

Ephemeral Intimacies and Queer Temporalities: Reframing Power, Desire, and Identity in André Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name*

-Dr. Vaishali S Biradar
Lecturer – English (GES – Class – II)
Government Polytechnic for Girls,
Surat, Gujarat

Abstract

This article critically examines André Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name* (2007) through the intersecting lenses of Power Theory, Queer Theory, and LGBTQ+ ideology. Focusing on the novel's exploration of temporality, desire, and the instability of identity, it engages with Michel Foucault's notion of biopower, Judith Butler's theory of performativity, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's epistemology of the closet. Elio and Oliver's relationship is read as a performative space of desire that both resists and is constituted by the cultural mechanisms of repression, temporality, and normativity. Aciman's narrative resists rigid sexual taxonomies and instead foregrounds the liminality of queer becoming. The article argues that the novel's poetics of memory and longing constructs a "queer temporality" that subverts heteronormative narratives of love and loss. Through an intertextual reading enriched by literary and theoretical references, the paper contends that *Call Me by Your Name* reimagines the politics of intimacy within a post-closet, post-identity framework.

Introduction: Reading Queer Intimacies beyond Identity

In the contemporary canon of queer literature, André Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name* occupies a unique position. Published in 2007 and adapted into an acclaimed film in 2017, the novel evokes an intensely sensuous and philosophical exploration of adolescent desire, memory, and the evanescence of queer intimacy. Elio and Oliver's summer-long entanglement in 1980s Italy unfolds not as a conventional romance but as an introspective meditation on desire's mutability and the queerness of time itself.

Far from adhering to fixed sexual or romantic identities, Aciman's narrative foregrounds the instability, fluidity, and performative nature of subjectivity. "We had the stars, you and I," Elio recalls, "and this is given once only" (Aciman 230). The temporariness of their union underscores the central theme of loss and longing that pervades the novel, situating it firmly within queer theoretical discourses that destabilize binary understandings of gender, sexuality, and time.

This article aims to examine *Call Me by Your Name* through three interrelated frameworks: **Foucault's Power Theory**, particularly the regulation of sexuality and identity through discourse; **Judith Butler's performativity**, which interrogates how identity is constituted through repeated acts; and **Eve Sedgwick's queer epistemology**, which foregrounds the tension between secrecy and disclosure in the formation of the queer subject.

Desire, Discipline, and the Surveillance of the Self

Although *Call Me by Your Name* is set in the ostensibly permissive atmosphere of 1980s northern Italy, the narrative remains shadowed by cultural codes and structures that discipline queer desire. Michel Foucault's analysis of power in *The History of Sexuality* provides a compelling framework to understand this tension. Foucault argues that modern power operates not through prohibition but through the incitement and regulation of discourse:

"Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault 93).

Elio's initial silence regarding his feelings for Oliver reflects an internalized form of surveillance, a disciplining of the self even in the absence of direct oppression. The secrecy that veils their relationship is not simply a result of societal taboo but a manifestation of biopolitical power—what Foucault calls the "policing of sex."

Even as Elio declares, "We can't talk about things like this," the novel shows that desire is already embedded in the language, gestures, and silences between them (Aciman 24). Their unspoken communication, their delayed confessions, and the impossibility of naming their desires are not failures but structured by power itself—what Foucault would identify as "productive power," generating both subjectivity and repression simultaneously.

The Third Space of Queer Performativity

Judith Butler's theory of performativity, particularly in *Gender Trouble* (1990), further complicates any attempt to assign fixed categories to Elio or Oliver. Butler posits that gender and sexuality are not expressions of a pre-existing identity but are constituted through repeated performative acts. In this light, Elio's self-fashioning—his imitation of Oliver's walk, his use of his phrases, and the now-iconic moment when they exchange names—functions as performative re-inscription.

"Call me by your name and I'll call you by mine," Oliver proposes (Aciman 145).

This act blurs boundaries between self and other, invoking a non-binary, non-essentialist formulation of subjectivity. The exchange of names is not simply an erotic gesture but a symbolic erasure of ego boundaries, collapsing the Cartesian dualism of "I" and "Thou."

This can be understood as the instantiation of a "third space," not unlike Homi Bhabha's postcolonial formulation, in which new forms of identity emerge beyond binary oppositions. It is in this interstitial space that queer intimacy operates—not as a declaration of identity but as a form of becoming. Butler emphasizes that the subversion of normative gendered and sexual codes occurs precisely through repetition with a difference. In Elio and Oliver's relationship, desire is a performative field of possibility, not a marker of fixed sexual orientation.

Queer Temporality and the Epistemology of the Closet

The novel's structuring around memory and retrospection contributes to what José Esteban Muñoz has termed "queer temporality"—a non-linear, affectively charged temporality that

resists heteronormative chronologies of marriage, reproduction, and closure. Elio's narration, recounted years after the events have occurred, inscribes the love affair within a melancholic temporality. This queering of time is not merely stylistic; it is ideological. As Eve Sedgwick notes in *Epistemology of the Closet*, queerness often exists "in a space of narrative intransitivity" (Sedgwick 6), refusing both plot resolution and epistemological certainty.

Throughout the novel, the reader is kept in a liminal state between knowing and not-knowing. The couple's romantic consummation is deferred, implied rather than described in graphic detail. Such narrative strategies reproduce the affective tensions of the closet—not simply a space of secrecy, but a mode of being. Sedgwick's claim that the closet is "the defining structure for gay oppression" becomes pertinent here: the closet in *Call Me by Your Name* is not merely social but epistemological. It is embedded in the narrative structure, the syntax of delay, silence, and longing.

"What remains unsaid is often more powerful than what is said," Elio reflects, articulating the novel's core epistemological paradox (Aciman 97).

This structure aligns with Sedgwick's understanding of queer reading as a mode that attends to the gaps, the omissions, and the unspeakable. The novel's power lies not in its explicitness, but in its gestures toward the ineffable.

Erotics of Vulnerability and the Refusal of Taxonomy

Aciman's narrative resists classificatory frameworks. Elio never self-identifies as gay, bisexual, or queer, nor does Oliver until the final chapters, and even then only obliquely. This refusal resonates with current critiques of identity-based politics in queer theory. As David Halperin suggests in *Saint Foucault*, queerness is "not a thing one is but a horizon one navigates" (Halperin 62).

Elio's fluidity is not portrayed as ambiguity but as multiplicity. His relationships with both Oliver and Marzia are not positioned as contradictory but as coexistent. His desire is not channeled through fixed categories but through sensuous encounters, intellectual resonances, and bodily vulnerability. In this way, the novel stages what Leo Bersani has described as the "aesthetic subject"—one that seeks "not to be but to desire" (Bersani 14).

Furthermore, the refusal of a redemptive or tragic ending—there is neither cathartic reunion nor total estrangement—subverts heteronormative narrative arcs. The final encounter, years later, ends with Elio remembering:

"I'll never have what we had again. You know it, and I know it" (Aciman 243).

Rather than closure, the novel offers elegiac openness, privileging the temporality of affect over the finality of resolution. This ambiguity becomes a narrative mode through which queerness is aesthetically and ethically inscribed.

Memory, Interiority, and Queer Poetics

One of the most profound aspects of Aciman's novel is its interiority—the sensuous depth of Elio's reflections, his attachment to place, music, and literature. In this affective landscape,

queerness is not an identity to be affirmed or denied but an atmospheric presence that suffuses the texture of experience.

Bachelardian spaces—rooms, water, sunlit piazzas—function as repositories of queer memory. The peach scene, for example, is emblematic of how desire collapses subject-object binaries and merges the erotic with the symbolic. As Elio contemplates the fruit and his own bodily responses, the act becomes both transgressive and revelatory. This scene enacts what Carolyn Dinshaw calls “queer touch across time,” a temporal erotics in which objects, bodies, and memories intermingle.

The lyrical prose style further enhances the novel’s affective density. Elio’s voice—part adolescent, part melancholic adult—underscores the unresolvability of queer desire. The recursive structure of the narrative, the interweaving of past and present, underscores that the novel’s queerness resides not only in its characters but in its form.

Conclusion: Queer Desire as Ephemeral Resistance

André Aciman’s Call Me by Your Name is a profoundly affective and intellectually rich meditation on queer desire, memory, and identity. Through its resistance to sexual taxonomy, its queering of temporality, and its performative narrative strategies, the novel enacts a radical reimagining of intimacy. Foucault’s theory of power, Butler’s concept of performativity, and Sedgwick’s epistemology of the closet collectively illuminate the complex negotiations that structure Elio and Oliver’s relationship.

Rather than seeking affirmation or moral resolution, the novel privileges the ephemerality and intensity of desire. In doing so, it enacts what queer theorist Sara Ahmed might call a “willful disorientation,” unsettling normative expectations about love, gender, and selfhood. Ultimately, *Call Me by Your Name* offers not a manifesto but an elegy—one that celebrates the fluidity of queer becoming, the impossibility of capture, and the enduring beauty of what slips away.

Works Cited

- Aciman, André. *Call Me by Your Name*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.
 Bersani, Leo. *Homos*. Harvard UP, 1995.
 Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
 Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Vintage Books, 1990.
 Halperin, David M. *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. Oxford UP, 1995.
 Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. NYU Press, 2009.
 Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California Press, 1990.
 Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke UP, 2006.