

*Research Article*

## Rethinking Sexuality: Queer Theory, Identity, and the Politics of Representation

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**Abstract:** Today, notions of sexuality are seen beyond their biological roots. Rather than understanding sexual acts and behaviour as biological truths, modern thinkers suggest the idea of constructing sexuality through culture, language, history, politics, media, and mechanisms of power. Queer theory, feminism, cultural studies, and post-structuralism have greatly challenged the conventional binaries of male versus female, masculine versus feminine, and heterosexual versus homosexual. The modern view on sexuality sees an individual as the carrier of a constantly changing and shifting identity. The present paper critically examines the evolution of discourses on sexuality in relation to theories developed by prominent scholars, including Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Adrienne Rich, and Gayle Rubin. In addition, this paper highlights the influence of globalisation, media, the digital era, and intersectionality on the formation of sexual identities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Above all, this paper discusses the necessity of creating an identity framework that is humane, diverse, and adaptable.

**Keywords:** Sexuality, Queer Theory, Gender Identity, Intersectionality, Heteronormativity

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**Introduction**

Human sexuality cannot be considered as an objective phenomenon that is similar for all individuals regardless of their culture, civilization, or period in history. Every society and civilization has developed its own perception of intimacy, gender, relationships, and sexual desire. Some of the things that may be viewed positively by one community may be rejected or repressed in others. Nonetheless, until recently, the discourse around sexuality tried to represent it as something biological and therefore unchangeable. Divisions such as man-woman, masculine-feminine, and heterosexual-homosexual became dogmas that could hardly be questioned.

The latter part of the 20th century witnessed an evolution in the study of sexuality. Researchers started to posit that sexuality is socially and culturally constructed and does not have merely biological bases. Michel Foucault's theories in *The History of Sexuality* played a major role in this development. Foucault postulated that sexuality is constituted through systems of discourse and power relations, not through natural phenomena. This sparked a scholarly interest in understanding the processes by which institutions regulate sexual behaviours and identity through religion, legislation, medicine, education, and media. Queer theory brought a novel approach to traditional views by discarding the assumption that identities were static and stable. Philosophers like Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick questioned the binaries that underlie the modern world. Butler posited that gender was not innate but was performed through social practice in their theory of gender performativity. Sedgwick analysed how modern Western society operates on the dichotomy of heterosexuality and homosexuality.

Current research highlights the importance of intersections of sexuality with race, caste, class, disability, religion, nationality, and technology. Modern studies also address globalisation and virtuality in relation to the formation of identities and communities (Brown 241-50). The goal of the paper is to re-evaluate the concept of sexuality from a multidisciplinary perspective. The text reviews the historical construction of sexuality, critiques normative assumptions using queer theory, and analyses intersectionality as an approach to identity. Finally, it evaluates representation and digital culture, as well as modern debates on sexual citizenship and embodiment.

**Methodology**

The following research has been carried out employing a qualitative approach. Since the study primarily investigates ideas, representations, theories, and socio-cultural frameworks rather than statistical data, the research is interpretative and analytical in nature. Foundational theoretical texts by thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Adrienne Rich, and Gayle Rubin form the study's theoretical foundation. Their works are critically examined to understand how sexuality has been interpreted through concepts such as discourse, performativity, heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality, and identity construction. The research adopts a comparative and contextual approach while discussing both Western and South Asian perspectives on sexuality. Special attention is given to postcolonial realities

and the Indian socio-cultural context, where caste structures, colonial legacies, religious morality, family systems, and contemporary globalization often shape sexuality. This allows the study to move beyond exclusively Western frameworks and engage with localized experiences and indigenous forms of identity and resistance.

### Historical Construction of Sexuality

The modern conception of sexuality is inseparable from the processes of its historical construction. Before the nineteenth century, same-sex attraction and relations had been defined mainly in behavioural terms. In the era of medicine and psychology in Europe, sexuality was transformed into an identity-related category. Foucault claims that in the nineteenth century, the term “homosexual” emerged as a social type because of scientific categorization and surveillance. According to Foucault, modern societies not only repressed their citizens' sexuality but also constantly engaged in endless debates on this topic: “What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they confined sex to shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as the secret” (35). Modern societies also regulated and controlled their citizens' sexuality by attempting to classify behaviours as “normal” or “abnormal”.

Sexuality, as this historical account suggests, is both contextual and constructed. Not all societies form their sexual identities the same way. Colonialism has had profound impacts on the creation of sexual identities. Western colonial powers established a rigid Victorian moral code, often criminalizing indigenous sexual behaviours. Sexual control in the colonies continues to affect post-colonial countries until today. Scholars have further expanded on the discussion above in light of feminist theories. Adrienne Rich, in particular, argued that heterosexuality serves as a means of keeping women in control. She coined the term “compulsory heterosexuality” to refer to the political nature of the practice:

Within the institution exists, of course, qualitative differences of experience; but the absence of choice remains the great unacknowledged reality, and in the absence of choice, women will remain dependent upon the chance or luck of particular relationships. They will have no collective power to determine the meaning and place of sexuality in their lives (659).

Gayle Rubin made similar arguments when criticizing the “sex hierarchies”. The construction of sexuality historically demonstrates how categories were not determined biologically but politically:

The realm of sexuality also has its own internal politics, inequities, and modes of oppression. As with other aspects of human behaviour, the concrete institutional forms of sexuality at any given time and place are products of human activity. They are imbued with conflicts of interest and political manoeuvres, both deliberate and incidental. In that sense, sex is always political. But there are also historical periods in which sexuality is more sharply contested and more overtly politicized (143)

Such an approach provides the foundation of queer theory today.

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## Queer Theory and the Destabilization of Identity

Queer theory arose in the latter part of the twentieth century to contest conventional perspectives on gender and sexuality. Queer theory draws on the fields of post-structuralism, feminism, and gay/lesbian studies. In this regard, the word “queer” was adopted as a political and academic concept after years of being used as an offensive label for homosexuals. However, “queer” is more than a description of a single identity category. Instead, it is a form of resistance that questions the necessity of strict divisions and categorizations within society.

Judith Butler, the foundational figure of Queer theory, introduced the concept of performativity in their book *Gender Trouble*. It fundamentally changed the understanding of gender. Specifically, Butler claimed that gender is not biologically determined but rather created by repetitive social behaviours. People create gender by what they wear, how they speak, and even their body language. It was a groundbreaking theory because it challenged traditional approaches to gender by divorcing it from sex in ways that previous feminist theories did not. Furthermore, Butler argued that gender is not an inherent truth but a socially performed act that is constantly reaffirmed: “Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (178).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick developed similar insights regarding Western culture in her book *Epistemology of the Closet*. In particular, she demonstrated that the heterosexual/homosexual binary is deeply embedded in our culture and can be detected even in literature that has nothing to do with sexuality at its surface level. The strength of queer theory lies in its unwillingness to rest comfortably in certainty. It always raises questions that make us uneasy, such as “preference of certain acts, certain zones or sensations, certain relations of age or power, certain species or a certain number of participants” (8). Why do we need clear-cut identifications? Why are some bodies natural, whereas others are perceived as threats? Whose interests does such an approach serve?

Queer theory has also changed over time. Early queer studies were often very much concerned with Western, middle-class, and predominantly white narratives. Recent queer scholars have attempted to transcend these boundaries through transgender studies, disability studies, black feminism, postcolonial studies, and Intersectionality. Modern queer theory cares much more about exposing the uncertainty of what seems like a natural truth. (Chaudhary 45-50)

### Intersectionality and Sexuality

One of the most common critiques of early sexuality studies was the assumption that there existed a kind of universal experience of being queer. No one’s experience is ever universal. Queer identity is never divorced from racial, caste, class, religious, ability, nationality, and class differences. Intersectionality helps us understand why. The term has been coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, who defines it as overlapping and intersecting systems of oppression. Thus, the experience of a queer person depends not only on their sexual orientation but also on their social position. Gender inequality,

caste exploitation, racial discrimination, poverty, disability, and religion all interact in multifaceted ways. An upper-class, queer person living in an urban metropolis would have a different experience regarding sexuality compared to one who lives in rural areas, dealing with caste-based violence or poverty. One has to understand that visibility comes with privileges. The approach of Intersectionality thus exposes the limitations of liberationist discourses, which assume that all queer identities share similar problems. Representation, for instance, does not equate to visibility. There has to be safety, access to health care services, legal rights, and economic empowerment. This explains why intersectionality is particularly important in the Indian context. Caste systems, family traditions, religious beliefs, colonisation, and nationalism heavily inform Indian sexuality. Queer identity cannot be fully understood in terms of Western ideologies. More and more, Indian queer politics has turned to the histories and experiences of its indigenous populations. Intersectionality poses challenges, but in good ways. The study of sexuality is taken closer to real-life conditions.

### **Sexuality, Literature, and Media Representation**

Media representation is essential because literature and other cultural products shape societal perceptions of sexual behaviour and relations. Traditionally, queer characters either did not exist or appeared under stereotypes. They were depicted as tragic, immoral, dangerous, humorous, or mentally unstable. Such imagery reinforced heteronormative beliefs and helped perpetuate social stigma against queerness. Modern literature and media are progressively breaking away from these traditions. Contemporary queer stories explore themes such as isolation, romance, domestic struggles, defiance, pain, community, and self-realisation in greater depth.

The rise of queer literary analysis also changed the approach to literary interpretation. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick found that even literary classics had subtle homoerotic undertones and fears. Queer approaches thus reveal the meaning that traditional criticism overlooked. Furthermore, digital media broadened the scope of discussion. Modern social networks give people an opportunity to express themselves, forge connections, and contest the dominant narrative. In some cases, social media provides visibility and support for those who lack it in real life. However, the culture of digital media is not inherently empowering. Online algorithms decide whose voice reaches the audience. Digital platforms filter out one Identity while highlighting another. The industries commoditise queerness for economic gain. Therefore, representation is inherently political. Instead of asking whether queer identities are visible, we must ask how queer identities are visible, how queer identities are represented, who is in control of the representation, and whose voices continue to be silenced.

### **Sexual Citizenship and Human Rights**

The concept of sexuality citizenship has gained prominence in contemporary discussions of sexuality and identity. Sexual Citizenship is the acknowledgement of sexual identities, freedoms, and rights within legal and political frameworks. Movements for gay marriage, anti-discrimination laws, and gender rights have certainly

brought great changes to many societies. However, the discussion around sexual citizenship continues to be extremely complex. The legal recognition of queer identities does not necessarily lead to social acceptance. In many cases, queer people still face violence, exclusion, policing, and discrimination even when their identities are legally recognised.

Critics emphasize the fact that frameworks of citizenship tend to emphasize only the “acceptable” queer communities— the ones that fit into the normative, respectable mould of monogamous, domestic relationships. Postcolonial studies complicate the conversation even further. Scholars criticise the tendency to make Western LGBT politics into universal models, which can lead to unintentional hierarchizing of cultures in global human rights discourse. This more complicated approach takes into account local histories, indigenous identities, and regional conflicts while simultaneously arguing for dignity and equality for all people. Sexual citizenship is not limited to official laws but encompasses much more, including a sense of belonging, security, visibility, dignity, and the freedom from fear of existence.

### **Rethinking the Body Beyond Biological Essentialism**

Historically, the discussion of sexuality has relied heavily on biological essentialism— essentially the belief that both sex and gender are natural and binary. Contemporary theorists strongly dispute this belief system. Transgender studies, for example, have provided a critical insight regarding the understanding of the body. More and more scholars are beginning to recognise the true complexity of human biology. Riki Lane, in his article entitled *Trans as Bodily Becoming: Rethinking the Biological as Diversity, Not Dichotomy* argues for “understanding biology as diversity rather than dichotomy” (Lane 136-57). Sex is not simply a choice between two options but rather a combination of factors that shape human physiology, identity, genetics, and other aspects. The body cannot be limited to biological aspects alone since it is deeply political and social at once. Discussions about reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, and transgender medicine highlight the extent to which the body still carries political weight.

### **Sexuality in the Digital Age**

Digital technology has completely changed the nature of sexuality in the twenty-first century. The web provides people with access to knowledge, self-expression, community building, and the ability to overcome loneliness. In particular, for many marginalised groups, digital culture has opened up opportunities that previous generations did not have. Online activism, community-building, and digital storytelling have all played an important role in increasing visibility and solidarity. On the other hand, digital culture has also introduced a whole new set of challenges. Social media tends to transform one’s sense of self into a form of performance. Queerness is commercialised through consumerism, where diversity is marketed without addressing underlying issues of oppression. Furthermore, digital technology can monitor users. Algorithms determine user categories and shape visibility. AI systems continue to

perpetuate biases related to sexuality and gender identities. Thus, the digital era represents a contradiction.

### **Criticism and Weaknesses of Queer Theory**

Queer theory, however, like any other form of critical theory, is not immune to criticism. One criticism is that queer theory focuses too much on fluidity and reconstruction that it tends to disregard material conditions like poverty, violence, exploitation at work, and unequal access to healthcare. Another is the complex vocabulary used in queer studies, which renders research less accessible outside academia. Debates are also ongoing about the connection between feminist theory and queer theory, particularly regarding political strategy and identity categories. Queer theory was criticised before for excluding certain groups within queer theory itself. Earlier queer studies tended to privilege the white, Western, and male experience while ignoring the transgender community, disability, caste, race, and post-colonialism. Despite these criticisms, queer theory has only grown stronger and more self-critical. It has expanded and become more intersectional than ever.

### **Conclusion**

Revisiting sexuality requires thinking outside the box and rejecting oversimplifications. Current scholarship reveals that sexuality is not determined solely by biology; instead, it is constructed endlessly through culture, history, language, politics, technology, and power dynamics. Queer theory, feminism, intersectionality, and transgender studies together have changed the way we see the concept of sexuality in modern times. These approaches show that social norms should be questioned, not taken for granted by anyone. The research into human sexuality is nothing other than research about humans, their belongingness, their physical being, as well as their conformity to the norms of the communities they live in, and what will happen if these norms are not adhered to. Furthermore, intersectional approaches show that human beings are far more complex than the concept of sexuality allows us to see them, and one cannot look at sexuality alone when dealing with humans because of caste, class, racial, or religious background. In today's reality, issues related to gender, sexual rights, sexual citizenship, and even sexual education are becoming increasingly urgent topics that need addressing. In the modern world, where sexuality cannot be disregarded as just another academic topic, the need for reconsideration of the concepts connected to it arises. One cannot think of sexuality in terms of strict labelling or categorisation anymore, since human beings are much more diverse and ambiguous than what has been admitted before.

The concept of sexuality has undergone dramatic development within the modern academic approach. For decades, ideas about sexuality were discussed in terms of biological definitions and heteronormativity, which took for granted that sexual orientation and desires are natural facts of life. It was important for men to behave according to their stereotypical gender, while women had to follow the rules and enter a heterosexual union. Any deviation from the paradigm was regarded as something

unnatural or even perverted. However, modern theorists have completely redefined the concept of sexuality as an artificial construct based on cultural grounds.

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