Literariness Journal
A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly Journal of Literature and Cultural Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614
E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

Vol. 1, Issue 4, September 2026

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A Literariness.org Project

DOI: 10.67147 literariness.v1i4.110

Challenging Heteronormativity: Analyzing Farhad J. Dadyburjor's *Queerly Beloved: A Love Story for All Seasons*

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Abstract: The paper seeks to analyze Dadyburjor's novel *Queerly Beloved: A Love Story for All Seasons* in the light of Queer theory. The term Queer has its roots in German word 'Quer' which means 'out of alignment'. In order to understand the term and its multiple usages it becomes imperative to trace the trajectory of the Queer and an attempt has been made in this paper to do the same. The term offers a substitute to terms used earlier like lesbian, gay, bisexual transgender etc. which were considered derogatory though some gays and lesbians feel the same about the term Queer. In earlier twentieth century, the term was used for everything that deviated from the normal but in the same century it came to be used for sexual "oddness" also. In contemporary scenario, the term is used as a synonym for LGBT sexual relationships. The novel under study presents the Queer sexual behaviour not as something to be despised of but as something as acceptable as heterosexual relationships are. The theoretical perspectives of gender, sexuality and subjectivity will also be taken up for understanding genealogy of Queer theory.

Keywords: *Gender, Queer, Feminism, Sexuality, Subjectivity, Psychoanalysis*

The word Queer has multiple usages and meanings depending upon the context in which it is used. It can be used as a noun, an adjective and a verb. The term defies any clear cut definition but can nearly be defined as done by D.M. Halperin, "Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*" (qtd. in Hubbard and Griffiths *Queer Studies* 11, original emphasis). The term Queer has its roots in German word 'Quer' which means 'out of alignment'. The phrase Queer theory was coined by Teresa de Lauretis in 1990 in a conference organized by her at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Mark Rifkin in *The Cambridge Introduction to Queer and Trans Studies* (2026) states that queer does not "solely refers to homosexuality, homoeroticism, or whatever lies outside dominant straightness, but also to the critique of ideological and institutional structures that present "opposite sex" desire, monogamous couplehood and marriage, and the nuclear family household as inherently natural, healthful and necessary for human development and thriving" (1). These structures are referred to as heteronormativity. It was coined by Michael Warner in *Fear of a Queer Planet* in 1991. He contends that the identity that does not follow heterosexual norm is considered as deviant and queer. Heterosexuality has always enjoyed the dominant privileged status in society. It points towards the social patterns that consider the ideas like; desire, sexuality, home gender etc. are preordained and are to be followed by everyone. The queer studies have emerged out of the social movements of the 1960s. Initially, the term was also used in a derogatory sense. It was used as a slur during 1895 trial against Oscar Wilde. It was in the 1980s and early 1990s that it emerged as an academic field. Queer and Trans studies transcend the stereotypical images of the past. However, it cannot be denied that these earlier movements had various ideas that played a vital role in establishing the new order. As Roderick Ferguson states that from 1960 onwards the categories of gender, class and sexuality were not seen separately but simultaneously (Rifkin 55). The struggles of gays, lesbians and feminists were interdependent. There were events like Stonewell riots and writings like Carl Wittman's "A Gay Manifesto" that strengthened these struggles. Wittman is of the view that nature does not define the object of sexual desire. He also talks about arbitrariness of gender as gender being a social construct and not natural.

The concept of Queer is inclusive of people who have been marginalized by the power. The issues of gays, lesbians, feminists etc. all intersected with the term queer. It captured a large range of variations in sexual practices and identities that refused to conform to heteronormative structures. It is also worth mentioning that the term is not limited to gay and lesbian identities. The queer liberationists consider police, capitalism, societal rules of sexuality as antagonists. The gays and lesbians are estranged from the existing norms of sexuality. Gay identities reject and transcend the existing gender norms which are based on binary system. They consider

homosexual and heterosexual as "artificial categories" (Rifkin 59). The society is intolerant to transvestites also. Their unacceptability restricts their employment opportunities and this often pushes them towards prostitution. The gays and transvestites often faced assault at the hands of police because of determining sex as per their choice. The manifestos and statements of gay liberationists demanded freedom to choose gender, freedom to make physiological changes and even modification of sex if so desired by them. They wanted to use their body as they wished to.

The activists who were part of Stonewell riots founded an organization named STAR (Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries) and referred to themselves as gay. Marsha P. Johnson an Afro-American trans woman said in one of her interviews, "We want to see all gay people have a chance, equal rights as straight people . . . . We don't want to see gay people picked upon the streets for things like loitering or having sex . . . (qtd. in Rifkin 60). Sylvia Rivera the founder of STAR wanted to hurt everyone who hurt gays. The members of Third World Gay Revolution and gay liberationists considered family as unit of capitalism as it imposed gender and sexuality on the individual. An individual's identity is constituted of gender and sexuality along with various other elements. But their ambiguity leads to anxieties and these "surface around queers, queerness, and the work of the queer theorists" (Turner 5). Queer theory leads to new forms of thought. Sex, gender and sexuality have influenced queer theory.

In order to understand the term "gender" we need to explore Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversions of Identity* (1999). In this she considers performance as a means of replication and dispute regarding gender as well as sexual norms. Butler provides new insights to study gender identity. For Butler gender identity is a performance. In corollary to Beauvoir's famous assertion "one is not born but rather becomes a woman". Butler too insists that ". . . woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification" (43). Butler unlike the assumption that sex, sexuality and gender are related to each other believes that gender is 'unnatural', not bound to corporeal reality of male and female. She rejects essentialism. Judith Butler in "Performance Acts and Gender Construction: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" asserts that gender is instituted through acts so "the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style" (520). Gender, contends Butler, is not fixed according to sex rather this construct called "sex" is as culturally constructed as "gender". In her account of sex and gender she concludes that though gender is considered a social construction but its laws make it as fixed as biology. Thus, it is "not biology, but culture, becomes destiny" (*GT* 12). Butler drawing from Foucault

observes that sexuality wants to free itself from the chains of sex but sexuality too, is affected by power. In other words, subjects are formed by "juridical systems of power" (4) and through these systems political life is regulated in very negative terms. There are various limitations, prohibitions that reproduce the subject in accordance with those structures. As a result, "the feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation" (4). Gender is tangentially touched by identities of race, class, ethnicity etc. The intersections of politics and culture with gender invariably produce and maintain it. The distinction between sex and gender suggests the lack of fixed relation between "sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders" (10). Gender hence, becomes a "free-floating artifice" making man and masculine signifying a female body and woman and feminine signifying a male body. In other words, a woman can have masculine traits and a man can be effeminate.

The fluidity of gender gives freedom to both men and women to choose their gender and sexuality. Farhad J. Dadyburjor's *Queerly Beloved: A Love Story for All Seasons* (2026) exhibits the story of a gay couple Ved Mehra and Carlos Silva who defied gender norms and plan to get married. The novel is unique in the sense that their relationship gets social acceptance also. The novel opens with Ved seeing a dream in which his marriage to Carlos gets cancelled. This was the second time in that month that he saw that dream. His mother Dollyji feels it to be some divine message. Carlos and Ved had been living together from the last three years. Ved's mother expects to have grandchildren. Carlos is a kind of travel influencer whose instagrm account and blog is named *Curious Carlos*. He has around 80,000 followers and Ved has nicknamed him as Carlospedia. Carlos and Ved had come to Udaipur to celebrate Ved's forty- first birthday. Both of them enjoy an intimate relationship. Carlos is ten years younger to Ved. Ved's parents wanted him to marry the girl of their choice but he refused as he was dating Carlos. The homosexual way of life adopted by Ved and Carlos was accepted by parents of both of them. The novel deals with the queer gender norms that are usually unaccepted in the social system. The queer behavior is gradually getting acceptance as the system has made the same sex marriage legal.

The influence of social forces in shaping of sexual behavior is also acknowledged by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality Vol.1*. In spite of rigidity in rules there was rise in the discourses of sex. In making confessions to get penance the sexual act and "all the insinuations of the flesh: thoughts, desires, voluptuous imaginings, delectations, combined movements of the body and the soul; . . . had to enter . . . into the process of confession and guidance" (Foucault 19). Since the eighteenth century sex of adolescents and children became the issue of concern for which various "institutional devices and discursive strategies were

deployed" (30). The forms of discourse on the sex multiplied. From the architecture of the buildings of schools to the minds of pupils everything was carefully designed. There were "doctors [who] counseled the directors and professors of educational establishments but they also gave their opinions to families . . ." (28) regarding moral and medical aspects. The matrimonial relations were under the constant surveillance of: canonical law, Christian pastoral and civil law. The sexual activities termed as sinful were: adultery, incest, rape and sodomy. The courts condemned homosexuality, infidelity, and marriage without the consent of parents. The nineteenth century and the later centuries favored "sexual heterogeneities". It was during this time that "medical, legal and psychiatric discourses (among others) began to think of the homosexual as a type of person" (Hubbard and Griffiths 15). Foucault states that in 1870 homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality and heterosexuality as a sexual identity came later (15).

Foucault in Part IV entitled "The Deployment of Sexuality" of *The History of Sexuality Vol.1* analyzes the power relations that control desires. The hold of power is maintained through language. It is through language that power dictates its laws to sex and creates a discourse. For controlling sex, power employs the law of prohibition. The transgression of this suppressive law leads to punishment. Foucault argues, "Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries to gradually uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct . . ." (Foucault 105). Sexuality, like rituals and cuisine is socialized. It is never single sexuality rather sexualities that acquire meaning through complex ways. The social and political forces come together to shape sexuality and also connect it with power relations among class, race, and gender.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, another follower of Foucault, whose lesbian and gay studies are considered among some of the earlier works on such tendencies, believes that, sexual phenomenon cannot be treated as separate from culture. She elaborates that sexuality falls into two opposed tendencies of eroticism. In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (1985) she argues about homosocial relationships between men both in literature as well as society. She refers to homosocial bonds (intimacy and touching between men in sports teams) between men, who are otherwise straight, that challenge the binary relation between homosexuality and heterosexuality. In her other work *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) she challenges the binary opposite positions of heterosexual/homosexual, private/public etc. She recognizes two axes that pass through diverse sexual perspectives. This division is between 'minoritizing' and 'universalizing' views of desire, whereas, the second makes division between 'sexual' and 'gender' definition. To elaborate point of Sedgwick explains that when sexuality is

assumed to possess a fixed character (hetero/homo sexual) since one's birth it is termed as 'minoritizing' but if a choice is allowed in allowed in living one's erotic life it is termed as 'universalizing' (qtd. in Bristow 186).

Feminism too played an important role in the development of queer theory since feminists also challenged the patriarchal norms of gender. The first –wave feminism emphasized equality and in the second-wave the stress was on liberation. The second-wave led to explosion of feminist theory along with women activism. Simone de Beauvoir's work became its basis. The second-wave feminists by drawing distinction between sex and gender made different roles accessible to women. Another type of feminism called Critical Race feminism also ushered in this era and women of color and LGBTQI also became active participants in the movement. Black and lesbian feminism also influenced queer theory. The racial and sexual discrimination were intertwined. Lesbians were women who challenged the normative sexual and gender roles that restricted their emotional and sexual lives. Lesbian women thus "sought to value women's experiences, emotions and relationships with each other as sources of individual and collective insight, interpersonal transformation, community building, and political imagination" (63). Lesbianism is the explosion of the anger against gender norms that can no longer be contained by women as it obstructs her to become a free human being. It makes her identify herself as she desires. By doing so she is not affected by the oppression the heteronormative society generates.

The story of Ved and Carlos challenges heteronormativity. They express their choice to live as couple, in a heterosexual society. Both of them are seen in positive light as their family and friends do not object to their relationship. The queer is treated as naturally as heterosexuality. The heteronormativity nowhere creates unpleasantness in the narrative. The parents of both Ved and Carlos are divorced which further testifies that heterosexual marriages are not enough for leading a happy and successful marital life. Carlos frequently tells Ved of the disturbed relationship of his parents and shares memories of his parents' quarrels whenever they were together. He tells Ved that their marriage was hell because of his "father's constant drinking and womanizing" (116). He said, "My parents couldn't be in the same room without turning it into a fight. Slamming doors, breaking things, yelling until they were hoarse" (220).

The other two characters whose marriage didn't work well were Akshay and Kapil. Akshay was Ved's ex-lover who left Ved and married girl whom his parents had chosen. Ved was highly disturbed when Akshay deserted him. It is years later that Akshay calls Ved to tell about his divorce. He feels great sense of remorse for not taking a firm stand of marrying Ved. Akshay's parents were shocked when he expressed his will to marry a boy. His father slapped him. But now at the age of fifty he is jobless and has a broken marriage. He tells Ved, "You're so

lucky your parents have been so supportive" (71). Akshay expresses his desire to meet Ved. Carlos does not like that ved was seeing Akshay. Ved had proposed Carlos for marriage a few days ago but his meeting with Akshay upsets Carlos and he makes it clear that he does not want an open relationship with Ved. But Ved assures, "I love you Carlos, you're the only one I want. As my husband. My ride or die. Forever and ever" (61).

The novel not only describes marriage of a Ved and Carlos but also their desire to have a child through surrogacy. Their only concern was the law did not permit them for the same. They could not accept that only heterosexual couples could have this privilege. They wanted this right to be given to them also. Both of them felt that they are being denied the basic right and said in annoyance, "As gay men, we're not supposed to get legally married, we're not supposed to legally have a child, all we're supposed to do is to be grateful that they even recognize us legally. That's what the government is basically telling us" (79). Though as a couple they are accepted by their family and friends but the system still not given whole-hearted acceptance to queer way of life.

During one of his visits to his father, Ved comes to know that his father Prem was liked by one of Prem's friends named Kapil. Prem shows Kapil's letter to Ved in which he has confessed of his love for Prem. Ved accepts this very calmly though he was upset when he came to know about his mother's affair with Raj Vohra, a friend of her youthful days. This shows a very hypocritical side of his personality. The patriarch in Ved can be seen at work though later in the story when Raj saves Dolly ji from getting burnt in Diwali party that Ved trusts him with his mother. In the meanwhile Akshay also finds his love in Raoul who was much younger to him.

The interview of trans woman Kanika by Ved in his programme ME Inclusivity Talks too is a way to deconstruct the hegemony of straight people over the queer. The guest was born a male named Karan Sharma. He confesses that since his childhood days he never felt like a boy. He would put on the clothes of his mother whenever she was away. He realizes that his body, "felt different inside, but I could not completely decipher it" (121). Ultimately he went to America to fulfill his dream and underwent many surgeries in order to possess the body he had always dreamt of. He was supported by his parents in his decision that made things easier for him. After his surgeries his mother looked after him and his father bore all the expenses. After this transformation her life changed and a French man fell in love with her.

In the end, Ved and Carlos get married. A very lavish wedding is arranged by Dollyji. All the guests are happy and enjoy the wedding. The epilogue of the novel states that several months later Ved and Carlos have a baby girl through surrogacy. The novel ends on a happy note leaving its readers believe that homosexual relations can also be fulfilling. Herteronormativity cannot be

considered as the only acceptable and healthy way to lead life. The concerns and presence of LGBTQ cannot be ignored.

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