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# Exploring the Anxiety of Action in *Call Me by Your Name*

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André Aciman's novel *Call Me by Your Name* (2007) is divided into four parts each of which intends to capture Elio's conflicted emotions in the purview of his doomed love for Oliver, a 24 year old scholar from America. Elio's incessant need to impede his actions through the ambivalence of speech, wavering desires, and misconstrued ideas lays foundation for the subjectivity of action and, more acutely, his anxiety. Consequently, it becomes integral to examine the location of Elio's anxiety either in a same-sex relationship or the universality of anxiety in the context of the novel. The essay hopes to map the similarities of the queer experience permeating across definite time periods, cultural landscape, and religious identity keeping in mind Elio's own subjective experience. It also intends to explore the inception of anxiety in view of the text at hand, the subjectivity of action in terms of the less than hopeful resolution, and how the possibility of circumventing these anxieties is in tandem with the changing locations in the novel.

The novel, in its very premise introduces us to the idea of subjectivity in 'meaning.' For instance, the word "Later" entails different meanings at different stages in the novel (Aciman 1). Elio is stunned by Oliver's "harsh, curt, and dismissive..." way of leave-taking by using the said word in the beginning (Aciman 1). The meaning of the word then transmutes into a metaphor for delay in action: "Just be quiet, say nothing, if you can't say "yes" don't say "no," say "later"" (Aciman 52). In another instance, "later" suggests the inability to say goodbye, the avoidance of using a word that anticipates parting. The word also suggests the possibility of a relationship between the two characters—Rabbi Hillel's injunction "If not now, when?" is replaced with the idea "If not later, when?" (Aciman 51). Elio moulds the meaning of the word "later" in accordance with the shifting spatial-temporal setting. Subjectivity emerges from the spaces created through alternating 'meanings.' In short, the ambiguity of evolving meanings creates a space for queer desire; their language creates a space for

communication that the otherwise dominant cultural milieu will relegate to the margins. The subjectivity in 'meaning' acts as an antecedent to the creation of space for the same sex lover.

In the context of the novel, therefore, the intrinsic question arises from the need for separate spaces for the lovers—the need for secrecy. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick articulates same-sex love as "famous for daring not speak its name" (Sedgwick 41). Which implies that much of the novel is about what is left unsaid than what is said; for example, in "Monet's Berm" Oliver says "Don't ever say you didn't know" and Elio admits "His words made no sense. But I knew exactly what they meant" (Aciman 150). Thereby, secrecy and ambiguity play a critical role in propelling the plot into motion. Queer desire, as Sedgwick states, is never openly discussed, neither is it "name(d)" (41). In opposition, "coming out" becomes an integral part of the "heterosexist" culture wherein the "double binds" of public and private dictate the agency of the same-sex lovers (Sedgwick 44). The experience of love cannot be spoken out loud, and neither can it bypass the binaries. Therefore, for Sedgwick the idea of "coming out" entails that:

> Even an out gay person deals daily with interlocutors about whom she doesn't know whether they know or not (about their sexual orientation)... The gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people. But for many gay people it is still the fundamental feature of social life... (42)

In which case, the "closet" is intrinsic to the same sex lover—the image of an enclosed space. This idea of being trapped, which further ripples into—after "coming out"—the multiple traps of "coming out" leading to negotiating these spaces vis-à-vis one's social landscape. Elio and Oliver avoid the "closet" but the centrality of the closet is in the enclosed spaces of "secrecy" (Sedgwick 41) which further emphasizes upon the duality of the closet—the idea of "coming out" and its trappings with the confines of not "coming out."

Therefore, the location of the novel gains primacy—the space created in the unnamed village of Italy makes the love affair possible. The village establishes a location that is isolated from brazen homophobic prejudices. However, despite the ideal setting of Italy, Oliver and Elio are intimate with one another in closed quarters only. For instance, Elio is open to have intercourse with Marzia at the beach but he gets intimate with Oliver only in secluded corners like the Monet's Berm (Aciman 81); the only exception being the time they spent together in Rome—they kissed in open spaces disregarding the pedestri-

ans (Aciman 205). Rome, therefore, emerges as an escape from the figures of authority who invoke fear. Fear, thereby, acts a fulcrum to negotiate his identity in context of his relationships. Even though Elio's father would never repudiate his feelings for Oliver but rather encourage them, Oliver, at one point, states that his father would have sent him to a correctional facility if he had been found out like Elio (Aciman 227). This insists upon Oliver's identity as an American belonging to a somewhat orthodox family, who will eventually settle into a heterosexual relationship as opposed to Elio's trajectory. However, they are both skirting around the ambivalence of language to communicate, creating separate spaces away from probing crowd, which in turn highlights the universality of anxiety in the homosexual lover despite their orthodox or liberal upbringing.

James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* also negotiates through similar spaces of queer desire in a predominantly heterosexist setting. The novel brings to fore the complexities of the same-sex desire in tandem with the questions of race through the lens of the othered homosexual. However, much like *Call me by Your Name*, the spatial setting of Giovanni's 'room' establishes the binaries of the public and private. David, the protagonist of the novel, is hesitant to accept Giovanni beyond the threshold of the 'room.' The space created within the parameters of the room encourages the lovers to behave in accordance with their desire; for example, David's desire to play the 'housewife' (88). However, David must navigate through these desires in order to circumvent the anxieties of the queer lover, which he is unable to. The room is a symbolic representation of the private space created by the closeted lover. Negotiating these binaries or the creation of spaces allows same-sex love to exist without the interference of societal restrictions. The spaces they create are an extension to the anxieties of the same-sex lovers who are afraid to 'come out' into the open.

Eve Sedgwick argues that "a lot of the energy of attention and demarcation (that) has swirled around issues of homosexuality since the end of the nineteenth century, in Europe and the United States..." (44). Moreover, the "dangerous incoherence" of the heterosexist culture through the mapping of these "issues" underlines the "crossing and recrossing" of the "closet" to be inexorable (Sedgwick 44). In which case, the created spaces of David's room and Elio's Italy become an extension of the "closet" made central through the fear of the dominant heterosexist cultural location, which in turn elucidates upon the performance of heteronormativity; for example, the presence of David and Elio's female partners. The binds of the spatial setting are ineffably being 'crossed and recrossed' not only through the perform-

ance of heterosexuality but also through the secrecy of the spaces created. The "double binds" (Sedgwick 44) of experience in their same-sex desire renders the closet both inconsequential and immutable within a heterosexist space, thus requiring the constant need to create a 'closet' for more 'closets' to be created later.

Yukio Mishima in *Confessions of a Mask* also delves into the anxieties of the "self" which further necessitate the desire to create private spaces opposing the heterosexual public performance in context of his homosexual identity. Even though set in the distinct socio-political context of Imperial Japan, the universality of performance of the queer self may arguably pervade through the clear-cut divisions of culture, time, and space; for example, the narrator states that he feels a "sense of uneasiness" about his identity as he needs to "understand" himself as opposed to the other boys who have had no such prerequisite. His "uncertainty" emerges from his same-sex desires and his inclination towards sexual violence. In Imperial Japan, his identity is defined by his ability to "play a part" (Mishima 65). He cannot be his "natural" self as he would unequivocally be othered in the context of his social location (65). Much like Elio's desire for Oliver which is never discussed in the open, he never confides his feelings in his friends or family. His father touches upon the subject of his love towards Oliver, but it is in the end of the novel, not during their tryst, whereas Elio does not have any qualms about discussing Marzia with his father (Aciman 51). Through this conscious choice of confidence, Elio, to a certain extent, also seems to be "play(ing) a part." Dan Zahavi in his essay "Subjectivity and the First Person Perspective" states:

> When I experience myself and when I experience others, there is, in fact, a common denominator. In both cases, I am dealing with embodiment and one of the features of my embodied subjectivity is that it, per definition, entails acting and living in the world. When I go for a walk, write a letter, or play ball, to use Strawson's classic examples (Strawson 1959, 111), I am experiencing myself, but in a way that anticipates the manner in which I would experience others and others would experience me. (4)

In the context of Mishima's novel Zahavi anticipates his "I" in purview of the societal rejection of his identity as the homosexual other. In Elio's case, his lack of communication about his feelings for Oliver with his family members highlights his own anxiety of becoming the Other, in spite of the fact that his family would accept his identity. Thereby, he is experiencing the "I" in tandem with the 'other' of

society, he is experiencing himself in anticipation of how others would experience him. He is experiencing the fear of being othered.

In short, the trope of the queer homosexual narrative can be summarised by the initial ambivalence to the same sex desire, the performance of being heterosexual, which compels the "I" to "come out" or not, which nonetheless renders the "self" to be closeted, into the binaries of spaces or specific identities patent in a novel like *Confessions of a Mask*. However, the idea of one's sexual identity is contested in *Call me by Your Name* not only through his polyamorous relationship with Marzia and Oliver but also through the episode in which they call each other by their names. The exchange of identity is primary in circumventing their anxiety in action, however momentary the event may be. While tracing the narrative of the novel the exchange of identities certifies their ability to move beyond the restrictions of conventional identities. However, the last interior monologue establishes the inability to communicate again beyond the binaries of the self and the other:

> I stopped for a second. If you remember everything, I wanted to say, and if you are really like me, then before you leave tomorrow, or when you're just ready to shut the door of the taxi and have already said goodbye to everyone else and there's not a thing left to say in this life, then, just this once, turn to me, even in jest, or as an afterthought, which would have meant everything to me when we were together, and, as you did back then, look me in the face, hold my gaze, and call me by your name. (Aciman 248)

This inability is portrayed twice in the narrative: the first time when Elio calls Oliver as Elio, nine years later, only to realise that he has forgotten and the second time is in the conclusion of the novel (Aciman 231).

In context of their exchanged names their Jewish identity is also brought to the fore. Elio narrates that their shared Jewish identity "transcended all difference" (Aciman 19). His sense of unity in his shared identity roused in him a feeling of home—"Was he my home, then, my home coming? You are my homecoming" (Aciman 49). The intermittent references to their Jewish identity, more often than not, reside in the pretext of brotherhood—an identity that was safely "tucked away" but is now brought to the fore (Aciman 19). Janet R. Jacobsen in her essay 'Queers Are Like Jews, Aren't They? Analogy and Alliance Politics' explores the idea of "difference" in the scope of queer and Jewish identity. She contests the idea of "analogy" (66) in

regard to these identities stating that these identities could "is like" and simultaneously "is not like" each other (86). Thereby implying that the Jewish and queer identity are 'analogous' to one another in the pretext of their marginalised identities despite being two very 'different' identities.

The idea of "differences" itself eschews the unstable unity of the two identities—Jewish and queer—vis-a-vis Jacobsen's argument, what binds and separates them is the "differences" of these identities sidelined by the dominant culture. In other words, the point of convergence lies in the shared identity of the marginalised other—the shared "differences"—not only as Jews but also as same-sex lovers which in turn "transcends all differences" (Aciman 19). In other words, both the exchange of names and their Jewish identity marks a point of unity. It helps mitigate the anxiety that is inherent in Elio's experience of queer desire. The creation of spaces through this unity leads to the synthesis of the "differences" by both confronting and navigating them. The created spaces exist in lieu of the dearth of spaces to engage in the same-sex love—the 'closet' is both safe and claustrophobic. Therefore, when the identities converge through religious identity and the act of exchanging names the 'differences' collapse despite their marginalised positions that more often than not are compromised in the dominant culture.

However, what remains seminal is the "differences" that exist despite their moment of shared identities palpable in their inability to sustain their relationship. Elio's desire—"please don't hurt me"—will upend its meaning and suggest "hurt me all you want" (Aciman 25). The anxiety is woven into the ambiguity of communication—Elio hesitates between his desires to "I had to let him know I was totally indifferent to him" (Aciman 52) and "Just say something, just touch me" (Aciman 59). These two desires however disparate are experienced by the same individual. Is it the fear of the same-sex desire or the anxiety of a lover irrespective of his sexual orientation? Even though difficult to ascertain, Jacobsen's examination of the idea of "differences" subsists. The differences that bind them together also disable them from uniting in lived time which affirms that the "differences" in experience of the heterosexual lover and the same-sex lover in a heterosexist location cannot be one and the same. In short, the shared identities establish contact but also destabilise their relationship as it can never be normative—the creation of 'meaning' and space both liberates and restricts them.

Annamarie Jagose states that contemporary theory challenges "...the very notion of the natural, the obvious, and the taken-for-granted" (102). The identity of the queer lover contests the idea of "natural" and redefines it. Moreover, the escape from the definite binds of identities is made explicit throughout the trajectory of the novel which ignites a dialogue about the inescapability of identities—the act of exchanging names is possible only once. Elio's desire is marked by the subjectivities of the self-conscious lover which become more potent when aligned with his same sex desires. The narrative of the novel contradicts such an analysis when Elio's ability to consummate his love for Oliver is brought in focus. However, the analysis persists when his love is shortly undercut by their moving beyond the spatial, temporal setting of mid-1980's Italy. The resolution to this is Oliver's monogamous heterosexual marriage and Elio's persistent love for him, made emphatic through his interior monologues suggesting the abandonment of these "ghost spots" not in memory but in real time (Aciman 210). They cannot exist together in a different location, when their love was situated in a created reality of space and time, hidden away from prying eyes.

The subjectivity of meaning, the ambivalence of action, and the creation of spaces for the othered identity ascertain the anxiety of action in the novel. The anxiety teeters in fear of trespassing beyond the given "natural" identity in the dominant culture, which in turn contests the specificity of identification and its stereotypes. Elio and Oliver's romance is determined by the security of spaces they create—the "spots" (Aciman 210)—which are not tainted by the "taken for-granted" (Jagose 102). However, the fairytale romance must end when the creation of these spaces debilitate in the face of lived reality after the summer holiday. Their romance in Italy manages to create a space of security but it also becomes a microcosm for a world where prejudices are not explicit but covert. Consequently, the creation of spaces 'instigates' anxiety in a predominantly heterosexist world, leading to the subjective actions of an anxious lover.

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