

Queer Studies: From the Roots Up

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Introduction

Queer studies is an academic field related to gender, sexuality and sexual orientation. It focuses on the LGBTQ community. Like women, the queers have long been made to suppress the real them. Now the scenario is hopeful as the world is changing its mind to accept such minorities. It emerged during the early 1990s, trying to think through the politics of gender and sexuality. One of the significant cultural occurrences supporting this ideology's development was the AIDS epidemic. Activist groups forced governments to take steps against the epidemic and to treat the gay-lesbian community more humanely. The queer theory had many influences of liberation on it, like the homophile movement, gay and lesbian feminism etc., and the challenge it faces today is to create innovative ways of thinking, coming out of binaries like heterosexuality, homosexuality, man-woman etc.

Theresa de Lauretis introduced the term, Queer. She explains in her work *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (1994),

“As for Queer theory, my insistent specification ‘lesbian’ well be taken as a may taking of distance from what, since I proposed it as a working hypothesis for lesbian and gay studies in this (differences) very journal, has very quickly become a conceptually vacuous creature of the publishing industry” (De Lauretis).

The Stonewall riot was a significant incident that spearheaded the gay liberation movement in the US, where homosexuality was a criminal offence. The Stonewall Inn, New York, was owned by the mafia, who took little care of the clients except for the flowing money. The police raid at this gay bar resulted in an uprising of the gay community, which lasted over six days. Such attacks and protests were quite common during the times, but after this incident on 28 June 1969, things were never the same. The media coverage helped the riots get a quick reach and broad support. The years to come saw the surfacing of sexual minorities into mainstream society.

As a theoretical concept, it questions heterogeneity as normal sexuality. The marginalisation of the ‘so-called sexual minorities’ has resulted in the suppression of real human beings themselves, based on one of their inherent characteristics like temperament,

love of pets and love of mechanisms. According to Queer theorists, the word means a crossing of boundaries and an inability to fit into the set shapes of gender and sexuality. The important questions that come under queer studies relate to the role of sexual normativity in shaping various social and political institutions, the intersections of sexual marginalisation etc. “Heteronormativity is a worldview that promotes heterosexuality as the normal and/or preferred sexual orientation and is reinforced in society through the institutions of marriage, taxes, employment, and adoption rights, among many others. It is a form of power and control that applies pressure to both straight and gay individuals through institutional arrangements and accepted social norms” (Library).

Interestingly, one may find that the term ‘Queer’ itself is somewhat queer. It is used in various situations with differing meanings. One of the primary theoretical gestures of queer theory is to identify the moments in which gender, the sexed body, and desire do not line up in expected and heteronormative ways, thereby destabilising and undermining the assumed naturalness of the heteronormative order (Sinnott).

In 1990, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick published *Epistemology of Closet*, one of the pioneering works of queer studies. It points out that the standard binary interpretation of human sexuality is too simple to be all-inclusive. Binaries are not only binaries but are designed so that one presides and subordinates the other. It is the act of equating homosexuality with the ‘other’ which is not normal. Gay people are in a ‘closet’, which means letting the public know their identity. This is a daring task. When you try to be yourself, it results in oppression and neglect.

Significance of the study

What is the need for this Queer study? In a rapidly developing world, things, concepts, ideas, trends, people, and their mindsets are ever-changing. The ancient world never accepted the queer community as they were. They were marginalised, oppressed, and written out of record; they were silenced. They were never taken into the mainstream. But when you search the myths and history, you may see that queers were there. They existed, did their part, and disappeared into the air. They were considered non-human or cast-outs. Centuries of oppression and negligence have passed, and now society has accepted the reality as an inevitable change. Sexuality is no more counted based on binaries. Governments have included them as the third gender in official papers. One is given the choice of not revealing his/her gender. The LGBTQ community is progressively interfering with societal affairs,

which is a hopeful scenario. They have their own stories to share and their own identity to reveal. The movement of postmodernism has done a great deal in bringing up these marginalised classes.

Queer theory: The Black and White

Theories, before creating discourses, exist in black and white. That is why it is essential to go through the critical books on the topic, inquiring about reality. *The History of Sexuality* is a canonical text on Queer theory, which has got three volumes - “An Introduction”, “The Use of Pleasure”, and “The Care of the Self”. Foucault does not believe that western society has repressed sexuality and that they never talked about sexuality. He proposes three questions against this hypothesis:

1. Is it historically accurate to trace what we understand as sexual repression back to the 17th century?
2. Is power in our society expressed in terms of regression?
3. Is our present discourse a deviation from the history of repression, or is it a continuation of the same account?

He tries to discover how and why sexuality is a subject of discussion. He points out that in the 18th and 19th centuries, the discourse of sex moved from meetings of married couples to sex outside it and various forms of ‘perversions’. He tries to elaborate on how the separate category of homosexuals arose. Another ground-breaking text in this discipline is Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*. Homosexuality ‘has become a category of identity, rather than being accused of committing a sin’, she observes (Butler).

Butler gives clear-cut definitions of terms like sex and gender. Sex is a set of biological traits, like the primary and secondary sex organs, that define a person as male or female. Gender, according to Butler, need not essentially relate to sex. It is a set of socially constructed norms that the person must imbibe and follow according to the sex he/she is identified with. The world around us has certain expectations from a male and a female. All people in it are being shaped as per these expectations. Whoever behaves ‘abnormally’ is considered a violator.

Judith Butler introduces the term ‘gender identity’ in the book. By the term, what she means is the internal gender sense of a person. This may or may not match the physical gender. She develops her theory of gender performativity in this regard. In her view, a person’s internal sense of identity is influenced by many factors like day-to-day actions,

speech, body language, attire, behaviours etc. Connecting gender with the sexual body is dangerous and repressive. Gender is not the real essence that one holds within innately. It is a set of repetitions that creates an illusion of a continuing identity.

Gayle Rubin's essay *Thinking Sex* (1984) is another notable work. Here the author seconds Michael Foucault in rejecting the widespread belief that biological sex is the ultimate sex. Rubin notes that homosexuality was considered a threat to national integration. She questions the meaninglessness of the same and explains how one's sexuality is policed by society by norms like 'sex is bad', sex is worse than theft and assault etc. She mentions her concept of 'benign sexual variation', which is her terminology for accepting the difference in sexuality and sexual desire. It does not matter if the person sitting next to you possesses a different sexual orientation than what you do. Instead, people think everyone should feel the same, to be 'normal' (Rubin).

Mary McIntosh's *The Homosexual Role* suggests that labelling some people as 'different' is a way of social control (McIntosh). Scholars like Jonathan Katz, Geoffrey Weeks and Caroll Smith Rosenberg give a social constructivist model of queer theory, which explains that homosexuals were made into ethnic minorities and tries to analyse the social and material conditions that favour the formation of such groups.

Queer terms explained

When we consider this field, cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity, heteropatriarchy and gender corrective surgery are certain notions and practices worth attention. Cross-dressing, as the name indicates, is the usage of clothes typically belonging to the opposite gender. It is also called transvestitism. Cross-dressing individuals could be lesbians, gays, or bisexuals. In other words, it is also gender-identified. For example, the colour pink is usually associated with the feminine gender. Typically, female clothing is feminine, whereas male clothing is considered gender-neutral.

Hermaphroditism is a condition where the male and female reproductive organs are present in the same individual. It is an intersex condition in which a person has both ovarian and testicular tissue. The person may have XX chromosomes, XY chromosomes or both. The external reproductive organs may combine both male and female systems. Gender ambiguity is a physical condition where a baby's external genitalia create an ambiguity in determining its biological sex.

Queers are people who got caught up between two worlds. These worlds overlap, and they belong nowhere. The trauma they are destined to undergo is terrible, as one may easily understand. The desire to conform to the self-identified gender is common among them. Surgery is one of the methods for the same. Gender affirmation surgery is the procedure that helps people transit to their self-identified gender. This becomes relevant because not matching the biological sex and the self-identified sex creates an ever-turbulent mindset, which can curtail their social life and even mental health. Various types of surgery are available. They include facial reconstructive surgery, top (breast) surgery, genital (bottom) surgery etc. It is to be noted that surgery is just one option. Hormone therapy is an alternative chosen by many.

The queer theory assumes that sexuality is essential in determining one's social identity. The patriarchal system prevalent in society constructs the notion of heterosexuality as the standard mode of sexuality and rejects non-reproductive sexuality. Thus, a lesbian or gay identity becomes 'abnormal' in society. Renee Hoogland, the famous US author and professor, coined the term 'heteropatriarchy' to explain this concept.

Next in the queue are terms like transgenders and transsexuals. They are usually misinterpreted. Transgender people are people who cross genders by changing their looks and clothes, whereas transsexuals are people who cross sexes by changing their bodies. MTF denotes Male changes to Female and FTM and vice versa.

Queer studies has got multiple layers of meaning and interpretations. It is defined by each one's reality, which may or may not be the same as another's. For the same reason, queer studies is considered fluid-like. It is a collection of matches and mismatches, expectations and realities, realisations and rejections. It has become deep-rooted in present-day culture, whether the onlookers accept it or otherwise. It embodies the collective voices of generations of imposed silence.

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