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Reimagining Futures: Queer Spatiality and Futurity in *Monster*

Jaleena J S
Dr. Arathy Asok

This paper critically examines Hirokazu Kore-eda's film *Monster* through the analytical framework of queer spatiality and queer futurity. *Monster* follows the story of Minato and Yori, who form a deep emotional bond with each other as they navigate the challenges of childhood, identity, and social exclusion. Drawing on Judith Halberstam's idea of queer space, the paper explores how ordinary spaces are transformed into sites of queer intimacy and resistance. The study challenges the normative configuration of spaces and examines how queer individuals carve out moments of safety and belonging even in marginal and abandoned spaces. These reclaimed spaces serve not only as a temporary refuge from the surveillance and discipline of heteronormative society, but it also serves as an alternative way of being in the world. The paper also uses José Esteban Muñoz's theory of queer futurity to explore how the film creates space for imagining queer possibilities. Rather than seeing queerness as something tragic, the film offers a vision of hope and resistance that gestures towards queer liberation. The study employs qualitative narrative analysis, focusing on how queerness and its complexities are presented through plot structure, and character development.

Keywords: Queer space, Queer Futurity, Resistance, Heteronormativity, *Monster.*

The Queer community has faced a long history of exclusion from mainstream media, literature and film. For decades, queer individuals have been marginalized, erased, and relegated to the periphery of popular culture. This exclusion has been so profound that finding meaningful representation of queer identities in media and literature has been rare. The twenty-first century has witnessed a significant increase in queer representation and it has been a crucial step towards greater visibility and acceptance of queer people. However, despite this progress, queer representation still sometimes remains implicit and layered, requiring the readers and audience to engage with the subtext to understand the underlying queer narrative. While some queer representations are explicit and overt, others are implicit and suggestive in the portrayal of queer themes. By employing queer theory in the reading of queer subtext we can uncover the implicit queer narratives that challenge the traditional notion of gender and sexuality.

Queer theory as a critical framework interrogates the norms around gender and sexual identity and how they are regulated through power and social and cultural institutions. Nikki Sullivan (2003) opines that queer theory is a "deconstructive strategy, which aims to denaturalise heteronormative understandings of sex, gender, sexuality, sociality, and the relations between them"(p. 81). By denaturalising these understandings queer theory aims to expose the underlying power dynamics, social constructs and cultural norms that shape our perception of sex and gender. Seidman (1995) argues that the framework of queer theory is "less a matter of explaining the repression or expression of a homosexual minority, than an analysis of the hetero/ homosexual figure as a power/ knowledge regime that shapes the ordering of desires, behaviours, social institutions, and social relations." (p. 128). Queer theory examines the way power works to legitimize some forms of expression of gender and sexuality while stigmatizing others.

This paper draws on the concepts of queer spatiality and queer futurity to analyse the Japanese film *Monster*. The study employs qualitative narrative analysis, focusing on how queerness and its complexities are presented through plot structure, and character

development. *Monster* withholds overt representation and instead uses desire, intimacy, and repression to express queerness. Textual interpretation is used to read how the film constructs alternative modes of belonging and futures for queer characters. Drawing on Judith Halberstam's idea of queer space and José Esteban Muñoz's idea of queer futurity, the paper explores how ordinary spaces are transformed into sites of queer intimacy and resistance.

Queer spatiality explores the ways in which queer individuals and communities create and reimagine spaces against the dominant norms of gender and sexuality. Drawing on the work of Judith Halberstam, this paper analyses how queer subjects create, navigate and claim spaces for themselves. In the work *In a Queer Time and Place,* Halberstam (2005) argues that queer space "refers to the space-making practices within the postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understanding of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics" (p. 6). Queer individuals create their own spaces in opposition to normative publics. These spaces encompass not just physical, concrete locations, but also the conceptual understanding of space that arises from queer experiences.

Queer Futurity, as theorized by José Esteban Muñoz provides a futuristic lens through which queer subjects imagine a hopeful future beyond the oppressive reality. In his work *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz (2009) considers queer futurity as an "opening or horizon" (p. 91) that holds utopian promises. Muñoz's concept of futurity is used in this paper to analyse how the film *Monster* envisions an alternative, hopeful future for queer subjects. For Muñoz queerness is an "ideality", and queer futurity allows a mode of hope and refusal to accept the limits imposed by the present.

Even though his idea of futurity offers valuable insights into queer theory, some critics have critically challenged it. Lee Edelman (2004), in his work *No Future,* posits that queerness is often aligned with negativity rather than futurity. Edelman argues that "far from perpetuating the fantasy of meaning's actual realization, the queer comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity.." (p.4).

According to him, queerness does not fit into the societal ideal of progress and futurity. Likewise, Heather Love (2007), in her work *Feeling Backward,* critiques how queer theory is becoming overly oriented towards hope and optimism. She does not reject futurity in the absolute way as Edelman does, but she insists that, along with futurity, queer shame and queer past should also be explored (p.108). Despite these critiques, queer futurity is important so as not to leave queerness with no space other than that of survival. This article uses the ideas of Halberstam and Muñoz without overlooking the realities of queerness in the Asian context. Concepts of queer spatiality and queer futurity converge in how queer individuals carve out spaces that are both physical and imaginative. Together, these analytical frameworks are used to examine how *Monster* constructs alternative queer realities through spatial resistance and imagined futures.

Monster is a mystery thriller directed by critically acclaimed and Academy Award nomined Hirokazu Kore-eda. The screenplay was written by Yuji Sakamoto. *Monster* marks a rare occasion for Kore-eda as he has not worked with another writer's script since his 1995 debut *Maborosi* (Rooney, 2023). It is also notable as the last work of Japanese composer Ryuichi Sakamoto before his passing. *Monster,* at its core, is a film about the exploration of the complexities of human nature, the fluidity of truth and the significance of perspective. Beyond that, it is also a coming-of-age tale, which explores the complex journey of self-discovery and identity formation. Although the film never explicitly states that Minato and Yori have homosexual or homoromantic inclinations, a careful analysis of subtexts reveals that they indeed have deep romantic affection for each other.

Drawing on the conceptual framework of Halberstam's and Muñoz's theories of queer spatiality and futurity, the analysis situates *Monster* within the Japanese cultural context that shapes how queerness is articulated and negotiated. In Japanese media, queerness is often shown through subtle forms of representation rather than explicit articulations. Audrey Yue (2014) argues that in current queer Asian narratives, rather than presenting coming out as a decisive speech act moment of homosexual identity, it is highlighted as a process of negotiation and becoming (p. 148). In most instances of modern

queer narratives, coming out is not treated in isolation, but understood in relation to changing social and cultural dynamics with others. Chris Berry (2001) argues that queer Asian representation should not be understood as an imitation of Western gay identity but as a form of hybridity situated within socio-cultural contexts. He asserts that queer Asian identity in media is produced through negotiation between western gay discourse and the local cultural systems (p.p 212- 213). Thus, representation of queerness in Asian media does not blindly imitate Western models, but is produced as a hybrid formation shaped by both global and local values.

Monster is presented in three parts, where each segment is shown from a different perspective. The film follows the story of a single mother Saori Mugino who suspects that her son Minato Mugino is being abused by his teacher Mr. Hori. Saori confronts the school authorities and demands to take action but the authorities remain unresponsive to her concerns. Saori then directly confronts Mr. Hori and she is rather shocked by his claim that Minato is actually bullying a student named Yori Hoshikawa. In an effort to verify the claim, Saori visits Yori's house. There she is met with a sweet but strange Yori who shows concern for Minato. The school eventually suspends Mr. Hori, but he returns unexpectedly to school to find answers from Minato and to prove his innocence. Seeing Mr. Hori prompts Minato to flee in panic which leads to him falling down a flight of stairs. Later, Mr. Hori uncovers the truth and he visits Minato's home, only to find that he has vanished.

In the second segment of the movie, Mr. Hori's perspective is shown. Hori's perception of Minato is that of a troubled student who is struggling to control his emotions. Hori has witnessed Minato throwing things in the classroom without any apparent reason and locking Yori in the bathroom, which leads him to believe that he is a troubled child. He also doubts that Minato is bullying Yori. To investigate this, Hori visits Yori's house only to discover that his father is an alcoholic who abuses him. Later, when Saori accuses him of being abusive to Minato, he is forced to resign from the school. He is then harassed by the journalists, and abandoned by his girlfriend. The situation causes him emotional distress to the extent that he

contemplates suicide. In his home alone and distraught, wondering where it all went wrong, Hori's attention is drawn to Yori's homework, where he sees Minato's and Yori's names scribbled in the paper. In a moment of clarity, Hori realises that Minato was not bullying Yori, but the two children shared a very close bond. To address this, he goes to Saori's house, where he finds that Minato is missing.

The third and final segment of the movie is shown from Minato's perspective and it gives a comprehensive understanding of the plot. The final part uncovers the mystery that has been concealed throughout the narrative and provides clarity to the story's complexities. As the story unfolds, we see Yori, a shy boy who is bullied by his classmates forming an unlikely bond with Minato. Yori and Minato become surprisingly close and they often meet at their secret hideout which is an abandoned railcar. Minato often acts harshly towards Yori while at school which leads Hori to misinterpret their complex relationship. The film is layered and complex which needs careful unravelling to reveal the truth. The film "isn't about what it initially appears to be; the narrative peels away the diversionary misapprehensions until it arrives at its emotional kernel of truth" (Bradshaw, 2023). The film shows how the subjective nature of truth and changes in perspective can reshape the narrative.

The central characters in *Monster*, Minato and Yori, share an unusual bond. Yori is a shy, effeminate boy who is always bullied by his classmates because he looks and acts in a certain way. The bullying Yori faces reinforces the societal expectation of masculinity and femininity and shows how any other expressions outside these rigid boundaries are seen as deviant. Even though Minato is friends with Yori, he maintains distance and never engages in conversation during school hours. Minato is reluctant to associate himself with Yori in the classroom setting as he fears that it would threaten his social position and identity within the school environment. Here, the classroom becomes a site of spatial regulation where only normative gender and sexual behaviours are sanctioned. Yori's effeminacy is seen as deviancy within the heteronormative space, and Minato fears that associating with him might lead to his exclusion from the normative social order of the classroom. When Minato shows even a hint of

compassion towards Yori, his classmates mock him. They keep taunting Minato by saying, "Do you like Hoshikawa? Gross." (Kore-eda, 2023, 1:38:49). This causes him homosexual panic and Minato fights Yori in front of their classmates. Homosexual panic refers to "those behaviors which an individual who may be experiencing subterranean homosexual feelings (whether or not he/she is overtly homosexual), employs to deny/defend against the overt manifestation of active homosexuality" (Baptiste, 1990, pp.121-22). Sometimes it can lead to aggressive and violent behaviour towards queer people, like in the case of Minato. He is not necessarily against Yori, but rather the social consequence of their association. This illustrates that societal norms and gender expectations are regulated even in childhood, enforcing heteronormative standards.

The restrictive spatial politics of the classroom can be seen in other instances in the movie. Yori is often bullied for his effeminacy and his friendship with girls. Once when Yori sides with his friend Kuroda, he is mocked by his classmates. They ask, "Why do you take the girls' side? Are you a girl? A girl alien?" (1:20:23). Yori refusing to tease Kuroda and deciding to support the girl disrupts the expected performance of boyhood. His classmates call him a girl alien, making him an outsider to the expected male social order. This rendering him as an outsider is not just because he supported a girl, but primarily because he is effeminate, as "other men don't validate them as masculine" (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 22). Yori's effeminate traits become visible markers of queerness within the classroom space and they disrupt the normative expectation of masculinity. In this scene, Minato wants to help Yori and creates a diversion by throwing and thrashing things in the classroom to draw the bullies' attention away. This can be seen as what Muñoz might call disidentification. Disidentification is a strategy that queer people make use of to resist the socially dominant patterns of identification. Muñoz (1999) argues that disidentification is "survival strategies that minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (p. 4). Minato cannot openly go against the bullies as it would risk his social standing

and he cannot openly support Yori as it would associate him with gayness. Instead, he causes a disruption in the system and shifts the power dynamics without explicitly siding with Yori. Minato works within a dominant power structure but he "neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it (Muñoz, 1999, p.11). Queer individuals often adopt approaches that involve appropriating and altering dominant narratives for their survival in heteronormative spaces.

Minato and Yori's school acts as a restrictive space regulated by heteronormative norms. In a scene, Yori gives Minato snacks and when Minato hesitates to eat, he says, "I haven't touched them, so they're not dirty." (1:17:22). By assuring that he has not touched the snacks, Yori navigates this space by accommodating the logic of the dominant narrative that he should distance his body so as not to contaminate things. Minato assures him that he does not think they are dirty, but Yori in a disheartened way says "you might catch my disease" (1:17:27). This shows Yori's deep internalized shame. The regulative spaces have taught him to perceive himself as contaminated. Homosexuality was historically pathologized and framed as contagious. This has perpetuated the idea that being gay is something to be ashamed of and it leads to internalized homophobia. Minato's reply that he "doesn't think they are dirty" (1:17: 25) and his eating the snack is crucial as he rejects the notion that Yori is dirty. Yori subtly touching Minato's hair in this scene shows that Minato's assurance helps Yori to briefly reimagine himself outside shame. This interaction opens up a tiny queer space within the hostile environment of their school.

Minato and Yori carve out their own queer spaces through small gestures and intimacies. When Yori's bullies take away his sneakers, Minato gives him one of his sneakers and both of them walk home with only one sneaker each (1:22:12). By sharing their sneakers, they create an intimate form of support that resists the isolation imposed on Yori by their classmates. The physical space of the road becomes a temporary queer space as it allows them to momentarily step outside the constraints of the heteronormative power structure. Judith Halberstam (2005) asserts that identity is not just rooted in the physical body and she places "sexual subjectivities within

and between embodiment, place, and practice" (p.5). Minato and Yori's identities are shaped through their interaction within spaces and through small acts of intimacy. Heterosexual relations and intimacies are often supported not just through explicit references like "love plot and sentimentality but materially in marriage and family law, in the architecture of the domestic, in the zoning of the work and politics. Queer culture by contrast has almost no institutional matrix for its counterintimacies" (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p.562). So, Minato and Yori sharing sneakers is an act of non-normative intimacy which can be seen as a resistance to the heteronormative policing of their classmates.

Despite trying to distance himself from Yori at school, Minato finds himself getting close to him, mirroring his internal struggle with his sexuality. Minato and Yori meet regularly at an abandoned railcar. This abandoned railcar stands as *Monster's* most prominent symbol of queer spatiality and queer futurity. This railcar represents a liminal space, a place outside of the heterosexual matrix, where they can express themselves freely. They decorate the railcar with colourful papers and lights, thus transforming the abandoned space into a site of play and intimacy. Muñoz (2009) opines that "queer aesthetics, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of forward-dawning futurity" (p.1). Minato and Yori transform the railcar into something beautiful and meaningful. The railcar symbolizes a queer world they are building together. Muñoz (2009) in his *Cruising Utopia,* argues that reality is oppressive to queer people and queerness is a way to be different in the world that is shaped by heteronormativity. In the railcar Minato and Yori play a game of make-believe, where Yori drives and Minato fake calls from a broken phone. Minato asks, "Is it sunny where you are"? (1:25:34) to which Yori replies smilingly, "It's sunny here" (1:25: 36). Muñoz (2009) says "queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and insistence on potentiality on concrete possibility for another world" (p:1). Through their play, Minato and Yori create an alternate reality, and an imagined future where there is hope and happiness.

Minato and Yori's play in the wilderness near the rail tracks suggests that they exist in a space where they are free, and they

navigate through the queer geography, both physically and emotionally. When they reach the end of the railway track, the way is blocked by a gate (1:26:19). It shows the boundaries placed on the queer existence by the heteronormative society. Even the children draw these boundaries for themselves because of their internalized homophobia. Here, their future possibilities appear foreclosed. This echoes Muñoz's idea that queerness often is "not yet here". Even though Minato knows that he has a special affection for Yori, he is not able to accept it and he sets boundaries for himself. When Yori says that he is leaving the school, Minato is seemingly distressed and says, "I don't want you to go away" (1:36:37). The possible tension between these two children is shown when Yori calls Minato by his name and hugs him. When Yori hugs him, Minato wants to reciprocate the closeness, but he is held back by his fear and shame. He almost allows the intimacy, but when the reality hits him, he pulls back and asks Yori to get away from him. Minato pushes Yori and runs away from the railcar (1:36:51). Their queer utopia inside the railcar collapses here because of Minato's fear and repression.

Minato comes to terms with his identity during his conversation with the school headmistress. He admits to the headmistress that he "likes someone, but I can't tell anyone. So, I lie because they will know I can never be happy" (1:47:50). Minato hides his sexuality and believes that he will never be happy. Societal narratives portray queer lives as "often doomed, destined to remain in shadows where nothing grows" (El-Hafez, 2020). Here, Minato's queer emotions are forced into shadows and he has to lie to protect himself. Michel Foucault (1978) argues that if sex and sexuality are "condemned to prohibition, nonexistence and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of deliberate transgression" (p. 6). Minato's act of admitting that he likes someone is a form of transgression as he breaks the enforced repression of his queer desire. The headmistress's reply to him further reassures him that it is okay to be who you are. The headmistress answers, "If only some people can have it, that's not happiness. That's nonsense. Happiness is something anyone can have" (1:49:15). This scene marks a shift in Minato's identity development. The headmistress's reply offers him a vision of the world

where there is hope for the queer. For Muñoz, queerness is an "educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present". The headmistress's affirmative response offers Minato a vision of a liveable future.

Towards the end of the movie, Minato visits Yori's home, only to find him in the bathtub, fully clothed and beaten up by his father because of his identity (1:51:27). Yori faces emotional and physical abuse at the hands of his own father. Yori's father has ingrained in him the idea that he has a "pig brain", and quite sadly he has internalized this belief. Here "pig brain" can be seen as a dehumanizing metaphor for Yori's homosexuality. As Sarah (2009) points out, homophobia "originates, and is enforced, initially within the family" (p. 33). Yori's home works as a domestic space which is oppressive and offers no safety. Even though it is storming outside the two children leave Yori's house to their railcar. The abandoned railcar is their safe place, irrespective of what happens outside. This is a space separate from the violence and oppression of the outside world. In the railcar, they snack, laugh, and simply are themselves.

When the storm subsides, they climb up the railcar and crawl out through a tunnel (1:55:31). The crawling out of the tunnel and emerging into the sunlight can be seen as a symbolic rebirth. Once they are outside, Yori asks, "Were we Reborn?" (1:55:51) to which Minato replies, "I don't think that happened" (1:55:54). The boys are not literally reborn and the world has not changed, but they have created a new way of being for themselves. In the final scene, the boys run through the wilderness as they usually do, but this time, when they reach the end of the railway track, there is no gate to restrict them (1:56:39). The path with no gates offers a vision of queer futurity. This scene offers an "illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality". (Muñoz, 2009, p.1). The disappearance of the gate suggests the collapse of heteronormative boundaries and the emergence of space and a future filled with possibilities.

Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Monster* offers a delicate portrayal of queer childhood intimacy through the characters of Minato and Yori. Much of the discourse around queer representation in films is centred

around adult identities. In this film, Kore-eda offers an insight into the realm of queer childhood and how queer children navigate through life. The film shows that even in a time of strict social surveillance, oppression and violence, queer connection and intimacy exist. For queer subjects, futurity exists in unexpected spaces and through unusual gestures.

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Jaleena J S
Research Scholar
Government Victoria College, Palakkad
India
Pin: 678001
Affiliated to University of Calicut
Ph: +91 8089935253
Email: jaleenajs@gmail.com
ORCiD: 0009-0001-2988-4060
&
Dr. Arathy Asok
Associate Professor
Government Victoria College, Palakkad
India
Pin: 678001
Affiliated to University of Calicut
Ph: +91 9447425551
Email: arathyasok@gmail.com
ORCiD: 0009-0004-9196-2076