

Chapter-1

Introduction: Queer Theory

Queer Theory as a discourse within academia emerged prominently only in the 1990s in the west. This can be proved by the fact that there was no reference to Queer Theory in Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983). But the growing significance and acceptance of this new field of learning in the West is indicated by the presence of a specialized lesbian and gay studies section in some mainstream bookshops and publishers' academic catalogues; and by the establishment of relevant graduate and undergraduate courses.

The origin of Queer Theory is intermingled with Gender Studies and Gay/Lesbian Studies. Thus, according to Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan there are three broad areas of work in literary and cultural theory:

- (a) An assessment of the history of oppression of gays, lesbians and practitioners of sexualities other than those considered normal by mainstream heterosexuality.
- (b) An investigation of the countercultures of gay and lesbian writing that existed along with the dominant heterosexual discourse.
- (c) An analysis of the instability and indeterminacy of all gender identity, according to which, even normal heterosexuality appears as a kind of panicked closure forced on a variable, contingent, and multiple sexuality, whose mobility

and potentiality is signaled by the worlds of possibility opened by gays and lesbians.

While writing on Gay/Lesbian Studies, (as it was called before came to be known as Queer Theory) Peter Barry argues that this theory is not of exclusive interest to gays and lesbians alone, and like feminist criticism, has wider significances. It is obvious that not all literary criticism written by women is feminist, not all books about women writers are feminist, feminist writing need not be only by women, and feminist criticism is not directed exclusively at a female readership. Same way, books about gay writers or by gay critics are not necessarily a part of lesbian and gay studies, nor are books that are part of this field, directed solely at a gay readership, or relevant only to gay sexuality.

Peter Barry asks, what, then, is the purpose of Gay/Lesbian Theory? Accordingly, this theory does for sex and sexuality, what women's studies does for gender. The defining feature of Queer Theory is that it makes sexual orientation a fundamental category of analysis and understanding. Like feminist criticism, it also has social and political objectives, particularly, as an oppositional design upon society, for it is informed by the resistance of homophobia, fear and hatred against homosexuality, and heterosexism, the ideological and institutional practice of heterosexual privilege.

To Peter Barry, Gay/Lesbian Theory starts with an attempt to fight the essentialism of heterosexist ideals. It contradicts the regime of, what Adrienne Rich called, compulsory heterosexuality. It correlates the banishment of

alternative sexual practices and the violation of those who bear non-heterosexual gender identities. Thus, if men were to behave in accordance with the norms of compulsory heterosexuality and not engage in sexual practices that question their masculinity, friendship would be suspect and male homosexuality forbidden. People like Oscar Wilde, who is deemed guilty of challenging this socio-cultural dominance, would be an object of slander, if not violence. And all of this would be called normality while all of that would be stigmatized as perversion.

The path-breaking work of anthropologists like Gayle Rubin and historians like Alan Bray and Michel Foucault point out that gender is variable: in history and between societies, there is variation in the ways of practicing sex. Sexual practices like anal intercourse, intercourse between women, fellatio, and cunnilingus are coded differently in different societies throughout history. Anal intercourse and fellatio between men were common in 5th century BC Greek society, and only later (in the late 19th century, according to Foucault) would they be discovered to be signs of an identifiable perversion. Christianity stands between the two dates or sites and probably has a great deal to do with how non-reproductive sexual practices became stigmatized over time.

In Gay/Lesbian Theory, the main critical approach is borrowed from the post-structuralist works of 1980s. One of the main features of post-structuralism is to deconstruct the binary opposition, showing, firstly, that the distinction between paired opposites is not absolute, since each term in the pairing can only be understood and defined in terms of the other; and secondly, that, it is possible to reverse the hierarchy within such pairs, giving privilege to the second term rather

than the first. Hence, in Queer Theory, the pair heterosexual/homosexual is deconstructed.

Thus, Barry points out that identity categories like gay and straight, tend to be devices of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for liberatory contestation of that very oppression. Hence, it might be argued that the concept of homosexuality is itself part of homophobic discourse. Indeed, the term homosexual is a medical one, first used in 1869 in Germany, preceding the invention of the corresponding term heterosexual by eleven years. Here, heterosexuality only comes into being as a consequence of the crystallization of the notion of homosexuality.

Further, Barry argues that all identities including gender identities are a kind of impersonation and approximation—a kind of imitation for which there is no original. What is called into question here is the distinction between the naturally given, normative self of heterosexuality and the rejected other of homosexuality. The other of this formulation is as much something within us, as beyond us, and, self and other are always implicated in each other in the root sense of the word, which means to be intertwined or folded into each other. As basic psychology shows, what is identified as the external other is usually a part of self, which is rejected and hence projected outwards.

According to Peter Barry, the following is the list of things that gay/lesbian critics do:

1. Identify and establish a canon of classic lesbian/gay writers whose work constitutes a distinct tradition.
2. Identify lesbian/gay episodes in mainstream work and discuss them as such, rather than reading same-sex pairing in non-specific ways, for instance, as symbolizing two aspects of the same character.
3. Set up an extended metaphorical sense of lesbian/gay, so that it connotes a moment of crossing a boundary, or blurring a set of categories. All such 'liminal' moments mirror the moment of self-identification as lesbian or gay, which is necessarily an act of conscious resistance to establish norms and boundaries.
4. Expose the homophobia of mainstream literature and criticism, as seen in the ignoring and denigrating of the homosexual aspect of the work of major canonical figures.
5. Foreground homosexual aspects of mainstream literature, which have previously been neglected; for example, the representation of same-sex pairs in classics: Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Robinson Crusoe and Man Friday, and Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson.
6. Foreground literary genres previously neglected, which significantly influenced ideals of masculinity or femininity, such as 19th century adventure stories with a British Empire setting, or Hollywood Western movies (*Beginning Theory*143).

The stepping-stone in the realm of Queer Theory was a rebellion, against the harassment by New York police to people of alternative sexual preferences, now famously known as the Stonewall riot. This insurrection of 1968 unleashed a fresh excuse for the debate on homosexuality within both a political and theoretical framework, like the feminist movements.

This simply is one of the reasons why in the late 1960s and early 1970s, gay/lesbian movements sprouted in affinity with the feminists who were concerned with issues of sexuality and gender. In one sense, both the movements shared the same oppressor: the dominant male heterosexual. But there were grounds for differences too.

Things began to change at ideological level (differences within feminism between sexual identity and gender identity) and gay/lesbian movement emerged as independent movement. Gay/lesbian scholars during the 1970s and 1980s began to wipe away the veneer of chauvinism that had made it impossible, before the Stonewall riot, to read the history of queer literature, or to investigate how gay and lesbian life and experience were distorted in cultural history. Some of this early work includes the first volume of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, where Foucault has argued that homosexuality is a social, medical, and ontological category invented, and imposed on sexual practices in the late 19th century which, prior to this point, had enjoyed a scientific scrutiny. Thus, these works provide impetus to the idea that the modern heterocentric gender culture finds itself on the face of non-reproductive sexual alternatives that are in fact present everywhere in human society.

In the mid or late 1970s and in the early 1980s, a new field of gender studies constituted itself in conjunction with gay/lesbian studies. It put forward the theory that heterosexuality can be understood as forming a continuum with homosexuality, in that, such ideals as heterosexual masculinity seem inseparable from a panic component, a turn from a certain homosexuality that helps construct heterosexuality. In *Between Men*, Eve Sedgwick points out that male heterosexual desire is always modeled on another male's desire and always has a homosocial base. The male bonding that covers patriarchy is necessarily homophilic and forms a continuum with homosexuality.

Somewhere around this time, a tendency of separatism entered gay/lesbian studies based on the logic that as women, lesbians suffer a double oppression (as women, and as homosexuals). This ideology was theorized mainly by Monique Wittig and Luce Irigaray. Irigaray argues that lesbian women can only exist as such in a world of their own, apart from patrocetric culture.

In the year 1990, Eve Sedgwick published her celebrated work *Epistemology of the Closet*. Sedgwick contemplates that one cannot logically separate men-loving-men, within patriarchy, from homosexuality. This theory signifies that sexuality and gender are variable and indeterminate; they do not align with simple polarities and can take multiple, highly differentiated forms. In 1994, Lee Edelman's *Homographesis* applied deconstructive theory to the question of gay identity and the issue of recognizability. The gay is a homograph, someone who stimulates the normality of masculinity or heterosexuality, only to displace them as grounding ontological categories.

The real brief of Queer Theory as an important branch of learning was formulated in the mid 1980s, when the AIDS epidemic emerged as a fatal blow, killing many people in the gay community. Queer Theory provided gays and lesbians with a common platform around which to unite, and it also became a more radical way of calling attention to the issues raised by them. Queer Theory adopted a term of stigmatization (queer being a derogatory word) and turned it against the perpetrator by transforming it into a token of pride. The shift in nomenclature also indicates a shift in the analytic strategy, for now, gay/lesbian theories have begun to explore the queerness of supposedly normal sexual culture.

Indian Queer Theory/Literature:

Indian homosexuality sprouted at the same time as the recognition of homophobia in the colonial rule. Thus, writings on homosexuality in India have had to face the repercussions of homophobic discrimination. Another blow to homosexuality in India is the seriousness with which family life is viewed. Vanita and Kidwai writes in their book *Same Sex Love in India*:

India, the parental family remains a major locus of social and emotional interaction for adults. There are few public places where people can comfortably interact, so friends are entertained at home and absorbed into the family or turned into fictive kin. The family is also the only form of social security and old-age insurance available to most people. This means that heterosexual marriage and parenthood hold many attractions even for

homosexually inclined people. Many deal with the dilemma by marrying and then leading a double life. But the double life that was more socially viable in earlier periods now has to be more hidden since the domestic space has become more fiercely contested (202).

As a result, homosexuality remains an unexplored subject, and when there are references to homosexuality, they often wear a homophobic garb. Thus, in 1947, Vaikom Muhammad Basheer's Malayalam novel *Shabdangal* (Voices) was condemned as immoral, because it depicted male homosexuality. It told the story of a soldier, and his love for a cross-dressed male. At the end, the soldier dies in a sexually transmitted disease. Likewise, Kamleshwar's Hindi novel *Ek Sadak Sattavan Galiyan* created a tumult because it depicted a truck driver and a part time bandit keeping a young man. Here too, like the soldier in Basheer's novel, the protagonist is not a part of the mainstream, but an outlaw. In Chandrakant Khote's Marathi novel *Ubhayan Vai Avyaya* (1970), the protagonist's addiction to anal sex is depicted as a bad habit similar to liquor and drugs. Of course, examples like these were few and far between. There was no pro-gay fiction, and most of the time the author/s failed to understand the complexities of queer issues. For them, homosexuality was just another form of evil. By depicting homosexuality in their fiction, they tried to teach their readers not to follow what their protagonist did and be doomed.

The studied silence maintained by the Indian academic intelligentsia on the subject of homosexuality can be cited as a reason for the homophobic attitudes represented in fiction. With a few notable exceptions, Indian academics always

contributed to the myth that homosexuality is unknown in India, by ignoring it completely.

This leads us to conclude that original studies on the subject in India have been done outside academies. One important book in this respect is *The World of Homosexuals* by Shakuntala Devi. Apart from recounting personal narratives of what it means to be in closet in India, the book goes on to survey the scholarship on homosexuality in history, law, psychiatry, religion, and culture, with a detailed account of various surveys conducted in the West, including the Kinsey Reports. The book ends with a call for decriminalization as well as full and complete acceptance not tolerance and not sympathy by the heterosexual population, which will enable homosexuals to come out of hiding and lead dignified, secure lives.

In 1991, the AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan, known as ABVA, conducted a study on homosexuality and published the findings in a booklet entitled *Less than Gay*. The report contains interviews with a number of homosexuals, most of them under assumed names. It also surveys the Indian legal, social, medical, and cultural context of homosexuality, and attempts to answer prevalent myths about homosexuality and AIDS. Furthermore, it also presents summaries of western scholarship on these subjects. After listing many problems faced by homosexuals in India, such as the pressure to marry, opposition to their living with their lovers, misinformation and prejudice, lack of spaces to meet and socially interact, and enforced silence and invisibility, the booklet concludes with a charter of demands including decriminalizing consensual homosexuality, inclusion of homosexual rape in the anti-rape laws,

inclusion of sexual orientation in the anti-discrimination section of the Indian constitution, amending the special marriage act to allow same-sex marriage, non-coercive anonymous HIV testing facilities, non-heterosexual sex education and AIDS education.

The 1990s saw the publication of several anthologies, which concerned themselves with gay and lesbian experiences. These anthologies not only tried to make a case for homosexual experience in India by trying to locate its roots within our ancient socio-cultural framework, but they also encouraged personal narratives of queer experience. Rakesh Ratti's *A Lotus of another Color*, is an anthology made up of autobiographical accounts of diasporic South Asians. The book tries to highlight among other things, how being gay abroad amounts to becoming a minority within a minority within a minority, first being brown, then a foreigner, and then gay. The editor Ratti stresses how the politics of colour also plays an important role within the framework of gay identity. In 1996, Giti Thadani's *Sakhiyani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India* appeared. Here the author argues that same-sex love between women was a reality even in ancient India. Ashwini Sukthankar's *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian writing in India* is a collection of fiction, poetry and autobiographical accounts by a wide range of lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender women. On the other hand, *Yaraana: Gay Writing from South Asia* is a collection of contemporary writings on gay male experience, edited by Hoshang Merchant.

Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, English language newspapers in India printed gay-related stories mostly with reference to the West. These ranged from

the report on Hollywood icon Rock Hudson's homosexuality, to reports on gay liberation movements in Western countries, including rallies, changes in the law, and same-sex marriages were also published.

With regard to Indian society, the reports that appeared were mostly of sensational events, like attempted suicide by young women who left notes saying that they chose to die together because their families forbade them to live together. Though sympathetic and free of homophobia, these reports were sketchy and without a follow-up.

In 1990s many reports on Indian sexual behaviour, including homosexuality were published. These reports attempted to portray the everyday lives of ordinary people, not just the sensational and extraordinary. Thus, some individuals as well as magazines have conducted sex surveys and reported the results. One of the earliest of these, conducted in Madras by the sexologist Narayana Reddy, was reported in India Today on December 31, 1982. Thirteen percent of men said they preferred sex with men. Outlook magazine conducted a survey among urban, English reading married couple in eight cities and reported that thirty percent thought homosexuality was normal; fifty-eight percent thought it was not, and sixteen percent did not answer.

While homophobic fiction continues to be produced in the 1990s, it is countered by a spate of new positive representations of homosexuality. Among these are Nisha da Cunha and Vikram Chandra's English stories "La Loire Noire" and "Artha" respectively. While da Cunha's story recounts the protagonist's grief

as his French lover is dying of AIDS, in Chandra's story a Muslim software professional gets on a search for his long-term Hindu lover who, it turns out, has been murdered by the mafia in riot-torn Bombay.

A new genre of openly gay writing has emerged, including Mahesh Dattani's plays, Hoshang Merchant's poems (including, *Hotel Golkonda*), and R. Raj Rao's short story collection *One Day I Locked My Flat in Soul City*. Bhupen Khakhar's Gujarati stories and plays depict the everyday lives of working and middle class homosexual males, mostly married. Leslie de Noronha's novel, *Dew Drop Inn* depicts the successful lives of three young men in Bombay and Delhi, while P. Parivaraj's novel, *Shiva and Arun* depicts two young men discovering their homosexuality in a small town in south India. Another example of this new wave of Indian writing in English is the openly gay Parsi writer Firdaus Kanga, whose autobiography *Trying to Grow* was made into the film, *Sixth Happiness* by Waris Hussein. Homosexual episodes occurred in novels by other writers such as Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy. In Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* there is an episode where the character Aires De Gama escapes from his newly married bride to meet his male lover, wearing his wife's wedding dress.

***Yaraana*: The 'Gay' Age in Indian Literature:**

What gives *Yaraana* a different standing among Indian queer literature, is the fact that for the first time the book is trying to formulate a concept of gay literature in India. The book is not a collection of autobiographical accounts or re-readings of history. Instead, *Yaraana* offers the fictional representation of gay reality in India.

The pieces collected in the book are mostly short stories, plays, poems, and excerpts from novels. However, the book also contains Ashok Row Kavi's memoir as a crusader of gay activism, and Hoshang Merchant's first person account of his gay childhood; pieces which can be considered as autobiographies. Though most pieces are originally written in English, there are some translations too, collected from the gamut of Indian writing in regional languages: translation of Firaq Gorakhpuri's Urdu Gazal "Public Meeting and Parting as Private Acts", excerpts from Kamaleshwar, Vishnu Khandekar, Iqbal Mateen, Gyansingh Shatir, and Bupen Khakhar's fiction, and translation of Namdeo Dhasal's poem "Gandu Bagicha."

However, book is for all, and it is about those people who willingly or unwillingly choose to follow an alternative sexual orientation. The editor of the book feels no qualms to note that the book heralds a historic moment in terms of coming into its own and bursting upon the world's consciousness:

I am humbled to have been entrusted with defining the historic moment for India's homosexuals through their literature, old and new, heroic or pedestrian, lovely and lovelorn or rough and ironic. ... What is remarkable is the number of genres homosexual writing encompasses and the easy transition from one genre to another in a single piece of work by taboo-breaking lives. Literatures have no sex and poems have no sex organs. There is only good writing or bad writing. India's homosexuals have produced a lot of good writing, over the centuries a veritable feast. Here's a sampling." (Merchant, *Yaarana* xxvi)

In his autobiographical piece, Ashok Row Kavi writes about his personal journey in terms of identifying his sexual orientation, and demonstrates how it turned into a political cause for him, and how he found his support in unlikely places.

Mahesh Dattani's play "Night Queen" is a bold attempt at fighting against internal homophobia, or what Hoshang Merchant calls, "a state of voluntary mental self-castration." It denotes the fear of a homosexually inclined man who refuses to identify his own sexual orientation, lest society ostracize him. In the play, Ash's is a case of dual existence: at once gay and homophobic. He is unable to follow his desires for fear of his brother, and this frustration turns into a sadistic homophobia. Being gay himself, Ash's is a case of conflict between instinct and intellect. He meets a stranger, Raghu, at night and sadistically abuses him. All hell breaks loose when Raghu turns out to be the brother of the girl Ash is going to marry. In the play, the night queen and the snake under it, are symbols of forbidden desire. The symbol itself alludes to the biblical myth of the forbidden fruit. Ash confesses how he was fascinated by his brother, and how his brother forbade him to follow his desires. Dattani puts:

... The next evening he took me out. To the park. He showed me those guys, looking around, waiting for a sexual partner. A stranger. He told me how unhappy and miserable they were. They looked unhappy and miserable to me. And ugly. And I didn't want to be a part of that. I didn't want to be so ugly and repulsive! ... (*Night Queen* 72)

Dattani plays with the word ugly, and in the end, Raghu makes Ash believe the fact that they (gays) were not ugly, but people like his brother, who after all could not help him in dealing with his psychosexual trauma.

The book is complete with Editor Merchant's vocal argument that Indian queer identity is different from the bourgeois West.

The Boyfriend: A depiction of Caste and Class in Gay Subculture:

Pushpesh Kumar in his article *Queering Indian Sociology; A Critical Engagement* states that "Does my sleeping with rickshaw- Wallah Bridge the class- divide? Yes, but only in bed: not outside it." (11)

R. Raj Rao with his deliberate use of blunt language along with pungent humour and an unsentimental, irreverent style in his writings to expose the fallaciousness of so-called ever-lasting romantic leanings of the heterosexual love.

R. Raj Rao in an interview with Kuhu Chanana states that:

I have used the language to subvert and to shock. When Bulbul Sharma reviewed "The Boyfriend" in India Today, she said the language was not elegant. Many other reviewers of my work have expressed similar ideas. But this is not necessarily because I don't know how to use 'elegant' language. Perhaps, it's because I do not want to use elegant language and deliberately shun it, for it does not suit my aesthetic purpose. One of my ongoing concerns, in fact has been to evolve a queer aesthetic which can do justice to gay writing. That aesthetic would have much to do with hybridization and even corruption of language. It's likewise with other

literatures, such as Dalit literature. I think this also amounts to being experimental with language. (*Interviews with R. Raj Rao* 155)

The poems and stories chosen for discussion are all selected from the anthology, *Yaraana: Gay Writing from India*, edited by Hoshang Merchant. These are “O Pomponia Mine!” and “Epithalamium” by Sultan Padamsee; “Poems From a Vacation” by S. Anand; “Underground” by R. Raj Rao; “Beta” by Rakesh Ratti; “from “The Slaves” by Hoshang Merchant, “Night Queen” by Mahesh Dattani, “Moonlight Tandoori” and “Six Inches” by R. Raj Rao, and “An answer to the Female Liberationists” by Iftikhar Naseem.

The most remarkable aspect of all these poems (with the exception of R. Raj Rao’s “Underground”) is that at the core, they are very personal statements. All the poems are an attempt to come in terms with the poet’s own personal trauma of being gay. Through these poems, the poets are trying to struggle with their desires pitted against social norms. These poems and stories are read as individual desire versus oppressive social norms.

It is an attempt to locate the differences; what makes Indian queer literature unique and worthy of study.

R. Raj Rao’s “Underground” speaks about a gay utopia very much in the line of Western Queer Theory, Rakesh Ratti’s “Beta” unfolds the yearning of a son to fulfill his parents’ wishes, and at the same time give into his desires. Ratti’s poem is rooted in Indian traditional milieu. On the other hand, the poet narrator of Sultan Padamsee’s “O Pomponia Mine!” is playing tricks to hide his real identity

as homosexual in a public place, namely, a hotel. Thus the research project has not followed any specific method in discussing these poems. The reason for this is that to the best of my knowledge such a study has not been carried out in India previously. This limits the researcher's possibility of formulating a methodology. The uniqueness of this research project is the project itself, which speaks about a taboo subject and tries to give it a justifiable place within the literary and academic scene.

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