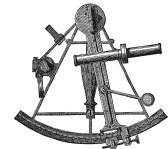


### **Care, queerness and the Global South: Imagining pluriversal literary and political discourses**



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#### **Abstract**

The reification and depoliticisation of queerness under capitalism, queer identitarian categories emerging from colonialism, an overwhelming scholarship on desire with regard to queer subjectivities, and a popular understanding of queerness as embodied non-heterosexuality have contributed to a homogenized queer template, which contradicts the radical promise of queer theory as well as the legacy of queer politics. Shifting foci from desire and sexuality and supplementing the conceptual tools of the imperium to understand queerness, the paper argues, can be achieved through a discursive move towards care as well as a locating of this care-based queerness in literary archives of the Global South, making the case for locating the unexpected and the radically diverse.

#### **Keywords**

Care; queerness; Global South; decoloniality; pluriversality

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*"Queer cannot be discussed in terms of sexuality or gender alone, because it is not through sex and gender alone that we live our complex lives"*

- Elisa Glick (2003, p. 128).

Queer theory's anti-assimilationist refusal to let the term "queer" be ossified finds itself at odds with the category of "gay world literary fiction" (Elam, 2017), or literary representations recognised as featuring same-sex intimacies, together assuming a borderless homogeneity of queer expression as embodied non-heterosexuality. Instead of being understood as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning" (Sedgwick, 1994, p.7), and an "intrinsic quality of non-representational thinking" (Nigianni and Storr, 2007, p.1), queerness appears to be reduced exclusively to a sexuality issue. This is aided by literary and cinematic pigeonholing and the prominence of LGBTQ+ identity politics, as well as a vast scholarship on queerness around desire and sexuality, with the two being compulsorily conflated in several predominant configurations. However, such a queer globality remains problematic owing to the histories of capitalism and colonialism. The reification of queerness into "a one-dimensional and non-intersectional narrative" (Ferguson, 2018, p.34) is a phenomenon unpacked in works like Roderick A. Ferguson's *One Dimensional Queer*, which speak of capitalism and the resultant exclusive identitarianism de-emphasising the coalitional origins of queer politics, often located in history as the Stonewall rebellion, an intersectional insurgency. Furthermore, Rahul Rao notes that "the very notion of the self to which sexuality attaches is itself an artefact of the colonial encounter" (Rao, 2020, p. xix) and flags the phenomenon of "homocapitalism" (Rao, 2020, p.12) as affirming hegemonies. Within the depoliticised predominant template of queerness as non-heteronormative, embodied sexuality poses the danger of intellectual and political stagnation and necessitates imagining vocabularies of queerness beyond the lexicon of desire.

In this regard, expressions of care, which, like queerness do not congeal into fixities can problematise the idea of a homogeneous and isolated gay universe. To specify the conceptual and political relevance of care in alternative queer world-building, two formulations by Joan C. Tronto are useful. The first is the definition of care devised by Tronto and Berenice Fisher,

On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a **species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world'** so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our **bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.** (Fisher and Tronto, 1991, p.40)

The second is what Tronto defines as *not* care,

[..] though care can produce pleasure and creative activities can be undertaken with an end towards caring, we can recognize care **when a practice is aimed at maintaining, continuing, or repairing the world.** One way that we can begin to understand the limits of care is by noting what is not care. Among the activities of life that do not generally constitute care we would probably include the following: the pursuit of pleasure, creative activity, production, destruction. **To play, to fulfill a desire, to market a new product, or to create a work of art, is not care.** (Tronto, 1993, p.104)

Based on these formulations, one can appreciate the significance of care as an alternative approach to understanding queerness. While desire is about excess, care is about continuity. Contrasting with Lee Edelman's rejection of the future, celebration of sexuality as difference, and theorisation of a compulsory "death drive" (Edelman, 2004, p.3) for queer existence, care can be used as an intellectual tool to look at the diverse ways in which spectacular and potential, visible and invisible, overtly insurrectionary and subtly resistant queer subjectivities can sustain queer lives. This can lead to a rethinking of the canon of queer world literatures. To counter the colonialist-capitalist antecedents of the existing canon, it is necessary to look at an expansive archive– one that does not merely locate queerness through acts of care, but also allows diverse, queer manifestations of care be located. Enabling plurality in a reimagined canon would therefore need not just caring queer subjects but also the conventional understandings of care to be queered.

Literatures from the Global South can add an element of pluriversality in this counter-narrativisation of a capitalist creation of the Global North. Texts from South Asia, Latin America and Africa, describing phenomena uncategorisable in a homocapitalist register, offer disruptive

as well as complementary possibilities of looking at queer lives along the axis of care alongside desire. This is crucial to expand the possibilities offered by the term “queer” politically, intellectually, and discursively. Unlike Edelman’s emphasis on disavowing a future based on sexuality as alterity and Tronto’s distinction between care and desire, I argue that sexual dissidence can occur alongside sustaining a life, while care and desire can be simultaneous and coexistent on the spectrum of human agency.

For example, one could gauge a non-obvious queerness in Shyam Selvadurai’s ‘gay’ novel, *Funny Boy*. Often read as the story of the coming of age and sexual maturation of a young boy, the text carries a manifestation of queer care as recuperative resistance in a world beset with conflict. A homosexual relationship between subjects belonging to ethnic communities in conflict in Sri Lanka functions as an alternative space to the violent sphere of the civil war and is enriched with emotional substantiality and acts of care, despite the divides that separate them. The communitarian possibilities of queer care can be gleaned in the fifth century CE Sanskrit play, *The Mrichchhakatika*, which features an impoverished scholar, Charudatta, married to Dhuta with a child, who falls in love with the glamorous courtesan Vasantasena. After several narrative twists and turns, Vasantasena, Dhuta and Charudatta get together in an indeterminate relationship, built upon acceptance and understanding, in the same household. The play, written several centuries before the modern categories of non-monogamous relationships, offers an example of a community formation that shatters hetero- and otherwise normative expectations of family. The African canon luxuriates with texts about such communities; to offer an example, one may look at Bessie Head’s story, ‘The Collector of Treasures’. Dikeledi, the protagonist, is torn between two heteronormative masculinities and filialities— the first is the indigenous patriarchal one, represented by her husband, the second is the ideal of the modern family, engendered by capitalist developments in Botswanan society. Dikeledi severs her abusive husband’s genitals, kills him, and is imprisoned. It is in prison, however, where Dikeledi finds community in the company of women who resisted patriarchal atrocities and were incarcerated for their ‘crimes’. As Kenneth W. Harrow notes:

There, Dikeledi finds the place for love, caring, and giving denied to her by a patriarchal society. [...] Exclusion is transvaluated into fulfilment. The margin turns against the centre again and again,

matching love and defilement and love, until the mist swirls over the lines that would separate them (Harrow, 1993, p.178).

The intellectual experience of reading non-Western literature without prioritising the hegemonic lenses of queer reading opens up several possibilities enabling the location of unexpected and forms of care which challenge popular assumptions. The protagonist of "Where are You, Dear Heart?", from the short-story collection *The Dangers of Smoking in Bed* by Argentinian writer Mariana Enriquez, is a woman with a fetish for heartbeats who finds a community of like-minded fetishists online, eventually beginning a relationship with one of them. Care for this couple is premised upon eroticisation of the heartbeat and as the man and the woman get tired of exploring usual possibilities of feeling the heart, they furnish a saw in the end to rip the man's chest open to hear and feel the pulsations of the heart. Care in this instance destroys all normative expectations, to a point where sustenance, nourishment and support are realised in a redefinition of erotic pleasure and physical annihilation. This theoretical possibility of finding caring queers and queered care can be extended to *The World That Belongs To Us*, the first South Asian anthology of queer poetry, animated by a queer poetics which includes writings about solidarity, the death of a sibling as well as treating oneself to a honeymoon, depicting various queer relationalities and acts of care, towards others and oneself.

On the whole, a queer emphasis on care and its juxtaposition with the literary archive of the Global South can animate discursive transformations that shatter the monolithic painting of queer subjectivities through the paintbrush of singularised sexuality and resist the coloniality and capitalist determinisms which inhere in speaking of both acts of care as well as queer self-identifications. The imaginary of queer care, upon taking cognisance of the histories of colonialism and cultural specificities, can arguably fashion a new route to elusive diversity, countering a reductionist liberal queer globality to pave way for pluriverses where human experiences are not flattened into fixed ontologies.

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