

Queer as Subaltern: Role of the Zeitgeist from Christopher Marlowe to Derek Jarman

Asijit Datta

Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* has evolved as the essentialist Renaissance homosexual drama for its overindulgences in homoeroticism merged with the tyranny of the king with countercultural tendencies. *Edward II*, occurring in a dystopian social order and alienating itself till death of its non-heroes acts as a liberator, is self-deprecating and inherently masochistic to the point of randomness and politically paralyzed. Marlowe's Edward is an individualistic voice suppressed against anarchic self-aggrandizement and fantasies of "order" in a conventional providential setting. The agents of power within this Marlovian context are the bearers of a certain atrophied imagination which self-destructs habitation and structures of social environment. If power merged with homosexuality generates distance from the centre and confusion regarding the political, then homophobia linked to personal insurrection leads to the subversion of the dominant codes of objective certainties and violence against the 'natural'. However, Marlowe suffers from a kind of Holinshed crisis overcharging the homosexual king with constitutional and military ineptitude. *Edward II* as a play delineating with issues regarding homosexuality turns self-defeatist as the king remains incapacitated and almost reaches an absurd Hamletian inertia failing to act in the absence of Gaveston. Under the prevailing Elizabethan regulations, Marlowe's design fails to extract anything other than hierarchical sympathy/negation from the non-

The author is Research Scholar at the Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata.
E-mail : asijitdatta@gmail.com

homosexuals belonging to the heteronormative order and interpreting the militarily impotent delinquents residing in some alien “otherwhere”. Edward, the un-heroic, entangled within the claustrophobia of a double-edged discourse, is reduced to a pitiable non-performer. Marlowe, almost being true to the realistic historical situation, highlights the homosexual love of Edward and takes away the masculine prowess associated with the Elizabethan codes of kingship, as if one can’t be homosexual and authoritative at the same time. The aura of homosexuality as a distinct form of existence dissipates under the pressures of a failed “king’s” tragedy; as H. B. Charlton and R. D. Waller quote J. M. Robertson’s view in their introduction to Marlowe’s *Edward II*, that the play had no success on stage as “it obtrudes a theme always offensive” and the perverted sexual passion of mock-herir of a famous conqueror “could not have gratified Elizabethan patriotic sentiment” (29). The politics of power itself acts as a personified entity, enacting revenge out of a conscious historical reflection. The perverse dichotomy in the play arising from the clash of the hierarchy and the Realpolitik and the polarities between the either/or evokes within the audience sensibilities of alienation and defamiliarization. Stephen Greenblatt in his *Renaissance and Self-Fashioning* observes that *Edward II* “uses the emblematic method of admonitory drama but uses it to such devastating effect that the audience recoils in disgust. . . . The audience is forced to confront its insistence upon coherence, and the result is a profound questioning of the way audiences constitute meanings in plays and in life” (203).

The politico-erotic crisis of Edward as an individual is problematized under the structural gaze of the power relations. Ian McAdam in his *Edward II and the Illusion of Integrity* quotes from “Sex, Politics, and Self-Realization in Edward II”, where Claude J. Summers points out that the play has been dismissed as a proper “history” because of “its failure to promulgate a political lesson compatible with Tudor orthodoxy” (203). Summers referring to Alan Bray’s “Homosexuality in Renaissance England”, remarks that, “in the Renaissance sodomy generally did not denote a specific identity or relate to a particular kind of person, but was considered a temptation to which all men were subject and a symptom of universal dissolution. In this context, Marlowe’s intuition of sexuality as a defining characteristic of personality is all the more remarkable” (McAdam 204). What makes Edward a tragic character is not only limited to his homosexual tendencies but also his violation and trespassing of class structures. Edward breaks the master/slave dialectic, displays behaviour of a king emasculated, is depoliticized and consequently murdered, primarily due the infringement

of the codes of manliness associated with sodomy, for not being, as Sara M. Deats writes in her *A Study in Androgyny*, the “masculine” male (McAdam 217). The sociopolitical disruption results from the search of legitimacy of a homosexual relation (linked to bestiality under the Buggery act of 1533), a historical impossibility, in a mass-regulated heterosexual setup. The question that Marlowe poses is centred on the evasion of responsibility in the quest for selfhood and transcendence through human bonding, “Why should you love him whom the world hates so? / Because he loves me more than all the world” (Charlton and Waller 90) and “knowest thou not who I am? / Thy friend, thy self, another Gaveston” (Charlton and Waller 77). Edward, the scapegoat king, is killed not only to purge the state of that “vile” disease, but also to uphold the death as a symbolic emblem in the face of universal, historical narrative. Beyond the discrepancies, Marlowe constructs a text where the failure of aesthetic romantic wish-fulfilment echoes within the screams of Edward in the face of essential political resolution. Queen Isabella’s subjection to sexual deprivation and consequent rebellion, Mortimer’s anti-heroic act of subversion, and the role of religion in othering the king and marginalizing Gaveston, construct the socio-behavioural complexity of the play. Under the panoptic gaze and censoring of the Elizabethan prohibitions regarding same-sex love and sodomy, Marlowe, who verbally flaunted integration within homosexuality and disapproval of Christianity, relegated the written word of the play to vehement suggestiveness. The readers encounter Edward in the image of a non-ruler, rather dealing with the throes of satyriasis, constantly whining for his partner and acting only in the presence of an-other potential sexual companion. Marlowe’s *Edward II* lacks all sense of empowerment; the play generates a ‘sympathetic’ understanding within the heteronormative readers who see the suffering of the unfortunate king and the societal justification in his death for being not what they are. The scene of Edward’s death with compelling possibilities where Lightborn orders Matrevis and Gurney to bring him a burning rod and arrange a room with fire is a grotesque parody of the king’s own unsanctioned sodomy and is left to the reader’s interpretation. Dispelling the contingency of this scene, Alan Stewart reiterates Ranulph Higden from *Ploychronicon* that Edward died “by a red hot poker being thrust up into his bowels” (83).

The audience undergoes a confused catharsis in this forbidden zone of homosexuality beyond the customary realms of sixteenth century ‘unnatural love’, neither entirely experiencing the sexual acts, nor confronting the passion of Edward’s

death through anal penetration. Critics and playwrights till the late 1950's confined the play around the boundaries of a 'friendship play', till Tony Robertson's 1958 production for Cambridge University Marlowe Society revived it as an aesthetic discourse on male homosexual relationship. Defiant representations and criticisms of the play populated the stage and academic writings, with the designing of the term 'homosocial' by the queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, which referred to the erotic and non-erotic historical relation between men. Derek Jarman's *Edward II* (1991), demonstrates the continuity of the gay-struggle and homosexual love throughout the movement of history. The film becomes a blatant political statement against the subjugation of the lesbians and gays. Jarman uses the context of the original text as the fundamental base to explore and advocate the raging issue of homosexuality and translocates historical consciousness within the modern framework. Jarman's script is interfused with postmodern elements of conference rooms and board meetings to decide the future of the state, the implementation of army as the repressive state apparatus, the song by queer icon Annie Lennox, the counter-propagandist and anti-establishment banners and pamphlets, unabashed display of male nudity and sexuality. In an interview with Roy Grundmann in *History and the Gay Viewfinder*, Jarman talks of war at the local level, an imagistic-textual battle against historical oppression conducted through his films. Referring to the backdrop of Clause 25 banning gay sex in Britain and recriminalizing gay cruising and kissing in public, Jarman says, "I don't think if I had written this I would have gotten any funding. I couldn't believe they'd actually let me do this. Take the murder scene: Edward is killed by a red hot poker shoved up his ass. How is this going to look on the screen?" (26).

Jarman forces the audience in the very beginning of the film, where two nude homosexual hustlers kiss each other intensely, to enter with a re-formed eye opposed to social stigmatization. Lust, colour, revolution and politics blend into an aesthetic plenitude in this rendition. Through the choice of Marlowe's canonical text as an agitprop, Jarman penetrates the core of social foundations and cultural organization and appeals to the contemporary same-sex constituency. Jarman uses the independent set-up of the film as a subjective non-linear, unstable narrative against the objective conformist systems which perpetuate hegemonic power structures; the distortion of the Marlovian text is equated with the disfiguring of Gaveston's body and Edward's fantasy/torture sequence. Gaveston's death is highlighted as a political defeat of the state through homophobia and brutal police persecution. In the film, political activism,

movement toward reclaiming of equal civil rights, radical fictionality, counterattack the traditional spirit of anti-queer framing. The film celebrates the return of the subaltern male body banished from the heterosexual gaze and substantiated only with relations to masculine prowess and performance. In *Historical Phallicy: Derek Jarman's Edward II*, Bette Talvacchia refers to the dedication page of the film's published screenplay which states, "How to make a film of a gay love affair and get it commissioned. Find a dusty old play and violate it", and ends with the attempt to 'repeal all anti-gay laws' (112). The past acts as a rejoinder to the present to accommodate an artistic movement through aesthetic, historical mise-en-scene, against political subjection and categorization. Jarman's remark accompanying the screenplay that "Filmed history is always a misinterpretation. . . . The image is the image, and the word, oh don't muck around with that, in the beginning was the word", highlights the semantic disjunction which the modern narrative juxtaposes on the historical (Talvacchia 112). Talvacchia asserts that "Extra-textual ideas and occurrences" in the film, "are transmitted wordlessly, through commanding images and inventive staging" (112). Jarman deconstructs Marlowe's printed page, tampers with the dialogues, interchanges historically defined role, introduces blood imagery and modern expletives to reconstruct the contemporaneous reality on the superstructure of medieval and Elizabethan reality. The incorporation of Gaveston's informal ceremonial scene with the enlarged ornamented sword has definite references to sharing of the phallic responsibility against the political authority. The scene of the "body-conscious" gay men in the gym exercising rhythmically to the instructor's voice, Edward's glinting torso in an exhibitionist act ironically challenge the accusations of new-age barons who complain on grounds of physical weakness and lavish overindulgences. Jarman constitutes the entire film in the form of a hunt where the heterosexual institution denigrates, subjugates and levels the homosexual. The allegation addressed to Edward upfront, in the complete presence of the "Chorus of Nobility" is preceded by the forced entry of a pack of hounds into the chamber, which foregrounds the animalistic and sadistic *jouissance* of hunting. Jarman adds an ironic spitting sequence during the expulsion of Gaveston, where the priests aligned in a straight line spit on Gaveston's jeans and leather jacket and the road simultaneously, replicating a comical purgation of the land by proxy. Restrained by the economic limitations of staging a historical drama, the film is designed in the style of a memory-unfolding episode, representing the disjointed narrative most of the times rather than enacting it. The expanse of empty, unpainted, concrete spaces within

the kingdom, the area leading up to the throne, the desolation in the alleys and bylanes, the burning dungeon, the sexual nothingness in marital compulsion, force the audience to interpret the vacuum. Jarman's inclusion of the independent bedroom scene works as a suspended addition to Marlowe's historical script, never tampering the narrative flow; rather, it provides a dimension to the sexual tension in the royal marriage, where a mute transferral of Isabella's desire and Edward's inability to perform heterosexual intercourse culminates in a masochistic punishment for Edward and consequent frustration of the queen. Possibly the most artistically gruesome scene is the Christ-like crucifixion of Gaveston's murderer hanging from the naked flesh of an ox, imported straight from Rembrandt's "The Slaughtered Ox", and Edward's revelry in the blood of the punished. In Jarman, Christ's bones and blood are removed; homosexuality emerges as the new religion, where the body itself becomes a subject of veneration and exaltation. Talvacchia discovers the "Caravaggesque prototype" in Edward's narcissistic looking down into the dungeon's pool, allusion to Goya's "The Third of May 1808" in the military round-up of the three lesbians, and borrowing from Fuseli's nude drawings in Gaveston's nude cavorting on the throne. The ritualistic, clustered, circular dance of nude men in the darkness with the background enveloped in the cries of agony is a reminder of the oppression suffered by the homosexuals. In the civil riot scene, Jarman interfuses the modern continuity and the historical consumption of events to produce a tangible threat to the heterosexual eye of the spectator. Through the carnivalesque representation of the war sequence, Edward assumes charge of the gay activists under the banner *OutRage* (the British LGB group formed in 1990) against the state police of Isabella and Mortimer. The display of non-violent rebellion shows whistling, yelling and posters upholding the anti-repression messages ("Get your filthy laws off our bodies", "Stop violence and lesbians and gay men", "Gay desire is not a crime", "Liberty, Equality, Homosexuality"), against the periodic chanting of the army metal against the glass-shield. Jarman seals the historical gaps in the film with the contemporary political problematic of the gay community.

The representation of women in the film as a political contradistinction from the Marlovian text, can be divided into five segments; Queen Isabella's journey from a dysfunctional marriage to sexual autonomy and political violence (bringing into account Margaret Thatcher's England), Annie Lennox as the new wave LGBT activist, the three women in the group of the ruling elite Chorus, the suppressed lesbians and nuns in the riot in their attempt to claim their rights, and prostitutes performing

sadomasochistic, kinky sex with Mortimer, but enjoying the more tender homosexual kiss amongst themselves in the absence of Mortimer. Through Isabella's transformation from the bejeweled queen to the dead deer shooting, blood-sucking, power-craving monster, Jarman doesn't introduce the mythical, dependent, subjugated woman under another potent military master and thereby connoting misogyny; Isabella, rather, is too much in charge of herself, engaging in the vampiric act, an ironic reversal of the male sucking the breast, running and gasping to place herself on the throne alongside Mortimer, and in the process deconstructing the cultural readings of the gendered woman. The film pushes the savage Marlovian ending of Edward's murder to the zone of nightmare, where the assassins force Edward to bend and Lightborn penetrates the anus with a red hot poker, a reminder of state interpellation through violence. In the altered reality of the film, Lightborn is used in the sense of light-bearer for the unseen and desired future of equality, when he enters the dungeon in the end, throws the rod into the pool, and kisses the king. The most controversial character of the film is the son of Edward who undergoes drastic gender confusion under the mother who feminizes the son with make-up and jewels and provides robots, masks and guns for self-preservation. Edward III is often discovered by the camera with a torch in the hand encountering the secrets and complexities of the kingdom and symbolically searching for his own identity; in one of the later scenes he tastes the blood of his uncle Kent, as if participating in the heinous act of the mother to join the ways of the ruler. The androgynous child in blazer and trousers, wearing his mother's earrings and heels, in the end, acts as a powerful instrument of Jarman's ideal future when he incarcerates Isabella and Mortimer within a cage. The scene is cut by the camera waving along the statue-like activists, stilled into contemplation by the increasing deaths of homosexuals in the country. Jarman weaves the end with a voiceover from Edward flowing like a hypnotic, trance-like plea to the audience,

. . . what are kings, when regiment is gone,
But perfect shadows in a sunshine day?
Come, death, and with thy fingers close my eyes,
Or if I live, let me forget myself.

The choice of the same sex subject for sexual fulfilment is often regarded as a part of an ambiguous and disorientation process; there is no space for what Foucault

would call “a hermaphroditism of the soul”. In a binarized surrounding the acceptance and identification of the homosexual as other, of an/other homosexual as an/other other against the heterosexual big Other becomes a complex problematic. The subject-formation of the heterosexual woman who can under certain occasions (since she is “immoral” and knows not how to control her libido) deviate into homosexuality to satisfy man’s masturbatory needs, emerges vis-à-vis the epistemological subjugation of the heterosexual man who is inherently disavowed from being anything other than what he is perceived as. Parallel and moving away from this is the male-male bonding where the orthodox visual dimension fails to endure the loss of the aesthetics. There, two men engaged in love-making with the ‘blatant’ use of the organ in comparison to the traditional lesbian ‘limited’ to her hands, pushes off the sexualisation of the graphic intercourse and introduces deformity and objectionable threat at the suspension of the ‘masculine’. The aesthetics related to the male body is often akin to the baroque palace architecture or renaissance sculpture which can be legitimately consumed by the male admirer, only as a work of art. The male physiology is hyperaestheticised, in a sublime and impersonal way; gay sex infuses it with the obscene. A rigidity to act and its consequent guilt factor accompany the dialectical forces of arousal of homosexual desire in the heterosexual man.

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