

RESISTANCE OR REBELLION: A QUEER STUDY OF “THE CITY AND THE PILLAR”

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ABSTRACT

Literature is an instrument and a vehicle for social reality, ideas and truths. Artist's creation of the art is an act through which artist tries to propound his ideas and ideologies. Many prominent writers despite their exhaustive efforts for creating art have always earned sneering denigration of academicians. However, in the contemporary times the postmodern theory and criticism has brought about a renaissance/plethora of studies on popular literature. Eugene Luther Gore Vidal (1925-2012) an American writer and public intellectual who has contributed immensely towards creating a whole corpus of literature has scarcely been studied. He has thrown light into various pertinent issues related with politics and religion and he was vociferous about homosexuality as well. He through his works has tried to uncover the fraudulency of the hypocrite society and its systems. Compulsory heterosexuality is propounded by such systems only. Gore Vidal in his work “City and the Pillar” voiced his concerns and resistance for such so called naturalization of sex. The present paper is an attempt to study “City and The Pillar” (1948) from the perspective of Queer theory. Gore has raised his voice in “City and The Pillar” as a form of resistance to the widely accepted view towards heterosexuality. His undoing of the notions of heterosexuality in his work has brought in different perspective to people at the time when such concepts were hardly thought off or even existed. Gore does not accept any view of the world which is prevalent in the vast oeuvre of works and puts it in close scrutiny, breaking the hegemony.

Keywords: Queer, LGBTQ, Heterosexuality, Homosexuality, Feminism

I often ponder how social norms distinguish one queer subject from another and leads to the complex question of who will come under queer subject and who will be eliminated from these discourses. Somehow, the answer to this is based on the understanding of sexuality. Sexuality is a way people experience and express themselves. Queer therefore challenges the inside/outside binary and also normalised and naturalised status of heterosexuality. It is pertinent to know how our sexuality actually affects the world around us.

Queer is a repository of various things like to do queer things, to live a queer life, to queer something. On every usage it becomes difficult and different, so how can one identify what is a queer thing and what is not; and more discreetly does all queer subjects live a queer life. Each utterance of queerness has the ability to expose the limits of heterosexuality. However, queer is also often and only about sexuality and gender binaries and which again limits the possibilities of unravelling the trans narratives away from conventional binary genders. According to Shraddha Chatterjee, queer is somewhere reduced only to sexuality and that to the sexual act, and “this stratification of sexuality also reduces their field of signification and leaves other fields of sexuality outside its discourses” (15). These discourses of sexuality have their roots in history. According to J. A, Cuddon:

The use of ‘queer’ follows the reappropriation of the pejorative term for homosexual by gay activists during the AIDS crisis of the mid-to late 1980’s. Many (but by no means all) queer theorists are gay and lesbian, though queerness has come to be associated with all non-normative gendered and sexual experience, including bisexuality, polyamory and transgenderism.... A key assumption of queer theory is that category of gender and sexuality are neither fixed nor natural. (580)

However, it is important to understand that heterosexuality and feminine and masculine gender roles are politically established as natural. Whereas other forms of gendered behavior are considered irregular and abnormal and often relegated to the margins.

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Literature is an instrument and a vehicle for social reality, ideas and truths. Artist's creation of the art is an act through which artist tries to propound ideas and ideologies. Many prominent writers despite their exhaustive efforts for creating art have always earned sneering denigration of academicians. Eugene Luther Gore Vidal (1925-2012) an American writer and public intellectual is also one such writer who has contributed immensely towards creating a whole corpus of literature that has scarcely been studied. *Williwaw* (1946), *In a Yellow-Wood* (1947), *The City and the Pillar* (1948), *Judgement of Paris* (1953), *Messiah* (1954), *Julian* (1964) *Two Sisters* (1970) are some of a few exemplary works contributed by him. Gore Vidal through his works has tried to bring in a new perspective towards life. He tried to uncover the fraudulence of the hypocrite society and its systems through his works. *The City and the Pillar* gained him outright fame. Gore Vidal in his work *The City and the Pillar* voiced his concerns and resistance for such so called systems which promote naturalization and normalization. His undoing of the notions of heterosexuality in his work has brought in different perspectives at the time when such concepts were hardly thought of or even existed. However, many critics were not then ready for such candid treatment of the subject. Many critics were outraged that Vidal has tried to 'undermine the seriousness of Christianity'. Gore does not accept any view of the world which is prevalent in the vast oeuvre of works and puts it in close scrutiny, breaking the hegemony.

Gore Vidal through his work *The City and the Pillar* has brought into foreground permissive heterosexual and homosexual ideologies so as to displace the center (heterosexual) and foreground the marginal (Homosexual). Marginals have always been deliberately kept in shades from times immemorial. They have no history of their own, no scriptures ever depict them as autonomous identities. The ideologies associated with sex throughout the world have their roots in the all-permeating influence of religions. Marriage is the be all and end all of man-woman relationship. Apart from marriage any other relationship is construed as lust — "whoever looketh on a woman to lust after hath committed adultery with her already in his heart." Rebellion, is a refusal of obedience or order. It refers to the open resistance against the orders of an established social norms. With his novel *The City and the Pillar* Gore Vidal was among the first in America who resisted against the natural social norms of sex.

The research work is an attempt to develop an understanding of the representation of the marginalised, here homosexuals and how and why this representation leads to friction in society. Vidal's works from the time they were written to till date are under scrutiny and are read with raised eyebrows. *The City and the Pillar* written in 1946 and published in 1948 is a kind of text which talks about the learning of sexuality of an individual via his encounter with different people of different sections of society. The text was written at the time when world was recovering from the turmoil of war and social setups were in torn states. During such scenario text like *The City and The Pillar* didn't have a cushy welcome. The protagonist of the text was opposite of 'normal' i.e., not the kind of traditional sissy guy which people want or know and hence the acceptance became even more difficult. Vidal explains in one of his interviews that in *The City and the Pillar* he deliberately used the "flat prose" and made Jim, "an average bland, uninteresting character in order to demonstrate "normality" of homosexuality" (Behrendt). Jim Willard undoubtedly was a threat to sexual assumptions and gender normality. Here, the protagonist athlete Jim Willard who has an excellent backhand at tennis goes through strange experiences in his life, strange because he found his world altogether different from what society called normal. His love was homosexual which takes him on an endless journey looking for his true love. It was not that the world was devoid of homosexuals and it was an alien concept. Vidal highlights that Jim Willard the protagonist who struggles with his homosexual identity, attends a party at his friend's house where he came across various homosexuals and his reactions are more or less enough for the reader to understand Jim's awakening conscience and also heightens readers consciousness. Homosexuality was always there but hidden under blankets and talked inside closed rooms. Sexual relief was there but no love.

The novel starts with a flashback of young Jim's life who is in love with Bob Ford, his senior at high-school. The sexual intercourse between the two at the riverside is one of the most rebellious scenes ever written. Vidal's representation of homosexual characters enjoying the sexual play actually

challenged the social tolerance of world towards queers. Jim believes he has found true love in Bob, but Bob wishes to move forward in life to make good career choices which was not possible living in that small place and spending his life with Jim. In fact Bob Ford is the kind of character who enjoys female attention, he is a bisexual and is extremely conscious of his social image as well. He enjoys being with Jim but unable to make any lifelong promise. Bob leaves and Jim's life is centered on looking for Bob. However, in the case of Bob, we can say that homosexuality, is not a stable, essential identity and hence as asserts Judith Butler, "identity can become a site of contest and revision." (19, Butler)

Next came the character of Ronald Shaw which perfectly portrays the duality of the society, as he wants Jim in his life for sexual pleasure but never for the kind of love two humans want for life. Although, it also reflects on the fact that 'coming out of the closet' as mentioned by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick 'is not a single absolute act'(Barber and Clark). Therefore, subject identity is also a complex amalgamation of various allegiances, social position, and professional roles, rather than a fixed inner essence. Jim's next encounter in the text is with Paul Sullivan, a writer in his late twenties. There is an immediate attraction between the two, although both of them have their own motives in this relationship. Paul wanted a relationship to experience the varied emotions which can help him establish as a writer, especially pain which he thought would be a great source for his writing career and Jim finds in Paul a perfect partner for the time being. Paul calls his friend Maria Verlaine to fulfil his motive of bringing pain in his relationship and all three of them (Jim, Paul and Maria) go on a vacation to Yucatan. Jim has a liking for Maria but he withdraws himself from any sexual relationship with her. He is sure that female body has least attraction for him sexually. Despite the fact that Jim doesn't want a relationship with Maria, Paul wants a breakup with Jim even with the imagination that his boyfriend can be with someone else. So, this endeavor of a relationship also ends. Jim and Paul part their ways for something different in their lives. Jim's longing and quest for true love is not fulfilled and his heart is still hooked with Bob. On the other hand, Bob has never looked back for Jim. Later after being discharged from his services from Army due to his illness, Jim moves to New York and meet Ronald and Paul again; he also starts visiting gay bars for sexual pleasure. Then the tragedy struck when Jim meets Bob finally in New York and tries to make love with him, Bob finds this totally unacceptable and punches Jim. Jim unable to handle this rejection strangles Bob (as in original version) and rapes him (as in the edited version). Vidal's attempt to break the stereotypes ultimately led him to fell back on dominant stereotypes when he portrayed an unhappy ending as overly dramatic.

Vidal's strange/abnormal/queer character Jim Willard is character of rebellion against all those acceptable norms which are treated as normal and which categorizes every other aspect as abnormal and unacceptable. This rebellion strikes a resisting chord against the normative behavior of our society and tries to bring forth the duality people keep in their personal and public life. His writings do not wish to sympathize with lesbians and gays rather portray them as humans with all the shades. Jim Willard in the text is not shown regretting his sexuality and living a shameful life rather he is a character who longs for true love, a love which is not afraid even if it lies under the category of 'queer'.

Vidal mentions in the afterword to the revised edition of his book that he has written the novel "to examine the homosexual underworld (which I knew rather less well than I pretended), and in the process show the 'naturalness' of homosexual relations, as well as making the point that there is, of course, no such thing as a homosexual. Despite current usage, the word is an adjective describing a sexual action, not a noun describing a recognizable type" (127, Altman). Here lies the whole point around which queer theory revolves, giving recognition to people on the basis of their sexual priorities. The sexual orientation of a person can't be a recognising factor for a human to be acceptable or non-acceptable. It's like bringing homosexuals on the same plane as of a criminal. Vidal believes that homosexuality cannot be generalized just like heterosexuality. In fact, the term homosexual and heterosexual create a binary which make us believe that either the person is this or not.

Twenty-first century has observed some changes in terms of recognizing homosexuals as very much part of society like any other individual but complete acceptance seems like a far dream. Cultural,

religious, political paradigms are still not flexible enough to face resistance or challenges from the marginalised section of society. The whole power game of these paradigms come under scrutiny when literature or any other art form rebel against the set notions of their agenda. These notions are so deep rooted that whosoever tries to change, reshape or reframe them faces friction from larger section of the society. The motive of this research is to look for those writings in literature which tried to bring the marginalised/queer/disempowered to the mainstream either through resistance or through rebellion and Gore Vidal works fall perfectly well in this category. Vidal made an effort so that homosexuals not remain queer rather be seen as a conventional part of our world. Lot more research needs to be done on the writings which empower the homosexuals as social beings neither above it nor below it.

In contemporary times one can see lot of resistance among various institutions in accepting same-sex relationships. In various parts of the world same-sex relationships are still outlawed. In fact, in India also decriminalisation of homosexuality came far too late, though legalizing same-sex marriage is yet a distant dream. Undoubtedly, India is divided into various sections despite its strong spiritual belief in *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* which means “the world is one family.” The scriptures and mythologies always propounded the idea of oneness yet people are deliberately marginalised, disempowered and silenced forever.

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