



Homosexuality in the films “*My Own Private Idaho*” (1991) and “*Call Me by Your Name*” (2017) from the Queer Theory Perspective

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Abstract

When heterosexuality has been constructed as a dominant power in a society, homosexuality is automatically marginalized and peripheralized in the society. In the realm of films, the presentation of homosexuality has been distorted and misrepresented. Therefore, it is important to examine the power that dominates and influences the society, especially the heterosexual dominance which practically intervenes in various social and cultural institutions. Thus, this research aims to say that the construction of heterosexuality and other categories are not natural. They are produced and reproduced within the society. By employing queer theory, this research studies the representation of homosexuals in particular in two films, which are “*My Own Private Idaho*” (1991) and “*Call Me by Your Name*” (2017). They are selected in order to analyze and examine the political power exercised in them by focusing on homosexual situations and presentations in the aspects of locations, characters, and scenes. In the discussion, several scenes in the films are shown to portray heterosexual repressive power attempting to marginalize, peripheralize and devalue homosexuality. Consequently, in order for heterosexuality to construct itself as a dominant power, homosexuality, which is its adversary, needs to be absent or at least inferior.

Keywords: *dominant power, construction, deconstruction, heterosexuality, homosexuality, misrepresentation*

1. Introduction

There is a significant difference between the two terms “sex” and “gender”. Sex is to divide most of living things biologically and anatomically into male and female, while gender is an abstract concept categorizing individuals by labeling them as “man”, “woman” and others such as “homosexual”. Butler (1999) states in her book *Gender Trouble* that gender performativity might intervene in every institution including family, school, and laws. These labels are socially constructed as humans acquire, produced and reproduced in a particular society. Therefore, gender can possibly relate to cultural and traditional ways of behaving and acting toward maleness and femaleness in that particular society. In other words, gender can be understood in terms of masculinity and femininity. However, to define a man or a woman based only on sex and gender is deficient. Foucault (1978) argues in his book *History of Sexuality* that the sexual conduct becomes problematic when one cannot use the acceptable pleasure and sexual desire to define oneself. Hence, sexual orientation or sexual desire must be taken into consideration since there are individuals who may not be fit in any acceptable category because of their sexual orientations.

In order to study those homosexuals, who fail to contribute to the intelligible norm, queer theory is employed in this research because queer theorists believe that sexual identity is one important function of representations. This means that individuals use sexual identities as a tool to represent their characters. However, the representations are to be granted depends on convention and tradition of the society, therefore, Pugh and Johnson (2014) say that these conventional and traditional representations are discussed in queer theory’s sphere as they may force individuals to hide their real sexual identities in order to present the acceptable one instead. Adopting queer theory can provide an opportunity to problematize heterosexuality, the dominant power in the society. For heterosexuality to become such power, it has to inevitably label others as abnormal and simultaneously gradually constructs itself as normal and natural. Kirsch (2000), the associate professor at Florida Atlantic University and the author of the book *Queer Theory and Social Changes*, explains how the dominant power of heterosexuality has influence over others. His studies are based on the analysis of Freud, psychosexual development, which states that the early

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experience, along with role model and environment, imprints a particular traditional identity onto children. Moreover, Kirsch's proposition suggests that in the early state of gendered identity construction, the genetics has influenced children's behavior before the ideologies of power shape and limit the possibilities of behavior and finally replace the natural influences (Kirsch, 2000). Therefore, it is to say that heterosexuality and homosexuality are politically related, and their history of domination has shaped and limited the possibilities to define gender.

Queer theory has adopted a concept from poststructuralism in order to explore the dominant power in institutions. Queer theory is employed to examine the relationship and opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality, and also attempt to deny the natural existence of categories. Since Owen (2010) has shown that queer theory examines normativity and encourages those who fail to conform to the intelligible norm, she states in her article "Queer Theory Wrestles the 'Real' Child" that the dominant power is exercising through the protagonists in literature as they appear to be the voice of reason, culture, and normality. There are therefore the limitation of what the reader, or children, can be and the definition of what is considered the norm. Spargo (1999) explains that queer theory explores the prejudice and bias which are held in certain institutions, namely, school, families, religions, communities, and nation-state. Moreover, queer theory is able to refuse gender as an unchangeable, fixed, and natural phenomenon. In addition, it states that any institutions are not constructed on heterosexuality as foundation, but rather than their foundations are intervened and inflected by heterosexuality. One of Foucault's emphasis in *History of Sexuality* is that homosexuality is not a natural construction, but it is an effect of a marginalization and subordination of heterosexual society as they see homosexual as deviation from their heterosexual norm (Foucault, 1978). Moreover, Butler (1999), the feminism and queer theorist, supports Foucault in *Gender Trouble* that once a certain gender discourse becomes dominant, it allows one to judge others from their sexual practices and to categorize others into its own categories, which are male and female. For those who fail to fit in either categories will be labeled as deviant and unacceptable ones. Hence, queer studies in politics are to examine and explore the dominant power that governs and generalizes the norm in institutions; furthermore, it is important to note that this dominant discourse automatically marginalizes and deprives others as the deviation from its norm. However, Kirsch (2000) states that the power will finally be changed through time and by the enforcement of social mechanisms and institutions. Therefore, as long as the level of queer analysis includes social movement, race and class, power and dominance, and social change, it is significant to view the dominant power as unstable and changeable for its existence as normal, and natural phenomenon may eventually possibly be denied.

2. Objectives

To study the depiction of homosexuality in terms of politics, to examine the dominant power, which is heterosexuality, that is embedded and intervenes in the fundamental level of most institutions and to understand the obstacles and oppression of homosexuality as they are seen as the inferior and deviant version of gender.

3. Materials and Methods

Two films, which are "My Own Private Idaho" (1991) and "Call Me by Your Name" (2017), are selected to be analyzed. Locations, characters' relationship and scenes in these films will be selected and analyzed using queer theory in terms of politics, which is about the power relation between heterosexuality and homosexuality. In order to depict such power exercising and repressing on the other, these elements will be analyzed, compared between heterosexual and homosexual elements portrayed in the films and scrutinized using cinematography, yet under the framework and tenets of queer theory.

4. Results and Discussion

In the discussion, two films, which are "My Own Private Idaho" (1991) and "Call Me by Your Name" (2017), will be analyzed using queer theory to study the depiction of homosexuality in terms of politics and to examine the heterosexual political power exercising in these films. However, this research is



based only on author's point of view and analyzed by queer theory perspective which means that the research does not provide a clear-cut assumption of whether the films are right or wrong, yet it attempts to provide the educational information about the power relation between heterosexuality and homosexuality which can be depicted in these two films. Therefore, this research is completed for educational purposes without any attempt to individually criticize the films in particular.

In order to address and deconstruct the repressive power displayed in two films, queer theory has adopted the concept from Poststructuralism, therefore the relation and influence of heterosexuality on homosexuality can be defined as dominant power repressing on the other. The first element to analyze is the location in which scenes have taken place and demonstrated the power relation between heterosexuality and homosexuality.

In the film "My Own Private Idaho", the dominant power of heterosexual has been noticed in the setting of the film since the locations and their significant differences demonstrate the relation of power. Despite the fact that the film is mostly set in Portland and Seattle, which are located in Oregon and Washington, respectively, it involves the name of a smaller state with fewer population like Idaho in its title. It is important to focus on the significant differences in the number of populations in each state. The film was launched in 1992 and mostly set in Oregon and Washington where their population was 2.9 million and 5.3 million, respectively. These numbers of populations are relatively significant because the domination and relation between heterosexuality and homosexuality are presented by the different sizes of states. On the other hand, Idaho is a smaller state in the northwestern region of the United States, whose population in 1992 was 1.03 million and there is only one scene that had been shot in Idaho throughout the entire film.

The story mostly takes place in Portland, Oregon, which is a moderately big state, where homosexuals have to secretly live in an old dilapidated hotel, named Governor Hotel, without any facility as if the hotel has been neglected for a long time or it has never been renovated or repaired. This portrayal of an abandoned hotel in an alley of the biggest city in Oregon, Portland, represents the homosexual situation as they are neglected from the society, in other words, the marginalized. They exist secretly in society and they have to work as a hustler, which is an illegal career. The portrayal of homosexuals is therefore marginalized and repressed. They are forced to live in the worst place in the city in order to exist in a big state like Oregon whose population in 1992 was 2.9 million and where heterosexuals are considered as a dominant power.

Besides the fact that Idaho was almost three times smaller than Oregon at that time and there is only one scene appeared in the film. It is used for the important situation of homosexuals in the film when Mike Waters, the main protagonist, confesses his romantic feeling to his companion, Scott Favors. Throughout the film, Mike has plenty of chances to confess in Portland and Oregon, yet he never confesses to Scott in those towns. However, Mike actually does the confession in Idaho where they decide to stay a night in the field. The only scene that Idaho is described is an empty field without any tracks of civilization as if it suggests that the only place where homosexuals can truly be themselves, implied by a confession, is the place far from others since they and their practices have been described as deviant, unacceptable and inappropriate. Therefore, they have to flee from the big cities and from the idea that dominates and represses them to a smaller and private place, like Idaho, where they can truly exist and even courageously make a confession.

In "Call Me by Your Name", Elio and Oliver construct their sexual intimacy and relationship in Italy, where Oliver temporarily visits due to his duty as an archeological student. Oliver spends most of the time with Elio and they fall in love with each other, yet when Oliver has to return to United States his homosexual feeling and identity stop, and he marries a woman. The film is suggesting that homosexual practice and existence are only possible in a limited place for a limited time and individuals who perform, or practice homosexual will eventually stop and confine with the norm. Moreover, as the film intentionally narrates the story in Italy, it perhaps attempts to suggest that homosexual's practice is only possible in foreign land as the contradictory homosexual possibility and acceptance between United States and Italy is presented in the film. In Italy, homosexuality is presented naturally and lively. For example, when Mounir



and Isaac, an openly gay couple, visit Elio's family, they receive equal and fairly hospitality because they are viewed as a normal and ordinary couple. Not only can homosexuality exist in Italy, but homosexual's emotion, passion and erotic romance are also portrayed naturally in the film. However, when Oliver has to return to the United States, he stops his homosexual continuity and marries a woman which can symbolize the homosexual situation in the United States, which is not accepted and deviant.

Apart from location, the dominant power is depicted in the relationship between characters. Family is an institution that is seriously intervened by heterosexuality. In the films, the relationship between family members demonstrates the vivid sign of repressive power from heterosexuality. In "My Own Private Idaho", the relationship between two main characters, Mike and Scott, and their fathers can demonstrate the prejudice and bias which are influenced by the heterosexual ideology that governs the American culture at the time, reproduced and repeatedly practiced within the family institution. Mike's father, Richard Waters, and Scott's father, Jack Favors, have become mature in a simply ordinary and heterosexual way as they have married and had family and a son yet it is crucial to note that throughout their ordinarily heterosexual life, they have produced and reproduced their own belief concerning the roles, which are traditionally and specifically asserted to each gender, and opposing those which are not within their families and the process finally results as conflicts between them and their children. However, their responses with prejudices and biases toward homosexuality are shown differently.

Richard considers himself as a man who always attempts to do the right thing and live the right way because he blames his wife or Mike's mother, Sharon Waters, for leaving him and ruining Mike. In his definition of "ruin", he also implies his prejudices on homosexuality along with his masculinity by saying that it is Sharon's fault which has made Mike the way he is, the homosexual. Moreover, his macho homophobia is strongly depicted in this scene when he manipulates Mike by an untruthful story about his wife, including the story about Mike not being his real son. He tells Mike that Sharon is a prostitute and has had an affair with a rich man, whom he believes to be Mike's real father. His deceptive story reflects his inner hate and denial of homosexuality. Despite his irresponsible father role, he patriarchally projects what he considers as a fault, deviant and odiousness in his son on his wife as he accuses her of being prostitute and murderer.

Richard responds to others who hold different ideologies by pushing them away and even denying their existence while Jack Favors, Scott's father, has a different way of facing the opposite idea. He believes that his son is just being immature and irresponsible, and in his perspective, homosexuality is something that can be diagnosed and cured. He may not assume it to be a medical syndrome as people in the 17th century did, but he lucidly understands it as a teenage situation or misbehavior, which can be solved or may disappear after maturity. It can be said that marginalization is not only to push homosexuality away from or deny its existence within heterosexuality's territory but also does not allow homosexuality to construct itself as anything besides flaws and drawbacks, which can be overcome as portrayed in the relationship between Jack and Scott. He ignores his own son's behavior and only one argument he makes is telling Scott to act like an adult. The film metaphorically portrays heterosexuality in Jack's compelling and flawless adulthood, yet it implies the contradictory portrayal of homosexuality as a powerless and immaturity.

The power relation of heterosexuality and homosexuality between Jack and Scott is not only portrayed in their relationship, but it is also portrayed in their social statuses and careers. While Jack is a mayor of the biggest city in Oregon who controls everything and whom others show respect, Scott is a hustler living in a dilapidated hotel. It suggests that heterosexuality controls the whole community and becomes the dominant power. On the other hand, homosexuality is hiding repressively under the power of heterosexuality as Scott is living in his father's shadow. The film portrays Jack to be a restrictive father, who expects his son to be under control and commands. This is the most important reason why Scott becomes a hustler in the first place. He becomes a hustler in order to embarrass his father and to contaminate his reputation as a mayor, who cannot take care of his own son and fails to be a role-model father. Scott's act of rebellion against his own father is compared to the resistance of homosexuals against heterosexuality in society. Homosexuals are attempting to exist in society and to find themselves a place to stand as Scott is asking for his father's attention. However, their voice is barely heard, nor can it raise



awareness in the society. It is similar to Scott's actions in his father's perspective, which is unimportant and inconsequential.

The relation of power is also implied in several scenes, which can be analyzed by focusing on the presentations between heterosexuality and homosexuality. This political power and its relation are reflected in three types of scenes in the film, namely, erotic scenes, homosexual misrepresentation scenes, and confrontation between heterosexuals and homosexuals. By analyzing these scenes, it is crucial to say that the influence of heterosexuality as a dominant discourse has abysmally rooted in people's consciousness and the way they see things. Not only does it govern the universal assumption of right and wrong, but it also directs people's opinions on whether what pleasure and acceptable is.

The first scene to analyze is an erotic scene. Since it makes films more popular, it is undeniable that most of the western films always include erotic scenes throughout the entire story. By comparing different kinds of erotic scenes portrayed in the film, the relation between heterosexuality and homosexuality becomes vivid and are strongly depicted. In comparison, an example of a heterosexual scene is to be analyzed in order to examine the portrayal of a positive vibe and what is called "normal". The heterosexual erotic scene in "My Own Private Idaho" starts with a romantic French kiss between male and female characters, Scott and Camila, and followed by motionless captures of sexual gestures, which have been beautifully arranged. It is to say that heterosexual erotic scenes generate positive feelings or vibes and responses from the audiences. However, the film has intentionally avoided direct erotic scenes between homosexuals. Instead of portraying similarly as heterosexual erotic scenes, the film replaces homosexual erotic scenes with irrelevant activities as if they are taboo. For example, when Mike is with Mr. Carell, the erotic sex scene is replaced by the cleaning scene. Moreover, since heterosexuality is a norm secretly influencing people's perception, the replaced activities are then portrayed as an abnormal and unconventional erotic fantasy.

Moreover, the use of lighting and symbol in cinematography are also depicted in these erotic scenes as they connote the importance of the subjects presented. By using light, the subjects which are presented in the light or left out in darkness are significantly different. In the heterosexual erotic scene between Scott and Camila, the lights used in the scene are mostly bright shone through the window which is adjacent to their bed conveying pureness and innocence. While the homosexual erotic practice has been portrayed in the closed room where there is no window and the lights used are mostly dark and the scene is barely visible. The dark or black color can convey the negative meaning of the scene, showing that homosexual's activities are unusual and unpleasant to watch. In the same scene, using a symbol is also depicted. In the heterosexual erotic scene, there is a window, of which presence can be interpreted that heterosexual erotic practice is acceptable as there is sunshine shone through the window. On the other hand, homosexual erotic practice is usually performed in a closed room, even though, there may be a window presented, the curtains are drawn as if it is wrong and unacceptable. Therefore, using the window symbolically means that heterosexuality is preferable and rightful, while homosexual is deviant and unacceptable, and its practice has to secretly perform.

In "Call Me by Your Name", when Elio and Oliver are kissing each other in a public place, the film portrays that there is no one close to them. Therefore, they can perform homosexual practice freely. In contrast with the heterosexual scene in the party, where Oliver kisses a girl, the film portrays that the kiss has been performed in the middle of the crowd. The film shows that heterosexual practice is normal and acceptable even there are several people around them. On the other hand, homosexual practice or any kind of activity denoting homosexual taste is prohibited and unacceptable as the film portrays that homosexual kiss has to be secretly performed.

Therefore, by comparing these erotic scenes between those of heterosexuality and homosexuality, a relation of power could be lucidly depicted. This relation positions homosexuals to be repressed by labeling them and their sexual practices as deviant and anomaly on the basis of their erotic and romantic lives which are distortedly portrayed in the films.

Further analysis shows that homosexuality has been portrayed differently and repressively not only in romantic activities but also in other aspects of life. The homosexual distorted portrayal is continued for



heterosexuality can constantly express its power and remain its prevailing position. The first scene to analyze is in “My Own Private Idaho”. The scene occurs in a café where a group of homosexuals meets up. A conversation between these homosexuals is about their experience in being homosexual and their first time having sexual experience. Instead of portraying homosexuality as normal and as being free choice, the conversation shows that being homosexual is equally being a victim from some tragic incidents such as broken family and poverty. Portraying homosexuality in this way allows heterosexuality to position itself above and play the role of savior looking down on homosexuals with sympathy and kindness. On the other hand, homosexuals are victimized, and they reach their hands for help. Moreover, the film makes the scene more emotional and reliable by using the conversation which is spoken by homosexuals themselves. Therefore, it seems like they are desperate and sincerely need help or even need a way out of this situation because they do not feel comfort, safe or satisfied to be homosexual as if they did not intend to be at the first place. The film also portrays that homosexuals have been living a poor life quality. Bob Pigeon, the homosexual teenagers’ leader, who rents from Jan, he sometimes could not pay the rental fee. The hotel is dilapidated and always under construction as if its renovation would never be finished. (the on-going process of identity under construction) There are more than twenty homosexual teenagers in the hotel and their life quality is very poor.

Moreover, homosexuality is not only portrayed as a peculiarity, or something that it deviates from what standard normal or expected is, but also that it is lower than the norm and even illegal. They are portrayed as outlaws, thieves, robbers and drug addicts. Besides labeling homosexuality as a result of an inferior society and environment, heterosexuality is accusing homosexuality of being the cause of that particular society. The fact that homosexuality is presented as both the cause and result of an inferior society is paradoxical. The film continually takes the audience to the state where they believe that homosexuals have to be eliminated by presenting them as the cause of social troubles associating with drugs and crime. It is as if the film is saying that homosexuals are not worth heterosexual generosity. Despite the plenty of choices of occupations homosexuals could have, the film portrays homosexuals to be an outlaw in order to make them an undeniable outcast.

Not only does the film distort and misrepresent the homosexuals and their situation, but it also implies heterosexuality in a higher position which can be depicted in the confrontation scenes. It is important to note that even though the film “My Own Private Idaho” has spent the majority of its screen time on homosexuality more than heterosexuality when they eventually meet, there are always conflicts portrayed between both parties. As if it suggests that there will never be a solution for them to harmoniously exist in the same location and occasion. The first confrontation is between the main protagonists, Scott and Mike, and the policemen. Heterosexuality is represented by the police, who are always rightful and lawful, while homosexuality is presented as criminals to whom badness is automatically asserted. It is important to note that the film presents two parties as opposite sides yet leaves out the fact that both Scott and Mike do not actually commit a crime of robbery.

The next confrontation scene is occurred in “My Own Private Idaho” between fathers, Jack Favor and Richard Waters, and their sons, Scott Favor and Mike Waters. According to the character analysis, it can be said that the fathers represent heterosexuality and the sons represent homosexuality. By analyzing the camera technique used in the film, the power conveyed through the entire film can be examined. The use of high and low shots is adopted in the film. The fathers are always standing in a higher position and looking down on their sons who sit on a chair. The portrayals show that the fathers are in a higher position, more powerful and influential, while the sons are sitting passively on a chair powerlessly. Therefore, heterosexuality represented by the fathers is always in a higher position through a low angle camera which portrays them as powerful and dominant. On the other hand, their sons, who represent homosexuality, sit passively on a chair looking up to their fathers. The film employs a high angle camera in order to portray homosexuals as small and powerless.

The last scene which demonstrates the confrontation is the funeral. Even though it is not a physical confrontation, it clearly demonstrates the relationship between homosexuality and heterosexuality by presenting two comparable funerals that occurred at the same location and occasion. The funerals are held



to honor the leaders of different groups. The first funeral is for Jack, Scott's father and the mayor of the city, representing heterosexuality, while the other is for Bob, the leader of the homosexual teenage group, who has lived in Governor hotel and represented homosexuality.

Jack's funeral is portrayed very conventionally, traditional and dignified because everyone who participates in it is all wearing suits and tuxedos in black and white. The ceremony is peaceful as everyone is quiet and traditionally show respect to death. On the other hand, Bob's funeral is very untraditional as homosexual teenagers are yelling and singing loudly. Some of them even stand on the coffin, while the others are jumping around. Their dresses also demonstrate the difference between heterosexuality and homosexuality because these homosexual teenagers are dressing casually without any particular colors. It is to say that the film intends to portray the funeral differently and contradictorily in order to devalue homosexuality.

Hence, the film demonstrates heterosexuality's attempt in constructing itself as a dominant power and in order to do so, it requires another division or contrast which is opposed or entirely different from itself, therefore, it places homosexuality as its opposition. Throughout the film, there are several attempts to show that heterosexuality is positioned above homosexuality by recognizing itself as rightfully authoritative and peripheralizing and labeling homosexuals as deviant. Not only is the repressive power depicted through portrayals and representations, but it can also be seen in techniques used in the film. The next part will be an analysis of cinematography and film techniques, which depict this kind of power and demonstrate how heterosexuality is constructed as being preferable.

5. Conclusion

According to the analysis of political power depicted in "My Own Private Idaho" and "Call Me by Your Name" by employing queer theory, the result shows that the portrayals and images of homosexuality are always distorted and misrepresented as it is repressed and dominated by a certain power. This power exercises within the society in which heterosexuality is a dominant ideology. Therefore, the influence of heterosexuality on homosexuality can be defined as dominant power repressing on the other. Moreover, to become the dominance in the society and to maintain such position, heterosexuality needs for homosexuality to be absent by peripheralizing, marginalizing homosexuality within its territory. The situation of homosexuality can never be improved since the absence of homosexuality is important for heterosexuality to construct its own definition. In other words, the macho homophobic male could be able to denominate himself as "straight" only in the opposition to that which he is not. Hence, it is important to deny the existence of any categories, especially heterosexuality, as natural phenomenon. In addition, the relation between heterosexuality and homosexuality is not only limited to the aspect of politics. It can be studied in terms of language and identity as homosexual identity construction is also struggling with the dominant power. Nevertheless, to examine this power relation is to provide an understanding that heterosexuality, homosexuality or other categories are an unnatural phenomenon, but what human asserts to them and the way for every gender to coexist equally and harmoniously is to deny these categories' existence.

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