

Combating Heteronormativity: Representation of Gay Men's Lives in *The Line of Beauty*

Abstract

This research paper discusses the concept of heteronormativity and its various definitions given by the critics. It also discusses the emergence of gay novel as a literary genre. Hollinghurst's novel *The Line of Beauty* also provides a real picture of the gay subculture of London in 1980s and the AIDS epidemic of the time is also realistically portrayed.

Keywords: Heteronormativity, Gay, Subculture.

Introduction

Heteronormativity refers to the western social norm, or assumption, that the overwhelming majority of sexual relationships in society are heterosexual. It is a concept used by sociologists and social scientists to describe the way that sex and gender are used to hierarchically organize people in our society. More specifically, heteronormativity is the belief that heterosexuality, or a romantic and sexual attraction towards the opposite sex, is the only normal sexual orientation. Other sexual identities are considered unnatural and sometimes even legally prohibited.

Strict norms about sexuality are enforced by heteronormativity and it also gives stress on the strict gender roles. For example, there is a model in the society that it is the duty of women to remain at home and raise children while men have to work outside this model suggests that they have specific jobs to do. The term gender binary is closely related to it where individuals are categorized into either male or female.

There is a relation between the terms sex and gender, but the distinction between the two is very important to understand. Sex can be defined as biological and hormonal difference between men and women, whereas gender is the term which tries to describe social relationships and standards, actions and behavior of men and women. The credit for popularizing the term 'heteronormativity' goes to Michael Warner. He broadly described the term in 1991 in one of his major works on queer theory. In his famous essay *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* Michal Warner writes:

Every person who comes to a queer self understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is intricately with gender. Being queer means being able, more or less articulately, to challenge the common understanding of what gender differences means. (xvii)

The concept is basically rooted in the notion "sex/gender system" given by Gayle Rubin and the notion of "compulsory heterosexuality" by famous critic Adrienne Rich. Samuel A. Chambers has written a series of articles and describes heteronormativity as a concept that reveals the expectations, demands and constraints produced when heterosexuality is considered as the only normal behavior within the society.

Kitzinger describes heteronormativity as, "the myriad way in which heterosexuality is produced as a natural, unproblematic, taken for granted phenomenon" (Kitzinger 478).

Heterosexism has become a recognized social problem since since the rise of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) activism in the 1970s. One of its manifestation is heteronormativity : the mundane production of heterosexuality as the normal, natural, taken for granted sexuality. (Kitzinger)

Aim of the Study

The aim of study is to examine the condition of the homosexuals as presented by the writer. As the writer is a homosexual himself, he has

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the first hand experience of the situation. The paper also examines society's attitude towards the gay people and its effect on their lives.

The Gay Novel

The gay novel is a subgenre of the novel that has become significantly popular in English literature in the twentieth century about the time of First and Second World War. Its popularity did not stand for the number of copies sold, but for the amount of literature that included homosexual themes, especially male ones. Its relation to the time of the war is that only during this period strong themes of male homosexuality and "intense feelings between men" (Barry 144) were being suggested to the reader. The gay novel mentions homosexuality to a greater or lesser extent and place it as a key interest. Their plots "highlight queer themes, characters and proto gay identities" (Kagan 280). Usually it is the protagonist who is a homosexual himself but this cannot be taken for granted, since any other lesser character could be queer as well. According to Michael N. Stanton "gay novels ...are about a search for identity" (Shanton). Alan Hollinghurst's gay novel is a very specific sub genre of literary fiction. It focuses on the greyest and darkest aspects of gay men's reality, emphasizing them and making them seem like the only reality out there. It refuses to add colorful themes, just as it does not avoid speaking up about discrimination, prejudice and bigotry.

Homophobia and Its Impact on the Homosexuals

Homophobia is a set of hostile attitudes and behaviors towards anything that is not heterosexual. Following acts of disapproval and hostility can be noticed along while reading the novel : "jeer and horn blast from a passing car" (Hollinghurst 43) on Nick and Leo kissing on the street , Sir Maurice saying to Nick that mentioning homosexual intercourse "fills him with a physical revulsion" (Hollinghurst 340) and claiming that they are deserving of AIDS, Leo's mother's refusal to accept his and his sister's homosexuality, Nick's observation of his mother having suffered from his orientation.

The Line of Beauty focuses on gay life along with the frivolous and deadly aspects of London gay culture. Set in London, the novel engages the story of a young man new to both his sexuality the manners of high society. The novel is in the 1980s, when the economy is booming, the Tories have just been swept into power. Margaret Thatcher is Prime Minister and the country is awash in hope and excitement. In *The Line of Beauty* sex is minutely depicted and there are two kinds of sexual attraction. First there is stereotyped allure of black and working class hunks and secondly there is a love for beautiful men, the ones who have a dancer's body and a feminine face. William has an affair with Arthur, a black homosexual. It is Wani who fills the role of the "beautiful". The nature of these choices shape varying degrees of intimacy and commitment, dramatizing modern gay relationship. Hollinghurst also points out the vastly disingenuous treatment of homosexuality by the politicians and by the diplomats who feel that homosexuals are to be blamed for the spread of the virus. In one of Nick's conversation with Sally Tipper,

wife of a rich businessman who very strongly claims that the best way to stop the spread of the disease is to abstain from all kind of sexual relationship till marriage. Sir Maurice Tipper is an open homophobe who openly says that the issue of homosexuality fills him with acute physical revulsion and mental distaste for a culture that has been blown out of proportion.

London Gay Culture

from the theme of the past history of gay men, *The Line of Beauty* shows a clear exposition of contemporary gay life and the lives of gay men leading a metropolitan existence. Nick brings to light both his sexuality and the manners of high society into focus. Nick embarks on two love affairs , first with Leo, a young black London clerk, and later with Wani, a Lebanese millionaire and a friend from oxford. Nights of parties, drugs, sex and scandal dramatizes the dangers and rewards of his own private pursuit of beauty. *The Line of Beauty* has a different outlook on gay culture and its activities, Nick and his friends no doubt have parties in the Feddens home and have joint sessions of gay sex.

But Wani ignored Shepton and stepped through the group towards the bed and...

Nick had a moment of selfless but intensely curious immersion in his beauty... everything in the house seem stale, over artful and beside the point...Wani gave no answering sign of special recognition... Wani said nothing about the turban, as if they were almost familiar with each other time and culture (Hollinghurst 92).

The Line of Beauty shows rather unfortunate picture of interpersonal relationship between gay men. It does not picture emotion filled romance, what it really does is expose that the best feeling that there can be between men is a friendship with a strong sexual undertone to it. Nevertheless, what mostly does take place is a promiscuous lifestyle, where freedom and liberation are being taken overly literally and has it effects in holding sexual intercourses with people very little known, over even not known at all. There is a number of examples of this kind of attitude towards it. The first one is obviously Nick's relationship with Leo, which started off as a date in a gay bar during which the only thought in Nick's mind was having sex with his companion, which happened the same night at a local park. Fascination in sex, or rather an addiction to it which is presented when Nick admits;

He felt deliciously brainwashed by sex, when he closed his eyes phallus chased phallus as a wallpaper pattern across the dark, and at any moment the imagery of anal intercourse, his new triumph and skill, could gallop in surreal montage across the street or classroom or dining table (Hollinghurst 155).

AIDS Epidemic

Alan Hollinghurst set the novel in the mid 1980s when the AIDS outbreak in England took place. Considering the age of the author and the fact that he was gay himself, we can conclude that he could have seen the outbreak of the epidemic from the "inside" of the gay scene. The characters of the novel live in fear of catching the new disease as well.

Nick, the protagonist watches his two former lovers die of AIDS, unsure of his own status. The AIDS epidemic and society's negative attitude towards it are present in *The Line of Beauty*. The mysterious illness that was drawing the life out of young men was first mentioned by Leo, when talking about his old lover to whom he referred as 'old Pete'. Even though it has never been said directly in Leo's speech that Pete suffered this disease, it has been said that he caught the 'new' illness, which was making him weaker and weaker. Society's unfavorable towards anything gay – related, including the illness, faced the daylight when Rachel tried to hide the real cause of his death saying that "he picked some extraordinary in the Far East... No one knew what it was. It's thought to be some incredibly rare thing" (Hollimhurst, 334), apparently assuming that something caught due to bad luck is much more honorable than catching a fatal sexually transmitted disease. *The Line of Beauty* shows a lot of damage that the epidemic has caused. Neither has it revealed Nick's results, leaving the reader shocked and wondering what happened to him next.

Conclusion

The Line of Beauty presents a real picture of the gay subculture of London that was emerged in 1980s. It describes the effects of homophobia on the lives of the gay people. There are also some instances of coming out or asserting the identity by the homosexuals. The gay people have to suffer because of their sexual orientation. They have started

opposing the heteronormative attitude of the society by establishing their own clubs and the events like gay parades.

Nevertheless, the times are changing a lot, with an exceptional rapidity in twenty first century. Homosexuals are getting more rights including gay marriage and that possibly makes the writer see that there is no need of constant victimization of the gay character.

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