

---

## **Reconstructing Traditional Gender Roles: A Queer Reading of Abha Dawesar's Fiction**

*Ashoo Toor*

*Assistant Professor, Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana (PB), India.*

---

Theory in literary criticism is being practiced under several names given to different schools and movements. Some such current theories include- Poststructuralism, Deconstruction, Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Marxism, New Historicism, Subalternism etc. All these different schools of thought are marked by the common spirit of theory, which is to problematise what has been established in life and lifetime in abstract or concrete form. With the more fashionable deconstruction in vogue in the literary academy today, it is natural to question binaries such as inside/outside, mind/body, speech/writing, presence/absence, nature/culture, form/meaning, man/woman etc. It is agreed upon that binaries are not natural and inevitable truths, and most modern theories seek to dismantle them as such.

Queer theory is one such deconstructive mode of dismantling the key binary positions of the Western culture, such as- male/female, heterosexual/homosexual and natural/unnatural, by which a spectrum of diverse things are forced into only two categories, and in which the first category is assigned privilege, power and centrality; while the second is derogated, subordinated and marginalized. The term 'queer', which was originally derogatory and was used to stigmatize male and female same-sex love as deviant and unnatural; has since 1990s been increasingly adopted by gays and lesbians themselves as a non-individious term to identify a way of life and an area for scholarly inquiry. Thus lesbian studies and gay studies, which began as a liberation movement have gained impetus in the present scenario and owe this spirit to the path-breaking works of Michel Foucault and Gayle Rubin, who concede that gender is a social construct and a mere available cultural category; and that gender as a cultural construct is largely generated by the pervasive patriarchal biases of our civilization. Foundational proponents such as Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler and Adrienne Rich also challenge the validity and consistency of heteronormative discourse and focus to a large degree on non-heteronormative sexualities and sexual practices.

The Queer theory, thus, has an anti-essentialist element in relation to sexual identity. It constructs a postmodernist concept of identity- wherein all masks, roles and potentialities are provisional and contingent. Young and promising author, Abha Dawesar, has been globally hailed as a coming-of-age writer, whose debut novel, *The Three of Us* and her second novel, *Babyji*, typify the anti-realist leanings of lesbian/gay criticism. Both her texts herald the breakdown of all fixities, absolutes and certainties, calling for abandoning gender borders, thereby lending credibility to the notion that alternate sexualities are perfectly normal. Her texts are sophisticated and tantalizing at the same time, dealing with amorous indiscretions and providing a colourful backdrop to questions of morality, gender roles and social rank. The readers are given a view of relationships between men and men, men and women and women and women; which project her stories as a rebel yell against the moralizing forces that prefer people with unconventional sexualities to just disappear. Arguing for a pluralistic sexual ethics and harping on the concept of benign variation from evolutionary biology, her novels channel a wonderful new reality, viz. the second sexual revolution.

Lesbian/gay studies do for sex and sexuality what women's studies do for gender... In lesbian/gay criticism, the defining feature is making sexual orientation a fundamental category of analysis and understanding. Like feminist criticism, then, it has social and political aims; in particular an oppositional design upon society, for it is formed by resistance to homophobia ... and heterosexism ... and to the ideological and institutional practices of heterosexual privileges (Barry 140)

*The Three of Us* tells the story of Andre Bernard, a young twenty-four year old intelligent banker, who comes to New York on his first job in a Japanese investment bank. But before one is through with the first chapter, Andre has been taken to a strip club by his boss's boss, Nathan and is seduced by him. The book follows a sexual merry-go-round, where Andre sleeps with Nathan, Nathan's elegant wife Sybil, the office secretary Martha (who gets pregnant and is intent upon having the baby), a French tourist he has met casually, and his ex-girlfriend Madhu, who is going through a rough marriage. And when he has a spare day in his miniplanner, he contacts the Gay and Lesbian Centre, hoping to find a lover. His typical week is a choc-a-bloc with day and night appointments with lovers. This casual 'fun', however, between Andre and Nathan is just the start of a long and trusted partnership between the two.

What is amazing though is the fact that both men have been and are into serious relationships with women as well. While Andre has had a large number of girlfriends, he had been serious about Madhu alone, but had broken off amicably. Nathan too is married to Sybil, who he believes is "the greatest wife on earth ... we're like siblings." (Dawesar 10) Yet both men come close to each other, seeking emotional and physical solace from each other. What appears refreshingly new is that the writer projects this 'queer' relationship in a positive light. No formalities, no excuses, just plain directness binds the two men. Their souls connect instantly and a deeper understanding takes place. Hungry for each other's company, the lovers snatch time between hectic schedules, grab lunch together or meet at coffee breaks- enjoying languorous love-making hours and yet, they do not interfere into each other's space.

Again, while Nathan is aware of his sexual orientation as a gay; Andre seems dazed, at least initially. "I've never understood the classification of people into gay, straight and bi-sexual. Those are too discrete. Also, these distinctions ignore time." (Dawesar 19) The writer's views of radical denaturalisation of dominant understanding of sexual identity echo the thoughts of Michel Foucault, a key poststructuralist, who effected a profound influence on the development of queer theory through his understanding that,

Sexuality is a discursive production, rather than an essential human attribute ... Foucault refuses the idea that sexuality can be authoritatively defined ... in arguing that sexuality is not an essentially personal attribute but an available cultural category ("Queer Theory- Michel Foucault")

What seems striking is the fact that through the web of relationships carved in the novel, the writer demands the readers' attention towards the lost sense of direction and chaos in Andre's life and how he attempts to sort out the complications that have suddenly sprung in his life. The suddenness of it all- "Was I gay? Was I in love with Nathan? What did it mean?"- hits him like "a little thorn in my throat." (Dawesar 21) His own sexual orientation is a question for him and he does not seem to have adjusted to

the fact that he is one for sure. "I didn't mind being gay, but I just needed to know for a fact that that's what I was. For once in my life, I wanted the security of being something, being definable and definite-in short, a word." (Dawesar 22)

But then the dazed protagonist, Andre decides not to ponder over these sudden happenings as they only deepen his inner crisis; and at the same time, he revels in his new-found liberation from conservative sexual patterns. The novelist in fact holds a mirror to the postmodern world, where, science has stripped us all of mystery and dignity. Andre, for Abha is a "post-Nietzschean" character who chooses hedonism over everything else. In her essay on Nietzsche, she says, "In very broad philosophical terms, he tells us where we have failed. Andre's problems stem partially from his lack of understanding of where he fits in and essentially from the denigration of the human being from being a soul to being a psyche" (Anthikad-Chhibber. "Editorial Reviews"). Not wanting to solve problems of mind/body that had assailed intellectuals for generations, Andre, who is in the grip of fluctuating emotions, finds comfort in science:

Attraction was about pheromones, love and dreams were about serotonin, happiness was about some other chemical. The modern world of bio-chemistry had sulked my idealism and my vision. I yearned for an earlier age when one could believe that love was about the soul. (Dawesar 60)

Feeling zoned out and moving like a zombie, Andre finally comes to see his truth. Yes, it was possible to love more than one person and equally truly at that. He feels warmly for Madhu and Sybil, yet it is Nathan alone, for whom he feels intensely and who can make him feel whole. The moment of ultimate realization dawns and he visualises a life where there would be beside him-his father, his unborn son Camille (if Martha would let him have his custody) and Nathan.

Dawesar's analysis of a human situation is undoubtedly startling, but one which captures the essence of the human element, shorn of all pretensions and superficialities. Unlike Andre, Anamika, the sixteen year old brainy New Delhi girl, a Physics wizard and the head prefect of her school, the heroine of Dawesar's second novel *Babyji*, also tries to dismantle and rearrange the social structure. Anamika Sharma, on the surface appears smug, mature, responsible and fiercely intelligent, yet her world is one of reckless passion, where lovers are multiple, all women, and of different social status and age. She tries to satiate her sexual hunger through her maid, Rani, her classmate, Sheela, and an attractive divorcee, Tripta. Multiple sexual relationships discussed openly in the story serve to waken up the society from a repressed slumber to the challenging emergent sexual fashion of the day. "The great Indian middle class is shedding its taboo ... gender relationships that remained hidden in closeted frames of interaction and the subconscious are out in the open." (*India Today*)

The concept of bold sexuality is unpalatable for Delhi, where life is still lived under cover, where life "churns slowly, secretly." (Dawesar 1) This is especially true of the sexual and amorous life of Delhi's young brigade that seems to have shed inhibitions and crossed barriers of sex, age, class, race, religion, culture et al. People are game for explorative and adventurous relationships and Anamika is no exception. The bold new generation is in the throes of change; their world is far more accepting and forgiving. Their method is a search for the contemporary and the means is to step out of glass chambers, open up newer vistas and validate their own individual values. Anamika is one such character for whom borders and barriers exist no more than the older definitions of love, morals and ethics hold no more. Anamika is full of questions that have no single and no right answer- What is

love? What are the boundaries of love? What does it mean to live life fully? What is the purpose of one's life? And then she rationalizes her multiple seductions in the language of her math and science classes. For her, Quantum Physics provides the rationale...if it's not in her Physics book she does not quite accept it.

It's particles upon particles, all bodies in motion. Anyone who was expected to understand differential and integral calculus; and the derivatives of formulae on centrifugal force, should be allowed to have affairs. (Dawesar 11)

Anamika's curiosity about sex cannot be contained and unlike her peers, she is driven by a desire to learn more about the taboo word, and is prompted to read the 'Kamasutra' while hiding in the family's scooter garage. Though she finds the book "alien and absurd"; yet "magical things started to happen" in her life and she is pushed by the desire to experience the rush of emotions associated with that elusive thing called love. (Dawesar 2) Her chance encounter with Tripta in her school campus sets off a strange chemical reaction in her, one she feels, is almost akin to what Newton must have felt while he cracked the gravitational theory. Anamika holds sensational views about love, not having anything to do with emotions but about pheromones, particles and chemistry. Her lesbianism is a foil to the accepted thought and value system which valorizes certain forms of sexual expression over others. Convinced that she is born with the lesbian gene, she resists all advances by men, prefers her partners' smoothness to hairiness of the other sex and wants to have a harem full of women when she grows up.

Anamika truly inhabits the conflicts and contradictions of adolescence, when the brain is advanced, the appetite is insatiable and the calculus of emotions is yet to be resolved. For Anamika, the epitome of the new-age philosophy, there are no classifications on the criteria of race, colour, sex, caste, religion, nationality, culture etc. The only acceptable criteria of classification are knowledge and wisdom. The absolutes of childhood run smack into the turmoil of adolescence and she realizes that absolute and all-consuming love for anyone wasn't likely. Unlike Andre, who chooses Nathan, his male lover above all others, Anamika has several female lovers and she knows that her life is yet to unfold and branch out; so her current relationships need not be ultimate, though they are important for the time being. And without her three lovers she feels as if a big black hole is sucking her up. She feels like a little prince with several brides. While she has not worked out the complexities of love, the topic of sex arrests her attention. Tripta's casual remark that "Indian sexuality is a spectrum" and that it is normal for women to fool around, impresses her, even though she is not sure what it implies. (Dawesar 149)

In Anamika's world, where "choices were infinite" and "possibilities limitless", just like maths and physics; she is suddenly accosted by a dilemma between "morality about what we want or what's set down by society" and is eager to know about the "truth of everything- ... the truth about life and about love. The truth about truth itself ... I don't have the patience to wait while my life unravels. I need to know what's wrong and what's right. I need to know what I should truly want." (Dawesar 169) Her questions invariably focus on issues of morality, and knowing right from wrong; which are atypical of her generation, which is stuck between the horns of dilemma over morality concerns. While her father believes that the Vedas and the Upanishads guide us to our duty, the fulfilment of which alone can bring happiness; Anamika disagrees that a single formula can make everyone happy, especially when all people are different. For her, happiness at one moment lies in Rani's embrace and immediately after, she longs to derive happiness with unison with 'Tripta'. She wishes to be "as quick as an electron jumping from phase to phase." (Dawesar 200) Again, there are times when she cannot resist attraction even towards her teacher, Mrs. Pillai. "Veritas, Meritas" The more, the merrier, she concludes. Be it

affairs, be it careers. "Ultimately, in Dawesar's works, sexual freedom becomes a metaphor for other kinds of freedom: emotional, social, economic." (*Planet*)

In both her texts, Abha Dawesar deals with the uniqueness of sexual expression. She undoubtedly heralds the second sexual revolution by conforming to the queer theory in a big way. With the depiction of a feminine hero and a masculine heroine, she calls for a break from conventional theorizing of sexuality. Sexuality, then, is not a derivation of gender.

Gender relations have been an important context for the articulation of the sexual system; sex and gender are not synonymous and the rubric of gender cannot account for sexuality in its entirety (Queer Theory- Gayle Rubin)

Thus by abandoning binaries, the writer calls for the need to embark upon a pilgrimage towards a gender-free, egalitarian society. The theme of alternate life styles, sexualities, heterogeneity and rarities stands out. Queer studies are a revolt against essentialism and as such stress on the concepts of 'fluid identity' or 'experimental forms'. The main project of the Queer theory remains to explore the contesting of the categorization of gender and sexuality. Identities are not fixed; they cannot be categorized and labeled because identities consist of many varied components. To categorize by one characteristic alone would be gravely wrong.

Therefore, there can be no kind of claim to any essential gender: it is all performative, slippery, unfixed. In general, queer may be seen as partially deconstructing our own discourses and creating a greater openness in the way we think through our categories. To quote Michael Warner,

Queer theory is a stark attack on the normal business in the academy...queer theory is really poststructuralism and postmodernism applied to sexualities and gender. (Queer Theory- Michael Warner)

## REFERENCE

1. Anthikad-Chibber, Mini. "Editorial Reviews." Rev. of *The Three of Us*, by Abha Dawesar, Hindu Online. 01 May 2003. 08 Aug. 2009 <<http://www.thehindu.com/>>.
2. Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. UK: Manchester UP, 2004.
3. Dawesar, Abha. *Babyji*. India: Penguin, 2005.
4. ---. *The Three of Us*. India: Penguin, 2003.
5. "Planet." Myspace. 6 June 2005 <<http://forum.myspace.com/>>.
6. "Queer Theory- Gayle Rubin." 16 Jan. 2010 <<http://science.jrank.org/page/10942/Queer-Theory-Gayle-Rubin.html>>.
7. "Queer Theory- Michel Foucault." 16 Jan. 2010 <<http://science.jrank.org/pages/10941/Queer-Theory-Michel-Foucault.html>>.
8. "Queer Theory- Michael Warner." Encyclopedia Wikipedia Online. 2011 <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer\\_Theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer_Theory)>.
9. Ray, Prasanta. "A Bold New Paradigm." *India Today* 18 July 2005:70.