

ISSUES IN GENDER STUDIES: LESBIAN/GAY CRITICISM AND QUEER STUDIES

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This paper makes an attempt to historicize Gender Studies by going into the origin of the theory and its implication across time and space. Moreover it discusses the major issues in lesbian/gay criticism with the help of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and Carl Churchill's *The Cloud Nine* (1979) and it's relation to Queer theory.

Gender theory came out in the 1980's from Feminist Criticism of the 1970's. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Man: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) and Judith Butlers' *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) are known as the fountain head of Gender Theory. Gender Criticism was very popular and at the same time controversial in the last decades of the 20th century. It came into existence after the emergence of sexuality as a fourth category in Western Culture. Western Culture was structured on gender, race and class, particularly the differences among these three categories. But the attachment of sexuality changed the whole scenario of western culture. Hans Bartens says:-

Until fairly recently critical interest was primarily focused on the three areas of difference, those of gender, race and class, that seemed to be most central in the way Western Culture has over the ages structured itself ...Gender and Race have traditionally gone together in organizing the West's response to non-western peoples and in establishing an exclusively Western Identity. Since the 1980's a fourth area of difference, that of sexuality, has gained prominence as an important principle of social and cultural organization. (217-18)

The emergence of sexuality as norm in Western Culture gave birth to Gender studies in the literary canon. It was not too long ago that the Western people viewed sexuality a natural. They believed that sex was built into the body, into human genetics, hormones into the very physiology of individuals as World Health Organization says, "Sex refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women (WHO)." But the new social perspective on sexuality challenged a conventional perception that assumed a natural division between men and women that extended into their sexualities. Against this naturalistic view of gender and sexuality, feminists argued that society, not nature, creates gender and sexual differences. As Simone de Beauvoir says, "One is not born women, one becomes one (301)". This view proposes that women's sexuality is socially shaped in a way that sustain men's social and political

dominance, whereas gender is a notion of social and cultural construct. It is matter of masculine and feminine. For example: The word ‘sun’ is masculine in English but feminine in German (die sonne) while ‘moon’ is masculine in German (der mond) but feminine in Spanish (le luna). Thus gender is a construct, a product of language, culture and its institution.

The new sexuality studies viewpoint does not deny the biological aspects of sexuality. There would be no sexuality without bodies. However, it is social forces which decide which organ and orifices become "sexual" and how such organ and orifices may be used or expressed their social and moral meaning, which desires and acts become the basis of identities and what social norms standardize behaviors and intimacies.

In other words Gender criticism unlike Feminist criticism makes no distinction between sex and gender. As Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) points out,

This radical splitting of the gendered subject poses yet another set of problems. Can we refer to a ‘given’ sex or a ‘given’ gender without first inquiring into how sex and/or gender is given, through what means? And what is "sex" anyway? It is natural, anatomical chromosomal, or hormonal, and how is a feminist critic to assert the scientific discourse which purport to establish such "facts" for us? Does sex have a history? Does each sex have different history or histories? Is there a history of how the duality of sex was established, a genealogy that might expose the binary options as a variable constructions? Are the ostensibly natural facts of sex discursively produced by various scientific discourses in the service of political social interests? If the immutable characters of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called "sex" is as culturally constructed as gender; Indeed perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all. (10)

For Gender Studies, sex and gender, a part from biological and cultural respectively, their relationship is based on identification and desire. This notion of identification and desire is a foremost issue in the lesbian /Gay criticism within the flight path of Gender Studies. Before discussing the major issues in Lesbian/ Gay criticism, take short a look at the history of the emergence of lesbian/gay criticism.

The two world war of the twentieth century enabled various young men to discover their sexual preferences. It is important to note that gay and lesbian theory begins in a social movement. The Stonewall riots of 1969 may be described as the point of origin of the Gay liberation movement. The riots broke out with the police raid of Stonewall Tavern in New York City. Many gays, lesbians fought back. The British Lesbian/Gay Front was formed at the London School of Economics on Nov13, 1970. Since then the gay liberation movement has sought to fight social, legal, medical and religious oppression and tried to promote the cause of the marginalized community. Major points which contributed in the development of lesbian/gay studies-

- In the 1960's same sex-pornography became easily available.
- The Journal *College English* brought out a special issue on gay writing and theory in 1974.

- The two germinal essays, "The Traffic in Women : Notes on the Political Economy of Sex (1975)." and "Thinking Sex :Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality (1975)", by Gayle Rubin, elaborated a theory that had become central to lesbian/gay criticism that gender difference and sexual difference are related but are not same.
- The publication of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality (1978)* and the rise of Feminist theory.
- Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Man* and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* also contributed in the development of lesbian/gay studies.
- A Re-reading classic authors like W.H. Auden & E. M. Forster. John Osborne, suggested an alternate culture phobia (fear of homosexuality and homosexuals) was detected in certain authors like Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee etc.

Politically the community of Gay and lesbians was marginalized, socially, they were mocked, harassed and mistreated and that's why lesbian/gay criticism, like feminist criticism, became gender-oriented. It critically examines the attitude of our society towards gays and lesbians as part of Gender Studies. As a theory, it emerged in 1980's and gained momentum in 1990's. Lesbian/gay studies questions the centrality of gender as a fundamental category of historical analysis and understanding and their aim is to remove the prejudices against "homophobia". Heterosexuality has been treated as the norm and homosexuality or same-sex bonds have been treated as abnormal perversion and even criminal. It can be seen in Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* in the discussion between Harry and Clive where Harry expresses his feelings to Clive which for Clive is a sin-

Clive: The most revolting perversion Rome fell, Harry, and this sin can destroy an empire

Harry: It is not a sin, it is disease.

Clive: A disease more danger than diphtheria. Effeminacy is contagious...

We can say that it was an actually a life in the closet. The closet is a crucial image in the later gay writing and theory. The main aim of Lesbian/gay studies is to establish the analytic centrality of sex and sexuality in several fields. Lesbian/gay studies focus on the cultural construction, diffusion and vicissitudes of several meanings. It struggles for sexual liberty and personal freedom as well as by resistance to homophobia and heterosexism on the ideological and institutional practices of heterosexual privilege.

Lesbian Criticism:

Perhaps because lesbian criticism and feminist criticism grew from the same soil-as responses to patriarchal oppression-and because lesbian critics are generally feminists, lesbian criticism is concerned with issues of personal identity and politics analogous to those analyzed by feminists. However while feminism addresses issues related to sexism and the difficulties involved in carving out a space for personal identity and political action beyond the influence of sexist ideologies, lesbian critics address issues related to both sexism and heterosexism. In the other words, lesbian critics deal with the psychology, social, Economic and political oppression fostered not only by patriarchal male privilege, but by heterosexual privilege as well, And this second form of privilege is a bone of contention among feminism and lesbian criticism. Lesbian feminism focus on the three situations and issues-

- Firstly, they refuse to be marginalized by the society.

- Secondly, they refuse to be marginalized by heterosexual feminist.
- Thirdly, lesbian of color and working class lesbian have refused to be marginalized by the white middle class lesbians.

Moreover lesbian theory says that lesbian is not necessarily a woman who had sex with another woman. A woman could be lesbian if she has lifelong attraction to other woman. This definition permits us to recognize lesbian existence within the boundaries of heterosexual marriage. In the novel *The Color Purple*, the relationship between Shug Avery and Celie and in *Cloud Nine*, the relationship between Betty and Ellen through light on this particular issue. Another example from the real life, we can take of Virginia Woolf who had successful married life, but her long -standing affair with the Vita Sackville-West.

Another important notion of lesbian criticism is that lesbian identity is not limited to the sexual domain but consists of directing the bulk of one's attention and emotional energy to other women and having other women as one's primary source of emotional relationship and psychological support. That's, a lesbian is a women-identified woman. Adrienne Rich calls it 'lesbian continuum'. She explains lesbian continuum as-"Include(s) a range-through each woman's life and throughout history -of woman- identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman (25)". The concept of lesbian continuum can be explained by the relationship of Celie and Nattie in *The Color Purple*. Celie only writes to God since she has nobody else to write to .The turning point in her life is when she starts writing to Nattie. She got her identity back when she identifies herself with her sister.

Another area of lesbian criticism is to analyze what constitutes a lesbian literary tradition and what writer and work belong to it. As Maggie Humn puts

What is a lesbian text? Is it one describing lesbian relationship? Is it one written by a lesbian author? Is it one in which hidden kinds of pleasure are offered to an implied lesbian reader? Are texts lesbian if neither author her content are explicitly lesbian? How much of a text has to be about lesbianism to be regarding as lesbian? (162)

Lesbian writing and lesbian reading are two aspects of lesbian criticism. On one hand lesbian criticism focuses on the current lesbian writing which is produced within last thirty to forty year and on the other hand it focuses on lesbian reading of texts published before the twentieth century, when lesbianism was unmentionable. It include, re-reading of Shakespeare's play, Jane Austen's novel, Emily Dickenson's poem etc.

Gay Criticism

Gay criticism unlike lesbian criticism does not try to define homosexuality. Sexual relations between men or even just the sexual desire of one man for another is the generally accepted norm in some countries. Major issue in Gay studies is gay sensibility. How does being gay influence the way one sees the world ,sees oneself and others, creates and responds to art and music, creates and interprets literature, or experience and expresses emotion? Gay sensibility includes awareness, dominant culture and the complex feelings that result from an implicit, ongoing social oppression. It other words, part of seeing the world as a gay man includes the ways in which one deal with being expressed as a gay man. Among other the three important domains of gay sensibility all of which involve response to heterosexist oppression, are drag, camp and dealing with the issues of AIDS.

Drag is the practice of dressing in women's clothing. Drag queens` are gay men who dress in drag on a regular basis or who do it professionally. However not all gay people cross-dress, not all gay people approve of drag. For gay men, drag is a form of political activism used to draw attention to gay issues, criticize homophobic government and religious policies and raise funds to fight AIDS. We can see the life of drag queen in Indian film *The Pink Mirror/Gulabi Aaina* which explores the taboo subject of transsexual in India which is still much misunderstood and ridiculed. Moreover Tennessee Williams' *A Street Car Named Desire* and Carl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* are wonderful examples of drag or cross- dressing.

As drag is a dressing in female attire, camp is a traditional stereotypical image of a gay man. It is a form of expression characterized by irreverence, artifice, exaggeration and theatricality. Unlike drag, camp is a way of affirming one's difference from heterosexual culture. It's a way of disarming heterosexism and healing oneself through laughter. And thus it is a way of transforming of victimhood into power. Moreover living with the reality of AIDS, which includes AIDS related discrimination, became part of gay sensibility in late 1980s.

Despite their focus on different theoretical issues, there is a good deal of similarity in the way gay and lesbian critics approach literary text. As, like lesbian critics, gay critics attempt to determine what might constitute a gay poetics, or a way of writing that is uniquely gay, to establish a gay literary tradition and to decide what writers and works belong to that tradition. Gay critics also examine how gay sensibility affects literary expression and study the way in which heterosexual text can have a homoerotic dimension. Moreover gay critics try to discover gay writers from the past whose work has underappreciated, distorted, or suppressed, including gay writers who have been presumed heterosexual. They try to determine the sexual politics of specific texts, analyzing for example how gay characters or 'feminine' men are portrayed in both gay and heterosexual text. Finally, gay critics identify and correct heterosexist interpretations of literature that fail to recognize or appreciate the gay sensibility informing specific literary works. For example-Re-reading of Walt Whitman's poetic voice, a study of the representation of gay identity in the work contemporary novelist Edmund White and a defense of the gay sensibility in Tennessee William's plays.

Another area of issue in Gay studies is Man's studies; they say that man has been studied as hero and villain, scholar and scientist, thinker and writer. But he has not been studied as gendered being. It is said or argued that man, also like woman, becomes prisoner and victims of sex-role paradigms. Gay criticism argues that all male and females are forced to fit in gender type casts. Patriarchy creates the myth of masculinity and demands that all men should play the role of ideal male and conform to the ideal. There is a constant pressure to behave like a man. The stress of living in the modern world, combined with the sex-role's strain, creates a tragic situation for both male and female.

After discussing lesbian/gay criticism, we can say that though Gay and lesbian criticism are different in their issues but their approaches are similar. We can refer them as the two sides of one coin-Gender Studies. But major question comes here, if lesbian/gay theory belongs to Gender Studies then why is it being related Queer Theory? Or is there any relationship between Queer Theory and Gender Studies? Many critics believe that queer theory and lesbian/gay criticism are synonymous to each other, but actually, queer theory is neither synonymous with gender theory, nor even with the overlapping fields of lesbian/gay studies, but it shares many of other concerns with normative definition of male, female and sexualities. The only thing which is

common between gender and queer theory is that they both explore issues of sexuality, power and marginalized population in literature and culture.

Before discussing that relating area's between gender studies and queer theory, take a short look on the development of queer theory and its major concerns. Queer theory as a field of critical theory emerged in the early 1990's out of the fields of lesbian/gay criticism and feminist criticism. In other words it is derived largely from post structuralism and deconstruction in particular. The term queer theory was first used by Terse de Lauretis. Now this word queer has been used by the critics differently. As Nikki Sullivan says,

The word queer has a range of meaning in literary studies. In a simple term, we can say it is a theory or interpretation related to queer reading of texts, or in other words any piece of literary criticism that interprets a text from a non straight perspective comes in the category of queer theory .(X)

In short we can say in the words of Merriam Webster Dictionary that it is an approach to literary and cultural study that rejects traditional categories of gender and sexuality (Webster).

Queer theory's main concern is with identity. Queer theorists say that identities are not fixed-that cannot be categorized and labeled-because they have various components and it is difficult to categorize them by one characteristic. For example-A queer reading of Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* might examine how traditional definitions of gender identity (masculine versus feminine) and sexuality (homosexual versus heterosexual) fail to explain the characters Harry and Betty. Their gender categorization is not fixed but crosses back and forth between the masculine and feminine. It is difficult to fixed Harry relationship with Betty, and then his relationship with Edward and Jousha, which makes gender blunder in the text. In the same way Betty's masculine behavior to please Clive and at the same time her heterosexual attitude to Harry and homosexual behavior with Ellen, makes it difficult to fix her identity in the first act of the play.

Another notion of queer theory is its poststructuralist view towards language. The discourse of queer theory was influenced by Michael Foucault, Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and others. This discourse centered on the way that knowledge of sexuality was structured through the use of language. Queer theory says that as language is never static but is ever- evolving, in the same way, identity like language is never static but dynamic. This theory challenged the validity and consistency of hetero normative discourse and focused to a large degree on non-hetero normative sexualities and sexual practice.

As Queer theory has its own specific area in the literary canon but there are some areas which are common between lesbian/gay criticism and queer theory. Many gay and lesbian critics combine some of the deconstructive insights offered by queer theory with the social political concerns associated with more traditional forms of lesbian/gay criticism. Queer theory was basically associated with radical lesbian/gay politics of ACT UP, OUT RAGE! That's why all there domains take an interest in recurring themes that appear throughout lesbian/gay literature and that constitute a part of an evolving literary tradition. As Lois Tyson says-

These themes includes the following: imitation, including discovering one's queer sexual orientation, experience one's first sexual encounters as a gay person, and "learning the ropes" in the gay or lesbian subculture; 'coming out' to family and friends, 'coming out' at the workplace; dealing with homophobia and with heterosexist discrimination, the psychology of

gay self-hatred, overcoming gay self-hatred, the role of camp and drag in gay life, dealing with loneliness...(399)

Thus we can say that there are lots of differences in Queer theory and Gender studies but their aim is one to explore the issues of sexuality, power and marginalized population in literature and culture.

After overall discussion we come to this conclusion that gender theory like feminist criticism is not woman centered but sees male/female sexes, the masculine/feminine gender in terms of a complicated continuum. Purpose of gender criticism is to criticize gender as we commonly conceive of it. Except it, gender and queer theory can be applied to literary texts as tool of criticism with limited success because life is not only about sex. It has other dimension too. Desire in man not always sexual-it could be political, social and even spiritual.

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