



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Homosexual Relationships: A challenge or mere replication of heteronormativity?

Brishti Sen Banerjee

Mphil Research Scholar

Department of Anthropology

University of Delhi, Delhi, India

Abstract: This paper have tried to understand and explore how the Gay relationships or kinship is portrayed and represented in the multimedia. For my study, I have taken Four American Television Series which constitute of protagonists who identify as homosexuals. I have tried to understand through the depiction of their characters that whether these portrayals are just a mere replication of the existing hetero-normative order or are an attempt to challenging the same .I have adopted content analysis as my method of research and have done a detailed in depth analysis of the mentioned shows. This paper have inferred from the analysis that almost all the shows in some manner or the other conforms to the social hetero-normative structure and instead of challenging it, ends up adopting it in different forms. It shows how the portrayal of characters intended to question the social structure ultimately falls back to the trap of heterosexual matrix.

I. INTRODUCTION

The principle of heteronormativity forms the crux of the contemporary society.Heteronormativity can be defined as “the enforcement of heterosexuality on the population as well as an adherence to a strict gender binary. It establishes heterosexuality as authentic and natural and thus marks non-conforming people as deviant or aberrant” Thesociety in general has always been governed by heterosexual norms, and nonconformance to it is detested. Prior to the nineteenth century sexual activity between two people of the same biological sex was characterized as sodomy and was considered to be illegal. But with the advent of sexology in the late nineteenth and early twentiethcentury , homosexual behaviors were put forward at the outset of the society. Karl Kertbeny was the person who introduced the words ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’. Homosexual relationships including gay/ lesbian kinship relations have always been looked down upon and have continued to remain a matter of ridicule. However American series have played a significant role in portraying gay kinship relations and have initiated the discussion regarding this matter.Historically, the portrayal of the gay/lesbian community in media has been negative, reflecting the intolerance for the community seen in cultures; however, from the 1990s to present day, there has been an increase in the depictions of homosexual individuals, issues, and concerns within mainstream media in North America. The gay community has taken an increasingly proactive stand in defining its own culture with a primary goal of achieving an affirmative visibility in mainstream media. But in most cases, it is seen that the gay relationships also end up replicating the heterosexual model of relationship. So, in my paper I would like to explore how gay kinships has been depicted in American television series over time, and whether the gay kinships ultimately go on to reinforce the heternormative structure instead of challenging it. To analyze these I have incorporated in my study 4 American television series as case studies: Modern Family, Greys Anatomy, How To Get Away With Murder and Orange Is The New Black.

II. ANALYSIS

1.1 Modern Family

Mitchell and Cam is often called the heartbeats of the series modern family. Although the relationship of Mitchell and Cam is quite progressive, they still hold very firm heterosexual gender roles. These gender roles further perpetrate and encourage heteronormative ideas and behaviors. Cam and Mitchell showcase how their household is no different than those around them which shows how "Gay domesticity has the potential to challenge ideas of home and family life as exclusively heterosexual as well as createnews forms of homonormativity". But also on the other hand by emphasizing on the concept of domesticity and constantly trying to prove they are at par with a heterosexual family, they are unconsciously replicating the heterosexual ideals themselves. By writing Mitchell's character as a lawyer who works full time with more "masculine" traits, compared to Cam's character who is the stereotypical "feminine" man who is the stay at home dad, the creators of the show want to show that the "gender ideologies such as hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity construct certain characteristics and practices as 'natural' and 'typical' of men and women". The purpose of Mitchell and Cam's homosexual gender roles is to make the show more appealing to a wider audience and in order to do this, they must make the audience that is perhaps "uncomfortable" with their relationship feel as though it more relatable, but unfortunately instead of doing so they also offers a very strict gendered division through their characters.

1.2 How To Get Away With Murder

In How To Get Away With Murder, two of the most significant characters are Oliver and Conner who are projected as the gay couple. In this relationship also, not so surprisingly Conner is projected as someone very dominant and confident, and Oliver is a little submissive and conformist in nature replicating the gender binary roles. Oliver is showcased as someone possessing a kind of feminine trait and is very much obsessed about getting married which in the heterosexual norm is often associated with the role of the woman. The incident of bottom shaming has also been very evident in the show. Bottom shaming, for the uninitiated, is the cultural tendency to deem the receptive partner (bottom) of anal (and sometimes oral) sex as somehow lesser than the penetrating (top) partner. This devaluing is usually couched, unsurprisingly, in terms of effeminacy, especially when a person chooses for whatever reason to identify as a bottom exclusively. Generally in heterosexual performance, the man is said to be the active partner, and the woman the passive, who gets penetrated by the man. Hence a link can be established between the bottom and the woman who plays a sexually passive role and how the bottom being shamed and ridiculed at times in the show refers to how women have always been devalued and looked down upon in the societal structure.

1.3 Grey's Anatomy

In Greys Anatomy, representation of the gay community has been projected from the lens of the characters Callie Torres and Arizona Robbins. Not only are they depicted in a position of power, but the show also exposes the problems that many women face as in the gay community and in Torres' specific case, the struggle that many Latin women face in the gay community. A towering problem in the gay community is the act of coming out, which we have also encountered in Kath Weston's 'Families We Choose' where she talks about how coming out to their family involves risk and often results in severing all ties with the family members. Torres also had to face the same while coming out to her Catholic parents. A continuous complication that many homosexuals face in real life is the fear of being rejected by their immediate families. This is a dilemma perfectly duplicated in the show when Torres comes out to her father, something her father did not agree with. Her father then continues to disown her and cut her off both financially and emotionally from his life. Interestingly, Torres and Robbins like the characters previously discussed were also very keen on getting married and hence falling back again in the patriarchal trap. Marriage is inherently a patriarchal heteronormative institution which legitimizes the sexual relationship that two individuals share. Engels referred to marriage as legal prostitution and described the relationship between the husband and the wife as exploiter and the exploited. Hence going by Engel's definition monogamous marriage is evidently a heteronormative concept that traces its root to all heterosexual ideas and thoughts. Hence, emphasizing on the institution of marriage and the need to get married to portray a sort of belongingness is also an act of imitation of the heterosexual model. Despite the normative deviation in a gay relationship, such a relationship as seen in Greys anatomy also succumb to the typical patriarchal concept of having a child to legitimize the relationship.

1.4 Orange Is The New Black

"Orange Is the New Black" offers some of the most nuanced, thorough portrayals of queer women on television. From the outset, same-sex female relationships are accepted as a given. Alex and Piper's relationship is shown with much casualty and simplicity, not deliberately emphasizing on the fact that they share a relationship which is labeled as 'abnormal' in the society. So when Piper's counselor tells her both comfortingly and emphatically that she does "not have to have lesbian sex" at Litchfield, she looks ridiculous. The problems that took place between Alex and Piper was not attributed necessarily to their sexual identities. If anything, Piper seems

worried that lingering feelings for her ex will lead her to cheat on her male fiance. Sexual fluidity is the least of her worries. The lesbian characters portrayed in this series may have been projected at times as territorial, but it is one of the rarest shows that has not fallen into the trap of heteronormativity and has very efficiently challenged heterosexuality as the dominant idea.

III. CONCLUSION

Of the four cases I have delved into here, barring one, all the rest three submits themselves to the practicing stereotypes of the prevalent society. In some form or the other they all surrender to the heteronormative structure of the existing society. The typical binary role even in a gay relationship conforms the fact that unconsciously it assigns itself to the social norm. One of partners is considered to be passive and generally it is that person who is 'typically effeminate'. As a consequence the other partner is portrayed as active and dominant and is looked up to as 'The Man' of the relationship. To conclude, we need to go back to what Butler said about the concept of heterosexual matrix in his book 'Gender Trouble'. He defined it as a dominant model of binary gender identities that make sense when sexed bodies are expressed through a gender that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the practice of heterosexuality as the only socially approved form of sexuality. Ironically the research findings of this paper reflects that people who are otherwise known as 'different' and are also stigmatized for being so, they too succumb to the heterosexual matrix, and hence to the typically assigned norms of the society. Is it so that had the media played a different role, the scenario would have been different?

REFERENCES:

Butler, Judith. 1990, 'Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity', Routledge, New York.

Connell, W, R. 'Hegemonic masculinity: rethinking the concept', University of Sydney, Australia.

Road, Abbey. 2017, 'Modern Family: An analysis of Mitchell and Cam'. <http://whosmanarethese.wordpress.com/2017/03/10/modern-family-an-analysis-of-mitchell-and-cam/>. Accessed on 4th November, 2017.

Topps, Jacy. 2017, 'My same sex relationship doesn't always escape traditional gender roles- but that doesn't mean we're bad feminists', <https://hellogiggles.com/love-sex/relationships/same-sex-relationships-traditional-gender-roles/>. Accessed on 4th November, 2017.

Weston, Kath. 1991, 'Families we choose', Columbia university press, New York.