

# Gender, Sexual dissidence and the “Queer” in Aruni Kashyap’s *His Father’s Disease*

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## **Abstract**

This article is an attempt to unearth the existing notions of gender, sexuality and emerging alternative forms of sexual practices and expressions within the Indian context by choosing to examine Aruni Kashyap’s short fiction titled *His Father’s Disease* from a queer perspective. Drawing inferences from postmodern critical discourses on queer subjectivity, this article examines the possibility of the text to define itself as a negotiation for queer space and identity, rightly exemplified through the metaphor of disease. The context of the entire engagement is an effort to re-examine the polemics of ‘queerness’ within the discourses of postcolonial queer marginality. The text provides a more inclusive approach in understanding the marginalized, without bracketing identities, thereby questioning the ‘standard’ heterosexual norm.

**Keywords:** Gender, sexuality, queer, heterosexuality, desire, construct

Postmodern/postcolonial discourses postulate blurring boundaries, binaries and negating fixed categorizations. Contemporary critical discourses look at sexuality itself as socially constructed phenomenon and argue that heterosexuality is a dominant narrative that imposes its hold and subdues other sexual practices. Since the 1990s, there has been increasing attention given towards homosexuality and placing gays and other sexual minorities to the centre of discussion in literary texts. Postmodern thinkers challenge the existing norms of sexuality and question the authenticity of legitimate and ‘normal’ sexuality. Taking inferences from the works of Michael Foucault, Judith Butler,

Gayle Rubin and others argue that homosexuality has always been relegated to the margins using religious, medical or legal discourses. That heterosexuality is the ‘standard norm’ is thrown into question and these theorists propagate the idea of fluid notion about sexuality. Theorists now speak about multiple sexualities and not just a single sexuality. ‘Queer’ now refers to not only gay/lesbian issues but accommodates wide range of sexual practices, identities and communities such as bisexuals, transgenders, transsexuals who have been marginalized or erased from the pages of history and literary studies. Postmodern studies address the issues of the minorities and negotiates for a space, thus interrogating any stable sexual identity.

Postcolonial queer writings often question the various identities and constructs demanded and imposed by families in heterosexual matrix. Marriage and family acknowledge only the heterosexual relationship and does not see queer relations or couple under its ambit. Marriage and family are institutions that hold power and regulate heteronormativity. According to the postmodern thinker, Judith Butler, heteronormative bodies and sexualities are constructed phenomenon to hold the power discourses. Butler’s theories interface gender and queer studies; especially the ideas associated with stigmatization. Any deviation from the constructed ‘normal’ goes for stigmatization and unacceptance. Butler contests that the multitude

ways that people are shamed or positioned as 'different' should not be understood as a consequence of their being or actions, rather the root cause of all this is when something is conceived as 'normal'. Under postmodern thought, gender and sexual identities are looked upon as plural/fluid structures and challenge metanarratives like patriarchy, family and marriage that endorse heterosexuality.

The crux of Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble* (1999) is that the coherence of the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality—the natural-seeming coherence, for example, of masculine gender and heterosexual desire in male bodies—is culturally constructed through the repetition of stylized acts in time. Butler understands gender, along with sex and sexuality, to be performative. Butler claims that gender is performatively created and there is no pre-existing gender identity. For Butler, gender and heterosexuality are constructed phenomenon, made to appear natural and thereby they limit sexual orientation. Butler aims to break the supposed links between sex and gender and considers gender not a fixed category, rather free and unstable. The idea of identity as free and flexible and gender as a performance paves way for queer theory. Judith Butler claims that identities such as *homosexual* and *heterosexual* are very limiting in nature. Heterosexuality is a way of imposing power. Butler's ideas greatly influenced and mobilized understanding of gender, sexuality and queer representations.

Queer theory deploys the tenets put forward by poststructuralists and like the concept of fragmented identities, hold sexuality as fluid and dynamic. It defies the heterosexuality as standard norm and explores the idea of multiple sexualities like bisexuality, homosexuality or lesbianism. Any fixity in sexual orientation is called into question. Queer theory thus questions the traditional binary constructions of sexuality. The heteronormativity which makes heterosexuality the privileged social norm is contested through the discourse of queer sexualities. Adrienne Cecile Rich, in her famous 1980 essay titled "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence"

argues that heterosexuality is not "natural" or intrinsic in human instincts, but an institution imposed upon by many cultures and societies. She uses the term 'compulsory heterosexuality' to represent how institutions like family and marriage proliferate heterosexuality as legitimate and standard. Heterosexuality thus becomes the dominant discourse that 'others' deviant forms of sexualities.

Contemporary Indian literary writings have started to expose different sexual preferences and represent sexual minorities. Literary works like Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* (The Quilt) (1941), R Raj Rao's *Hostel Room 131*, (2010), ShobaDe's *Strange Obsession* (1992), Anita Nair's *A Ladies Coupe*, (2001) Sachin Kundalkar's *Cobalt Blue* (2013) and Rahul Mehta's *Quarantine* (2010), a collection of short stories deal with homosexual and queer sensibilities. Theatre artists like Mahesh Dattani have also dealt with similar themes pertaining to gay voices and their rights. Tolerance towards the third gender or transgender groups is a recurring theme among many contemporary writers. In recent past, the treatment of sexual minorities has received increasing attention in academic writing and visual media. Although the idea of varied sexual preferences is not a new concept in the Indian context (Ruth Vanita & Kidwai) these are subjects that not readily accepted in Indian socio-cultural context. However, with the emergence of postcolonial queer discourses, representation of these subjects has gone a sea change.

Against this theoretical framework, Aruni Kashyap's *His Father's Disease* (2019) makes an interesting study in the field of postcolonial queer discourses on sexual marginalities. The present paper explores same sex relationship in Kashyap's short story *His Father's Disease* from postmodern/postcolonial queer perspective. Drawing inferences from postmodern thinkers like Butler, Adrienne Rich and others, the paper examines that the text makes a deliberate attempt to bring male homosexual desire and sexual fluidity to the centre thereby challenging heterosexual normativity imposed by family and marriage. Within the discourses of sexuality and queer

studies, this text forms a major paradigm of transgression and shift from conventional heterosexual matrix to addressing alternate forms of sexuality. The article locates the text as a counter narrative to fixed gender categorization and sexuality imposed by the power structures. The text deserves scholarly attention as it allows us to apply and analyze it from postmodern and postcolonial queer discourses.

Aruni Kashyap is one of the emerging writer and a translator from the state of Assam who is currently associated as a professor of creative writing at the University of Georgia, USA. He is the author of the novel, *The House With a Thousand Stories* (2013), *His Father's Disease* (2019), a collection of short stories, a translation of the last fictional work of celebrated writer Indira Goswami, *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* (2013) and a poetry collection titled *There is No Good Time for Bad News* (2021). He is thus a bilingual, writing both in his mother tongue Assamese and also in English. Rural Assam becomes the landscape and background of his writings in which he explores themes such as violence, insurgency, politics, desire, love, human relations within the matrix of social institutions and structures.

The theme of the short story, *His Father's Disease* revolves around same-sex relationships and masculine homoerotic encounters. This short story collection bearing the same name is a network of collected tales depicting insurgency in Assam through a queer perspective. The story, *His Father's Disease* (HFD) is set in the rural Assam and told through the perspective of Neerumoni who elopes with a man she fell for but later finds that her husband has a secret 'affair' with her younger brother. For her, the matter of same sex affair is a 'disease' as she could not find a better word to translate its meaning. Kashyap uses disease as a metaphor to suggest the anxiety that queer relation brings which is against the standard normalcy. Later to her bewilderment, she discovers that her husband's 'disease' has passed on to her son, Anil. Similar to lesbian texts, this text throws heterosexuality and heteronormativity to the margins by bringing two men (father and son) desire for male

sexual encounters. The text opens with a heterosexual normalcy; love, marriage and heterosexual family. When Neerumonidiscovered her husband's relation with her younger brother "she was too confused and shocked to know what was going on. So she couldn't cry" (HFD 119). Years later seeing her son she thought "He has acquired his father's disease" (118). For her, now "those sounds were all too familiar" (118). Neerumoni observes her son's intimate sexual relation with the soldier Gurmail Singh and later with Promod; all in silence and horror and helplessness. Helpless, she could "hear Anil uttering a series of helpless, muffled no-nos and weeping like a child....after a point, he let out a louder scream and then gradually his whimpers became sparse,..... Neerumoni stood there and started to weep. She didn't want to scream and let the whole village know, because if they knew, Anil would turn into an object of ridicule" (123). Here, we can note how the idea of queer relation is thought to be strange obsession, a disease thought of and therefore stigmatized.

The story begins with third person narration thus:

THE FISRT TIME Anil brought a man to his room, his mother Neerumoni .....went to the large one-acre pond to take a long bath – swimming from one end to the other, splashing in the water. She didn't want to hear the lovemaking sounds (HFD 118).

It is interesting to note the repeated use of olfactory images throughout the text; the sounds, the moan, the smell and touch. The "disturbing sounds" and "mild moans" were a horror although "those sounds were too familiar" (118) to her from the time she married Anil's father. After Anil's birth, much to her disillusionment, she found her husband Horo and her brother "heaving and moaning in her bedroom, thickening the silence of the hot summer afternoon" (118). She was terrified with the sight of her younger brother and husband naked on bed, with "their muscular bodies glistened in the dark as they rocked rhythmically" (119). In a state of grief, she noticed Horo's happy face then and now her son's happy face is also visible.

“Her husband’s disease had ruined her life” (119). In the narrative, we find Anil having the ‘affair’ with Promod, a boy seven years younger to him and later with the Sikh soldier, Gurmail Singh. The narrative informs that the initial pre and post marriage life of Neerumoni was a passionate relation between the couple. The transition from heterosexual relation to homo sexuality for both father and son questions the very nature of heterosexual societies where we live in. The cry of the mother, the moans, the smell of flowers, the fresh cow dung and the bedspread smelling like coconut water indicating the sexual intimacy are olfactory images the text evokes. The repeated indication of bed spreads smelling of the coconut water suggests the strong desire and intimacy between men. As the narrative proceeds, we find Gurmail visiting the village after two months with his wife and two daughters. Although the narrative shows a strong sexual intimacy between Anil and Gurmail, Gurmail gets trapped into the web of heterosexual relation through his marriage. This reminds us of Adrienne Rich’s coining of the term ‘Compulsory heterosexuality’. The compulsion and imposition laid by the dominant heterosexual practice pushes male desire to the margins. Gurmail’s encounters with heterosexual and homosexual partners indicate the fluid nature of sexuality itself, as contested by postmodern/postcolonial thinkers. The text shows how men too succumb to gender ‘performances’ and the need to perform their gender roles in the given heterosexual matrix. The story is paralleled with Anil’s election campaign and political engagement. This is suggestive about the way queerness and homosexuality itself gets politicised in the Indian context, giving rise to debates on the sexual minorities and identity politics. The narrative says, “Mother and son had never spoken about what she thought of as his father’s disease” (126). Diseases find their home in human bodies, minds, and sometimes the way humans think and perceive the world. Neerumoni perceives Anil’s homosexuality to a disease inherited from his father and that Section 377 of the Indian Penal code is a phone number that can perhaps solve her problems. Anil’s opposition party, Nirgun was using his ‘diseased’ condition for his

political movement and win over the elections. Towards the end, “the strong smell of kerosene and petrol” (129) foreshadows some strange future. The male bodies become the centre of focus in the text. The male desire and ‘male needs’ comes shattering as Anil’s house is burnt into flames by the opposition. At this time, he speaks about his love for Gurmail. The space that he created in his home for exercising his sexuality on bed, all burns to flames. As he registers this, he flees towards the burning house only for “the whole neighbourhood to wake up to an unusual smell- of burnt human flesh, the smell of burnt human flesh”(131). The text defies binary structures of gender and gender-sexual categorizations and expresses its desire to exist independently of the regulating structure and mechanism. The desire of the protagonist to liberate himself from the clutches of the structures paves way to end his body into flames. The body that the society detests is burnt into flames; self immolation of the body is due to societal stigmatization and rejection. The narrative presents how exercising one’s sexual preferences is burned to ashes in a heteronormative world, thereby pushing the sexual minorities’ desires and aspirations to the margins. The text also articulates the fact that it is not only the female desires and lesbian existence that is shunned but also the silencing of male desires in a fixed heterosexual society. The text thus critiques heterosexuality as a standard norm exercised and imposed to regulate the dominant power structures. Judith Butler argues that marriage legitimizes sexuality and anything beyond the purview of sanctifying law becomes deviant, inferior and illegal. Anil’s instinct to burn his fear along with his body into flames justifies Butler’s (2000) notion thus:

The stable pair who would marry if only they could are cast as currently illegitimate, but eligible for a future legitimacy, whereas sexual agents who function outside the purview of the marriage bond and its recognized, if illegitimate, alternative form now constitute sexual possibilities that will never be eligible for a translation into legitimacy. ( Butler 18).

As a postcolonial writer, Kashyap shows how men too become victims within the matrix of gender and sexual orientation.

### Conclusion

The chosen text for analysis thus becomes an ideal platform to investigate postmodern critical discourses on gender fluidity and emerging sexualities. Kashyap candidly problematizes the very notion of love, desire, sexuality, marriage and constructed perceptions on heterosexual desire within the institution of marriage and family. Thus, Kashyap's *His Father's Disease* is a text that deconstructs 'normalcy' and subverts ideas about fixed sexuality. That gender and sexuality is imposed and constructed within the social structure is what the text subverts. By using the metaphor of disease, the text challenges the constructed and fixed nature of heterosexual imposition regulated by family and marriage. The text points how expectations of 'family life' bind homosexual identities and questions such established sexual stereotypes. The text becomes

a negotiation for space, liberal approach and acceptance of alternative forms of sexuality, thus resisting heterosexual dictum. Aruni Kashyap's *His Father's Disease* thus becomes a seminal text for exploration in the context of Postcolonial South Asian Queer Studies.

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