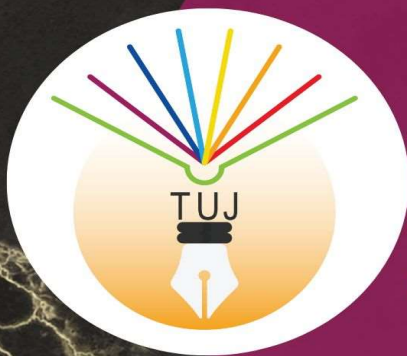


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**Deconstructing the Motif of Homosexuality in Women as Reactionary to Essential Patriarchy through Looking at Literary and Pop-culture Characters.**

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**Abstract:**

Over the years people and society as whole have learnt to accept the idea of homosexuality more than before. This growing consciousness about sexuality and homosexuality in particular calls for constant re-examination of the nature of it. A large number of books have been written after researching in that area with no one single conclusion. Especially, lesbianism, given to the inevitable connection between women's sexual awakening and their oppression, have caught my interest more. To gain some fresh insights I have delved into the world of literature and popular culture, the latter being a new common media to depict homosexuality and queer identities. In four parts this article attempts a reader-oriented interpretation of books and television series taking them as texts to discuss both established ideas and misunderstandings about how patriarchy affects lesbianism.

**Keyword:**

Homosexuality, Lesbianism, Female Friendship, Queer

*"Us two married ladies now, she say. Two married ladies. And hungry, she say. What us got to eat?"*

*'The Color Purple', Alice Walker*

In the rainbow-coloured days when queer studies and LGBTQ parade are much well-known and well-accepted though still frowned at aspects, homosexuality continues to suffer from striking unrecognition, the paradox being well intended.

This is not to imply that social perspectives have not broadened since gays and lesbians used to be punished by imprisonment or death penalty (which is still the case for many countries), but the effectiveness of the forever raised finger of heterosexuality is so well permeated in every layer of social knowledge and practice that the covert homosexual tendencies encountered in books and films continue to intrigue us, even when the genre of gay and lesbian writing, movies, series has thrived significantly. This article particularly picks the theme of lesbianism (with both the understanding and misunderstanding of the term) in literature and popular culture in which the characters exhibit latent homosexual attraction and builds a discourse upon the notions derived from such an interpretation of an apparently heterosexual relationship.

Whether it is Alice Walker's protagonist making love to her oppressive husband's former lover and whether it is the viewers' interpretation of the two female leads' childhood friendship as unexpressed homosexual feelings in the popular television series of recent time 'House of the Dragon', one thing remains certain- the subjective and hence complicated nature of both the rationale and signification of these ideas. But there is something "queer" about these notions that draws our meditation upon examining them however discursive the discourse might come out. And this is precisely the case for female homosexuality more than male homosexuality, a point I shall elucidate shortly. The discussion is divided into four segments: I) Lesbian undertone of sisterhood, II) Comparison between brotherhood and sisterhood and how it contributes in covert homosexuality, III) The problematics of searching for lesbian undertone in sisterhood, IV) Homoromanticism in women paralleling self-love. I have dared to borrow characters from Shakespeare's 'Twelfth Night' as well as from fairy tales like 'Snow White' to support the rather rival notions about this topic and to indicate its ubiquity in all kind of fiction and therefore in facts.

### **1.1. Lesbian undertone of sisterhood as witnessed in fictional characters.**

It did fit very well when in 'The Adventure of the Devil's Foot' the deathlike white, rigid, and horror-stricken face of Sherlock Holmes gave Watson "an instant of sanity and of strength" (Doyle) and he could break through his own traumatic seizure to save his dearest friend. Readers could silently acknowledge the strength of love between these two male friends who had never talked about their friendship in explicit terms, such strength that was able to put Watson from the depth of never-ending nightmare to save Holmes. But it came as a surprise to most of the readers when a woman in Walker's novel endures rape by her uncle to ensure the release of an imprisoned woman who is the wife of her own lover. That surprise is reasonable. Firstly, because Squeak and Sofia were not friends like Watson and Holmes, rather rivals over a single man Harpo who is Sofia's husband and Squeak's boyfriend; secondly, because being raped seems to be a much worse situation than the above instance although this reason is weakened as the strength needed to overcome the kind of physical and mental seizure caused by the poison mentioned in 'The Adventure of the Devil's Foot' cannot be fathomed if not experienced; but mainly because the female counterpart of bromance carries a reputation of being stigmatized by jealousy, back-biting, and dishonesty. Yet, it is this friendship of women that we have seen being depicted again and again in literature and now by a larger extent in pop-culture ('Sex and the City', 'Grace and Frankie', 'Dead to Me' to name a few). Even in the world of Jane Austen which probably shows the most disillusioned picture of female rivalry over male attention during the early nineteenth century England, we get some excellent representations of female friendship- Elizabeth Bennet and Charlotte Lucas in 'Pride and Prejudice' and very notably Emma Woodhouse and Harriet Smith in 'Emma'.

Alice Walker's ground breaking novel 'The Color Purple' gives us not only one, but two such friendships in which two things are common between the participants of that bond- they both are women and they both are related to one single man. Celie

and Shug Avery's mutual attraction, culminated into an ardent mental and physical attachment, is a phenomenal instance of female friendship born as the backlash of predominant male authority in their lives. It is also an instance of homosexuality as a retaliation to tormenting patriarchal relations. Celie was never jealous of the love and care her husband had in store for Shug Avery as she never tested those things from a man in the first place. For Celie, Shug was at first a mystery, an enigmatic woman who can hold certain power upon the men in her life, then a teacher who taught her how to be strong and helped to make her life better, and at last a sister with whom she could share, whom she could miss and in whom she could see a version of herself. The conversation that incited a sexual interaction between them was necessarily about the first time her father (step-father as she later discovered) raped her at the age of fourteen. All the sexual intercourses she had experienced since then starting from the very first time have only instigated inside her fear for heterosexual relations itself. And though we do not really get an account of Shug's experience with men, it is only possible that she too was not very satisfied with her relationships. Heterosexual intercourse by its very nature is oppressive its most accepted form being an act of thrust and invasion. Shug Avery did not use the term "making love" while talking about sex with men, rather she saw it as a plain act of "fuck"ing. But we heard her saying "I love you" while kissing Celie. The hunger from the quote at the beginning of the discussion was mutual. The hunger for an equal relation was inside both of them- "Us two married ladies now.... And hungry.... What us got to eat?" (Walker)

It is significant that the day they incited a sexual interaction, both their husbands were absent which, beside serving a suitable opportunity, also serves as a metaphor for an escape from oppressive heterosexuality. For them the act was a gust of fresh air inside a room with no open window. A similar picture has been established in a very popular television series that released in 2022 only. 'House of the Dragon' that has in its central plot a woman ascending to ruling power in such a system where

women are deemed unworthy of sitting on the throne by years of belief and tradition. The show has become exemplification of an outstanding and a pretty rare case of laying bare a true perspective of women, filtered of subtle misogynist preoccupations. This comes as no coincidence when four of the ten episodes are directed by two woman-directors (notably those in which we get an alternative representation of aspects usually conceived in phallogocentric way like sex, female friendship, and animosity etc.) and four written by woman-writers. Both the central female characters are primarily brought up by their fathers as one's mother was dead early and other's was almost always bedridden due to pregnancy. Amidst all the power-hungry and self-serving men around them including their own fathers who have constantly been politicizing the two young girls' lives, the only thing that does not choke them is their mutual friendship.

"I want to fly with you on dragon back, see the great wonders across the narrow sea and eat only cake."

This is the only thing Rhaenyra wants from the greatest kingdom of her lifetime. She is the princess but the place she most desires is the lap of her best friend Alicent. They are seen talking about her potential descent of position in the royal court and the camera takes a side view of Rhaenyra's face against Alicent's lap looking at the sky as we heard her saying, "I like this position. It's quite comfortable."

Almost all the men around them did not leave any stone unturned to turn their love into jealousy, to turn the sisters into rivals, and to turn two best friends into the greatest enemies of one another. All through their lives the men manipulated them against each other to serve their own political interests- the easiest and weakest pieces to move around on the chess board. It is more tragic that even during the worst moments of unfriendliness they longed to keep holding on to the love they once had. But they can only reach out to hold each other's hand; their hands would never meet as now obligation to father, accountability to family, duty towards sons

and mountains of anger, complaints, and psycho traumatic experiences are there between them to keep them apart.

But what is most interesting is that viewers have interpreted Rhaenyra and Alicent's friendship as having a tacit romantic attraction underlying it. Of course, just like in the real world, in a system preoccupied with heterosexuality being the only possible mode of affection, it is mostly inconceivable to recognize such feelings even if one has them. Yet once this idea makes its way to our head, it is not very hard to see Rhaenyra's urging to Alicent to accompany her in the dragon-rides as of a potential lover's. Rhaenyra has seen her mother dying after being forced to give birth to a son. They have grown up witnessing politically planned marriages in which women are used to squeeze out successors. Is it not then possible that when Alicent was forced to marry the much older father of Rhaenyra, it was not the fear of losing her father's priority and of her father trying to replace her mother, but the fear of losing Alicent as the only person completely her that caused Rhaenyra's anger? Is it not possible that their mutual hostility, which made the great war a reality, was not born out of political power-play, but their unfulfilled homosexual desire?

In the renowned Shakespearean comedy 'Twelfth Night', Olivia who was since then turning away from the very presence of men, fell attracted and in love with Cesario who was actually a woman- Viola in disguise. In fact, it is this attraction only, which made way for all the culminated unions in the play. Although any conscious intention behind such homoerotic undertone in an early seventeenth century writing is quite doubtful, the theme of homosexuality was not an alien one for writers of that time. Shakespeare's famous "fair youth" to whom many of his sonnets were dedicated has been giving birth to the idea of the poet's own homosexuality for years now. And even before that we find another great Elizabethan dramatist who was rebellious enough to depict a more apparent hint of male homosexuality- Christopher Marlowe in 'Edward II'. And this topic takes us directly to our next point.

## **1.2. Comparison between brotherhood and sisterhood and how it contributes in covert homosexuality.**

Among the countless blots projected upon the morally reprehensible representation of women by society, therefore by patriarchy, and therefore by men, women's inability to build a pure friendship among themselves is shining there like a big one. Now before any reader gets offended by my clear proclamation of men being accountable for this representation, I should clarify my reasons. While talking about institutionalised patriarchy people conceive society as the villain- society had done that to women, society created this division etc. etc. But what exactly do they mean when they say "society"? There was no system that we know of except the system we live in now. And this system of society has always been patriarchy. As far as human history goes, no evidence of a matriarchal and a gender equal society can be found which implies society has always been ruled by men sitting on the thrones of authority (it's implied in the term "patriarchy" itself); they had built the rules, they had conjured up the presumptions. Why is then this euphemism of saying "society" when the blatant truth is that men had done that to women, men created this division etc. etc?

Yet, women have some contribution in establishing these ideas as facts. There is certain truth in the assumption that female friendship is tarnished by jealousy and back-biting whereas men do enact friendship more freely. But isn't everything men do they can do it more freely compared to women? Male friendship shows less backbiting and jealousy because men have little reason to be malicious to and jealous of each other. Human being will readily tear off and eat each other's flesh if apocalypse hit placing them in a marginal competition. Darwin's "survival of the fittest" theory rightfully explains the situation of women. They are constantly put on trials to prove their worthiness as a dutiful daughter, as a "perfect" wife, as a self-sacrificing mother, and above all as a desirable smiling female body. From the



ordeal of Sita in 'Ramayana' to the kinds of reasons why women are rejected in marriage even today (for having pimples on the face, for having thick lips)- at whichever corner we will turn our eyes, we shall find this argument being manifested. Was it then even slightly strange when Rhaenyra and Alicent could not hold on to their friendship and turned against each other?

We also should never forget that women, historically, were never trained to be good friends. They were trained to be good daughters, good wives, and good mothers. But friendship was never a relationship that was valued in or even wanted from a woman. Whereas, men on the other hand have always trained themselves to be good brothers. Being the superior sex, they take pride in valuing other members of it more than those of the inferior sex- "Bros before ho\*s" (though this vow may alter in a not so ironical way when a member of that inferior sex is taken as wife/possession). But this does not at all permit us to come to this general conclusion that women are not friends in need and men are. In fact, the truth is as far from this statement as it can be. Despite being placed all the time upon the stage of defining competition and possessing the tradition of having scarce amount of time for practising friendship, a woman frequently bonds with another woman with earnest intensity, be it in the real world or in the fictional. It is nothing but plain hegemony working here following the policy of divide and rule so that the idea of women being the biggest enemy of themselves, permeate to the core of their mind. But if we look closely, isn't the male counterpart of catfight war?

Female friendship is like an umbrella; it is spacious enough to hold other relations like mother, daughter, sister, and lover all fused in it. After Rhaenyra's mother dies, she and Alicent become mother to each other; in a kingdom where the birth of even a single daughter is burdensome and Rhaenyra is always undervalued by her unborn brothers, Alicent becomes a sister to turn to. This womb like quality is the contrast between female and male friendship. Friendship among men is too straightforward to have so much layer. The kind of what Albus Dumbledore and

Severus Snape had in 'Harry Potter' is not easily found in fiction or reality. Let us look at what might be the depiction of the staunchest kind of friendship among men its motto being "All for one and one for all"- Alexandre Dumas' 'The Three Musketeers'. Throughout the story the musketeers went on living according to this motto. But what was the impetus for such strong friendship? Chauvinism and blind obligation towards authoritarian figure- the King and Queen both of which factors can be seen as metaphorical form of male ego. Now turning to two of the most celebrated interpretation of male friendships as covert homosexuality in literature- 'Edward II' and 'The Picture of Dorian Gray', we will see that in both cases a woman has been immensely wronged and gradually destroyed by being crushed under that friendship. In Marlowe's 'Edward II' Queen Isabella spent her life fighting and plotting to gain the favour of her husband for whom only the company of Gaveston was of any real value. In case of Wilde's 'The Picture of Dorian Gray', fate arrived before Sybil shaped as suicide after she is stripped of her femininity, embodied by her acting genius, by the love of Dorian who seems to be able to love truly only a man. "My dear boy, no woman is a genius. Women are a decorative sex. They never have anything to say, but they say it charmingly. Women represent the triumph of matter over mind, just as men represent the triumph of mind over morals" (Wilde). It would be very hard to disprove the fact that this bare hatred towards female sex is the bedrock of male friendship in the novel.

After discussing these above instances, it can be reasoned that a female friendship can be more easily and spontaneously subjected to the interpretation of hiding covert homosexual desire than a male friendship because friendship among men is often driven by the need of aggrandizing masculinity and men and belittling femininity and men's castrated counterparts, and friendship among women is often driven by the need of companionship. The former one being too objective and wicked to create profound personal feeling and the later enough subjective and earnest to bloom into romantic attraction.

““Jane, your little feet are bare; lie down and cover yourself with my quilt.”

I did so: she put her arm over me, and I nestled close to her.”- Charlotte Bronte’s ‘Jane Eyre’.

How come the language used in depiction of female friendship is so similar to that used in the depiction of romantic affection?

### **1.3. The problematics of searching for lesbian undertone in sisterhood in fiction.**

Discussion on homosexuality on any platform falls under discussion of Queer, a field so underrepresented and even misrepresented in fiction and reality that it demands much caution to come to any presumption on this territory. Only recently white feminists have begun to learn how they had been excluding the black women’s narrative in the discourse of feminism. When we enter the realm of people fighting for rights that they have been robbed of forever, a long preoccupation and hegemony checks our every step towards fair conception. Something as enigmatic as the fictional world becomes more cryptic when such topics set foot in the discussion. In fact, from the above discussion itself several questions arise that may cloud confidence in its equity- Is it necessary for a deep female friendship to hide desire in its core? What about those times when a person is connected to someone in an intense emotional way, possibly romantic, but is sexually attracted to someone else? Will not the establishment of an emotional ground for lesbian relationship be problematic for the biological aspect of lesbianism or sex as whole?

Let us look at the first doubt- no, it is not at all necessary for same sex friendships to contain homosexuality at its core. No one can claim that. Can’t a friendship be just strong enough for their participants to care and sacrifice for each other? Can’t Rhaenyra and Alicent be really good friends to fill the role of a mother and sister? But then, what is the borderline between friendship and romantic love, or is there

any? The knowledge of enacting these relationships have been passed on to us by our ancestors; we contend ourselves being spared from the toil of probing further. But if we start digging towards the root of these relationships, we will find the same premises working as foundation for friendship as for romantic love- attraction, affection, valuation, trust, expectation, and possession. When these aspects outgrow the accepted limit or decorum of friendship, it attains the dominion of romantic love and may allow sexual activities. Now a multifaceted and highly intense female friendship like those discussed above, often crosses the threshold of this limitations whether that can be easily perceived or not.

The second and third confusion seems to be easily fixed by using the term "homoromanticism" in place of homosexuality. Eroticism and sexual attraction can be driven simply by physical desire and that desire by choice. But oh, choice! There might have never been another venture more trapped in the subtlest hegemony and authoritarian interest. Prevalence of heterosexuality tries its best to make us feel we will be more ourselves being heterosexual and mostly it succeeds. If assuming that a heterosexual woman as covertly homosexual is problematic, thinking that she is not is also problematic, perhaps more. Those women who quite early became able to distinguish their sexual affinity from the normative dichotomy of man-women, are fortunate. But I have seen plenty of women who recognized their sexuality only after unlearning the past knowledge about sexual norms. Women like Celie, pain and oppression predominate whose experience with penis, is bound to lose both her emotional and sexual attraction to men. As Judith Butler has reminded us time and again in 'Gender Trouble', people sexually attracted to same sex are as much as the product of the only existing system as people attracted to different sex are. From a structuralist point of view, it can be said that homosexuality would not have been existed if not for heterosexuality and vice versa. And where sex might be biological, sexuality not at all is. Not only that, platonic love is just as constructed as is sexual love. So, when romantic love, friendship, sexuality, platonic love- all are fused in

and dependent upon one another and originated from a single controlling system, how much harm can it possibly cause to rightly interpret two fictional women's unusually intense friendship as hiding homoromanticism or homosexuality beneath its façade?

#### **1.4. Homosexuality in some fictional characters parallel self-love.**

Women are contorted fragmentized beings. "One is not born a woman, but becomes one"- De Beauvoir said that. Though this statement invites unavoidable arguments concerning sex and gender and the terms "women" and "female" themselves, the point that the French existentialist feminist wanted to make is not missed. Women are made as per the need of men and when they are made, they are made with their selves divided into parts. Some parts are lost through friction and some get buried within. And women drift around the sea of life searching for those lost parts like souls wandering at night; as did Bertha in 'Jane Eyre'. In their exceptional literary essay 'The Madwoman in the Attic', Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar established the constant infighting between two opposite natures of women. They put forth the story of 'Snow White' to reveal the pattern of that fighting- a docile amenable "girl" (Snow White), obliged to patriarchal rules and construction and a rebellious savage woman (Snow White's stepmother) snarling and gnarling inside the attic of a gentle household (in case of 'Snow White', a castle) always fighting to take down one another. At the end Snow Whites always win as this is the picture of women that patriarchy wants all of them to replicate. In their essay Gilbert and Gubar could not find a way through which these two opposite selves can merge and become a single whole self.

They ended their book with the notion of an unfortunate fate for women. But I wonder, are those two natures at war because being the stark opposites, they want to smash each other or because they want to mingle with one another but are always

prevented from doing so? Maybe they are not fighting to conquer over one another, but they are fighting to destroy the obstruction that comes within the selves as a consequence of manipulation and hegemony. Among all the above fictional women only Celie showed no hostility towards her rebellious self, embodied in Shug Avery. Her life was so crushed under male authority, she had no self left in her body to fight with. In Jane's journey throughout the book, Jane showed both the roles in different stages of her life. When Jane was picked up from the embrace of the obedient and God-loving Helen who died with arms around her the last night, it seemed like the submissive part inside her was dead forever. But when romantic love for a man awakened it again, she assumed the role of Snow White and Bertha being the original mad woman in the attic. Jane kept on wandering through the corridors of Thornfield Hall somehow always reaching near Bertha's locked chamber and Bertha during her ghostly night strolls decided upon Jane's room as her destination; their longing to be merged into one another brought them nearer again and again.

Rhaenyra and Alicent also fit in these opposing roles, Rhaenyra being the rebellious one and Alicent being the docile one and so do Shug Avery and Celie in 'The Color Purple'. All these contrary selves are like alter ego to each other. But what happens when instead of fighting, as is expected from them, they begin to show signs of love and attraction? They become able to love that lost part of their self, that part which they were not allowed to harbour inside their own mind and to connect the two parts in a whole. And if this wholeness is not something prior to construction or the existing system, it is definitely a new construction, not planned by patriarchy, a subversion to the existing system.

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