

## The Implication and Application of Queer Theory: A Study of the Emerging Trends.

Abhishek Chandel

*Research Scholar, Department of English, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra*

### ABSTRACT:

The paper aims to focus on the scope and approaches of queer theory in literature which is a field of post-structuralist critical theory also believed to derived largely from deconstruction theory. It has emerged in the early 1990's out of the field of queer studies and women studies. Thus queer theory includes both queer reading of texts and the theorization of 'queerness' itself. The paper also discusses the application of the theory to various genres of literature.

**Keywords:** *queer, lesbian, gay, unisexual, identity, sexuality, gender.*

Being a comparatively new field of study it is difficult to define queer theory as it is a multi-layered and rather complex field. Heavily influenced by the work of Laurence Berlant, Judith Butler, Lee Edelman, David Halperin, Queer theory builds both upon feminist challenges to the idea that gender is part of the essential self and upon gay/lesbian studies close examination of the socially constructed nature of sexual acts and identities. In 1970's a range of authors brought deconstructionist critical approaches to bear on issues of sexual identity and especially on the construction of a normative "straight" ideology. Queer theorists challenged the validity and consistency of heteronormative discourses and focused to a large degree on non-heteronormative sexualities and sexual practices.

Queer theory is not a theory in the traditional sense of the word. It is rather a perspective that scholars take in order to better understand both how we conceptualize sexualities and how to change them. Queer theory is not another term for gay and lesbian studies, but it can be useful for understanding gay, lesbian, and bisexual lives. Queer theory begins from the notion that identities are not destiny; our identities do not determine who we are, who we become, or how we view the world. Instead identities are constituted and constructed in order to meet particular goals. In this sense, queer theorists have paid much attention to what is considered normative, as well as to how and why people sometimes resist normativity. For example, if someone has a new baby, people often ask: "Is it a boy or a girl?" This assumes, of course, that there are only two possibilities. If the baby is a boy, he may find himself surrounded by blue clothes, blankets, and other gendered items. As he grows older, he will face normative expectations that he should want to play with certain toys, for example toy trucks, and should engage in certain kinds of activities, for example sports. He should not want to play with dolls or engage in sewing. These gendered constructions are historically and culturally constituted; they are not necessarily the

# 1st International Conference on Multidisciplinary Research (ICMR-2018)



NIILM University, Kaithal, Haryana, (India)



4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> August 2018

[www.conferenceworld.in](http://www.conferenceworld.in)

ISBN:978-93-87793-38-5

same in all historical eras or in all cultures around the world. In other words, these gendered ideas are not “natural,” or grounded in biology. Queer theory insists on the constructed aspect of identities, and by so doing it opens the possibility of constructing identities in other ways and for other goals.

Queer theorists recognize that the term queer is a pejorative designation for gays, lesbians, and those with other non-normative sexual identities. By adopting this description, queer theorists acknowledge its negative history but attempt to take that negativity and turn it on its head, reworking the term into something that could change the way we think about sexualities. “Queer” challenges the binary way of thinking about sexualities—as heterosexuality or homosexuality—in favour of a more complex project, of capturing the enormous diversity of sexualities—from gender ambiguity, transsexualities, or intersex to cross-dressing and more. Queer embraces whatever is non-normative. In this sense it is anti-essentialist, as it does not claim any essential, underlying character to the various categories of sexual identity.

## I. EARLY WORK

Work on gay and lesbian communication, of course, preceded queer theory. The early collection *Gayspeak: Gay Male and Lesbian Communication*, edited by James W. Chesebro (1981), reflects early interest in this area. While the essays in this collection would not be considered to be driven by queer theory, they laid some of the early groundwork for what would emerge later.

Much of the early work of queer theory was influenced by the French theorist Michel Foucault. Rather than taking gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people as its object of study, queer theory is more interested in examining the legal, political, religious, and other institutional discourses that create and reproduce these categories and the assumptions lurking behind these constructed categories. In other words, how does the law (at various times in history), as an institution, construct and constrain same-sex behaviors and identities? What role have psychological and medical discourses played in constructing these categories and subsequently regulating them? For example, in 1973, the American Psychiatric Association publicly changed its position that homosexuality was a mental disorder and, in 1975, the American Psychological Association agreed. Same-sex activities and desires did not change; the social institutions did—under pressure from gay rights activists.

Queer theorists would also point out that the categories heterosexual and homosexual are relatively recent inventions. This binary way of organizing sexualities is limited to a particular historical moment and cultural context. Other cultures in other historical periods have organized sexualities in a number of other ways. The boundaries between these categories of sexualities are viewed as fluid and dynamic as well, and in ways that trouble the simple binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality.

## II. MAJOR EMPHASES

Queer theory has been enormously influential across a number of academic disciplines, including literary studies, history, sociology, music, theater, and law. For communication scholars, the focus has been on

# 1st International Conference on Multidisciplinary Research (ICMR-2018)



NIILM University, Kaithal, Haryana, (India)



4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> August 2018

[www.conferenceworld.in](http://www.conferenceworld.in)

ISBN:978-93-87793-38-5

three major issues: (1) how communication and discourse have constructed these sexual categories and the implications of those constructions; (2) queering various aspects of communication studies; and (3) challenging how we write about sexuality in academic terms. Let's take a look at these three emphases.

1. Rhetorical and media studies focus on constructions and representations of sexuality that codify and reify these cultural constructions. In this line of scholarship the focus is on exposing the representational politics of constructing sexualities in particular ways. For example, in her study of media images of gay men with heterosexual female friends, Helene Shugart looked at these pairs in television and film and concluded that, within a normatively heterosexist culture, these constructions of gay men are acceptable because, "in these texts, homosexuality is not only recoded and normalized as consistent with privileged male heterosexuality, but it is articulated as extending heterosexual male privilege" (Shugart, 2003, p. 68). Shugart demonstrates how, in this case, the construction of the gay man serves patriarchal, normative heterosexuality rather than challenging or upending it. The question is not whether gay men are "really" like that, as they are not the object of the study, but how these constructed representations of gay men function to serve some ideologies over others.

2. Other scholars use the notion of queering to challenge traditional, normative ways of thinking about communication studies. For example, in a public address, Charles Morris III (2013) has analyzed the debates over the sexuality of Abraham Lincoln.

Some scholars find his sexuality to be no normative, while others defend a more traditional, normative view of his sexuality. Morris takes the position that "Abraham Lincoln was not gay" (Morris, 2003, p. 400), yet "Abraham Lincoln's collective memory has always been queer" (p. 396). By reconfiguring a queer Lincoln, Morris is able to deploy his image so as to invite a queer rhetorical pedagogy, as Lincoln becomes an image for all of us. Erin Rand (2014) invokes queer theory to challenge the ways in which rhetorical theory, criticism, and the archive have been organized. Her interest is in disturbing the easy reproduction of the rhetorical canon.

3. A third emphasis has been on the ways in which the academic community polices and creates barriers to writing about sexuality. In 1997 Frederick Corey and Thomas Nakayama published "Sextext," which challenged contemporary styles of epistemology about sexualities as well as how scholars wrote about sex. When this article appeared in *Text and Performance Quarterly*, a lively discussion ensued, largely in the online forum CRTNET (Communication Research and Theory Network), but also in other outlets. Since then, the manner of academic writing about sexualities and beyond has opened up and new ways of finding out how we "know" about sexualities have been explored.

### III. CONTINUING AND EMERGING AREAS

In addition to critiques of bisexual erasure, there has been increasing focus on the lack of attention in queer theory to transgender identities. Many attribute the coining of the word "transgender" to activist-scholar Leslie Feinberg. This term can be tied to a social movement that calls for individuals to be able to choose their own legal and personal gender status, to perform multiple gender expressions, and to have civil rights. The

# 1st International Conference on Multidisciplinary Research (ICMR-2018)



NIILM University, Kaithal, Haryana, (India)



4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> August 2018

[www.conferenceworld.in](http://www.conferenceworld.in)

ISBN:978-93-87793-38-5

term “transgender” can also be used as a social identity marker. Transgender scholars and activists have also argued for a less obtrusive emphasis on bodies and surgery, focusing instead on gender expression and performance.

Scholars in transgender studies advocate using the terms “cisgender” and “transgender” in order to mark gender performances even further. Cisgender refers to the experiences of individuals whose identity and gender expression or performance match the sex they were assigned at birth, while transgender can refer to a myriad of identities, including those of people whose gender differs from the sex they were assigned at birth, individuals who identify as genderqueer, transwomen, transmen, gender nonconforming, or androgynous. Transgender activists and scholars have offered gender-inclusive or neutral pronouns such as “hir” and “ze.” Connected to transgender studies is transfeminism, which asks us to consider how gender is a socially constructed process for all people. Transfeminist studies materialized out of histories of marginalization in gender and women’s studies and queer studies.

*Transgender Communication Studies: Histories, Trends, and Trajectories* (Spencer & Capuzza, 2015) is among the first books in communication studies that are focused solely on transgender studies. While recent years have seen the increasing prominence of transgender celebrities in the media, such as Janet Mock, Laverne Cox, and Caitlyn Jenner, it should be noted that transgender activists and scholars like Susan Stryker were active decades before these celebrities emerged in the public eye.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

- [1.] Chesebro, J. W. (Ed.). (1981). *Gayspeak: Gay male and lesbian communication*. New York, NY: Pilgrim Press.
- [2.] Corey, F. C., & Nakayama, T. K. (1997). *Sextext*. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 17(1), 58- 68.
- [3.] Johnson, E. P., & Henderson, M. G. (Eds.) (2005). *Black queer studies: A critical anthology*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- [5.] Morris, C. E., III. (2013). *Sunder the children: Abraham Lincoln’s queer rhetorical pedagogy*. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 99(4), 395–422.
- [7.] Rand, E. J. (2013). *Critical queer rhetoric bites back*. *Western Journal of Communication*, 77(5), 533–537.
- [8.] Shugart, H. A. (2003). *Reinventing privilege: The new (gay) man in contemporary popular media*. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 20(1), 67–91.
- [9.] Spencer, L. G., & Capuzza, J. C. (2015). *Transgender communication studies: Histories, trends, and trajectories*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- [10.] West, I. (2013). *Transforming citizenships: Transgender articulations of the law*. New York, NY: NYU Press.
- [11.] Yep, G. A., Lovaas, K. E., & Elia, J. (Eds.). (2003). *Queer theory and communication: From disciplining queers to queering the discipline(s)*. Binghamton, NY: Hawthorne Press.