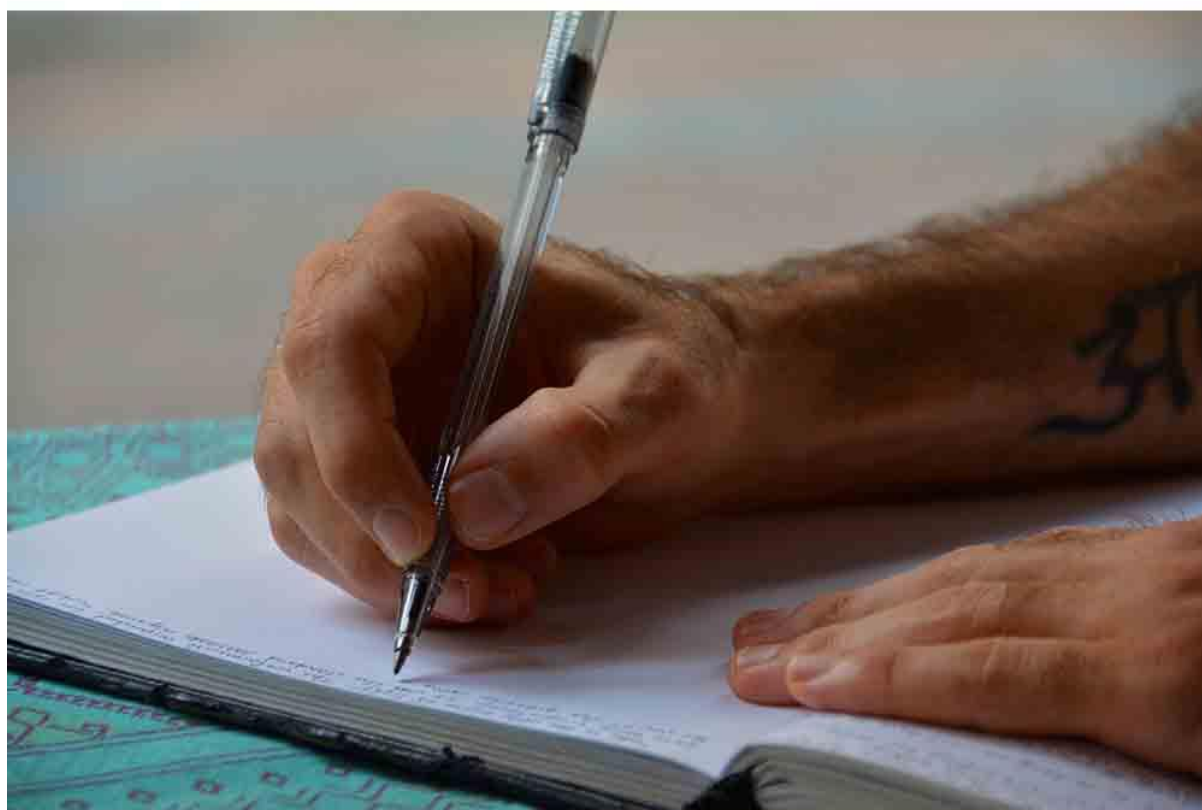


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Spatialising Queer: A Critique of the Summer We Got Free By Mia Mckenzie

Abstract

Queer – an umbrella term used in combining other forms of sexuality (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) takes its roots from the cultural movements and they created a critical and philosophical perception about the body, space and the sexual identity. Heterosexuality or the mainstream sexuality is hegemonic and the homosexuality is considered a sin or a taboo by the mainstream society labeling them as the sexual subalterns. Literature evolves as a major source for bringing out the traumas faced by the people of minor communities. *The Summer we got Free*, a queer and gothic fiction by Mia Mckenzie highlights the traumas of the lesbians and gays in the society. Ava, the protagonist of the work of fiction follows her aspirations using queer as a source of inspiration and creates her own new self. This paper is an attempt to study how the sexual subalterns create their own identities before a religious, heterosexual society.

Key words: Queer, Homosexuality, Heterosexuality, Religious

Queer space has evolved out to be an important geographical concept. The culture, urban sociology, architectural psychology all comes under the heading queer space. It could also be defined as the social space with tolerance for difference and ambiguity. Queer spaces

are new areas or the pockets in the society where there emerge new styles of dressing and living. It is an open portrayal of one's gender in the social space. It has evolved out as a dominant social order where one allows oneself to be the queer or the Other. This leads to an exploration and creation of a new self.

Discriminations based on sex, gender, race and class have become a common phenomenon in today's world. With them evolves the discrimination of the LGBT community (Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) or the queer who are considered different from the mainstream heteronormative society. Statistically, it has evolved as one of the most discriminated groups in the society. LGBT workforce continues to face widespread discrimination in the workplace as they have been discriminated against in hiring, promotions and pay.

Their sexual orientation towards the persons of the same sex as compared to the heterosexual community leads to their traumas and sufferings. They are rejected in their homes and by their parents in their teenage. Queer cultural studies is an attempt to give an identity for those oppressed on the ground of sexuality and to provide a social or a cultural space within the dominant heterosexual community.

Michael Foucault, the pioneer in the study of Queer, through his work *The History of Sexuality* emphasized sexuality as a focus of power. Foucault was the first to make a comprehensive critique of sexuality as a historical and cultural product. He rules out the popular notion of heterosexuality as historical and therefore natural. He argues that homosexuality is naturalized rather than being natural.

The Summer We Got Free elaborates on society's attitude towards the queer community who are pushed to the backstage. Ava Delaney a young artist who is bold and is firm in her ideals and notions. The story revolves around the life of Ava who lost her passion of painting with the death of her twin brother Geo, who was a part of her life, which affected

the lives of each and every one of the family. Ava was successful as an artist but the circumstances demanded deterioration in her passions and desires.

Delaney family was shattered after this miserable incident and Ava abandoned her passion after she lost her brother. The story is said through a series of flashbacks and the narration fluctuates between the past and the present. A series of transformation is occurring in Ava from the avid girl to the one who has lost her passions and desires and now leads a dry life. The novel depicts her unhappy married life with Paul and the revival of her passions which leads to her transformation to an artist again. Helena, Paul's sister comes to her life and Ava once more enters the world of colors. Ava and Helena begin a sexual relationship and they lead a life together, breaking down all the cultural norms of the society. Her transformation is the result of her acquaintance with Helena and Ava retains her passions and her desires. Here homosexuality is seen as a way of life where the couples understands and encourages each other. George, Ava's father was a gay and he was involved in a relationship with Chuck, the Deacon of the Church but they were never ready to lead a life together as they believed in religious norms of the society.

As her debut novel, Mckenzie has made it a mirror of the society where race and sexuality play an important role in the American lives during the later half of the twentieth century. Set in a nuclear family environment, the story moves from the interiors of the family to the exterior with social and moral consciousness. The novel which is a blend of the queer, gothic and black narrative, captures the attention of the audience addressing the social issues of the lives and the identity of the homosexuals, and the challenges they have to face in the heteronormative society.

The self- realization of her skills and her passions attributes power for the character of Ava, making her a woman with strong values. Her self- realization is due to her sexual orientation, which the society finds hard to accept. Her relationship with her husband's sister

Helena, which at first appears to be of a casual one, slowly changes into a wild one arousing sexual desires. This sexual relation draws her artistic skills and she decides to restart her passion of painting the mysterious, the unknown and the societal morals. The queer space and aspirations can be seen when Ava moves back to her passions, discovering her desires and the ability to paint and to feel love.

As a woman with the same passions Ava finds her soul mate in Helens . Ava receives Helena with a kiss which appears to be weird for the readers. She tastes the passion or the desire to enter the world of colors through Helena, her sister- in- law. The kiss points to the artistic world that is implanted within Ava, which finds orientation or an awakening through Helena: “When their lips touched, Ava tasted color” (8).

Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* too revolves around the depiction of the queer space as a way of raising the consciousness of a black woman named Celie. Celie is confined inside the four walls of the house by her husband Mr Albert. Her relation with her husband’s mistress Shug Avery, who is a pop singer, releases her from his bonds and she begins to raise her voice against his mistreatment. Queerness can be considered as a means of self-realization of the power and the capabilities of women in many of the works in literature. *Sing You Home* by Jodi Picoult also shows lesbianism as a way through which the characters Zoe and Vanessa realize their common interests and they begin a life together, overcoming the restrictions and the morals placed by the society.

The narration of the story fluctuates between the past and the present lives of the characters. Beginning with the married life of Ava, it slowly moves back to the times when Ava as a naughty child loved painting and accepted it as her life’s desire to become an artist. Ava is in the world of illusions compared to her husband Paul who is in a materialistic world, who thinks only about making money.

Paul and Ava are poles apart in their passions, desires and also in their ways of living. Ava lives in a world of emotions, sentiments and family bonding which she is not ready to break so easily. Paul only had his sister Helena and he only thinks about being self-sufficient and independent. Helena, like Ava, lives in an illusory world of emotions and feelings which appears to be the reason for their relationship. In the end of the story, we realize that Paul is never a sort of person for Ava and Paul leaves Ava the moment he learns about her relationship with Helena.

The Summer We Got Free stresses on the theory by Adrienne Rich – Lesbian continuum which explains the way of stressing how diverse is the spectrum of love and bonding among the women of which includes the female friendships, the relation between the mother and the daughter, women's partnership where they cooperate and work together, the social groups which they form and also the same sex sexual relations.

The character of Ava is the one who goes together or in sync with Helena. She finds in her, the perfect partner for her life. Ava supports her at the time when Paul has left Helena knowing that she is a lesbian. Her character is revealed to the Delaney family when Pastor Goode says about her and Helena confesses it before them which shocked the entire family. Ava is the only one who could understand Helena's feelings, emotions and desires as she too is on the same path. Ava loves Helena for her boldness to accept homosexuality, her boyish behavior and her open confession before the family that she is a homosexual.

The intensity of the marginalization of the queer is well screened in this work of fiction. McKenzie has written the work against the superstitious attitude of the church where the lesbians and gays are considered as sinners. They emphasized that homosexuality as a crime and they were kicked out from the brotherhood. Pastor Goode, the one with the orthodox notions, openly insults Helena as she is a homosexual.

He raised his hand and pointed his finger right at Helena, and the crowd turned its collective head and looked at her, as he said, “That woman is a homosexual and a home wrecker! (Mckenzie 149)

These words of the pastor depict the real discrimination towards Helena. This statement clearly points to the society’s unwillingness to accept the homosexuals to the mainstream society.

George, father of Ava, is a significant character who is a gay. George cannot entirely overcome the trauma of his childhood. He is a religious person but their rejection from the church makes him weak as he is very much attached to the Church and his belief in Jesus. Unlike Ava he is conventional and he believes in the powers of God. His story deals with the complex interplay of masculinity, desire and sexuality that inform his identity as a black man. George is closely bound to the Church. He meets Chuck in the Church who is the deacon of the Blessed Chapel. Chuck, being a good speaker attracts George and there arises a bonding between George and him.

The relationship between Chuck and George has evolved out of spiritual beliefs. George finds in him a great preacher and he accepts Chuck to be a good preacher who can understand the traumas of the people. Chuck loves George as he finds a salvation from his life’s miseries such as his shattered familial life with Lena. Chuck is loyal in their relationship and he wants George to be always with him. But George’s desire for Chuck arises only out of some lust. He finds solace in Chuck, but still he has the shameful feeling of having an illegal and filthy relationship. This emotion might have aroused out of his fear for God. He is aware of how his family or the society thinks about this shameful act of his.

George let go off him. He grabbed his clothes and put them on, hastily almost frantically, wanting to get out of there fast, before the thing in him that made him do these things, that made him return, time and time again, as hard as he

tried not to, to this secret, shameful life, could take hold of him again.

(Mckenzie 156)

The social construction of sexuality stereotypes homosexuality as a taboo. Society neglects the rights of the homosexuals as they are considered as deviants because of their sexual drive. This labeling created a social control assuming a patriarchal position for the heterosexual sections. Identity of a person is determined by what the society imposes on them. Sexuality in the same way is an essentialist phenomenon with the assumption that sexual identity is formed out of the norms put forth by the society. Foucault argues that homosexuality as a special type of human subject was the construction by the medical and the legal discourses. Ava, Helena, Chuck and George go through the same trauma: the acceptance of the queer by society. Mackenzie proves that the society and religion has labeled the homosexuals as criminals and they are pushed to the margins of the society. Homosexual communities are devoid of many of their rights and their aspirations because of the social constructs imposed by the society upon them. They are to face discrimination in all stages of their lives. Ava and Helena give out a bold picture of their queerness as they boldly admit their queerness before society. They are unconventional in all respects and they decide to live together despite all the trials and tribulations they have to face in society. On the other hand, Chuck and George are concerned about the society and they try to hide it from society. Chuck wants George as his better half, but George loves Chuck only out of his lust. He also has a similar relation with Butch, his old classmate, which also arises out of his lust. George and Chuck are bound to the Church and Chuck is not ready to have a sexual intercourse on the pews of the Church. But George, out of his anger towards his denial in the Church, decides that he would do it there. But still they are bound by the laws of the Church and the constructionist attitudes of the society which considers homosexuality a sin. Ava and Helena are never concerned about the laws of the Church and they boldly attack the ideals and rules

of the Church by living their lives in their own ways and according to their wishes and passions.

Queer thus acts as a catalyst for the development of the passions and desires in the life of Ava. She once again enters her world of passions, begins her career as an artist. Ava and Helena begin a life together. Homosexuality is also considered a sin by George and Chuck. They can never lead a life together as it is considered against the rules of the Church. This shows the biased treatment of the queer by the heteronormative society. The society still finds it difficult to accept the minority community of LGBT. But the queer people find their sexuality not as aberration but as an alternative choice available to them. They find the wide range of nebulous and fluid identities embedded in the queer. All these sexual identities are counter hegemonic as opposed to the hegemonic heterosexuality.

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