, Pashupati she starts imitating Nirip. But how this lack, this mismatch between her biological sex and social gender occurred is a curious theme to explore. Gender and sexuality has a political relation. Sex is determined biologically but the society identifies with a gender on the basis of repeated practices considered as necessary for a particular gender. Judith Butler named it ‘performative construct’. In her work, *Gender Trouble*, Butler states that “there is no gender

identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (33). She argues that various institutions working in a society like medicine, law, and religion determine the traits of a particular gender. Magnum was no different. Her upbringing also plays a part in herself-destruction. Shaamo, the ghoul, suggests Manasa to kill her as she was an unwanted and illegitimate girl child of Pashupati. But Manasa had other plans. When Magnum was born, Manasa declares “... the two darling [Nirip and Magnum] could be brought up together as boys” (149). She conditions Magnum as a boy irrespective of her biologically assigned sex as female. As a result Magnum starts connecting herself to masculinity and hence tries to attain stereotypical traits of male gender like – violence, masculinity, and emotionlessness.

Another symbolic element is her name giving idea of her changing gender identity. At her birth “Manasa advised Pashupati to name it Kamagni, the fire of god of desire that subsumes everything” (148). The relation between name and gender identity can be seen as a supernatural fairy tale element of the novel. Manasa, a witch plans to keep Kamagni [Magnum] confused about her own sexuality. She believed that a name can impact a personality. So she decides to call her ‘Kamagni’ which meant “the fire of god of desire” (148). Lal Prasad Singh in his book mentions that Kamagni is longing for the spiritual unification of the Kundalini with Parama Siva, Devi with Mahadeva or Radha with Krishna.... Like maiden whose heart desire for union with her lover, the Kundalini becomes restless to embrace Parama Siva. This mystic excitation of the Kundalini has been described here as Kamagni. (72)

In short, it points towards the concept of Ardhanarishwara. Ardhanarishwara is a form which Lord Shiva attains after the unification with Goddess Parvati. So, under the light of fairy tale element, it can be considered that Magnum developed a sense of frustration about

her gender identity because of her name. She felt that the name Kamagni is too feminine and decides to have a name Magnum. The word Magnum is defined as “A gun designed to fire cartridges that are more powerful than its caliber would suggest” which means power and violence” (Definition of Magnum in English). Stereotypically, power and violence are considered equivalent to male gender. So, she decides to have a new name ‘Magnum’.

She wanted power and masculinity because she felt a sense of discrimination between her and her half-brother Nirip since childhood. Pashupati wanted him [Nirip] to be his representative at the inauguration of Pashupati Comprehensive Healthcare Centre. But Magnum supports Pashupati “... in all the photographs in the newspapers and magazines, looked quite the male heir, the eager next-in-line in her well brushed hair, blood-red tie and grey suit of perfect fit” when Nirip refuses to participate in his illegal works (15). Magnum knew that she is secondary to Nirip in her own house. As mentioned earlier in the paper, she was only a shadow to Nirip. Hence, she becomes violent and disturbed due to her treatment by her own family members.

Magnum’s character comes out as confused and dumb. Nirip designs the idol for the hospital and gives it a name “Computer wali Bhawani”. Nirip says “... Computer wali Bhawani is the modern eternal feminine because even eternal changes with the times. And you the eternal male in the female.... The two of you are essentially one” (166). He very easily convinces Magnum to become a dancer to the goddess. In reality, she was manipulated and when she realizes the same “...sex and violence were what she dreamed of night and day... she’d discovered the wonder of testosterone... She’d been injecting herself in the thigh twice a week since then...” (162). The side-effects of injecting testosterone caused high libido in her body and to fulfill her needs she turned towards men, neglecting the fact that sexually she is more inclined towards women.

Her dance is symbolic of her inner turmoil. Schemer says that "the dance of gender serves both to define social behavior and to express human conflicts....In this way gender betokens power, belongingness, and completeness and so is essential to identity and social survival" (60). But her turmoil never ends. "Despite dancing and twitching butts for months on end before Computer wali Bhawani, Kamagni received no divine help whatsoever to drive her problems away" (173). The unguided use of testosterone dosages and her crooked behavior, is not what she wanted in her life but "... she wanted to be treated as Pashupati's right hand man and heir..." (171). She starts behaving like a violent animal to prove her masculinity.

When she holds Nirmala Wilson's child in her hand, she feels like a mother which is stereotypically considered opposite to masculinity. She thinks:

How will the baby manage without her, worries Magnum ceaselessly... She is bald now, Magnum, and in recompense her breasts have sprouted tufts of hair. They tickle and pleasantly annoy the baby when it suckles at those shapely, dry teats. It gurgles. Magnum gurgles back to it. The feel of its gums at her nipples is heavenly and makes her come four times a day. There is nothing else to life. The baby renders it complete. (332)

This feeling ends her quest for her sexual identity and she also feels that she is no more a frustrated being. But when Nirmala Wilson claims her baby back, Manasa flings the baby into the hands of Nirip and jumps from the window of the 13th floor of their house. She always wanted to be a man but with the baby she also attained her other half, femininity. But she commits suicide when she assumes that everybody is trying to snatch the baby [and symbolically the traits of femininity] from her.

Upamanyu Chatterjee equates life to an empty quest. Even in *Fairy Tales at Fifty*, through Nirip, he states that life is like standing "... at the end of the long road, all that he would find

was that he, like everybody else, was just a bloody onion, with layer upon layer enclosing at its core nothingness” (283). Life is not about taking sides but about finding balance. In this novel, Magnum is shown in quest of her own identity. She is presented as gender dysphonic who felt herself to be masculine in every sense. But in the end, Kamagni [Magnum] realizes that she has attained completeness by attaining both feminine and masculine traits. But she commits suicide because she felt misunderstood and disconnected with the world. She is the only one, in the novel, who attains the knowledge of eternal truth– the knowledge of the concept of Ardhanarishwara. It does not look like that the author wanted to label Magnum as homosexual or gender dysphonic. Through Magnum, he tries to show that labels only work due to social constructs. In reality completeness is not in being male or female but in being Ardhanarishwara.

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