

# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

## After Criticism, a Call to Rethink Queer Theory

Said Ahmed Aboudaif

Chairman, Department of the English,  
Department of the College of Science and Humanities Alafraj, Salman University, KSA

**Abstract:**

*This article explores the need for rethinking literary theory in general and the queer theory in particular. This paper examines the queer theory and its developmental phases. A historical approach is adapted to trace the changes of this literary theory. Also, the article presents the sociological background of queer theory and its relation to psychology. This research presents the queer of color theory as a contemporary change of this literary theory. The paper in general has employed biographical and historical approaches to trace the changes of queer theory. Queer reading of some classical and modern literary texts is surveyed. For example, Shakespeare's works are seen from a queer point of view and Harry Potter is analyzed from the same point of view.*

**Keywords:** *Queer theory, queer reading, queer writing, the queer of color theory*

The need to rethink the theory of criticism is urgent. The new decade is full of post-modern critical theories and approaches that are hard to account. These contemporary critical ideas should be taken into consideration in case of theorizing for literary criticism or even in case of analyzing literary texts. The efforts to escape the hypothesis and to find new ways of rethinking and new points of view concerning the issue of literary theory become a necessity and obligation to cause some sort of development and round taking process. Most of the theoretical and the practical criticism have been organized around acknowledged movements like classicism, romanticism, symbolism, modernism, feminism, avant-garde, or around historical periods like, Renaissance, Victorian, Edwardian, Modern and Post Modern. Based on these traditions, firstly the aim of this article is to introduce the concept of rethinking literary theory. Secondly, I intend to discuss the developmental phases of the queer theory. The article will present a survey of queer textual analysis of some literary works including queer reading. Finally, it will explain how the queer of color theory intended to serve as the basis for queer reading of literary texts.

To start with the terminology, what is meant by 'rethink'? Mario Valdes and Linda Hutcheon explain the term. They say: "To 'rethink' is not only to think again; it is to think anew. This does not involve revisionism or revising: it is not a question of correcting, altering, amending or improving. To rethink is to reconsider, with all the associations of care and attentiveness and serious reflection that go with the notion of consideration" (web). The literary theory of criticism needs to be reconsidered to go with the new challenges of the present time. This age of fads and trends has new boundaries for the literary theory. The recent developments of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are encouraging. First, although literary theory survived over the past decades and centuries, a revival needs to concern the theorists and critics to adapt the demands and inspirations of the new world to the literary qualities of these theories. Second, literary theories are reflected in the works of literature and important topics are discussed according to the interpretation of these theories. For example, topics like 'racism' 'humanism' 'feminism' survived on literary works reflecting different theories (historical, sociological etc.) but these topics witness a change of concepts at the new age, which means that there is a need for different theories or a least a change of the interpretation.

A fact must be acknowledged that literary theorist like Michel Foucault, Hillis Miller and Terry Eagleton of the 20<sup>th</sup> century helped the literary theory to become a discipline, but the new century witnesses a turn or a need to rethink literary theory. Many theorists declared this change in their writings like Terry Eagleton's *After Theory* (2003), Valentine Cunningham's *Reading After Theory* (2002). One of the reasons to rethink the literary theory is that literary criticism is no longer able to add much and cope with the new issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Literary criticism keeps handling issues related to authors, texts, readers, and language. This makes the theory barren unable to develop. This situation drives theorists to present developed ideas under names of the theories, like post-modernism, post-colonialism etc. An example is the queer theory of the twenties. One may ask a rhetorical question; does it need to be reconsidered with the huge change of concepts and ideas related to this theory? Mario Valdes and Linda Hutcheon add this clarification to the need for rethinking literary theory. They wrote:

One of the things that has consistently been rethought over the centuries is the very concept of the "literary": its boundaries have been extended from the view of literature as only imaginative writing, to include many other categories of discourse — factual as well as

fictional, oral as well as written, vernacular/popular as well as canonical/"elite." This inclusive and non-normative notion of "literature" is not new to the late twentieth century, but it has been theorized anew, with the help of, among others, post-structuralist and feminist thinking that has crossed cultural and national language borders (web).

To rethink the queer theory of criticism one has to find out the traditional concept of it, "Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence" (Halperin 62). This theory reflects on feminist ideas, on gender and on gay/lesbian studies in addition to close examination of sexual acts and identities. The theory sheds light on the difference between sex, gender, and identity. It digs deep on themes related to intersexuality and gender-correction. In addition, the ongoing arguments about the place of the theory in the last century and the real sense of the meaning of "queer" are reconsidered by contemporary critics.

The old notion of the feminists that women writers have common characteristics and interests which distinguish their writings is rethought by Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble*. She said that women are no longer understood "The very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms" (Butler1). She also said that gender relations should be reconsidered. "The consequence of such sharp disagreements about the meaning of gender... establishes the need for a radical re-thinking of the categories of identity within the context of relations of radical gender asymmetry" (Butler 11). Butler said that this approach of unknown identity of gender created a binary view of gender relations in which human beings are divided into two groups, men and women. Rather than opening up possibilities for a person to form and choose their own individual identity. Butler added that feminists denied the idea that biology is destiny and they developed a patriarchal culture which acknowledged masculine and feminine roles by culture. This way of rethinking is close to the queer theory. Annamarie Jagose wrote "Queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. For most, queer has prominently been associated with simply those who identify as lesbian and gay" (72). The theory is a rich field of literary criticism which includes many contrasting ideas. It inquires about what is normal and what is not. How the normal notions are oppressing the abnormal. It is to say that this theory discusses the act of queering. Tyson concludes, "Clearly, the word queer has a range of meanings in literary studies today. As an inclusive term, it can refer to any piece of literary criticism that interprets a text from a non-straight perspective" (334).

This argument moves to the epistemology of the term 'queer'. Adam Isaiah Green explains, "So, the evolution of the queer begins with the problematization of sexual identity categories in Fuss (1996) and extends outward to a more general deconstruction of social ontology in contemporary queer theory" (Green 28). The critics of the 1990s wondered about the people of different sexual identities when they had the same political orientation, and the possibility of the cultural diffusion. The modern theorists focus on non-heteronormative sexualities. In short, the issue of gender and sexuality became a debate about whether sexuality is natural or acquired and whether sexuality is changeable due to society. The contemporary critics have a belief in the real nature of a person and that sexuality is related to the personality not to the gender. The medical biology added more debates about the effect of HIV and AIDS on queer theory. The gay shame and the gay punishment are questioned as a result of the AIDS crisis. Janet Halley & ETL explain "...it is difficult for HIV-infected gays not to be also infected by the shame-including judgment that AIDS is a punishment for their sexual sins" (Halley 92). However, the queer theorists and critics tried hard to disturb the politics of binary ideas such as hetero-homo, man-woman, gay-lesbian and masculine-feminine. Such binaries existed in the conscious of the communities which deepened this shame that became close to the queer people. All modern critics try to avoid the shame feelings and to create some acceptance of this literature calling it 'gender studies'. Halperin explains, "One thing the culture currents we have just reviewed have in common is the permission they give us to explore experiences of shame that have not totally disappeared from the lives of queer people with the allegedly new-found possibility of gay pride" (10).

Another theorist rethinks the dogmas of the queer theory and relates its ideas to sociological criticism. Michael Warner believes that the ideas of the queer theory have social backgrounds. He explains, "Social reflection carried out in such a manner tends to be creative, fragmentary, and defensive, and leaves us perpetually at a disadvantage...Because the logic of the sexual order is so deeply embedded by now in an indescribably wide range of social institutions" (Warner xiii). He thinks that the aim of queer theory should not only call for sex equality, but also for understanding that the homophobia and heterosexism have social and cultural backgrounds. The theory clarifies that some of the sexual ideas are related to social concepts and that the sexual behavior and the sexual identity are also related to social ideas which creates some certain types of social identity. The theory gets use of the feminists who believe that human sexuality is not determined by biology or some ideas of morality but identified by social behaviour. The queer critics believe that sexuality is a complicated selection of social codes or social activities which are interpreted in the form of what is normal and what is deviant. It is seen through some social standers of what is natural and what is not. This social concept is emphasized by Foucault, the psychoanalyst. He argued:

For a long time they tried to pin women to their sex. For centuries they were told: "You are nothing but your sex." .... But the feminist movements responded defiantly. Are we sex by nature? Well then, let us be so but in its singularity, in its irreducible specificity. Let us draw the consequences and reinvent our own type of existence, political, economic and cultural (Foucault 115).

Generally speaking, the critics' discourse has changed to use the idea of queer theory as a kind of replacement to terms such as gay/lesbian or normal/abnormal. "Queer Theory was arrived at in the effort to avoid all of these fine distinctions in our discursive protocols, not to adhere to any one of the given terms, not to assume their ideological liabilities but instead to both transgress and transcend them" (de Lauretis iii). Queer critics presented more interesting ideas about the theory and its relationship with sociology. Green adds, "To conclude, queer theory and sociology have an important place at the table of sexuality studies. But a proper application of each requires a clear recognition of their respective epistemological premises, and the methodological implications that follow" (45). They identified queerness as a social semiotic not as a social phenomenon. To identify someone as queer clarifies some

sort of indeterminacy about his sexuality and his gender. This is how one would be unable to categorize people because of their gender (male or female) or because the social rubric is deviant in practice. Hedges explains:

While in practice each of these categories is rather elastic, it is usually when they do not line up in expected ways (say, when a man wears a dress and desires men) that one crosses from normative spaces into "queer" ones. In Butler's view, queer activities like drag and unexpected identifications and sexual practices reveal the arbitrariness of conventional gender distinctions by parodying them to the point where they become ridiculous or ineffective (30).

However, since the discussion includes human's identity and complicated social situations, what about the relationship between queer theory and psychology? In the process of rethinking queer theory, a question would rise to the surface about the nature of the relationship between queer theory and psychology. Do they enhance each other in case of literary studies? Ian Hodges claims that queer theory 'provides the tools . . . to prize open the workings of psychoanalysis both as theory and analytic technique'. Aaron Balick sees queer theory's critique of psychoanalysis as more limited and holds out hope for a response in psychoanalysis that ontologises a more relational subject (Quoted in Hegarty 2). In Peter Hegarty's study about this relationship between them, he states that psychology influenced somehow the critical studies of sexuality. He suggests this great influence of psychology on queer literary studies to the extent of adding a present description of both of them as queering of psychology. He clarifies "... a queering of psychology would break apart the disciplinary formation of queer theory in quite useful ways" (Hegarty 3). The obvious relations between psychology and the queer theory make important remarks about the topics of queerness related to gender, race, sexuality, and normality. This important relationship needs more study specially when discussing literary works of queer nature.

The queer of color theory which is presented by Roderick Ferguson has to be mentioned. He defines queer of color analysis as:

[an]interrogation of social formations as the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, with particular interest in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices. Queer of color analysis is a heterogeneous enterprise made up of women of color feminism, materialist analysis, poststructuralist theory, and queer critique (149).

The queer of color theory starts as a reaction against the queer theory of the white among the people of color. Queer color critics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century present studies about how much the gender and sexual writings of the color writers are affected by the cultural and economic situations of the color people in America. As David Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz present in their introduction to *Social Text* "What does queer studies have to say about empire, globalization, neoliberalism, sovereignty, and terrorism? What do queer studies tell us about immigration, citizenship, prisons, welfare, mourning, and human rights?" (84). The writers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century discuss these issues in their writings. In relation to contemporary queers of color, they try to find themselves a place in the recent world of literature and criticism. This brings up some questions about the importance of queer of color theory. This theory tries to find a place in the ongoing arguments of literary studies, writing studies, religious studies, educational studies, and social studies. The theory examines the social relationships of queer color people in their continuous struggle against oppression especially of class and gender. In his book, *Queer of Color Critique Aberrations In Black: Toward A Queer Of Color Critique*, Ferguson presents the historical beginnings of queer of color to the present. He examines the current queer theory as a canonized body of scholarship focused primarily on white subjectivity against the queer of color. He explains "One can imagine that the words 'Colored Men' not only identify the gender racial specificities of the bathroom, but they announce an invisible line that separates her from the four African American men. The picture dramatizes what has become an established insight- that is, the way in which a discourse of sexuality was inscribed into racial exclusion." (Ferguson viii) The critique of queer of color insists on explaining that the queer theory neglected the problems of the queer color people in relation to oppressions of race, gender, class. The young scholars of the theory present queer writings which celebrate mainly the difference between the queer studies and the queer of color theory. They emphasized in their critiques the struggle of the color people in relation to the social, religious, and educational ideas of the community. Darnell L. Moore confirms this meaning:

But as an African American SGL individual who subsists, along with many other SGL people of color, within an intersectional matrix wherein oppression(s) based on race, class, gender, and sexual identity thrives, I am not totally convinced that queer studies/theory can generate and sustain analysis and action that aggressively counters technologies of power, like white racist ideology and white privilege, which buttress this repressive matrix (157).

Moreover, the queer theory presents a stimulating idea of textual analysis of literature. The theory presents queer reading and writing of texts. What is meant by queer reading and writing? The difference between the straight texts and queer texts is in the implied ideas that readers grasp from the text. A queer text implicitly indicates homosexual acts and uses indirect sexual symbols to lead the reader to the hidden meanings. So, critics present their queer reading of a text through a queer interpretation of the language, symbols and implicit ideas. In contrast, the queer writing is the method or the strategy used by writers to present queer ideas. In general, writers used to avoid speaking in a direct way to express their homosexual themes and ideas. Hanna Kubowitz (2012: 202) "By queer reading strategies I refer to strategies that readers may apply to unearth queer meanings in ostensibly straight texts. Analogously, by queer writing strategies I refer to strategies which authors may apply in order to convey queer meanings without addressing them explicitly." However, queer reading of the 21<sup>st</sup> century differs. These texts present the queer themes and characters explicitly. Some of these texts are written by well-known gay writers. Those writers do not hide their orientations and they openly declare that their works are queer literary texts. The recent century witnesses the change from literary works discussing queerness implicitly to works that present homosexual themes and queer characters explicitly. This reflects a social change that some communities nowadays acknowledge queer writers and allow their freedom of expression.

Gayle Rubin's article suggests, once you set up a category labeled "normal," you automatically set up its opposite, a category labeled "deviant,". Critics focus on the queerness of texts related to gay-writers both on the language level and the level of structure. This means the implied structures in the text that lead to queer understanding of the text. It cannot be ignored that the queers' language is

deviant compared to other straight writers. For example the queer writer may use certain words with special meanings to indicate homosexual acts. The language and the themes of queer texts have completely different ideas and different points of view from straight ones. Richard Norton (Wikipedians 146) suggests that the existence of queer language is believed to have evolved from the imposing of structures and labels from an external mainstream culture. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner confirm, "The meta-discourse of 'queer theory' intends an academic subject, but queer commentary has vital precedents and collaborations in aesthetic genres and journalism" (10).

The queer theory opened a new horizon to queer interpretation of classical and modern texts. Queer critics consider the gays' writings would have different language signs that would create queerness. Benjamin Bateman explains, "Where interpellation locates the subject in relation to present circumstances, the queer invitation encourages a move beyond into unknown territory, opening a horizon of possibility" (180). This vision goes even behind historical barriers where critics of this theory rethink the queerness of Shakespeare's texts. This is seen not only in the language but also in the themes and the hidden relations between his characters. In an interview with Madhavi Menon about Shakespeare's queerness, he says: "Shakespeare's queerness, for example, forms the basis for a certain version of literary theory to the extent that our theory of the subject contains, in both senses of the term, an encounter with the incoherence or queerness informing his texts" (S. Q. Admin Web). The tragic heroes of Shakespeare are seen queer. Queer critics see a gay relationship between Hamlet and Horatio and explain that Hamlet failed in his relationship with Ophelia, as well as the great grief of Horatio over Hamlet's death. Tyson explains that "queer criticism reads texts to reveal the problematic quality of their representations of sexual categories, in other words, to show the various ways in which the categories homosexual and heterosexual break down, overlap, or do not adequately represent the dynamic range of human sexuality. These kinds of readings can be rather complex" (336).

The nature of the novel allows the writer to create characters that have multi relationships which digs deep in the human self representing either heterosexual or homosexual relations. E M Forster's *Howards End* (1910) is an example of queer reading. By the end of the novel Forster is having Helen, Margaret and the baby to live together at Howards End. This is the situation which Forster presents as an ideal queer environment for Helen who doesn't want a man. The whole situation is queer where Helen is a symbol for female figure and Margaret represents the male symbol in this relationship. The language Forster uses to express the relationship between the two sisters indicates this level of queerness "I mean to love you more than ever ... You and I have built up something real, because it is purely spiritual... Unreality and mis-tery begin as soon as one touches the body" (Forster 1983 195). Helen is blaming Margate for her marriage and she wants to continue their love relationship because she is unable to do sex with men whom she dislikes. In addition, the novel of Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925) which is a traditional novel with a normal plot about a straight tragic love story is seen by queer critics as a novel conveying queer sexual themes. They present a different interpretation of the novel and analysis of its characters. Nick Carraway, the narrator, has gay's point of view. Tyson presents a detailed queer analysis of the novel. He clarifies, "The *Great Gatsby's* sexual ambiguity results from the delivery of a heterosexual plot through the medium of a closeted gay sensibility. In addition, I will suggest that the novel's sexual ambiguity mirrors the conflicts Fitzgerald apparently experienced concerning his own sexuality" (Tyson 343).

It is not only some of the classical texts are interpreted from a queer point of view but also modern texts. Modern queer critics present recent queer readings of the series of novels *Harry Potter*. These fantasy novels are based on legends that are away from real life relationships. However, those critics think that the world of magic is full of secrets and hidden activities that are unrevealed to the world and this insinuates the queer activities in these novels. Heather Fleming explains this kind of secret life of the wizards and that "they have to or choose to exist in the margins of muggle society and have to develop an entire culture away from it" (web). As Hagrid tells Harry on first being asked about the two cultures' separation. "Why? Blimey, Harry, everyone'd be wantin' magical solutions to their problems. Nah, we're best left alone (Rowling 50). The amazing thing these novels introduce is that there are two worlds from the wizards' point of view. One that is normal or straight and the other which is referred to as the others life. Those two worlds represent the true existence of the queer life which is indicated as the other life. "Harry Potter" texts are presented by the author in an entirely male society. All the people surrounding Harry and responding to his demands are all male characters. This kind of queerness gives ideas to queer critics to indulge and present queer interpretations of these texts. Fleming assures this meaning:

One of the tenets (if there can be any) of queer theory is the re-formation of 'normal' as being merely another form of 'other'. It uses the experience of gay identity politics to look again at such things as 'normal' marriage and family and to make them part of an array of behaviours instead of the standard against which all others are judged. In *Harry Potter*, the wizarding world and its magic-instead – of-science way of doing many things is at first to a reader the Outside and the abnormal, but the books take place firmly within that culture and consistently ask the reader to abstract modern life and present his/her own life as being the queer one (Web).

Moreover, the queer novelist, Edmund White, is a great example of queer writers. White represents a new generation of writers who are devoted to their queerness and they present books and novels that tell their queer experiences. White is a novelist and a cultural critic. He is known as a gay writer devoting his novels and books about the queer life of gays. He presented his book *The Joy of Sex* (1970) about the gay life style and his recent book is *Inside a Pearl: My Years in Paris* (2014). Stephen Barber gives a clear indication of White's writings:

White's writings look forward to a future of culture as one unlimited by either the rigidity of political correctness, or by the persecution of individuals for their race or sexuality (for White, the power structures behind those two forms of repression have a resemblance). In large part, his experiences as an outsider in Paris—and his contacts with other expatriate writers and artists there—gave to White his view of the future of culture as hybrid and proliferating, impossible to pin down to a national or political or social formula, and finally, joyfully elusive (133).

In White's recent novel, *Inside a Pearl: My Years in Paris*, white remembers his 15 years in France where he catalogs the famous people he met in Paris. White wrote also about the gay men he picked up in Paris and he presented a clear picture of sexual relationship in an elegant style. He represents an important example of queer writings of the contemporary literary and cultural 21<sup>st</sup> century.

All this is to conclude that if queer theory is difficult to describe its nature, it is because it is related to gender studies and the instabilities of human sexual orientations. The theory has multi social complications. Roger Luckhurst puts it in straight forward words "Queer Theory offers an activist politics, a crucial revitalization of debates on sex and gender and offers some of the most provocative readings of literary and cultural history currently available. This is a combination which indicates its current and growing importance across academic disciplines" (339). This article tackled the importance of rethinking literary theories in general and the queer theory in particular. A historical approach is being used to give a glimpse of the history of the theory and to survey different phases of the theory. The background of some important queer writers is presented, especially the writers of gender studies. It also provided the reader with a survey of some queer readings of some classical and modern literary texts. Finally, the article debated the queer textual analysis of some literary texts and introduced the queer of color theory.

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