

Queer Space: Position in various contexts of Modernity

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Abstract

Queer space challenges the notion of prevailing heterosexual hegemony and carves a niche for all those who are termed as sexual dissidents. This paper is an attempt to interrogate the dominant heteronormativity within or outside queer geographies. Queer cultural politics and critical race theory get merged in the deconstruction of gender and sexuality. This understanding is necessary to comprehend the power structure across the dichotomy between heterosexual and non-heterosexual identity. Queer perspective is not about how people live but it is also about sexual politics of resilience and deeply rooted queer geography with critical race theory. The paper explores the key dimensions of the dynamics of deconstructing urban space vis-a-vis queer approach. The changing dimension of 'queer space' evinces the arsenal of 'others' in the terms of cosmopolitanism and solidarity.

Keywords: Heteronormativity, identity, deconstruction, liberation, equality, solidarity

The idea of queer space came to light in the late 1970s. With the publication of the book *The Sexual Citizen: Queer Politics and Beyond* by David Bell, the construction of sexual identities within discrete geography engages itself with the interdisciplinary field of sexuality studies. Actually, the very notion of queer space begins to be seen as an alternative to sexual space. It is said that space cannot be pre-identified as heterosexual. Thus, the occupancy of space by heteronormativity is a technique to diminish the visibility of sexual deviants. Queer space promotes the visibility of alternative sexuality under the facade of hegemonic heterosexuality. The paradigm of centre and margin centralizes the hetero/non-heterosexual deviation. As a matter of fact, queer space is all about extending the normative rather than challenging it. It can be said that queer space does not limit itself to homosexual spaces rather it should transgress beyond normativity. Gill Valentine opines in *Sexual Politics* in the companion to political geography, sexual minorities should not be excluded from the institution of marriage. And the exclusion of their rights from their partners' properties should be considered. In this context, Ruth Vanita says,

LGBT people are entitled to their civil rights and human rights. This is a requirement of democracy and has nothing to do with east or west, north or south. South Africa guarantees these rights; so do Brazil, Argentina and Nepal. Japan and China decriminalized same-sex relations before the US did so. Our obsessive focus on the West results in a defensive desire to simultaneously imitate the West and to defy it. Instead of endlessly agonizing about West and East as if they are completely incompatible, it makes more sense to focus on the requirements of democracy. ("Not Same-Sex")

Moreover, Valentine has focused much on queer critiques of identity politics. Jasbir Puar analyses the dominant queer space within the spheres of geography. She says, “While it is predictable that the claiming of queer space is lauded as the disruption of heterosexual space, rarely is that disruption interrogated also as a disruption of racialized, gendered and classed spaces” (936). In cosmopolitan societies, queer space challenges the very notion of sexual normativity. Queer space does not only operate the homosexual and heterosexual binaries but it serves as a critique of the discourse of class, race and gender.

In 1969, the Stonewall Riots of New York and its following reaction through protest and Pride March ignited a dominant voice of resistance and revolution against prevalent heterosexuality. In the 1950s and 1960s, homosexuality was considered a crime and the practitioners were subjected to humiliation, violence and discrimination. They were even ostracized for their sexual orientation. This subjugation and misconduct reach a height when the policemen raids on the 28th of June, 1969. The brutality and unjust treatment were severely criticized. This large-scale defiance made a massive impact on society. The riot marks a new dawn for sexually marginalised people. People started to raise voice for gay equal rights. First pride march was organised on the same day i.e., 28th June, one year later. Stonewall riots became a pivotal moment in history. Without an exception, the strategic planning, cultural protest, the act of self-affirmation and Pride March cast an impact on India as well. In fact, the young generations of India, especially from urban areas, started to show support and solidarity by participating in Pride March wearing colourful dresses, hoisting rainbow flags, holding banners, roaring slogans and their determinism plays a strong part in the new formation of sexual culture. The colonial history and the popularity of English as an official language motivate Indians for decades to follow western books, music, films, literature, culture and almost everything that can cheer them up. Technological advancement, internet, cable and satellite ease geographical distance, cultural gap and also the obsessive ideas of sexuality. It is important to understand the theoretical framework which is required for the changing nature of queer space in an urban locality. Analysis of queer space can be interpreted from the works of Henry Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* and Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Notably, Lefebvre's work serves as a reliable platform to understand how queer space changed in the scenario of western cities. Lefebvre's work helps us to understand how the 'closet era' turned into 'coming-out era' through the development of spatial practices and representations of space. Lefebvre believes that we have to find out differential space with the help of abstract space.

It is believed that queer space is basically an urban phenomenon which is not true at all. It is not that queer community dwells in cities only. Therefore, queer space is not always urban and it is also the fact that queer urban space plays a pivotal role in shaping queer culture. A city dweller can create their own space by overlooking the powers of hegemony which exists in representations of space and other social practices. Generally, space is always hetero-normative because heterosexuality being a power relation operates in all spaces both at home and at other social construction. The existing varieties of queer space can be understood from Lefebvre's perception of social space being represented as a social product. Alongside this literal typology, Lefebvre shows absolute space leads to abstract space through a linear narrative and the abstraction of social labour. There is also the possibility of differential space which opposes the homogeneity of abstract space. Abstract space is linked to the success of capitalism and the hegemony of the bourgeoisie and creates new spatial

practices. One needs to know the interlinking of absolute space and abstract space to differential space in order to understand the implications of queer urban space and other representational space related to that. Broadly, the 'closet era' can be understood as a mode of representational space which developed into a spatial practice in the 'coming-out' era with an intensification of abstract space. The lack of visibility around gay male space led to a predominance of representational space in the 'closet era' even though representations of space still took place.

Contemporary musicians like Adam Lambert, Trey Pearson, Jonathan Knight, Steve grand, and singers like, David Bowie, Elton John, Freddie Mercury, George Michael have openly declared their alternative sexual preference and people have accepted them as they are. Literary texts like *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin, *The City and the Pillar* by Gore Vidal, *Dancer from the Dance* by Andrew Holleran, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, and *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf deal with different forms of sexuality. Moreover, American Gender theorists like Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Jack Halberstam theorize on this area of queer theory. In the field of research, the marginal spaces of alternative sexual people have been recognized through American ghettos which further reinforce to locate similar marginal spaces all over India. After the Stonewall riots of 1969, gay areas grew and they became more visible into 'Commodified zones of gayness'. With the increasing spatial practices, queer people engage themselves more in production and reproduction. This spatial practice contributes to capitalist profit and engages in the practice of everyday capitalist life. The representational spaces became representations of space as a result of the spatial practices taking place within queer urban space. Queer space can be defined as a space that offers a radical alternative to heterosexual space by making the sexual subcultures visible.

For instance, the hijras of India live in a group and in a particular place. For the hijras "being independent of the group means not freedom, but social suicide" (Nanda 48). The dwelling places of hijras are similar to American ghettos but they were not visited or addressed until ghettos came into our knowledge. The ghettos which were once situated at the working-class part of the city or economically undeveloped area later transformed into an expensive and high-quality gay neighbourhood but the residents of hijra community have found no greater improvement. Public visibility and public accessibility of queer people are limited with gendered moral values, legal and social regulation. The patriarchal and homophobic norms of society do not consider the queer individual as normal beings. As a result, the queer population lives in a specific boundary to avoid homophobic discourse. The repression and intimidation of sexual minorities lead them to confine themselves within ghettos with complete exclusion from society. LGBT friendly spaces are called 'safe' because individuals socialize with people of same sexual orientation and this is how they are not subjected to discrimination or harassment. For the past few years, queer people have been trying to enter into the mainstream of society to gain public visibility against the opposition of power. This transition from the periphery to the centre of the city produces the counter spaces as per the idea of Lefebvre. Generally, queer urban space development focuses more on the gay population than on lesbian identities. Now, the fact is that gay men can assert their social practice i.e., building new institutions and reclaiming the space. But the lesbian community still has a long way to go to appropriate public space for their social and political needs. So the disparity between gay urban space and lesbian urban space stand in sharp contrast where lesbian space becomes invisible and fragmented both politically and economically. It can be said that queer women suffer from the lack of desire for visibility and

demand for their own space.

Indeed, the autobiography, *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* written by an Indian hijra, A Revathi delineates an exceptional tale of emancipating a claustrophobic soul who did not dare to raise voice against contemptuous societal pressures. The riveting memoir of a woman trapped in a man's body is a must-read for the marginalised section of people who dreams for their individual rights. In an interview to Gayathri Prabhu, A Revathy opines, "These constructs are from the West, written by people sitting in air-conditioned rooms and typing on computers. Your sexual identity is whatever you want it to be! If you say you are gay! What is important is that we don't discriminate against people for their sexual preferences and orientation" (Prabhu). However, the different facets of the study of sexuality in India are difficult to comprehend because of the diversity in Indian culture. People from a different class, caste, and financial statutes cannot perceive the notion of sexuality uniformly. In this context, it can be said that the acceptance of sexual minorities in the west is broader as all their LGBT and straight people irrespective of classes participate spontaneously in the Pride March. Therefore, the cities of the United States like New York, Washington DC, Chicago, and Los Angeles could arrange spectacular rallies every year with the highest number of LGBT people. Specific areas of the US, where only alternative sexual people are entitled to access, are also open to straight people who are knowledgeable and respectful of queer culture. So the homogenization of this abstract queer space is for both queer and straight people. Homophobia is fundamental in understanding the construction of these identities and the subsequent need to create social and symbolic spaces of interaction. Pride march can be seen as a protest against years of suppression of queer and queer space which have been transformed into a homogenous and depoliticized attraction in a liberal city.

As an inevitable outcome of colonialism, homophobia was internalised by the native Indians. Same-sex friendships are more acceptable than cross-sex friendships. According to Vanita and Kidwai, "This allow homoerotically inclined individuals to develop ties of varying closeness with one another" (198). The only acceptable monogamous heterosexual practise is challenged by the temple sculptures of Konarak and Khajuraho which underscores the fact that ancient India exercised a whole range of sexual behaviours. Nehru claims that "homosexual behaviour was an aberration introduced into India in the British colonial period" (Vanita 269). On the contrary, Nandy critiques colonialism by using queer effeminacy, "It was colonial India..still preserving something of its androgynous cosmology and style, which ultimately produced a transcultural protest against the hyper masculine world view of colonialism in the form of Gandhi" (Nandy 45). In cosmopolitan cities of India; Pride Marches are celebrated by not only sexual deviants but also liberal heterosexual freedom for LGBT people's self-acceptance, freedom, rights, and pride. But people from rural areas remain ignorant of their rights at large and, unfortunately, they continue to suffer in their own shell. While the urban queer people could easily accept the progressive values and ideas, the proletariats are unable to assert their sexual preference adequately. The deep-rooted hetero-patriarchal ideology poses a hindrance in the visibility of queer space and the erasure of queer sexuality from the narrative of Indian social structure. This results in an identity crisis in an apparently sexually repressive country. There's no denying the fact that people from rural areas face more discrimination than their urban counterparts. The non-heterosexual people can stay in mainstream society by exercising their choices, unlike the eunuchs. Being alienated and marginalized, the Hijra community are forced to form an artificial family structure among them.

Queer studies have become a substantial area in contemporary theory. In recent times, research scholars engage themselves in re-examining queer theory as a multi-disciplinary field which cast an impact on the social, cultural, psychological and literary area. Margaret Cruikshank opines,

We feel a special urgency about the lesbian studies because so much of our past has been lost. Sometimes editors and biographers hid the truth, and sometimes families destroyed evidence of lesbian relationships. Several of the most interesting documents in the Lesbian Her story Archives were actually rescued from trash cans New York City Sidewalks. (N. pag.)

K. J. Dover's work *Greek Homosexuality* (1978) and Martin Duberman et al.'s *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (1989) elaborate the sexual dissidence and subjugation for the homosexuals. These literary works are remarkable in its vitriol in the discourse of the marginalisation and exclusion of queer people in the mainstream society. Queer studies need rethinking in the arena of space, age, class, ethnicity etc. Nevertheless, the gay-lesbian texts are crucial in analysing the oppression of non-heterosexuals for ages. Subsequently, it can also be said that queer space is a subculture that survives on the fringes, attempting to encroach in.

Homosexuality has been recognized as a globally characterized culture and to explain the globalism of gay identity, Dennis Atman cites from the *Economist* "In effect what McDonald's has done for food or Disney has done for entertainment, the global emergence of ordinary gayness is doing for sexual cultures" (Jackson 358). The dynamics of queer culture has its first outlet in the United States and later it transcends to other parts of the world. The attempt of the rural sexual dissidents to occupy a place in the centre needs acceptance and recognition from all walks of life in society at large. However, the scholars of queer studies, academicians and other conscientious citizens should extend their helping hand in bringing forth the identities and existences of rural, subaltern alternative sexual deviants. In most of the cases, the conservative mindset is held responsible for negating the visibility of queer space. In post-independent India, a federal parliamentary democratic republic state is established but the dichotomies, binaries and divisions in terms of gender, race, class, caste, religion, language, economy, and politics evince to be the biggest cultural impediment in achieving the much sought-after democracy. In this context, it should be remembered that the gay liberation movement of The United States induced a change of policy which is a counter-culture reaction to the widespread oppression against non-heterosexuals. Queer spaces can be termed as acts of appropriation that is transformed by queer-identifying individuals. Queer space demands territory, a territory of asserting own individuality. This is an open area of possibilities, lapses, resonances, dissonances and expanse of meaning. Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) unequivocally demonstrates the importance of non-heteronormativity in urban regeneration. He propounds the importance of queer space in each of the US city. Florida opines, "To some extent, homosexualised represents the last frontier of diversity in our society, and thus a place that welcomes the gay community welcomes all kinds of people" (256).

Silviano Santiago, a famous Brazilian writer, expresses the failure of LGBT movement in Brazil and the strategy of "coming out", adopted from North America pushes up only "a 'wily' form of exhibitionism that is centred on the body, on conduct, on the 'ambiguity of behaviour', rather than on the expression of marginal identity." (Cruz-Malave and

Manalansan 9). The globalization of sexual identities sometimes fails to address marginal and subaltern sexual identities. Yet, the significance of Pride March cannot be denied because it generates the feeling to take pride in identity. It can be related to the theoretical terminology “closet” which is a sign of oppression and we cannot ignore it as “it indicates at once the restraints on queer self-expression, the terror and claustrophobia inherent in these restraints as well as to the simultaneous mystification, revulsion, fear and curiosity of the onlooker outside the closet in response to the quasi-mythical, part-demonic ‘other’ inside it (a replication of the childhood fantasy of the unseen ‘monster in the close’)” (Mallick Choudhuri 25). In *Love’s Rite: Same-sex marriage in India and the West*, Ruth Vanita opines, “To get the bugbear of ‘westernization’ out of the way – both of us [Vanita and Kidwai] were raised and educated in urban India and definitely have been influenced by western thought, as any reader of this book and any educated Indian, including the non-English speaking necessarily is. It is debatable whether even rural literate Indians today are entirely untouched by the ‘west’, and whether to be so untouched is desirable. Neither ‘Western’ nor ‘Eastern’ influence is pure or unmixed and neither has fixed value; more important is what one selects and what one aims to accomplish” (Vanita & Kidwai xxxiv).

Metaphorically, the closet is a space of "hiding", "invisibility" and "darkness" and the act of “coming out” determines visibility, release and liberty. These theoretical terms help us to understand the sexual subjectivities and also the displacement of place for sexual minorities come into consideration. The spatial mobility of the sexual deviants should be analysed in detail as they seek visibility like a sexual normative model of society. A nuanced understanding is necessary for an analysis of racialized, gendered and sexualised framework of queer perspective. It would be pertinent to go deeper into the queer urban space and to look beyond the western cities to make queer people question the context around which these social urban theories are constructed. Many Geographers analyze the hegemonic forces for shaping the social relations of inclusion and exclusion in the production of gay urban space. In the age of social media and other promotional events for queer space, queer neighbourhoods are becoming a culturally significant destination for other queer people and non-queer people also. It is important to foreground homosexuality as an acceptable way of living in social and political contexts. Mere labelling of certain people as sick, abnormal and criminal is detrimental in the discourse of the normative model of society. Mary Mackintosh opines in his famous essay, *The Homosexual Role* (1968) that it is a deliberate attempt to alienate non-heterosexual people just to create a make-believe world. The understanding of place and space is instrumental in grounding ideology for sexual politics and gender identities.

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