



## Performing Bodies and Bodies in Performance in Genet's *Un Chant d'Amour*

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### Abstract

Autonomous selves incarcerated under hegemonic binaries invent new forms of language. Performance of desire transforms all body parts into independent and unrestricted meaning-making machines. Consequently, state-sponsored, syntactic language dismantles, and a silent, schizophrenic rhythm is created. Genet's objective in *Un Chant d'Amour* is to claim this primal silence of sexual bodies and their identities through symbolic metamorphosis of objects, dance, fantasies and longings. Originally conceptualized as an image film with no script and dialogue, Genet's tour de force exhibits sexuality and performing bodies as brute force rupturing the veil of the big Other. The film unfolds inside a Foucauldian Panopticon-like prison cell, where the Guard observes, interrogates, tortures, and simultaneously derives voyeuristic pleasure out of the inmates' sexual acts carried out under 'enclosure'. The Guard is not only the measuring rod which bears the mark of state capitalism, but is also a divided subject, split between his duties toward the order and his native libidinal responses. Genet's film is attuned to the subversive Postmodernist ambience of the 1950s' Europe when the 'centre' was dismantled leading to a proliferation of multiple centres, multiple truths and thus multiple sexualities. In my proposed paper, I would look at theatre artist Jean Genet's only (silent ) film *Un Chant d'Amour* ("A Song of Love"), released in 1950 and subsequently banned, and investigate how in its presentation of homosexuality, Genet adheres to as well deviates from Foucault's 'sexuality', considered as the most powerful starting point of Queer Theory. This paper would further delve into the various aporias generated in the text, and the absence of language as a tool for restructuring and re-writing.

### Keywords

homosexuality, prison, language, metaphor, body, dance

...there is a close relationship between flowers and convicts. The fragility and delicacy of the former are of the same nature as the brutal insensitivity of the latter. Should I have to portray a convict—or a criminal—I shall so bedeck him with flowers that, as he disappears beneath them, he will himself become a flower, a gigantic and new one... Erotic play discloses a nameless world which is revealed by the nocturnal language of lovers.

(Genet 40)

Jean Genet's film, *Un Chant d'Amour* opens in an enclosed space, a space containing certain number of male bodies, all isolated in separate individual cells, and subsequently patrolled by a uniformed Guard through a tiny spyhole on each door. The setting is quintessentially Foucauldian, an elaborate prison replicating the modus operandi of the Panopticon, a symbol of the repressive state apparatus, a disciplinary structure based on social exclusion, where a particular category of people is kept. Identified as a 'perverse' species, this category comprises men engaged in deriving sexual pleasure out of masturbation, autoeroticism and homosexual proclivities, practices that have no procreative agenda, practices that deny 'biological essentialism' and hence deemed as 'abnormal', 'unnatural', 'against the Law'. Such aberrations are seen as potential dangers; they pose as a serious threat to the established structure and invite punishment—hence the imprisonment, observation and correction. It can be understood that peripheral sexualities is not hidden or suppressed; it is rather made an "analytical, visible, and permanent reality" through the device of surveillance (*The History of Sexuality* 44). In Genet's narrative too, each convict is subject to the powerful gaze of the Guard, who discreetly patrols each cell, studying and attempting at regulating "illegitimate" sexualities. However, during the task of patrolling, he becomes increasingly involved and interested in the sexual obsessions of the confined prisoners, therefore doing just the exact opposite of what he should do, what he must do and what he is supposed to do. His repressed sexuality surfaces with unmitigated violence, though his acts of brutal seduction fail to achieve anything productive. The lovers' 'love making' and fanciful reverie offer a perfect foil to the Guard's ferocity. In the end, compulsive heterosexuality is dismantled and the gay lovers' idyll is restored and celebrated. This is brilliantly conveyed through the bouquet or garland, a symbol of fruition and blossoming of homosexual love, which though swings unsuccessfully from one prison window to another in the opening scene, is successfully acquired in the final scene.

In Genet's film, the Guard functions as the State sanctioned agent of law and order, being entrusted with the holy mission of bringing all forms of 'queer' or strange deviances under disciplined control. However, instead of preventing 'perversions', he partakes the process of perversion—the controller comes under the gripping control of the supposedly controlled, and this is the central aporia. In the process of discreet patrolling, he is not abhorred, but rather derives pleasure on seeing his captives pleasing themselves. He gazes on, uninterruptedly, into the private worlds of his prisoners, enmeshed in erotic behaviours, to satisfy his voyeurism. The prolonged ejaculation, desperate moments of autoeroticism, and masturbation of the semi naked men let loose his scopophilic tendency. He feels sexually excited, pants and gasps for breath, touches his own lips on

one occasion and adjusts his trousers at the crotch, rubbing it occasionally. He is particularly invested in observing the pure love between two prisoners and even imagines a sexual space with one of them. His imaginative space is rigged with aggression involving a frenzied intimacy of snatching and consuming flowers from the mouth, smoking and forcefully kissing; the play of seduction and nude male bodies brushing against each other clearly evoke the image of anal penetration. That he is himself gay, compelled to suppress his 'sickness' under the facade of the patriarchal state authority, is understood. But his sexual fantasy does not stop here. He lets the frustration of his repressed sexuality vent out violently. He lashes the older convict brutally and compels him at gunpoint to please him homosexually. He forces him on his knees and thrusts his gun into the convict's mouth, the gun as the state sanctioned instrument substitutes his own organ, parallels oral intercourse. As the Guard partakes the process of 'queering', the patriarchal vault stands ruptured. The heteronormative centre is successfully decentred.

Inherent and embedded psychological traumas are exploded by the implosion of sexual metaphors and bodily gesticulations in Genet's narrative. Foucault observes, "...this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation.... The inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (*Discipline and Punish* 201). In other words, the inmates should know that they are being constantly observed by those in power, even if they are not. The force of discipline thus enters the physic terrains of the prisoner's mind—it is the fear of punishment arising out of the feeling of absolute surveillance that leads to absolute self-discipline. In the film, however, the panoptic mechanism is rendered powerless. The prison as the ideal site of surveillance and control is also demolished. The sexual desperations, the provocative positions, the sensuous dance movements, and the ecstasy of physical intimacy via gestures of the confined, puncture the sole task of the confiner. The master's eye is contested and discipline does not happen. Therefore, the onlooker's domination fails to guarantee absolute self-discipline. The censoring gaze of the Guard is futile in the face of the erotic longings of the prisoners. Besides, with the Guard himself joining the league of the 'other' and subsequently unleashing his own repressed homosexual desires, the sacrosanct walls of the prison are breached and the invincible penal institution comes crashing down.

Theatre practitioners Carl Lavery and Paul Woodward adapt Genet's *Un Chant d'Amour* into a physical theatre to protest against Margaret Thatcher's outrageous Clause 28 in 1988; they opine that "Baptismal rites in urine and vomit took over the performance as we, the prisoners and performers, explode a realm beyond the linguistic and disciplinary structures which served to silence and suffocate the outcaste...using our bodies to celebrate abject processes meant that our queer identities could not be assimilated into heterosexual systems of representation (122). The smoke-exchange episode knits a significant counter-narrative to the discipline mechanism of the prison. The continuous vacillation of the prisoners between sexual desire and physical incapacitation to achieve intimacy reaches its climactic point in the scene where two convicts blow smoke into each other's throat using a straw through a hole, metaphorically making love, letting the metaphoric semen flow (Barber N. pag). It is a tiny hole on the wall separating the cells of the two lovers that drills through the structure of power and

punishment, exposing the inherent disjointedness of the power machinery itself. Symbolically, it exposes the cracks and fissures within the so-called unbreachable walls of heteronormative language. The scene begins with the younger inmate knocking on the dividing wall in acute desperation, an image akin to the mating call. He then draws out a straw from his mattress, pushes it through the hole, and inhales thick coils of smoke as the other prisoner exhales smoke into the pipe. The blowing of cigarette smoke from one eager mouth to another evoke the image of anal penetration and oral intercourse. The massive impenetrable prison walls are thus successfully penetrated. We are here reminded of Foucault who notes, “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Should it be said that one is always “inside” power, there is no “escaping” it...” (*The History of Sexuality* 95). Power, therefore, is not just oppressive; it is also productive. The apparently enclosed space becomes a potential site of resistance, a site of active subversion of the structural constraints that prevent homoerotic communication. Consequently, the sealed spaces open up to the ‘queer’ longings of the characters, as they overcome the physical barrier of brick and mortar and the psychological fear of prohibition and suppression to establish an eroticised ‘perverse’ dialogue with one another. This dialogue composed of an alternative language renders the heterosexual enforcements void. Automatically, the socio-culturally constructed binaries that favour heteronormativity over other forms of sexualities are blurred. With the privileging gone amiss, the notion of alternative sexualities as ‘corrupt’ sexualities is overthrown; this leads to the proliferation of multiple sexualities or plural sexualities as opposed to a one-dimensional sexual identity.

If language is exclusively heteronormative, the homosexual cannot speak and cannot have any access to language. Language, therefore, is that vehicle that excludes a particular class in favour of the dominant class or culture and mutes the voice of the Other. Language is a prison in itself- it is restrictive and claustrophobic. However, the film characters attempt to break through the literal prison as well as the linguistic prison, by letting unrestrained erotic affection and unfiltered passion flow. Refusing to be locked up in a semantic closet, they invent an alternative form of language, the language of silence, a subversive form of expression that drills through the architecture and the regulations of the penal institution, giving expression to that which must not be expressed. It is the language of liberty, of love and of longing. Being barred from communicating with the object of desire by the apparently unbreachable walls and tormented by unfulfilled yearning for one another, the inmates kiss the wall that stands in between, knock on it, bang the fist and let the penis constantly strike against it. The rigidity of the walls are not just physical; they also stand for the walls that humans, as a community, have erected between themselves and also the walls of separation within their own minds. Here walls comprise an easy tool to achieve a common goal— marginalisation of the ‘queer’ and dissociation from them for social convenience. With no language at their disposal, the inmates contest against the lack or the unavailability of verbal language through the counter language of silence. Silence, conventionally associated with defeat and disempowerment, is here employed as an instrument of rebellion and resurgence. Here silence is not a language of words but a language replete with sexual gestures,

physical performances and even the mundane act of smoking. The linguistic and structural constraints that problematize homoerotic feelings are subverted through this stealthy language of silence, that ushers in indiscipline through bodily manoeuvrings of ecstatic sexual acts, thereby smashing the glass ceiling of naturalised heteronormativity. The attempt to silence the prisoners through censorship and masculine force of the hetero-regime is undermined by the erotic silence of homosexual solidarity. Ironically, it is bred within the prison gates the very purpose of which is to curb sexual possibilities. Explained best in the scene of subtle exchange of smoke between the inmates, it not just challenges mainstream language but also mainstream representation of love making. The act of intercourse operates on the symbolic level of a language which is not only personal and exclusive, but also decodable only by the participant qua lovers. The sexual force of the organ and the (male) hole fractures the dividing barricade between the inmates in the form of fumes; therefore, Genet employs something as lucid as smoke to represent the fluidity of gender and the brute exercise of love making. For Genet, “song” is a term he attributes to this counter language that opens up the claustrophobic spaces and voices which are excluded by the heteronormative culture. In an interview Genet remarked, “Talent... is giving voice to what was dumb” (qtd. in Stephens 65). His ‘queer’ song sung by ‘silenced’ characters cracks up the unconquerable heteronormative fortress, making it explicitly sexual and erotic, favouring the pleasure principle over everything else. This reveals that people from the periphery can achieve communion through private communication, by surpassing the limits sanctioned by the centre and by overcoming those barriers that try to contain and regulate them.

However it must be noted that silence functions differently with different people inside the prison house. Whereas silence is functional for the inmates, it is non-functional for the Guard. The ‘queer’ inmates, upon suffering from an absence of language, use silence as a potent weapon of protest—loaded with homoerotic defiance, this silence is insolent and insubordinate, gutsily undermining state impositions, thereby challenging the prison and the hegemonic structure as a whole. This silence liberates the inmates, contrary to the position of the Guard who is silenced into servile obedience by the authoritative regime. He is a victim interpellated into the state mechanism, in contrast with the position of the inmates who have not been conditioned yet. Unlike them, he is unable to create his own language, rather learns their language of sexual fantasy and physical intimacy through voyeuristic observation of the bodies in performance, peeping through the spyhole, and choosing his narrative from cell to cell. He studies their language stealthily, through prolonged onlooking, the inmates being the victims of his all-encompassing gaze, a gaze that they cannot return, until in one shot where the younger inmate gazes back at him directly. This counter gaze unsettles the Guard and he backs off immediately—it upsets his sway of power over these inmates as he becomes one with them via his homosexual reverie. However, unlike the soft symbols such as the garland or bouquet and the straw that the inmates use to communicate love, the Guard uses the hard symbol of the Gun, of state sponsored violence and authority, to fulfil his thwarted sexuality. Attempting to violate the elder prisoner with his gun, he grows uncontrollably brutal and sadistic. But when the gun goes futile and he fails to fulfil his frustrated sexuality, he slips back into a sexual fantasy of forced intimacy, of naked male bodies



locked into one another against the backdrop of total darkness, trying to forge a language based on violence but failing in its execution. Set against the open idyllic space of the lovers' peaceful imagination, the Guard's fantasy is almost an assault on the imaginative mind- boxed up in dark spaces, his wild fantasy suggests how the state machinery has corrupted his imaginative zone, such that he can now fantasize only in terms of brute force and bestiality, giving rise to a series of disturbing images of 'intimacy'. Being regimented into slavery by the State and being coercively silenced though the habit of inspection and surveillance, he can only find partial pleasure through observing of the body's suppression and performance. Therefore he cannot have a language he can call his own; he is a prisoner within his own prison. This realisation strips him of his authority. As a result, he not just backs off from the prisoner's cell but also abandons the prison altogether. In the concluding scene, he walks away from the prison, vanquished. State power is thus defeated and the song of love is celebrated.

The underlying distortion in the frame of heteronormativity in turn assists the homosexual couple to manifest their desires through oblique, opaque and 'perverse' means. The suppression of homosexual impulses by the hetero-discourse keeps the suppressed perpetually boiling under the surface; thus the homosexual compulsions constantly thump on the walls of the dominant ideology. In other words, the sexual explicitness of homophobic language is inherently homoerotic- the vocabulary of homophobia is intensely sexual. Foucault terms this as a "reverse" discourse where the homosexual can speak for itself "often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified" (*The History of Sexuality* 101). Elizabeth Stephens in *Queer Writing: Homoeroticism in Jean Genet's Fiction* writes,

...because homophobia is a language devoted entirely to the subject of homosexuality- often in the most graphic terms- the prisoners' appropriation of homophobic language does not infuse it with homoeroticism so much as reveal the latent homoeroticism always already within it. As a result, they expose homophobia's constitutively contradictory function: this is a language that eroticises the sexuality it reviles and provides a vocabulary for that which it ostensibly proscribes. (89)

In a form of reverse mechanism, Genet's method of highlighting the proscribed homosexual forces through the hegemonic treatise in turn ends up revealing the very oppressed, banished and marginal desires. Therefore, homophobia is both coercive and self-generative, silence and voice, and results in articulating the innermost libidinal urges which it originally aimed to obscure. The camouflaged homophobia within the language of the ruling majority can only be conquered by an alternative speech which is equally sensual and carnal; subsequently towards the end of the film we find a harmonious balance between the vocabulary of the saxophone and the dangling, dancing penis of the black prisoner.

Genetian subjects derive the ability to reconstitute and reconfigure themselves and consequently become political instruments, through their ability to dance and their metaphorically loaded acts of love which aim at a symbolic self-reconstruction. Language seems to have metamorphosed into performance of the body- each body constructs a

language of its own through performance and creates its own sensory world. The frenzied dance of the black man with his penis dangling out of his white pants, the naked masturbating man or even the lovers' physical closeness, enhanced by the raw sensual music on Saxophone being played at the background, debunk the binaries of space. Martin Hargreaves writes that in his essay "The Tight Rope Walker" Genet advises,

Abdallah Bentaga to 'dance! But with a hard-on': Your body will have the arrogant figure of a congested, irritated sex. That is why I advise you to dance in front of your image and to be in love with it. You can't get out of it: it is Narcissus who is dancing. But this dance is only your body's attempt to identify with itself with your image as a spectator experiences it. (qtd. in 118-119)

The dancing body with its molten texture, together with the hardness of the organ is both the image of the dancer and also the image perceived by the other; the paradox here is to quest eternally for the identification with one's image, which is also the reflected figure thrown from the other end of the spectrum. Hargreaves highlights that in Genet, "dancing is written as an act of self-becoming, yet always through the reflected spectral desires of the Other, and this nexus linking masturbation, self-creation and abjection provides a major theme for alternative choreographic re-workings of his texts" (109). The Guard's interiority, the prison being technically owned by him, is fractured by the inmates' tenderness and affection, such that his interiority now transforms into the prisoners' interiority. Even the most brutal acts in the film, as perpetrated by the Guard, are extremely seductive, conveying how sexual longings are uncompromised within the 'controlled' prison space. As the barrier between the punisher and the punished gets blurred through shared desires and longings, a range of diverse relationships are formed, based on the plurality of experiences, leading to the construction multiple identities against a singular exclusively heteronormative one.

The lovers' peaceful reverie of pure companionship in the forest landscape, the chase and capture narrative and the final undressing initiating the process of love making, consolidate into the language of love, as opposed to the language of violence, of stark naked bodies interlocked, not in embrace but with brute force, that the Guard's reverie exudes. Despite the difference in the kind and intensity of the fantasies, Genet's characters re-write personal histories through their bodies, through same-sex desires and reveries, where the straw, a primitive tool for inscription, is substituted by the penis, the phallus being reiterated throughout the film either literally or symbolically. The performing bodies as well as the bodies in performance write an alternative form of discourse, using the penis instead of the pen. Remembering the smoke exchange scene, one sees how the lovers use straw, metaphorically the pen/penis, to write their love song on the restrictive prison walls. The body attains priority and the walls disappear. Consequently, at the end, the garland of love is successfully transferred from one prison window to the other, uniting both the homosexual spaces previously divided by the state wall.

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