



ENGENDERING QUEER SPACE/ COLOURS IN THE NEW DAWN: A QUEER READING OF KARUNA EZARA PARIKH'S "NEW DAWNS"

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Abstract

The paper aims to find out the disrupting patterns, the social ethos, the coming out of the sexual minorities and its depiction in the text under study with special reference to the use of varied colours and shades to portray the liberation of sexual minorities. The colour symbolism is used to bring these sexual minorities to a life that every Indian would enjoy. The paper aims to study how the queer people, especially lesbians, grapple with the marginal spaces and society's notion of gender binaries. It also brings under focus, the performative aspect of gender along with the colour symbolism in the select short story "New Dawns" by Karuna Ezara Parikh in the collection of *Out! Stories from the New Queer India*. Coming out is something that requires great courage from the part of LGBTQ people because here, one is openly declaring to the world (to one's family, friends and society) of his/ her sexual inclination.

Key Terms: *Queer, Space, Sexuality, Gender Binaries, Inclination, Sexual Minorities.*

Introduction

In her work *Queer Theory*, Annamarie Jagose says that "Queer a is a product of special cultural and theoretical pressures which increasingly structured debates (both within and outside the academy) about questions of lesbian and gay identity" (76). She continues "...as an intellectual model, queer has not been produced solely by lesbian and gay politics and theory, but rather informed by historically specific knowledges which constitutes late twentieth century western thoughts" (77).

In a world where space becomes the directions/ routes taken and sexuality becomes a vexed question, queer studies gain importance. The paper is an attempt to peruse the myriad ways in which the queer minority go on engendering queer spaces which is crucial in defining their identity. It also attempts to look at how the rainbow-coloured flag of the queer community encompasses the diverse experience of the same. The year 2012 saw the publication of *Out: Stories from the New Queer India* when the Supreme Court decriminalised homosexuality. One of the short stories in this collection titled "New Dawns" written by Karuna Ezara Parikh is taken for the analysis.

Discussion

When we orient ourselves in space what happens is, we are taking a direction which in turn will define us. Queer spaces are spaces inhabited by the queer subjects whether it is lived space or not. The lived space is dynamic and noted for its vitality. We always have emotions attached to such spaces. With the publication of Henri Lefebvre's work *The Production of Space*, a spatial turn has occurred. This view of space is a platform for struggles that shapes and designs ideas, stances, believes principles and values. In the selected short story, "New Dawns" different kinds of spaces are mentioned (Aarushi and Sabah are the same- sex couples in this short story): one at the RJ night, second is the room/ house that Aarushi and Sabah occupy, the third is the studio where Sabah paints and the fourth is the Karoke bar at which Sabah and her boyfriend often meet. All these spaces are different locations in Delhi.



At the RJ party and Karoke bar Sabah finds herself as an alien. She often wonders whether she belongs to these spaces. She is sometimes lost and confused when she finds herself at such spaces. She fails to orient herself at such spaces and ends up taking ‘wrong’ directions as far as her identity is concerned. These are spaces where the heterosexual majority dominate. Homosexuals are not welcomed here. So, Sabah feels distanced and distraught. These are public spaces that hesitate to accommodate the LGBTQI community. For people in the the queer community, these spaces will not be transformed to ‘places’, which, according to Lefebvre, one can inhabit with power. Parikh opines that Delhi in four years would welcome deviants in art and fashion. It probably may; but not deviants in sexuality.

The house of Aarushi and Subah is a perfect heaven for these lovers. They occupy this space with love, power and sexuality. Much of the story happens in this space where they feel free and can engage in an explicit same- sex relationship. It doesn’t mean that they haven’t come out but that they enjoy more freedom in this space. Here, they have transformed it to their place where they can be themselves.

The studio of Sabah could be seen as a space where homosexuals and heterosexuals are tolerated. Friends of Sabah and Aarushi are portrayed as characters that have a strong sense/ idea of who a lesbian is. They support and sometimes play crucial roles in making Aarushi/ Sabah realise their own sexuality and thereby their self.

The rainbow-coloured flag of the queer community originally contained eight colours- pink, red, orange, yellow green, turquoise, royal blue and violet. This LGBT pride flag was designed by a San Francisco artist named Gilbert Baker in the year 1978. Each of these colours has different meanings. The colour pink represents sexuality. It thwarts the notion of binaries like male- female; masculine-feminine; homosexual- heterosexual and straight- deviant. Denoting queer sexuality, this colour as represented in the flag of the queer community, communicates flexible nature of the same. If we try to analyse the characters in the story “New Dawns” with the traditional tacit notion of sexuality, we fail to understand them. The mainstream heterosexual society tries to define homosexual relationships with the narrow ‘feminine- masculine’ binary. Thus, Sabah always confront the question- ‘who is the provider?’/ ‘Who is the man in the relationship?’ (315). The irony in it is that these questions are asked by the ‘free thinking’ friends of Sabah. Parikh writes: “Everywhere there are lines. If you are not this, then you must be that. If you are not on the straight path, you are on the homo path. If you are a homo you must have a gendered role nonetheless. Sabah does not see these lines” (315). If we look at their relationship with this set notion of gender role, we may find Aarushi more masculine than feminine because she has cropped hair has taken a Master’s Degree in Business Administration (a degree more ‘suitable’ for men), has sharp jawline, is flat chested, plays football and looks like a ‘handsome woman’. But she is not the provider of the family. She is the cook in their small family while Sabah who is more ‘feminine’ knows nothing on cooking. She has voluptuous features- “rounded hips and enviable breasts (315)”, wears heavy eyeliner and ornaments. She is also an artist. These traditional notions of what constitutes femininity and masculinity are thwarted by this same sex couple. They mock at the triviality of these binary notions that govern sexuality and gender.

Reflecting on Butler's *Bodies that Matter*, Jagose says that "Butler reiterates the fact that gender being performative, is not like clothing and therefore cannot be put on and off at will. Rather it is constrained- not simply in the sense of being structured by limitations but because (given the regulatory frameworks in which performativity is meaningful) constraint is the prerequisite of performativity" (87).



They celebrate their sexuality; their love: “now she sits, across from Aarushi, on a bed that has seen more love than many marriages. The bedspread is a worn, pale pink, the colour of women and babies and health and love. Everyone thinks that they have rejected their femininity by choosing what they have chosen, but if only they could see how they have celebrated it so” (315).

Red colour denotes life. Sabah looks at lives around her. She reflects on her life considering other paths- paths that are usually taken by others. At the RJ night which is full of noise and activity; singing and dancing, Sabah feels as a cliché. She feels as if she is repeating the set patterns that are repeated by all others in the mainstream society. Here, we could see a confused Sabah- one who finds herself at the crossroads of her life. At this point she is confused whether to accept the love of a girl (Aarushi) or to tread the traditional line. It is not out of love that she befriends the handsome RJ but all she wanted is to experiment with the feeling of belongingness. Here, she tries to perform her assigned gender role. Butler in her essay ‘Imitation and Gender Insubordination’ (*Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*) says:

Although compulsory sexuality often presumes that there is first a sex that is expressed through a gender and then through a sexuality, it may now be necessary fully to invert and displace that operation of thought. If a regime of sexuality mandates a compulsory performance of sex, then it may be only through that performance that the binary system of gender and the binary system of sex come to have intelligibility at all. (318).

After her one year- long experiment with the clichéd role as a woman/ beloved, she chooses the 'deviant path'- a path that leads her to her female lover Aarushi. For Sabah, Aarushi means life.

Orange colour implies healing. After a yearlong courtship with the RJ, Sabah returns to Aarushi. But this has resulted in a rift in their relationship. Aarushi, at first, is reluctant to accept Sabah even though she loves her. She wants to mend / heal the wounds/ cracks/ fissures in their relationship. She wants to open up her mind but she couldn't. She makes all sorts of lame excuses to reject Sabah's advances each time. She takes time to heal/ mend the wounds of herself and Sabah. Towards the end of the story, to a sleeping Sabah, she lets out her worries and pains that were troubling her. Sabah has her own way of dealing with her wounds. She poured out her heart on the canvas: “she draws and draws and paints all day, but at the end, it only looks like she has written Aarushi's name out a million times” (312) and she is healed.

Aarushi like the morning sun (yellow colour) wakes up before Sabah, is a ray of hope for the latter when her boyfriend leaves her. Aarushi, waking up in the morning, silently admires the sleeping beauty near her. The name ‘Sabah’ comes from the Hindi word *subah* which means dawn that is made beautiful by the morning rays of sun. *Subah* is the reflection of the morning sun. It gets variegated colours from the rays of the sun. Similarly, Sabah's life becomes colourful, beautiful and meaningful when she is with Aarushi. She gets her meaning/ identity in relation to Aarushi.

In a society where there are norms for males and females, these sexual minorities suffer at large being in the grey area. What is masculine and feminine governs the majority while the queer falls out of these rigid classifications. But the society tries to bring them to the earlier said categories for it turns a blind eye to the sexual orientation of these people. In the short story which is taken for the study, these binaries are at operation whenever they come across the hostile heteronormative society.



In the 1990 book *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick examines what are the conditions that make up the sexuality of people (it will be either homosexual or heterosexual). This binary concept of sexuality is inadequate to express the complex sexual orientations of people at large. Yet our society tries to categorize people on this basis.

The question of natural/ unnatural; normal/ abnormal is implied through the colour green. In a world where homosexuality is seen as an aberration/ deviation, the question of what is natural reigns importance. The queer subjects find their passion natural and holds it close to their self (even though the world doesn't recognise it). Whenever they try to 'act' natural (Sabah at the RJ night) they fail. Heterosexuality is not natural for them. What is natural to Sabah flows through her: through the act of drawing and painting Aarushi's name all over the canvas.

The harmonious coexistence of the Queer is symbolised by the colour royal blue. Together they regain their rhythm and happiness- Sabah comes back to Aarushi and they form a harmonious pair: "Aarushi and Sabah, Sabah and Aarushi. What a pair" (312). Watching the 'inky' January sky, they once again find comfort in each other. "They are more in sync and at ease with each other than most people pray to be. They cannot be cruel unless absolutely attempting to. They, then can break each other with ease" (301). According to Gayle Rubin, society lacks a concept of benign sexual variation. She also adds that the heterosexual majority don't recognise the fact that just because they don't like to do something, it won't make that something repulsive. So it is the society's inability to have proper understanding of the queer experience that makes it strange. Such a society fails in realising the harmony in these kinds of relationships.

Sabah and Aarushi are faced with the same issue that people like them face in a hostile society. But what is worth noticing is that they are not at all limited by these norms that once restricted them. They are now free. They are in a way celebrating their togetherness as never before. The colours that govern their life are not two in number but multiple. They mock at what is masculine and feminine. They feel sympathetic to those who cannot see them as they are and wonder at the inability of people around them. This is indeed a radical change in the way the queer perceives themselves. This is just a way of looking at the society that has elevated itself from zero tolerance level to that of ruling out a section that was against homosexuality. The male/ female constructs are broken in many of the short stories in the collection *Out! Stories from the New Queer India*. The life of Aarushi and Sabha accounts for a new way of perceiving things around them, which is indeed remarkable.

The varied hues in the life of these sexual minorities and how the colour symbolism works out the passions and poignant emotions as reflected in the lives of them. The spirit of the Queer community is portrayed through the colour violet. It is the spirit/ joy of the love that they share. It is the spirit of queer sexuality. This spirit is shared and cherished by Aarushi and Sabah: "A brother is a brother. And a husband...that is all he can be. But a woman...she is your sister, and your mother, and your daughter, and your lover...A woman can change shape or role and cross boundaries. Together they have learnt this. From each other they have learnt this. And this knowledge alone would protect them" (314). This knowledge has freed them from the traditional/patriarchal roles that every women are bound to. Women are expected to play their different roles in the family. Even though the menfolk fail in fulfilling their roles/duties, they are excused. Aarushi and Sabah have learnt that their same sex relation is more liberating and protective than any other relations that the heteronormative society could offer.



Conclusion

The LGBTQ celebrate their togetherness by proudly flashing their rainbow- coloured flag which symbolises spirit, peace, nature, sunlight, healing and life. *Out! Stories from the New Queer India* reflects the feelings, emotions, aspirations and anticipants of these sexual minorities as they step on to a new India that has begun to show a degree of tolerance to their issues. We cannot turn a blind eye to the problems and issues of these people who are also the citizens of India. When they are getting recognized worldwide, we cannot pretend that they don't exist.

There is a radical turn in the marking of spaces by the queer community. The spaces where the queer community and their sexuality are considered taboo subjects, gradually evolve out to partially accommodate these minority groups even though with a little hesitation. A remarkable change is implicit in the stories of the collection *Out! Stories from the New Queer India*. This change in the mindset is seen reflected in the lives of Sabah and Aarushi. Engendering queer spaces has a pivotal role in the coming out of the LGBTQ people. From the enclosures that restricted the free expression of their gender identity, they have come out into a colourful dawn by proudly flashing the rainbow-coloured flag. They are creating spaces in which they could be themselves. They mark their presence by engaging in diverse social activities that will somehow unite them with the heterosexual majority. The reluctance of the heterosexual society in accepting, acknowledging and accommodating these minorities in public spaces can't continue as in the past.

In this anthology, the LGBTQ characters are no longer bothered about invisibility; in fact they are now at the forefront- they have gained visibility. In these stories, we could see their determination to live their life in a way they dreamt. They are no longer hiding themselves in fear or in agony in the closet- they have 'come out' to express whatever that they have in their mind. Sabah and Aarushi experiment with their sexuality and boldly create their own spaces out in the heteronormative society.

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