

Diagnosing Queer in Hanya Yanagihara's A Little Life

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Abstract

The present study entitled **Diagonising Queer in Hanya Yanagihara's A Little Life** is an attempt to analyse the general features of queer theory which is predominant in the novel. Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which necessarily reefer. It is an identity without an essence. 'Queer' then, demarcated not a positivity vis-a- vis the normative. Queer theory looks up at the history of cultural representations of the gay or lesbian as deviant, sick or criminal, while foregrounding sexuality as an important category of critical analysis when dealing with cultural texts. Queer theory moves between literary analysis and activism because it shows how cultural representations contribute to very real material oppression of homosexuals.

KEYWORDS: Queer, legitimate, homosexuals

Introduction

Hanya Yanagihara is an American novelist editor and travel writer born on 20 September 1974. She was a fourth generation resident of Hawaii, her first novel *The People in the Trees* based on the real life case of the virologist Daniel Carkton Hajdusk, was praised as one of the best novels of 2013.

Yanagihara's A Little Life was published in March 2015, receiving predominantly favourable reviews. The book was shortlisted for the 2015 Man Booker Prize for fiction, and won 2015 Kirkus Prize for fiction. *A Little Life* defied expectations by its editor, Yanagihara's agent and the author herself that it would not sell well. Even though the book never expected much reader's and acceptability, it came to be one of the bestselling novel by the year 2018. *The New York Review of Books*, sharply critiqued *A Little Life* technical execution, its depictions of violence, which the critics found ethically and aesthetically gratuitous and its position with respect to the representation of queer life or issue by a presumed heterosexual author. She was received by readers and her writings had a great impact on the society.

The novel follows the lives of four friends in New York City from college through to middle ages. The novel focuses on Jude; he is a lawyer with a disastrous past and poor health. His past life is not known to other friends and he has a dreadful habit of self harming. The rest of the group includes Malcolm an architect, JB a painter of Haitian family and Willem an aspiring actor, Jude is very close to him and both of them are orphans, comparing to other two in the group they are poor.

Jude is hesitant to share his past even to Willem. Nonetheless he excels his law studies and he develop a parent child relationship with his professor Harold and his wife Julia and this result in adopting Jude at the age of thirty. Meanwhile rest of the group finds success in their respective fields.

It becomes clear that Jude was sexually abused at a very young age, and as result of this he was not able to engage in romantic relationships, his friends starts questioning his loneliness and finally he enters into an abusive relationship with a fashion executive named Caleb. Jude later breaks relationship when Caleb rapes him. The rape leads him to flashback his childhood. Remembering about the past he decided to kill himself, but he survives the attempt. After this incident Willem came back and they started sharing about his horrifying childhood and soon they begin a relationship, but Jude continues to struggle with opening up and doesn't enjoy having sex with him. Jude again harms himself due to the depression and Andy reveals Willem about the cause of the wounds and finally Jude discloses each and every trauma that he underwent in his life.

The relationship continues, with Willem sleeping with women and not with Jude. They both settle into a comfortable life but the situation changes when Jude's legs become worse. However while picking up Malcolm and his wife from the train station for a visit, Willem is involved in a car accident with a drunk driver which kills all the three. With this incident Jude descends once again into self destructive habits losing such an excessive amount of weight that his remaining loved ones stage another intervention. Years of depression finally overtake Jude and he commits suicide.

Diagonising Queer in Hanya Yanagihara's A Little Life

Queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. For most queer have been prominently between with those who identify as lesbian and gay. Unknown to many, queer is in association with more than just gay and lesbian, but also cross dressing, hermaphrodites, gender ambiguity and gender corrective surgery. A key assumption of queer theory is that categories of gender and sexuality are neither fixed not natural. As we move on through the novel we come to meet many queer characters. Specifically there are many queer characters in A Little Life that have displayed LGBT characteristics, though a keen eye is required to catch some of these it should be. Being homosexual is not seen as a tabooing the novel. Sex, nudity, self harming, abuse is shown with almost cruelty.

The term queer has the most widespread and durable meaning “anti normative”. This anti-normative discourse rereads the cultural contexts which were earlier heteronormative. In Queer Theories, Donald Hall summarizes this consensus by describing queer theories as “positioned abrasively toward notions of the normal” and queer .texts as those that “explicitly or implicitly denaturalize notions of sexual normality and that provide evidence of the 40 mutability and variability of human sexual desire and performance in excess of the hetero/homo binary” . Queer theory is not just about homosexual representations in literature; it also explores the categories of gender as well as sexual orientation. Some argue that queer theory is a by-product of third-wave feminism while others claim that it is a result of the valuation of postmodern mineralizing, that is, the idea that the smallest constituent must have a voice and identity equivalent to all others (mini-narrative). Queer theory's main project is to explore the contestations of the categorization of gender and sexuality. In Literary Theory: The Basics, Hans Bretons remarks that “queer theory questions traditional constructions of sexuality and—especially in its British version—sees no heterosexual forms of sexuality as sites where hegemonic power can be undermined”.

One of the important queer possibilities a novel can have is the LGBT characters, *A Little Life* is filled with several gay characters like JB, Caleb, Jude, Brother Luke and three lesbian characters like Edie Kim, Marta and Francesca, the novel possesses one transgender character, Edie who was one of the lesbians earlier. The portrayal of gay characters can also be taken as a queer possibility of gay assimilation. Homosexuality is visible throughout the novel, and it is not criticized in the novel and none of them in the novel is reluctant to expose their homosexuality before others except Willem only because of being a much celebrated actor. Intersex identity is exhibited by Malcolm at some part of the novel but ends up in finding himself a male interested in an opposite sex. Another major aspect that queer theory deals with is the Sexually Transmitted Diseases. The novel effectively discusses about the causes and effects of STDs in human beings. Queer also tries to explain the sexual disabilities a person can have, this is presented through the character of Jude, but his sexual inability was the result of abusiveness he has undergone throughout his lifetime. Sexual perverseness is also well portrayed through Caleb, Luke and other characters in the monastery; by compiling all these possibilities together we can consider *A Little Life*, one of the finest queer novels.

All together there are four main characters, two are heterosexual, one is gay and one is the subject of so much sexual abuse that his sexuality is nonexistent, and whatever it would have been, give time, is now stunted and smothered. Even when he finally embarks on sexual relationships with men, the sex is so painful and repugnant that he only consents to it get the emotional comfort from relationships that he feels he has to pay for with sex.

The central queer characters of the novel is the protagonist Jude himself. The novel moves on through almost all aspects of queer theory. Jude had an unpleasant childhood, in which Brother Luke has raped him and focused him for prostitution. When Jude turns to his middle ages he was confused about his sexuality and was unsuccessful in finding a partner for him. He was actually afraid of having a relationship because sex is something inevitable in a relationship, he was unable to have sex, the treacherous past feelings of childhood come to his mind, also for him sex is something to be paid, he doesn't want that to occur in his life again. His sexual identity was not a problem for him, he was a homosexual person who cannot compromise with any women who exhibits an attraction for him. There is an instance which presents this insecurity of Jude, there has been a party hosted by The Bitches of Bushwick - a trio of lesbians, in which Edie had an attraction for Jude, which irritated him and he left the party very fatly. Jude's childhood abuse and forced prostitution by Brother Luke pushed him into STDs, this made him hesitant to express his identity before everyone, he never finds sex as something which is necessary in life, according to him companionship is something which is to be valued the most. Jude had relationships with Caleb and Willem, but both relations were not successful, at the same time the experiences he had both relations were different one was supportive, loving and caring, the other was love, abuse and torture. Nobody is criticizing Jude for his past, this shows that identity is not criticized anywhere in the novel. The queer concepts or aspects like gays, homosexuality, the geography of sexuality, link between sexuality based oppression, problems and insecurities a person has to face due to STDs and rapes is well carried on by Jude in the novel.

Willem is a bisexual person; his love for Jude remained a complication always. He had relationship with many women but only a single man Jude. The sexual identity of Willem is never ever questioned in the novel. Willem engages in relation with Philippe and Robin but it ends up because he was not able to stay in a relation without Jude. Willem doesn't hide his relationship with Jude, but his not willing to be the poster child of gayness in the film industry.

Caleb is a cruel character who indulges to have a relation with Jude. A good looking gentleman at the very first look but a crucked fox who enjoys hurting others that is a sadist. Caleb and Jude meet in a party hosted by Alex. In the very first meeting itself Caleb aroused a feeling for Jude and he gradually engaged in a relationship with Jude and within a few weeks his real character is opened up, hits Jude brutally, have forced sex, abuses him and even tries to beat him to death. Caleb's only interest is on having sex with Jude and torturing him and he finds happiness and satisfaction in it.

Brother Luke was whom, who made Jude's life a tragedy; he was the reason for all the turmoil's that Jude had to face in his life time. Luke molested Jude in the garden at the age of seven, Luke had sex with Jude and forced him to prostitution after eloping from the monastery and he even watched and enjoyed others having sex with Jude by hiding in the bathroom. Not only homosexual but also a person with sexual disorder. The sex with several persons stepped him into the hands of STDs, even when he found out that Jude was affected with STD he never set Jude free continued his business with Jude, Luke was actually a sexual pervert.

Gender identity is another factor of that queer focuses. The character Malcolm faced the problem of finding his sexual identity. He was always confused whether to have a relationship with a boy or a girl. However he managed to have a relation with Sophie, they got married and were planning to have a baby.

A Little Life also present the queer characters like lesbians and transgender, the characters Edie Kim, Francesca and Marta are lesbians, in which Edie transferred to a male later. Of the novel's main characters, only JB unambiguously embodies an immediately recognizable and unambivalent gay identity, he is the most selfish, shallowest, and cruellest character of all four of them. Three of them form their primary physical and emotional bonds with other men, though sometimes in ways that challenge the usual nomenclatures of the novel's main characters.

Just as Yanagihara's characters challenge conventional categories of gay identity so A Little Life avoids the familiar narratives of gay fiction. Yanagihara approaches the collective traumas that have so deeply shaped modern gay identity, sickness and discrimination. Obliquely, avoiding the conventions of the coming out narratives or the AIDS novel. Her characters suffer relatively little anxiety about the public reception of their sexual identities- only Malcolm will be tormented by coming out, before realizing that in fact he is straight.

Conclusion

Hanya Yanagihara had presented the novel with at most naturality and dedication, she never shies away from describing gay sex scenes, largely in a negative light and Jude's association of men with trauma and physical pain is never downplayed. This novel is a combination of several aspects that Jude and his fellow partners have to

undergo. The novel presents the abusiveness, depression, self harm, trauma and intense male relationships originally and seriously. This brilliance of portrayal made *A Little Life* much celebrated among the readers. As a reader she has made a different way of thinking and writing in her novel.

It is reductive to say that in the novel being gay always has bad consequences and bring straight always has positive ones, but this conclusion would be an easy one to draw, in this portrayal. Yanagihara is only being faithful to the real world as she sees it, where young gay men are far more likely to be suicidal, be subject to abuse and have suicidal thoughts that straight men.

Thus the novel *A Little Life* has become a monstrous tombstone in the portrayal of abuse, depression, self harm, trauma and male relationships. However what she has masterfully done in the *A Little Life* is that she created a world of trauma possibility that supersedes gay or straight binaries which made this work an excellent example for queer novel which stepped out of usual focusing on queer aspect of lesbians.

To understand the novel's exaggeration and its intense, claustrophobic focus on its characters inner lives requires recognizing how it engages with aesthetic modes long coded as queer, melodrama, sentimental fiction, grand opera. The book is sealed to the grand intensity of Jude's inner life and for passages it forces the reader to experience a world that is brutally wrapped by suffering. Again and again *A Little Life* conveys Jude's sense of himself through elaborate metaphor; he is "a scrap of blooded cloth" etc. It's sometimes greeting description of Jude's self harm and his perceptions of his own body, the book reminds readers of the ling filiations between gay art and the freakish, the abnormal, the extreme-those aspects of queer culture we have been encouraged to forget in an era that increasingly embracing gay marriage and hermonormativity.

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