

SHADES OF HOMOPHOBIA IN MARLOWE'S *EDWARD II*

Dr. Ruby Roy

Assistant Professor
Department of English
Satyawati College Evening
University of Delhi
New Delhi, India, 110052.

Abstract

This Paper aims at a critical study of complex phenomenon of Homophobia concealed on the inside as well as outside of sexual fantasy and practice of 16th century England witnessed in one of the key plays of Christopher Marlowe *Edward II*. The Paper initiates an exploration of the term “Sodomy” which was considered perceived threat to sexual as well as political order in Elizabethan England. The Paper consists of close reading of Queer Perspective and reshaping the definition of Queer theory making it interdisciplinary and creating new ways of thinking in how sexuality molds and is shaped by other factors. In *Edward II* we witness homophobia and horrific enactment of punitive sodomy which exposes how sodomitical acts were locus of sexual anxieties and bodily phobias. There was violence and deep cultural embedding of homophobia present in 16th Century England.

Key Words: Homophobia, Same-Sex Desire, Queer, Homosexuality, Sodomy, Male Friendship.

Homophobia is a violent and deeply embedded phenomenon against which any time period modern or contemporary, makes headway with great difficulty. It is a phobia not necessarily confined to alien cultures, to the unenlightened, to religious bigots, to naively militant heterosexuals only; it remains concealed on the inside as well as outside of sexual fantasy and practice.

One of the most relevant happening in critical practices during 1980s has been the emergence of an academic agreement within the early modern studies and somewhat beyond it regarding the basic constitution and depiction of homosexuality in the early modern period. This critical practice became an integral part of Queer theory.

Queer theory's beginning is tough to clearly define, since it came from many critical and cultural contexts, including feminism, Post Structuralism, radical movements of people of color, the gay and lesbian movements, AIDS activism, many sexual subcultural practices such as sadomasochism, and post colonialism. Queer theory as an academic tool came about in part from gender and sexuality studies that in turn had their origin from lesbian and gay studies and feminist theory. It is a much recent theory, and opposes many of the set ideas of the more established fields it comes from by challenging the concept of defined and finite identity categories, as well as the criterion that constitute a binary of good versus bad sexualities. Queer

theorist's aim is that there is no set normal, only changing norms that people may or may not fit into, making queer critics' main defiance by disrupting binaries in hopes that this will destroy difference as well as inequality.

The term "queer theory" itself came from Teresa de Lauretis's 1991 work in the feminist cultural studies journal *differences* titled "Queer theory :Lesbian and gay sexualities". She talks about the term signifying three interrelated projects at play within this theory :rejection of heterosexuality as the yardstick for sexual formations ,a challenge to the belief that lesbian and gay studies is one single entity, and a strong concentration on the multiple ways that race shapes sexual bias. De Lauretis considers that queer theory could signify all of these critiques together and make it possible to rethink everything about sexuality.

One of the most important concepts in queer theory is the view of "heteronormativity", which refers to "the institutions ,structures of understanding and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent-that is organized as a sexuality but also privileged" [Berlant] .Heteronormativity is a widespread view that endorses heterosexuality as the normal and/or preferred sexual orientation, and is reinforced in a society through the institutions of marriage ,taxes, employment, and adoption rights, among many others.

Some of the relevant theorists in the development of queer theory include Michael Foucault ,Gayle Rubin ,Eve Kosofsky Sedgwicketc.Foucault considers Power making sexuality seem like a hidden truth that must be dug out and be made specific. Foucault denies that sexuality can be clearly defined, and instead pays attention to the expansive production of sexuality within governments of power and knowledge. Whereas Gayle Rubin's essay 'Thinking sex' is often considered one of the important texts, and it shows Foucault's rejection of biological explanations of sexuality by thinking about the way that sexual identities as well as behaviors are hierarchically organized through systems of sexual classifications .Rubin laid the foundation for debate about making a distinction between gender and sexuality paved the way for many more critics who analyzed through the perspective of Queer theory.

When we analyze with a queer perspective it can undermine the base structure on which any identity relies on [although it does this without completely erasing categories of identity],the theory has been misunderstood to be just about questions of sexuality .This perception that queer theory is only about sexuality has been opposed by having an intersectional approach that starts off with the premise that sexuality cannot be disconnected from the other categories of social status and identity .This reshapes the definition of queer theory making it interdisciplinary and creating new ways of thinking in how sexuality molds and is shaped by other factors.

Michel Foucault's *History of sexuality* was a major text which changed the mode of criticism .Foucault proposes that homosexuality was invented by 19th C Sexologists, and that the term is outdated if applied to any earlier period. According to Foucault, What would have been termed homosexuality [primarily meaning male homosexuality] in 1976 would once have been covered by the term *sodomy*. For Foucault ,however, "sodomy" was "that utterly incoherent category" that didn't exclusively apply to male same sex relations .For Foucault sexuality would always show up distinctively within a given historical matrix and in relation to a distinctive set of coordinates .Influenced by Foucault ,most critics consider sodomy as the historically appropriate term for talking about early modern sexual relationships between men .It somehow came to categorize illicit sexuality, but also some form of disorderly verbal conduct entailing no sexual activity .As an alternative designation the term *masculine love* coexisted with *sodomy*.

The term ‘sodomy’ was perceived threat to sexual, hence political order rather than same-sex relations exclusively: atheism and sedition were also linked to sodomy in denunciation or legal charges. The rhetoric and practice of same sex relations may have been different on the continent than in England during the 16th C Both as regards the humanistic philosophies of same-sex attraction and as regards the representation of same-sex relations between women.

Alan Bray, talked about male homosexuality during the 1500’s, in *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, states that “The term *homosexual* did not exist in 1611, in fact, it was not until the 1890’s that the term *homosexual* first began to be used in English. And none of its predecessors now survive in common speech” [Bray, 13]. Different terms like Ganymede, Bugger, and Catamite, among many other names were used to label the homosexual. The most extensively used term for homosexual relations was the word ‘sodomite’. During 1500’s, the act of sodomy was used to describe a myriad of sexually deviant activities, including homosexual ones. Matt Cook, editor of *A Gay History of Britain*, includes a chapter dedicated to Renaissance Sodomy written by Randolph Turnbach. He believes that “The history of sodomy in England during the Reformation and the Renaissance begins with the passage in 1534 of 25 Henry 8, C-6. This Act of Parliament took jurisdiction over sodomy away from the ecclesiastical courts and gave it to the secular state” [Turnbach, 49].

Henry 8 and his son forbid Sodomitical acts. However, for a short time under the rule of Mary, the Protestant Acts were repealed and the ban on these sexual acts lifted under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Under the rule of Elizabeth, the act of sodomy became a crime against the Queen punishable by death. Kenneth Boris, editor of *Same Sex Desire in English Renaissance*, “Sodomy ceased being a secular crime until 1583... only in 1861 was the resultant death penalty for the anal coitus of male abolished; only in 1967 was private homosexual sex between consenting adult males decriminalized in England”. Allan Bray in his essay *Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England* talks about the state of Elizabethan society which lacked the idea of a distinct homosexual minority, although homosexuality was regarded with a readily expressed horror. In principal according to Bray it was a crime which anyone was capable of, like murder or blasphemy. [Bray, 40]. Bruce Smith in *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare’s England* states that “Nothing in Renaissance theory suggests that individuals found their identity this way, and that homosexual behavior may be cross cultural, trans historical phenomenon”. That is why Allan Bray stated that there was no specific name associated with homosexuality, just general labels for sexually deviant activities.

In *Homosexuality and the signs of Male friendship in Elizabethan England*, Bray talks about the idea of the Masculine friend versus the homosexual or sodomite. “The image of the masculine friend was an image of intimacy between men in stark contrast to the forbidden intimacy of homosexuality” [Bray, 42]. The definition of Masculine friend is a confusing one. These “friends” are considered throughout Elizabethan history and Literature as strongly bonded, male, same sex partners. These friendships benefited men of station and wealth into more advance scenes and back rooms of politics and business endeavors. The fact was any friendship that was too private and posed a threat to social hierarchy was considered sodomitical. This created a sort of anxiety about such friendships and reduced chances of private friendship. Worries about sodomy pushed such friendships into public sphere. This is where the lines of ‘masculine friend’ and ‘sodomite’ became blurry because it fell upon people to view the relationship between males as sodomitical or not. Thus historical analysis of homosexual identity can lead one to the presumption that sexual action, even when officially disapproved or

criminalized, coexisted relatively peacefully in early modernity. The extreme cases for prosecutions for sodomy—technically a capital offence in England—may give rise to impressions that multiple sexual behaviors could be pursued, sometimes by the same person with severe repercussions, and also without phobic consequences which is in itself flawed one.

The complex phenomenon of homophobia for grounded by power relationships was very much a reality in Elizabethan England; witnessed in one of the relevant play *Edward II* written by Christopher Marlowe. There was violence and deep cultural embedding of homophobia present in 16th Century. The question arises whether homophobia should be historically scrutinized? Is such a project imaginable? Can it be said even to have started? Would it be component of history of sexuality? Has the knowledge which is resulted out of queer studies been accompanied by blindness to homophobia. If increased recognition might seem to make homophobia a more incurable problem; one might also suggest that nothing to be gained by underestimating its reach and complexity.

Queer analysis of *Edward II* has been done in detail by Jonathan Goldberg in *Sodomities*. He does extensive critique of the heterosexist assumptions and policing of the sexual area still prevalent in early modern criticism of Shakespeare and Marlowe in particular. What was unique in his criticism is that he questions some self-identified queer critics who view male same sex relations through the lens of heterosexuality.

Goldberg took the term “sodomitical” for a sexuality without social or procreative excuses and without biological base; that is thesexuality evident in both *Edward II* and in *The Tragedy of Dido*, co-authored by Marlowe and Thomas Nashe. Goldberg applied sodomitical as early as modern term to all sexualities socially constituted as illicit, whether in relations between men or between women and men [Isabella in *Edward 2*, Venus in *The Tragedy of Dido*]. Isabella takes on this term when she removes herself from the bondage of marriage and becomes the adulterous partner of the power hungry Mortimer.

Goldberg’s key point in the whole criticism is when Mortimer Sr. in the play dissociates male-male sexual relations from political disorder, partly because male friendship along a homoerotic spectrum is the glue that hold together the elite male political world. Mortimer Sr. says at one point about Edward, “Let him without controlment have his will... The mightiest have had their minions...” [1.4.389-90] naming among them Alexander, Hercules, and Cicero. Nobody objected in such a scenario as long as hierarchical distinction is maintained between master and minion. It would seem the main objection baron have for Gaveston is that he is an upstart, foreign, favorite being promoted and loved rather than them who have certain social rank being insiders. By the same token, the queen considers Gaveston as a sexual, not a rival or homosexual and all the power brokers in the play presume that if Gaveston were removed, Edward could love Isabella again. Goldberg emphasizes on Mortimer’s speech legitimizing male-male sexual relations actually leads to crippling of the term ‘homosexuality’.

Apart from one brief reference, Goldberg overlooks the magnificent finale of *Edward II*. This finale raises the issues of phobic accompaniments and terrible consequences to male-male sexual relations. The finale of *Edward II* dislocates any complacent consensus about homophobia not existing or happy coexisting behaviors in modern period.

In Act 3, Scene 1 Gaveston’s murder breaks his relationship with Edward midway through the play although replaced by Spencer Jr. The play moves from the playing of “homosexual” relationship to Edward’s deposition and murder, events in which the issue of male-male relations returns with a vengeance. Marlowe according to critics, leaves crucial

details yet the audiences ,performers, or readers were too well aware about Holinshed’ s account of the murder .Even if stage directions completely leave something to the imagination, they still carry on with a scene that already exists in the contemporary public mind .If important details are left out ,the equally crucial apparatus is specified .

Homophobia and horrific enactment of punitive sodomy is what we witness in this murder scene .This is far away from neoclassical tolerance or the social worldly politics of male “friendships” .We find ourselves in the moral realm of sin and Dantescan punishment. The sin mentioned would be the one traditionally characterized as “too horrible to be named among Christians” surely nothing short of that could justify the extremity of the punishment .If this reading is valid, then we have to suppose that *sodomy* could still peculiarly excite guilt, horror and a desire to punish in Marlowe s time .Marlowe might have internalized contemporary homophobia, despite or because of his apparent implication in male *sodomy*.

The Rape-murder of *Edward II* exposes culturally induced anxiety of penetration .This fear arises from the construction of a cultural masculinity that privileges phallic penetration; it does not mean objection to male same sex relations but to occupy passive position [Being a Uke] in those relations.To be penetrated is to become “feminine” or excluded from privileged masculinity .The performance of Edward s murder is not only reenactment of history ,but also an enactment that seeks imaginative projection and completion .As Goldberg asks in *Sodometries*,, “What fantasy is this?”[93].Then termsodomitical might mean sexually illicit fantasy which could result in sadomasochistic extremism very much witnessed in Elizabethan era.This type of fantasy might include strange perversity displayed by the murderer Lightborn ,who is little bit maternal towards Edward before committing the murder [there is no gain for him to delay the murder]. In DerekJarman ‘s movie *Edward II* the gruesome murder turns out to be only figment of Edward’s imagination in fact we seeLightborn having sex with Edward .In this way Jarmen rewrites the historical script .He also taps into the strange erotics between Lightborn and *Edward 2*to activate what may be only latent in the play.

The punishment of *Edward II* raises more questions than answers .Is the killing then a Judgment or a crime? Do we relate with the tortures or the tortured, or with both, a possibility to which many contemporary texts including Shakespeare’s tragedies attest? Where does Justice lie when retribution very rapidly overtakes the perpetrators as Isabella is imprisoned and Mortimer Jr. is sent off to execution by the new king, Edward3? Thus the murder of Edward in itself becomes a different text to be decoded as it is extremely dense ,contradictory, affectively supercharged discourse, the true meaning of which cannot be secured by positing authorial intent or hypostatizing a monolithic Elizabethan audience response .

There is proximity or mutual implication of the homoerotic and homophobia in the affectively charged terrain of male same sex desire and fantasy or sexual fantasy .Thus one can assume that sodomyhas been locus of sexual anxieties and bodily phobias. *Edward II* is a text which exposes the internalized homophobia in its gruesome ending.

The murder of Edward is not a sudden happening at the end of the play ,but the climax of events leading to Edward’s seemingly unjustified martyrdom at the hands of Isabella and Mortimer Jr .Once they have Edward in their clutches ,they could kill him immediately .Instead ,they torture him through their agents Matrevis and Gurney ,to degradation of a peculiarly telling kind .Edward is shifted from one prison to another,starved, shaven with filthy sewer water ,subjected to verbal abuse , and finally imprisoned in a castle sewer ,where he is continuously showered with excrement .At one level, this represents Isabella and Mortimer’s untrammled

power .At another level ,they systematically attack and defile the sacred body of the king .This type of torture exposes the concealed homophobia as the tormentors feel it to be justified action on Edward *II* for self defilement as a royal sodomite .It clearly belies the sang-froid Mortimer has previously in claiming that he objects to Edward and Gaveston’s relationship only because it imposes on the prerogatives of the legitimate aristocracy, and because Edward and Gaveston considers the aristocrats into stage comedy figures while observing them from the battlements. The humiliation and torture of Edward represents strictly homophobic punishment making a connection between sodomitical body and excrement .Mortimer and queen’s torture does not carry any moral rationalization or explanation yet is clearly indicative of hatred for same sex relationships accompanied with class discrimination.

This homophobia is prevalent everywhere on the inside as well as outside of sexual fantasy and practice It cannot be considered alien or overlooked as misconception or denial .Marlowe’s *Edward II* shows how sodomy can become the locus of sexual anxieties and bodily phobias .If *Edward II* calls for revision or extension of the queer theories, it does so most in these directions.

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