



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE, LITERATURE  
AND TRANSLATION STUDIES (IJELR)

A QUARTERLY, INDEXED, REFEREED AND PEER REVIEWED OPEN ACCESS

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

<http://www.ijelr.in>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.1., 2017 (Jan-Mar.)

ISSN

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

QUEER THEORY: ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an introduction to the origin and development of queer theory. It is associated with one of the many postmodernist concerns related to “repressive universalism”. The attempt to universalize and freeze the identities in a particular frame has always been unfair and in some cases even violent. Heterosexuality as a societal norm leads to the marginalization of other “sexual minorities”. This theory takes over the concerns of people who are culturally marginalized on the basis of their sexuality. Unlike lesbian and gay studies queer theory is not based on any specific identity category.

**Key words:** Queer, Identity, Sexuality, Gender

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Queer theory as an official field emerged in the early 1990's out of LGBT studies and Women studies. It developed out of an examination of perceived limitations in the traditional identity politics of recognition and self-identity. In the words of Annamarie Jagose, queer is used as an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginalized. Hence queer becomes less an identity than a critique of identity. Theory draws on theoretical discourses such as Cultural Materialism, Psychoanalysis, Structuralism, Feminism, Marxism, and Semiotics (Jagose, 1). It is a set of ideas based around the idea that identities are not fixed and do not determine who we are. It suggests that it is meaningless to talk in general about 'women' or any other group, as identities consist of so many elements that to assume that people can be seen collectively on the basis of one shared characteristic is wrong. Indeed, it proposes that we deliberately challenge all notions of fixed identity, in varied and non-predictable ways. This idea of identity as free-floating, as not connected to an 'essence', but instead a performance, is one of the key ideas in queer theory. In this way, our identities do not express some authentic inner "core" self but are “performances”. It is an identity without an essence.

The word queer was once commonly understood to mean “strange,” “odd,” “unusual,” “abnormal,” or “sick,” and was routinely applied to lesbians and gay men as a term of abuse. But now it intimates possibilities so complex and rarified that entire volumes are devoted to spelling them out. Even to define queer, we now think, is to limit its potential, its magical power to usher in a new age of sexual radicalism and fluid gender possibilities. David Halperin has said, “Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers” (Halperin, 62). Queer theory originally came into being as a joke. Teresa de Lauretis coined the phrase “queer theory” to serve as the

title of a conference that she held in February of 1990 at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she is professor of 'The History of Consciousness'. At that time the word "queer" was being tossed about in a gay-affirmative sense. Her usage was scandalously offensive. She had the courage, and the conviction, to pair that scurrilous term with the academic holy word, "theory" (Halperin, 1). In her opening remarks at the conference, Professor de Lauretis acknowledged that she had intended the title as a provocation. She wanted specifically to unsettle the complacency of "lesbian and gay studies". She also wished to challenge the erstwhile domination of the field by the work of empirical social scientists, to open a wider space within it for reflections of a theoretical order, to introduce a problematic of multiple differences into what had tended to be a monolithic, homogenizing discourse of (homo)sexual difference, and to offer a possible escape from the hegemony of white, male, middle-class models of analysis (Halperin, 3). The moment that scandalous formula "queer theory" was uttered, however, it became the name of an already established school of theory, as if it constituted a set of specific doctrines, a singular, substantive perspective on the world, a particular theorization of human experience, equivalent in that respect to psychoanalytic or Marxist theory.

Unlike lesbian and gay theory, Queer examines sexual difference separate from gender altogether with a radical deprivileging of the status of gender in traditional discourse that places individual within restrictive sexual orientation, thereby subverting the normalizing tendencies of the sexual order. Queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. It locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilize heterosexuality. It explores the contesting of the gender and sexuality and challenges the claims of stable identity based on gender and sexuality. It maintains that identities are more self-consciously historicized and are seen as dependant products of particular genealogies rather than enduring or essentially natural kinds. Although the concept of 'queer' itself is not new, but the academic and the political addressing of the issues concerning the 'queer' is sure a novelty. Main proponents of this theory are Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Lauren Berlant, all of them heavily influenced by the works of Michel Foucault. In his work *History of Sexuality*, Foucault has argued that homosexual and heterosexual identity did not emerge until nineteenth century. Before that time, terms described practices and not identity. Foucault cites Westphal's famous article of 1870 on 'Contrary Sexual Sensations' as the 'date of birth' of the categorization of the homosexual (Mills, 87). The text that has been more responsible for initiating the tenets of queer theory is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire*. Sedgwick finds the origin and reflection of homoeroticism within hetero-erotic practice themselves.

Theory harmonized very nicely with the contemporary critique of feminist and gay/lesbian identity politics, promoting the assumption that "queer" was some sort of advanced, postmodern identity, and that queer theory had superseded both feminism and lesbian/gay studies. Queer theory achieved what lesbian and gay studies, despite its many scholarly and critical accomplishments, had been unable to bring about: namely, the entry of queer scholarship into the academy, the creation of jobs in queer studies, and the acquisition of academic respectability for queer work. Queer theory, therefore, had to be invented after the fact, to supply the demand it had evoked. The two texts that, in retrospect, were taken to have founded queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, were written well before anyone had ever heard of it. Queer theory has effectively re-opened the question of the relations between sexuality and gender, both as analytic categories and as lived experiences. It has created greater opportunities for transgender studies and has pursued the task of detaching the critique of gender and sexuality from narrowly conceived notions of lesbian and gay identity. It has also supported non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality, encouraging both theoretical and political resistance to normalization. Queer theory has underwritten a number of crucial theoretical critiques of homophobia and heterosexism and has redefined the practice of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender history while significantly dramatizing the far-reaching theoretical promise of work in lesbian and gay studies. But with the institutionalization of queer theory, and its acceptance by the academy, have come new problems and new challenges. The queer theory had to become a harmless qualifier of "theory". It also had to despecify the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or transgressive content of queerness, thereby abstracting "queer" and turning it into a generic badge of subversiveness.

Queer is not a matter of specific sexual identities but of the world itself. Their meanings are always relative, a matter of relationships and constructions. Queer is the current ambition of lesbian and gay studies to go beyond documenting specific homosexual identities and cultural practices. Increasingly its charge is to investigate the mechanisms by which a society claims to know gender and sexuality. Homophobia is not a mere byproduct of the ignorance and prejudice of a segment of the population, but an aspect of the way power is organized and deployed throughout society. The word heterosexual was only coined after homosexual - both terms are late nineteenth-century inventions. It is as if the dominant culture needs the 'other' to be certain of itself. Queering the text is more than pointing to potentially gay and lesbian characters or insisting on the sexual identity of an author; it involves revealing the signs of what Adrienne Rich called "compulsory heterosexuality." Queer is more encompassing. It can be taken to refer to a whole range of possible identities - gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender - or even a kind of fluid state between these orientations. As a field of inquiry, queer studies potentially shift the emphasis away from specific acts and identities to the myriad ways in which gender organizes and disorganizes society. Queer theory is deeply indebted to feminist and African-American writings, just as lesbian and gay liberation itself was built on the model of the women's movement and on the struggle for black civil rights. Literary and cultural studies that focuses on sexuality as a key category, was an offshoot of wide ranging social and activist movement through the 1960s and early 1970s. The Stonewall riots of 1969 may be described as the origin of the gay liberation movement which was provoked when police raided New York's Stonewall Tavern, a popular meeting place for gays. Organizations like Gay Liberation Movement (GLF), Gay Activists Alliance (GAA), AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) sought legal, medical, social freedom and rights for gays and lesbians. Queer theory drew upon the experiences of these movements while adding philosophical and critical insights into the nature of the body, the geography of sexuality and the question of sexual identity. This was the age when homosexual artists like Jasper Johns and Hollywood stars like Rock Hudson began to make public their sexual preferences. A revolution in thinking the sexual was on. Academic interest began to show itself in the form of critical essays and collections and 'College English' brought out a special issue on gay writing and politics in 1974. Today queer theory has political affiliations with women's studies, African American cultural criticism and theory and post-colonial studies. The common commitment to centering the marginalized, emancipation for the oppressed and social justice is what brings them together on one platform.

Queer theory looks at the history of cultural representations of the non-heterosexuals as deviant, sick or criminal, while foregrounding sexuality as an important category of critical analysis when dealing with cultural texts. Queer theory moves between literary analysis and activism because it shows how cultural representations contribute to very real material oppression of non-heterosexuals. Queer theory is thus more useful in the discipline of cultural studies than in literary studies because its interests lie in the connections between the politics of cultural representation and institutional constructions of sexuality. It is interested in power relations, social evaluation and institutional biases that underlie representations of the heterosexual or homosexual. Mapping the agenda and potential of queer sexuality studies, Suparna Bhaskaran writes: "queer sexuality embodies stories of development and under-development, modernity and tradition, economic (re)production and nonmaterial degeneration". Queer sexuality, she emphasizes, is linked to AIDS activism, caste, the law and imperialism. Thus, queer theory is about the cultural contexts of queer sexualities.

Queer Cultural Studies may be defined as 'an attempt to redefine identities and carve out a cultural/political space within the dominant heterosexual paradigm, to simply stop being invisible "other" of heterosexuality'. Queer theory is, therefore, resolutely political in nature because of its concern with structures of power. Basically queer theory is concerned with the general construction of sexuality in discourses of medicine, law or religion. It looks at popular representations of non-heterosexuals, the public understanding of alternate sexualities and examines the institutional structures namely religion, family, medicine, law that undergird popular representations of homosexuality. It also examines the link between sexuality-based oppression and other discriminatory forms such as patriarchy and racism. Queer Theory takes an anti-assimilationist stance and seeks to destabilize the essentializing and resists heterosexual cultures

through the carnival, transgression and parody. 'Queering' is therefore the process of reversing heterosexuality as a norm. It now refers to not only gay/lesbian issues but also includes other practices, identities and communities, all of which have been marginalized in history. Transgendering, transvestitism, drag and camp, and other sexual identities present the multiple nature of identities that cannot be reduced to one category.

Broadly speaking, queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. It resists that model of stability which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect. Queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. Institutionally, queer has been associated most prominently with lesbian and gay subjects, but its analytic framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery. Whether as transvestite performance or academic deconstruction, queer locates and exploits the incoherencies in those terms which stabilize heterosexuality. Demonstrating the impossibility of any 'natural' sexuality, it calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as 'man' and 'woman'.

Queer retains, however, a conceptually unique potential as a necessarily unfixed site of engagement and contestation. Judith Butler does not try to anticipate exactly how queer will continue to challenge normative structures and discourses. On the contrary, she argues that what makes queer so efficacious is the way in which it understands the effects of its interventions are not singular and therefore cannot be anticipated in advance. Butler understands, as de Lauretis did when initially promoting queer over lesbian and gay that the conservative effects of identity classifications lie in their ability to naturalize themselves as self-evident descriptive categories. She argues that if queer is to avoid simply replicating the normative claims of earlier lesbian and gay formations, it must be conceived as a category in constant formation. In stressing the partial, flexible and responsive nature of queer, Butler offers a corrective to those naturalized and seemingly self-evident categories of identification that constitute traditional formations of identity politics. She specifies the ways in which the logic of identity politics, which is to gather together similar subjects so that they can achieve shared aims by mobilising a minority-rights discourse, is far from natural or self-evident.

In the sense that Butler outlines the queer project, queer may be thought of as activating an identity politics attuned to the constraining effects of naming, of delineating a foundational category which precedes and underwrites political intervention, that it may better be understood as promoting a non-identity or even anti-identity-politics. If a potentially infinite coalition of sexual identities, practices, discourses and sites might be identified as queer, what it betokens is not so much liberal pluralism as a negotiation of the very concept of identity itself. For queer is, in part, a response to perceived limitations in the liberationist and identity-conscious politics of the gay and lesbian feminist movements. The rhetoric of both has been structured predominantly around self-recognition, community and shared identity; inevitably, if inadvertently, both movements have also resulted in exclusions, delegitimation, and a false sense of universality. The discursive proliferation of queer has been enabled in part by the knowledge that identities are fictitious, that is, produced by and productive of material effects but nevertheless arbitrary, contingent and ideologically motivated. Unlike those identity categories labeled lesbian or gay, queer has developed out of the theorizing of often unexamined constraints in traditional identity politics. Consequently, queer has been produced largely outside the registers of recognition, truthfulness and self-identity. Queer, then, is an identity category that has no interest in consolidating or even stabilizing itself. It maintains its critique of identity-focused movements by understanding that even the formation of its own coalitional and negotiated constituencies may well result in exclusionary and reifying effects far in excess of those intended.

Acknowledging the inevitable violence of identity politics and having no stake in its own hegemony, queer is less an identity than a *critique* of identity (Jagose, 1). But it is in no position to imagine itself outside that circuit of problems energized by identity politics. Instead of defending itself against those criticisms that its operations inevitably attract, queer allows such criticisms to shape its future directions. Butler writes "the term will be revised, dispelled, rendered obsolete to the extent that it yields to the demands which resist the

term precisely because of the exclusions by which it is mobilized". The mobilization of queer foregrounds the conditions of political representation: its intentions and effects, its resistance to and recovery by the existing networks of power. For Halperin, as for Butler, queer is a way of pointing ahead without knowing for certain what to point at. "Queer" ... does not designate a class of already objectified pathologies or perversions', writes Halperin ; "rather, it describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance". Queer is always an identity under construction, a site of permanent becoming. The extent to which different theorists have emphasised the unknown potential of queer suggests that its most enabling characteristic may well be its potential for looking forward without anticipating the future. Instead of theorising queer in terms of its opposition to identity politics, it is more accurate to represent it as ceaselessly interrogating both the preconditions of identity and its effects. Queer is not outside the magnetic field of identity. Like some postmodern architecture, it turns identity inside out.

Though the term is recent, Michel Foucault's writing kicked off the intellectual part of queer theory long before the term came into fashion. The intellectual part of queer theory had in fact begun with Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. Early debates about it within gay studies focused on its critique of psychoanalysis and its turn to a constructionist account of gay identity. Foucault's remark that "the nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage" became the most famous phrase in the book. But the bigger challenge, one that took longer to digest, was the way Foucault had flipped the lens on the whole project of studying sexuality. Instead of starting with sexual identities, he wanted to think about the prior structuring of sexuality by several techniques distinctive to modern societies. He drew attention to the way sexuality is stabilized for us by secular expert knowledge and anchored in individuals both by genres of therapy and self-representation. In his account, sexuality became visible as a field of regulation, therapy, and liberation simultaneously. He opened new questions about the deep ties between modern knowledge of sexuality and various forms of what he called "state racism," including colonialism and, in the extreme forms, genocide and eugenics; the process by which the categories of experts can be taken up as mobilizations by the individuals to whom they are applied; the kinds of normalization specific to modern societies; and the variety of alternative formations throughout history in which the pleasures of the body have been developed within entirely different purposes and imperatives (Spargo, 24).

The politics of sexuality, in Foucault's treatment, led not just to an affirmative study of sexual minorities, but to a thorough and radical re-evaluation of the techniques of defining modernity. Lesbian and gay studies quickly took on board Foucault's constructionist account of the hetero-homo opposition, but the rest of his argument necessarily lay beyond the study of same-sex attraction, and indeed beyond the study of sexuality as a stable object. Eve Sedgwick accomplished something similar in her early work. Sedgwick was envisioning a way for gay studies and feminism to find a common perspective on straightness, masculinity, and the dynamics of domination in modern culture. Like Foucault's, her analysis flipped the lens: The real problem, for her, was the mechanism of male sociability that, in envisioning the domination of women, made its own homoerotic dimensions abject, projecting the homosexual as a failed but dangerous and repudiated version of itself. In that turn, Sedgwick was already beginning to imagine what she would boldly declare in the first paragraph of her 1990 *Epistemology of the Closet*: "An understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition." If anything, subsequent queer theory has tended to argue an even stronger version of that claim, suggesting that the normative field of sexuality is so dispersed that it requires us to understand such things as racialization, the dynamic between developed countries and colonies or post-colonies, and so on. Butler's 1990 *Gender Trouble*, in addition to its well-known but widely misunderstood arguments about performativity of gender, had its deepest impact through the same kind of shift in perspective. Instead of starting with the nature of sex, she urged us to analyze the normative frameworks by which gender and sexuality are constituted and inhabited in the first place. The problem, she said, was the "regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence," which "disguises itself as a developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe."

At its best, queer theory has always also been something else, something that will be left out of any purely intellectual history of the movement. It has created a kind of social space. For many, queer theory is the extreme case of "difficult" academic prose, and Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick were both singled out for mockery by the self-appointed guardians of accessibility. It's a frequent complain that queer theory lacks "clarity." But technical clarity and journalistic accessibility are not the same, and the attack on difficult style has often been a means to reassert the very standards of common sense that queer theory rightly challenged.

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