



## A CRITICAL INTERPRETATION OF *THE WISH MAKER* FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF QUEER THEORY

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### Abstract

This study explores the portrayal of queer identity in Ali Sethi's novel "The Wish Maker" through the lens of queer theory. The study delves into the intricate portrayal of queer identity and its navigation within a patriarchal society. By focusing on the character Zaki Shirazi, the research examines how societal norms and expectations precipitate marginalization and exclusion of individuals with queer identities. The study sheds light on the traditional concept of binaries, highlighting the privileged and unprivileged status associated with these binaries, and how they contribute to the marginalization of queer individuals. Through a qualitative approach, this research investigates the complex dynamics of gender and gendering, revealing how these constructs lead to marginalization and discrimination of individuals with queer identities. By analyzing selected passages from the novel, the study demonstrates how "The Wish Maker" challenges the notion of fixed and inherent categories of sexual identities, underscoring the complexities and nuances of queer experiences in a society that systematically marginalizes non-heterosexual orientations and gender identities. The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of queer theory thereby promoting a more inclusive identity.

**Keywords:** *Discrimination, Gender Identity, LGBTQ<sup>+</sup>, Marginalization, Queer, Sexuality, The Wish Maker*

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## 1. Introduction

The term *gender binaries* refer to the conventional division of gender into male and female gender roles, which are often viewed as mutually exclusive. In this binary system, a person is assigned a gender role at birth, solely based on their biological traits, often recognized by outward physical characteristics such as genital organs. In many societies, the biological gender is the only recognized gender identity, with specific roles assigned to each gender. According to the American Psychological Association (2012), this traditional binary definition centers around sex, which is determined at birth and includes the biological traits that define a person as male or female. Many people misunderstand or assume that the terms "sex" and "gender" mean the same thing. However, gender encompasses more than simply biological sex; it is a complicated and multidimensional notion. Gender refers to the social and cultural roles, expectations, behaviors, and identities associated with being male, female, or other gender categories (Butler, 1990).

While sex is generally considered as a biological classification, determined by reproductive and physical traits, gender is socially constructed that differs across societies, historical periods and cultures. It transcends male and female in term of biological differences, and contains psychological and social aspects of being feminine, masculine or other non-binary gender roles believed by individuals (Rubin, 1984). Judith Butler (2011) stated that gender identities are merely acts individuals play out for themselves, and that gender and sex are not inherent traits but rather merely performative aspects of identity. rather than inherent traits. She further argued that stereotypical media depictions and institutional discourse perpetuate and reinforce gender as a cultural fiction.

Gender expression refers to how individuals present and express their gender identity through their appearance, clothing, behavior, and mannerisms. It can include both stereotypically masculine and feminine traits or can involve a blend of gender expressions. Gender roles are societal expectations, norms, and behaviors associated with specific genders in a particular society. They can vary across cultures and change over the passage of time. The media affects how we see gender roles, often reinforcing stereotypes that can be limiting and perpetuate inequality by reinforcing societal biases and expectations.

According to Rubin (1984), societal norms prioritize certain sexual behaviors and identities over others, laying the foundation for discrimination and oppression. Gender stereotypes are oversimplified and generalized beliefs about characteristics, behaviors, and roles associated with specific genders. Blair & Hoskins (2015) discussed how gender nonconformity is associated with the abuse and prejudice experienced by members of the

LGBTQ+ community, and how femininity is often devalued and regulated. Their study also points out how in-grouping discrimination in LGBTQ+ communities reflects the wider social phenomenon known as gynophobia.

It is important to recognize that, like all other identity markers, gender is a deeply personal and individual experience. Individuals may have different gender identities and expressions that may not fit into traditional binary categories. The understanding and acknowledgment of diverse gender identities and experiences are essential for promoting inclusivity, tolerance, respect, and equality for all individuals (Butler, 1990). In this context, Teresa de Lauretis coined the term "Queer" to describe people who don't identify themselves with heterosexual tendencies. The term later developed into a theory in which gender is not considered a binary limit. According to Butler (1990), "those who fail to approximate the norms are condemned to a death within life."

The structuralist theorists have advocated a binary system by identifying objects through their opposites, such as day and night, hot and cold, black and white, and male and female. We can examine how the theory propagates gender in a binary construct even though it does not expressly address the concept of gender and identity. According to structuralism, the link between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. In other words, no intrinsic or natural link exists between the two. Meaning is established through a set of differences within a specific language or sign system. The signifier obtains meaning by distinguishing itself from other signifiers in the system. Traditional gender roles in many societies have been designed perfectly in line with this binary opposition system, with expectations and standards attached to each group (Sedgwick, 1990). However, it is crucial to remember that structuralism does not mandate or prescribe a specific concept of gender. Instead, it offers a framework for examining and comprehending meaning systems in a specific cultural setting. Historically, binary gender roles have been dominant in many countries, including Pakistan.

With Jacques Derrida, the understanding of gender has gone beyond the traditional binaries and encompasses a variety of identities, challenging the traditional definitions of gender and sexuality. The Queer Theorists believe gender to be fluid and unlimited. There is a gray area between male and female roles and expressions. There is a possibility that males have the characteristics of females, and females have masculine characteristics. It means that the binary extreme is inherently insufficient if not wrong altogether. The Queer Theorists are also of the view that the biological space between the two binaries, previously known as the "third gender," is not correct because in this space there are many more gender roles present. Attached to gender identity, according to the Queer Theorists, there is also the issue of sexual orientation as personal and individual preference in the same

manner as gender. The purpose of Queer Theory is to determine these gray areas. So, Queer Theory does not deal with the biological orientation of gender because they believe gender is relative.

The basic concern of Queer Theory is the traditional concept of binaries and the privileged and unprivileged status associated with these binaries, as structuralists have emphasized the existence of binary oppositions. In other words, that is called patriarchy, a system of male dominance rooted in gender binaries, in which according to Beauvoir, male is the privileged while female is considered secondary (Bressler, 2012). As Sara Ahmad (2007) highlights, society praises institutions like heterosexual proximity and marriage as "good objects," while those who don't fit into normative categories are cast as misfits, dissatisfied, or broken.

Pakistani media, like Shoaib Mansoor's film *Bol* (2011) and the drama *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* (2016), depict the prejudice, rejection, and emotional trauma faced by transgender and intersex individuals. *Bol* narrates the experience of Safi, a transgender child, locked away by his family due to fear and shame. Similarly, *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* revolves around Mahagul, a mother who challenges societal norms to provide equal opportunities for her intersex child, Noor. These narratives illustrate the deeply ingrained heteronormativity and patriarchal oppression in Pakistani society.

*The Wish Maker* is a novel written by a Pakistani author named Ali Sethi. The novel was published by Riverhead Books in 2009, which tells the story of Zaki Shirazi, a young boy from the United States who returns to Lahore, Pakistan. Shirazi experiences sexual and romantic attraction more towards males than females. He often admires the males for their appearances and manners and desires to engage in a serious relationship with them. Through the character of Zaki Shirazi, the writer explores the experiences of Queer individuals in Pakistani society, where they face social stigma, discrimination, and social alienation. Using the queer perspective, this study investigates Shiraz's queer identity, his feelings, and the challenges such people confront in a patriarchal society that ultimately leads to their marginalization and exclusion. The study also explores the traditional concept of binaries: the privileged and unprivileged gender roles, while focusing on the related and selected passages from the novel.

### 1.1. Research Questions

- 1) How is sexual orientation of Zaki Shirazi depicted in the novel "*The Wish Maker*"?
- 2) How do non-binary gender and sexual orientations lead to marginalization in "*The Wish Maker*"?

## 1.2. Objectives of the Study

- 1) To explore sexual orientation of zaki's shirazi in "*The Wish Maker*".
- 2) To investigate how gender and gendering lead to marginalization in a patriarchal society.

## 2. Research Methodology

This study uses qualitative approach as it suits the nature of the research. Qualitative research is often used to investigate topics that are complex, subjective and context specific. This method aims to explore the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols and descriptions of things. Unlike quantitative research, which seeks to measure and quantify aspects of a phenomenon, qualitative research focuses on understanding the underlying processes, motivations and social dynamics (Kumar, 2019). Therefore the researchers employed qualitative research methodology to analyse the Ali Sethi's *The Wish Maker* in order to answer the research questions and achieve the objectives of the study. The approach is effective especially analysing the novel, revealing both implicit and explicit meanings, thus the interpretative nature of the study allow to understand and explore mutiple layers of meaning, shaped by the researcher's perspective.

According to Greenham (2019) close reading is a foundational analytical skill involving careful, sustained interpretation of a text's words, sentences and larger contexts. This study employed the technique of close reading to examine the selected excerpts from the novel through queer perspective in order to reveal, how language, imagery, structure and descriptions, reflect and uncover both concealed and overt meanings.

This study is further guided by queer theory, which function as the theoretical lens. A theoretical framework provides a blue print or logical map for a research (Grand & Osanloo, 2014; Kumar, 2019). Queer theory foregrounds marginalized identities and challenges heteronormative assumptions. While *The Wish Maker* does not directly depict queer identity or intersexuality, however, these can be inferred through its cultural expectations, treatment of relationships, and negotiations of sexuality and gender.

By adopting qualitative approach and combing close reading and queer theory, this reserch develops a nuanced interpretation of *The Wish Maker*. Thus the integrated

methodology highlights the novel's engagement with queerness, marginalization and identity, marginalization, uncovering both overt and covert aspects of its narrative.

### 3. Analysis and Discussion

This section deals with the interpretation of Ali Sethi's novel, *"The Wish Maker"*. In the context of queer theory, *"The Wish Maker"* is a novel that explores the various ways in which sex and gender are constructed and perceived in Pakistani society. Our interpretation has been focused on how Zaki's queer identity shapes his sense of self and his relationships with others. Additionally, the study has examined how the novel depicts gendering and other such factors contribute to marginalization of queer people in Pakistani society.

#### 3.1. Analysis of the Text

*"The boy too was fair skinned and danced with slow movement of his shoulders and it was instantly sexual it was sexy in extreme." (Sethi, A. P.23 )*

Examining the lines through the lens of queer, On one hand, the description may reinforce stereotypical notions of queer individuals as sexually attractive or hypersexualized. On the other hand, the text employs terms such as *"fair-skinned," "slow," "sexual," and "sexy"* to emphasize Zaki's attraction and appreciation for Saif's appearance and movements which reveals his tendency towards homosexuality. These remarks imply that Zaki is not only observing Saif but also fantasizing about him and his body. Additionally, the novel uses repetition and intensity to depict Zaki's strong and immediate reaction to Saif's dance. The phrase *"instantly sexual"* is followed by *"it was sexy in the extreme,"* indicating Zaki's admiration and fascination with Saif's performance. The adjective *"extreme"* also conveys that Zaki's feelings are extraordinary or unexpected.

*"You can do it on your own until you get married? "You pregnant." Don't have to," said Isa. "Your babe can take the pill. Otherwise she'll get "Condoms also ... " said Mossa from the bed "Condoms suck," said Isa. Moosa made a squelching sound they laughed. Then do it with a boy." (Sethi, A. P. )*

In the novel, the main character Zaki Shirazi suggests that individuals should engage in sexual activities with someone of the same gender, thus highlighting the concept of homosexuality. The text can also be interpreted as a thought-provoking and provocative conversation between friends, where they openly express their opinions and preferences regarding sex. The phrase *"Then do it with a boy"* can be viewed as genuine advice or a proposition, indicating that the speaker is sincere and earnest about their suggestion. The

speaker might be disclosing their own homosexuality or bisexuality, or encouraging the other person to explore their sexuality or experiment with a boy.

*"Never Marry," he said, shaking his head dismally at his own faint reflection in the Windshield. "You will forget the man you were, the man you wanted to be. Never marry" (Sethi, A. P.)*

The novel reveals the driver's unhappiness and regret regarding his marriage and life. He advises Zaki to avoid making the same mistake and to refrain from getting married. According to him, marriage would change Zaki's individuality and identity, causing him to lose sight of his dreams and aspirations. The driver expresses his discontent with his own choices and circumstances. The book also portrays Tanvir's traditional and patriarchal views on marriage and gender roles. He emphasizes that Zaki will lose his autonomy and authority as a result of marriage, becoming subordinate and dependent on his wife. Tanvir believes that marriage will restrict Zaki's opportunities and freedoms, hindering his pursuit of dreams and ambitions. It is evident that he is projecting his own prejudices and biases against the institution of marriage.

*"Who Were generally more blunt, though Tara Tanvir herself was more like boys, then, Because she liked to say what was on her mind" (Sethi, A. P.)*

The remark implies that Zaki believes that being direct or speaking what one is thinking is a masculine trait, or that boys do it more than girls. Tara Tanvir, he claims, was more like boys back then since she wanted to communicate what was on her mind. He implies that this was uncommon or strange for a girl. Even the narrator is looking for male tendencies in girls.

*"why? I said, touching his arm, his foot, why? Stop it, he said. You want me to stop it? We appeared then to fight, and it was the opposite of what we were doing, but there is a release in occupying an estrangement that gives weight to wishes and Ways of arriving satisfactorily what we already know" (Sethi, A. P.)*

The scene in which Zaki and his male friend Kazim engage in a sexual encounter in a hotel room is portrayed. Zaki is perplexed and intrigued by his feelings for Kazim, questioning why they are behaving in this manner. Their interaction escalates into an argument when Kazim insists that Zaki stop asking questions. However, Zaki argues that their disagreement is a way of expressing their emotions and perspectives. He suggests that being separate or distinct from one another brings a sense of relief or liberation, as it allows them to acknowledge their desires and their understanding of themselves and each other. It implies that they share a profound bond that surpasses the traditional or expected roles of friends or lovers.

The passage realistically and intricately depicts homosexuality. It may suggest that Zaki and Kazim are uncertain about their sexual orientation, identity or relationship. They may possess complex or contradictory aspects of their personalities, histories and goals. They might also face challenges or societal pressures from family members or society who do not accept or acknowledge their homosexuality. Their argument could serve as a way to confront or cope with these challenges and pressures.

*"In this time of new kinships, similar to my own. I was in Charge of magazine publicity, and took their flyers everywhere. I went to the Nineties Dance, to the South Asian Dance, to the Islamic Society Banquet, and I went to the Queer Dance, and stood beneath the colors of the rainbow, which were mine" (Sethi, A. P. )*

The mention of attending the Queer Dance and standing beneath the colors of the rainbow, which the narrator recognizes as their own, indicates the queer aspect in this paragraph. This implies that the narrator is a member of the LGBTQ+ community and emphasizes their involvement and support for LGBTQ+ events and causes. It is right, The Queer Dance and rainbow colors are unambiguous signs of the paragraph's queerness. Other subtle indicators of the narrator's LGBT identification, such as their involvement in the magazine and the protests, might be interpreted as questioning the status quo and expressing solidarity with marginalized people. Queer theory challenges us to look beyond the obvious and challenge the assumptions and norms that influence our understanding of sexuality and gender.

Gendering leads to marginalization:

*"She meant to say these things to my mother, her daughter-in-law, who lived in The same house and ran a magazine and was organizing the wedding and was felt to have acted as if she owned everything. There will be no wedding," said Daadi. "We are not responsible for any wedding" (Sethi, A. P )*

In patriarchal society, power and decision-making are often associated with male member of the family. But in this text daughter in law is overstepping the traditional boundaries and exerting control. Dadi and her daughter in law challenges these traditional gender norms. That women have specific and domestic roles and caregiving duties. This often challenges the binary construction of gender and hierarchal nature of gender expectation. From a queer perspective, the given text appears to portray marginalization within a family setting.

*" Two years later I was born, and though in moments of hostility she claimed to be my aunt, entitled by the nature of that position to be deferential treatment, we were raised from the start to consider ourselves part of the same litter." (Sethi, A. P.)*

From queer perspective it portrays the concept of marginalization through the relationship between the narrator and their aunt. The phrase "*Two years later I was born*" suggests that the narrator is younger than their aunt. Despite their age difference, the aunt claims to be the narrator's aunt in moments of hostility. This claim is used as a means to assert her authority and demand deferential treatment.

The mention of being entitled to deferential treatment based on the nature of the aunt's position as significant. It implies that the aunt feels deserving of respect and obedience solely due to her familial role. This highlights a power dynamic within the family where the aunt tries to exercise control and exert dominance over the narrator.

The concept of marginalization is depicted through the power dynamics between the aunt and the narrator. The aunt, by claiming her position as an aunt, attempts to assert her authority and establish a hierarchy where she is entitled to special treatment.

*"Later she told Zakia about her friend Alice, who was black and a lesbian and was in the habit of settling Nargis's head in her lap and playing with her hair. "She calls me her doll," said Nargis. Zakia didn't ask any questions "You're shocked." Zakia said, "Notreally." She didn't know about those things." (Sethi, A. P.)*

Queer theory questions long-held beliefs about identity, sexuality and gender, particularly heteronormativity, or the view that heterosexuality is the only normal and natural expression of sexuality. Queer theory is concerned with the ways in which LGBTQ+ persons are marginalized and oppressed by society. It aims to understand why these people are excluded from mainstream society and how they can be integrated more fairly. The theory also investigates how power relations around sexuality and gender are established, as well as how these connections may be questioned and transformed. This sentence implies that LGBTQ+ people, like Alice, endure social marginalization. Nargis' remark on being dubbed a "doll" by Alice illustrates their tight and caring bond. It means that Alice regards Nargis as special and treats her with respect. However, Zakia's failure to recognize or comprehend these parts of Alice's identity points to a larger societal issue: the marginalization and lack of visibility of LGBTQ people. Zakia's reaction of not being horrified can be taken in several ways. It could be a reflection of Zakia's personal acceptance and lack of judgement towards Alice's identity, or it could be a reflection of her ignorance about LGBTQ+ experiences and the obstacles they confront. The latter interpretation maintains the notion that LGBTQ people are frequently marginalized or disregarded in society, and their experiences are marginalized or ignored. It also suggests the exclusion of gender based discrimination. In the continuation of this paragraph, this distinction based on family structure can be seen as an example of marginalization from a queer perspective. The absence of a father figure in the narrator's life sets them apart and

creates a sense of exclusion. It suggests that traditional family structures, with both a mother and a father, are regarded as the norm and carry certain privileges within the social context of the novel.

*"Suri and Hukmi sat by her side and stroked Her back, soothed her with words when she awoke, made her drink at glasses of Water, had her pace the room and encouraged her to go back to Sleep." (Sethi, A.P.)*

From the perspective of queer theory, the passage can be analyzed in terms of how gender is marginalized. This text doesn't explicitly mention gender, but the power dynamics and interactions can be examined to explore potential aspects of gender marginalization. Suri and Hukmi are caring for and supporting a female character who is in trouble in this scenario. Their actions of massaging her back, comforting her with words, forcing her to drink water, and coaxing her to sleep again can all be considered acts of care and empathy.

Queer theory questions the notion of set gender roles and norms, recognizing that society frequently marginalizes people who do not comply with standard gender expectations. Suri and Hukmi are described in the passage as providing caregiving and emotional support, which are traditionally associated with feminine gender roles. Their activities are consistent with stereotypes of women as nurturing, soothing and caring. *"She was standing above the tray with the Small jug of milk in her hand, and was holding her briefcase in the other hand. She took it every morning to the office of the English-language daily for which she worked, and returned with it in the evening; and by then all items for the Running of the household had been bought." (Sethi, A. P.)*

From the perspective of queer theory, the passage could be interpreted as opposing established gender roles and customs that marginalize women by restricting them to household responsibilities. The woman in the paragraph violates the norm that women should be entirely responsible for caregiving and homemaking by working outside the home and taking on household tasks. From this vantage point, the sentence could be interpreted as a challenge to established gender roles and customs that marginalize women by restricting them to home responsibilities. Suggesting the departure from traditional role, it also gives the implication that women can actively participate in the work place.

*"Samar Api's descriptions of life in the village were unimaginable. She said she wasn't allowed to sit with her male cousins, she wasn't allowed to speak until she was spoken to, she wasn't allowed to step out of the house, not even to go into the garden unless she went a servant "we have to wear chadars when we go out," she said. Even we are setting in the car. And I can not even see through it. And it's so bloody hot in berhampur like bloosy oven. (Sethi, A. P.)*

From the queer point of view this depicts gender-based marginalization through Samar Api's descriptions of her life in the village. Samar Api outlines a set of repressive norms imposed on her as a girl by her family and neighborhood. She reveals that she is not permitted to sit with her male cousins, talk unless spoken to, or even leave the house without being accompanied by a servant. These constraints clearly indicate how gender norms and expectations marginalize and limit the agency of girls and women. The passage also emphasizes the chador (a traditional covering garment) being imposed on girls and women. This demonstrates how gender-based dress standards are restrictive and limit women's visibility and freedom of movement.

### 3.2. Comparison with Other studies

The study of Anderson (2024) resembles the present research, as both the studies inquire into the notions of queerness and hypersexuality within LGBTQ communities. Anderson's study investigates claims that LGBTQ individuals conduct themselves in ways that are sexually inappropriate in comparison to heterosexual individuals. The study asserts that perceptions of hypersexuality frequently function to justify discriminatory laws, such as Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill and anti-transgender policies. This emphasis on legal marginalization and societal bias, resonates with our research's focus on institutional and cultural responses to queerness.

Likewise, Dr. Barnett (2017) investigates the sociocultural and biological foundations of homosexuality, which aligns with our explorations. Barnett argues that sexual orientation to a great extent is biological, though it is also affected by sociocultural and psychological factors, mirroring a biopsychosocial framework. This multifaceted comprehension of sexuality, supports the perspective of the current research that sexual orientation is not mere a matter of choice but is largely influenced by interconnected factors.

Our study also explores gender nonconformity, which is defined as behaviors that do not conform to societal expectations that are allocated at birth. This notion resembles with the study of Labiski and Merie (2003), whose work similarly finds how normative expectations are challenged by gender nonconforming individuals. Both researches emphasis the tensions between socially constructed gender roles and individual identity.

In addition, Proctor (2020) highlights the social and political marginalization of LGBTQ communities. Proctor argues that being sexual and gender minorities, LGBTQ individuals frequently confront limited access to political institutes, strengthening methodical marginalization. This finding directly enhances our interpretation of marginalization in *The Wish Maker*, where characters of queer identities, navigate social hierarchies that confines their visibility and autonomy.

Finally, Green (2020) investigates the minority stress experienced by subgroups within the LGBTQ community. Their study shows that stigmatization, discrimination and poor social treatment enhance vulnerability to the challenges of mental health, such as larger rates of suicide in LGBTQ individuals, when compared to the normal population. This parallels with the current study's discussion of the social and psychological pressures, confronted by queer individuals, strengthening the effect of societal oppression on their well-being and identity.

#### 4. Conclusion

The study explored the main character Zaki Shirazi's portrayal of queer identity and investigated how sexuality and gender are socially constructed, emphasizing that these constructs are not rigid or inherent categories but rather the products of political, cultural and historical processes. It challenges the notion of a fixed, fundamental and binary understanding of sexual identities, such as the traditional divisions between male and female or gay and straight. Queer theory criticizes the mainstream heteronormative paradigm that considers heterosexuality as the norm while marginalizing non-heterosexual orientations and gender identities. The study examined how social systems, cultural practices and power structures perpetuate and regulate conventional, sexual and gender identities while stigmatizing and marginalizing those who do not conform to these norms. *The Wish Maker* explores such themes through the character of Zaki Shirazi, who exhibits an attraction towards males, often expressing admiration for male characters more than females. He often comments on the various aspects of their bodies and movements. For instance, in a dance scene, he described, "*The boy too was fair-skinned and danced with slow movements of his shoulders, and it was instantly very sexual.*" This highlights his attraction and admiration for the boy's appearance and motions. Moreover, Shirazi suggests that he experiences unsuccessful marriages with the opposite gender, which reveal his queer tendencies and non-conformity to heterosexual norms. Shirazi supports LGBTQ+ and subsequently goes to their community. Within the framework of queer theory, the study also examines how gender and gendering leads to marginalization and discrimination of the individual with queer identity, while highlighting the gender binaries and the norms of sexual orientation, imposed by society. Individuals such as transgenders, queer and those who don't fit into these predetermined categories, face challenges, stigma and social isolation.

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