

A Critical Exploration of Queer Temporalities in *Slightly Burnt*

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Abstract- This paper inspects the idea of queer temporality in *Slightly Burnt* (2014), a young adult novel by Payal Dhar that explores the themes of friendship, family, LGBTQ+ identity, within the heteronormative societal norms of Indian society. In consideration of Jack Halberstam's notion of queer time, this study examines how the novel disrupts conventional, heteronormative understandings of adolescence and life progression. By portraying queer time as nonlinear milestone of life cycle, the novelist has tried to portray the different vision of adolescence. While queer theory has increasingly informed readings of Western young adult literature, there remains a noticeable gap in scholarship that examines queer temporalities in Indian young adult fiction. This study aims to address that gap by situating *Slightly Burnt* within the emerging discourse on queer time in non-Western contexts, offering a culturally grounded understanding of how time, identity, and belonging are renegotiated through narrative. The novel challenges the normative expectations placed on youth to conform to socially accepted paths, using the tension between Komal's confusion and Sahil's clarity to depict the conflict queer individuals often experience in aligning their internal sense of time with the external pressures of social conformity. The disruption of friendship, the re-evaluation of familial bonds, and the struggle for self-acceptance are not presented as sequential milestones. Consequently, Dhar establishes a framework for understanding queer adolescence as temporality and emotionally distinct from heteronormative models. *Slightly Burnt* thus becomes a critical text for examining how narratives of queer youth in Indian literature can offer alternative modes of belonging, identity formation, and temporal experience.

Keywords- adolescence, heteronormativity, LGBTQ+ identity, narrative time, queer temporality.

Introduction

Dhar's *Slightly Burnt* is a creative work in the field of Indian young adult literature. It deals with LGBTQ+ themes within the Indian cultural context where all such discussions are criticized. Set in urban India, the novel revolves around the story of a teenage girl, Komal, who came to know that her best friend Sahil is a gay. The novel explores the character of Sahil, who identifies himself as a gay and the issues faced by him after "coming out" (Sedgwick 68) as his true self in front of his best friend Komal. Komal's gradually developing the understanding of queer identities gives a productive opportunity for analyzing the concept of queer temporality- a theoretical framework which questions the normative understandings of time and life experiences. This paper will highlight how queer time has been presented in *Slightly Burnt* and how it has subverted the conventional portrayals of adolescence, family dynamics, and societal norms.

In *Slightly Burnt*, queer time establishes through Sahil's experiences of adolescence, which diverge from heteronormative expectations. While his peers, including Komal, navigate the typical heteronormative

thinking such as dating, school life, and envisioning a future aligned with societal norms. Sahil is forced to confront a different timeline, formed by secrecy, fear of rejection, and the emotional struggle of managing a non-normative identity in an orthodox social setting. His coming out disrupts the linear, progress-oriented, narrative of teenage life and reflects a fragmented and nonlinear progression, marked by pauses, delays and emotional decline.

Queer Temporality: A Theoretical Framework

Queer time is a concept given by Jack Halberstam in his book *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005). Halberstam through this concept tries to flash a light on the idea that queer individuals experience time differently. Queer time refers to the idea that LGBTQ+ individuals does not follow the linear (general) heteronormative milestones of life cycle - such as childhood, education, marriage, reproduction, and career development. Rather, it develops in opposition to the heteronormative linear time structures, permitting queer individuals to imagine their future outside linear time structures. Moreover, queer time discards the view that life should revolve around building one's own family and the continual of legacy. In fact, it focuses on present and non-linear ways of living.

Queer time is built around a different way of understanding time. It challenges the common belief that people must follow a set timeline in life to be happy or successful. This usual timeline often includes getting married, having children, and focusing on creating the next generation. Society often treats these steps as signs that a person is growing up properly, becoming mature, and building a good future. These milestones shape the way people are expected to live their lives, pushing them to move in one specific direction. Queer time questions whether that path is the only or best way to live, and instead opens up space for different, non-traditional ways of experiencing life and imagining the future.

In her *Queer Time and Place* Halberstam continues her research which she did in her *Female Masculinity* (1998). She looks at queer communities like drag kings, punk musicians, and poets to show that queer people usually live outside the general timelines of growing up, getting a job, and starting a family. She examines the idea that being an adult means following a fixed path. Rather, she reveals that queer lives can follow different and non-traditional paths that don't always lead to a successful future. Halberstam asserts that queer time allows people to survive outside conventional heteronormative rules even if they are not in queer relationships. Halberstam argues that queer ways of experiencing time often go against the traditional ideas of how life should unfold like getting married, having kids, and following a typical family structure. Instead, queer communities create different ways of thinking about the future that don't depend on those usual life milestones. They imagine other kinds of lives and timelines that don't follow the standard path most people are expected to take. Queer time can also move differently from the usual pace of everyday life and challenge the typical timelines that focus on getting married, having kids, and raising a family. These traditional, straight-line life paths are called "straight time," (Boellstorff, 2007) and queer time questions or pushes back against them.

Queer Time in Slightly Burnt

The novel follows Sahil, the gay protagonist's journey of his coming out as his true self and his best friend, Komal's understanding of life from a different perspective when she came to know about Sahil as she already had dreams for her best friend's future girlfriend, marriage, and kids. She had her own plans for Sahil, which all got shattered in the blink of an eye. His revelation as a gay broke Komal's heart into a million pieces and she couldn't even understand what was exactly happening. She was not even aware of LGBTQ+ community exactly, which she later googled on her PC. She says, "I'd Googled enough to do a Ph.D. on it." (Dhar 79)

Sahil's identity provides an idea that his timeline doesn't align with the societal expectations, breaking normative general milestones of life cycle. His existence outside the expected milestones of teenage life shows his emotional strength and social alienation, handling a harsh world with calm determination. His queerness places him outside the script of school crushes, dating, and future planning. He doesn't want to fix anything, instead only to be accepted for who he truly is. Additionally, the friendship between Sahil and Komal gives a clear view about queer time. Komal is not able to accept their friendship and her inability to understand Sahil's sexuality disturbs general ways of understanding friendship, consequently highlighting the disruption of linear temporalities of time (which also includes adolescent friendship). This disruption further weakens their relationship. Their relationship resists emotional timelines which point towards queer time. Moreover, Komal, after getting knowledge about LGBTQ+ community goes to Usha McDowell's office. Usha supported her and made her understand that being a gay or a part of LGBTQ+ community is not a sin. Rather, she said, "Komal, you realize that our society doesn't make it easy for people who don't conform, who don't live traditional lives, get married, have children and so on? The law is not on the side of gay people either." (Dhar 79)

It was Usha McDowell who told Komal about the sufferings of gay people. She helps her understand that what she perceives as 'abnormal' is simply different. Her advice disrupts the heteronormative timeline by validating queer identities and experiences as equally legitimate, challenging the idea that there is a 'normal' way to grow up or form relationships. Later on, Komal started realizing that she cannot lose her best friend. She confronts her own prejudice and realizes that her discomfort is rooted more in societal conditioning than Sahil himself. Through this slow emotional processing (which reflects the idea of queer time) Komal eventually comes to accept Sahil for who he is. She recognizes that their bond doesn't have to fit into traditional categories, and real friendship means supporting each other even when it challenges your beliefs. Her journey from shock to acceptance describes how emotional growth doesn't follow a straight path. This is another instance in the novel which shows queer time and identity outside the heteronormative environment.

Komal's evolving perception of Sahil's identity, from shock to empathy occurs outside the typical timeline of adolescent emotional development. Her personal growth highlights how interactions with queer identities can trigger a reassessment of normative developmental milestones. The novel subverts the

conventional portrayal of adolescence by illustrating both Sahil and Komal navigate an alternate temporality.

Conclusion

Dhar's *Slightly Burnt* shows how queer time can be used as a powerful tool for challenging normative norms. Through its refusal of linear resolution, its depiction of emotional ambiguity, and its cultural specificity, the novel offers a compelling representation of queer time. Sahil's presence and Komal's developing response questions the idea that adolescence must follow a fixed path towards maturity. Dhar's work explores identity through moments of change and self-discovery, enriching Indian queer literature and young adult fiction. The story shows that growing up, forming friendships, and finding oneself doesn't happen on a fixed timeline. Sahil's path to self-acceptance is slow and non-linear, highlighting the value of embracing this process. This approach challenges traditional notions of personal growth, highlighting that taking time and being open to complexity can lead to more authentic understanding and self-discovery. The novel's treatment of family dynamics and societal norms is also infused with queer time. Sahil's silence in his family and his need to maintain a dual identity shows how queer individuals often exist in temporal separation with their families, whose expectations are rooted in heteronormative continuity. Thus, *Slightly Burnt* not only provides vision to queer identities but also subtly reimagines the timeline of youth itself, revealing how queer adolescents must live and grow in spaces that challenge dominant social chronologies.

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