

LESBIANISM, HOMOPHOBIA AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE: A STUDY OF *LOVING HER AND THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE*

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ABSTRACT

The term “homosexual” emerged, as Michel Foucault states, as a clinical description for a type of individual, rather than a sexual activity (43). Homosexuality has always been seen as pathological in western society. While the Black Power Movement challenged and redefined identity politics of “blackness,” the Gay Liberation movements did so to homosexuality. These two movements were contingent to changing dominant society’s myopic constructions of racist and heterosexist conceptualizations of racial and sexual identities. In spite of all their achievements, neither of these movements was able to create a space in the society or to empower individuals who were at once, blacks and “sexual minorities” in the American society. And, no movement what so ever, save some legislations have been able to curb homophobia and its resulting violence on LGBT people and more specifically, on LGBT women of colour. Leslie and Mac Neil say that black lesbian identity portrays the intersection of race, class, gender and sexual orientation. In “Double Positive: Lesbians and Race.” They contend

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INTRODUCTION

The majority of the most visible lesbian community is composed of white, middle class and upper class lesbians. Because of this lesbians of color, as well as working-class lesbians of all racial groups, often feel misunderstood, marginalized, or unrepresented by the better-known community and organizations. (2)

Furthermore, they argue that, “[f]or lesbians of color, conflicts can abound” as they ‘have to integrate identities of a lesbian, a woman, and a person of color.’ But at the same time, though “[w]hite lesbians are not accepted by their white cultural community, because they are lesbians;” “they have access to power because they are white” (1). Thus black lesbians stand at a multiple-marginalized position and for them, “[c]hallenges manifest on three principal levels: identity, community, and intimate relationships” (1). Many lesbians of colour describe a sense of displacement, of not feeling truly accepted or at home in either the majority lesbian community or in their ethnic community. This sense of displacements is fostered and sometimes even encouraged by racism in the lesbian communities and by homophobia in ethnic minority communities (2). Black sexual minorities in the Gay Liberation struggle, similar to those in the Black Power movement, were trapped within what Barbara Smith identifies as the “contradictions” and “invisibilities” of being black and gay. They are further silenced, excluded, and marginalized by homophobia and pervasive racism in the black and

gay movements, respectively (*The Truth That Never Hurts* 126).

What is interesting to note is that homophobia is a Western attribute and did not exist in the African communities. The genesis of the term “same-gender-loving” or SGL elucidates this. As against the clinical terms ‘Men who have Sex with Men’ (MSM) and Women who have Sex with Women (WSW) which border on pathology, or the terms ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ which have a totalized Eurocentric connotations, the term “same-gender-loving,” SGL, a term coined by activist Cleo Manago, found more appropriate a description for homosexuals and bisexuals, particularly in the African American community, and has been adapted as an Afro centric alternative to the Eurocentric homosexual identities of gay or lesbian.

Cleo Manago, talks about the genesis of this term in “Why the Term “Same Gender Loving” for Black People.” He says: “[a]mong indigenous and African Samoans of Hawaii, the term ‘samalinga,’ meaning ‘same-gender’ is used to describe same-gender-loving (SGL) family members. Samalinga love is respected and affirmed throughout” (Manago). He says that ‘the affirmation of same gender love is characteristic of their indigenous mores’ and gives further references to the respect given to SGL people in Africa’s Burkina Faso, the ancient Dagara community who often refer to them as Gatekeepers. He says:

Among the Dagara, Same Gender Loving people are considered more dimensional, dual in consciousness, spiritual and more insightful than heterosexuals.

They are called Gatekeepers because it is believed that SGL folks have a heightened sense of connection to the spiritual realm, and a special ability to guide and protect the community.

Gatekeepers are not only accepted, they are revered. (Manago)

Manago’s philosophy not only eradicates the socially-inhibitive, marginalized identity crisis associated with black gays or lesbians; it gives a spiritual and special identity to them.

In the section entitled, “The Transformative Power of “SGL,”” Manago further says that ‘love has been the real goal of SGL members and is dedicated to discovering and restoring their feelings and desire to connect with other SGL Brothers or Sisters.’ He further states: “The term Same Gender Loving asserts... [a] rich sense of Blackness while allowing us to pronounce our love for ourselves and our partners. SGL reawakens and reaffirms our capacity to love within our own cultural establishment” and “that we give love, that we have love, and that all of us are crucial to the future of Black people” (Manago).

Black women creative writers have voiced this affirmation and have tried to dispel the allegations of sexual deviance and licentiousness levied against them by the hegemonic white culture. While works like Ann Allen Shockley’s *Loving Her* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* have contributed to the genesis of black female SGL characters who function as counter-hegemonic paradigms that expand limited constructions of black womanhood and act as agents of true social and political change, some others like Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* show how SGL women suffer brutal sexual violence.

Ann Allen Shockley’s *Loving Her* makes its mark as the first interracial lesbian text with an “explicitly,” lesbian love. Lane, says that “the operative word here is “explicitly”” (v), because, of “an unapologetic affirmation of lesbianism” (Dubey 152). *Loving Her* instantly hit both the literary as well as social circles. It is hailed as “a groundbreaking text” not

only because it is “the first African American novel written with an explicitly lesbian theme, but it is the first to feature a black lesbian as its protagonist.” (Lane v)

Renay Davis, the protagonist of Ann Allen Shockley’s *Loving Her* oversteps convention and traditional circumscriptions for black women to subvert nationalist ideologies regarding sexuality, womanhood, and family, and challenge essentialist binaries that characterize same-sex desire, homoeroticism, and homosexuality within an interracial setup especially during the Black Power/Black Arts Movements, when black writers were expected to espouse “blackness,” heighten black consciousness, and promote racial loyalty and solidarity (Gayle 44). In foregrounding a black same-gender-loving woman protagonist during the height of the LGBT movement, the writer accosts a polemic that destabilizes the ‘middle-class/well-to-do’ and ‘white’ representations propagated by gay liberationists.

Shockley finds the rubric of lesbian very limiting as she does not want to label her protagonist, Renay, as one. Though after several years in a heterosexual marriage, Renay engages in an interracial same-sex relationship, she never calls herself a lesbian. First, upon being called a “lesbian” by Lorraine, a white lesbian who had never before encountered a black one, “[a] warm flush heated Renay’s body” (Shockley 72). Renay seeing no visible changes in her-self or a heterosexual woman concludes that she was called a “Lesbian” simply because she was with Terry. “Wrong judgments had been made that way” (72). This is a forceful justification of the normalcy of a lesbian, problematizing the limited constructions of lesbian identity, which neither captures nor reflects the complexity of Renay’s sexual life, desires, and experiences. Hence an SGL rubric would be beneficial for further arguments.

Renay Davis is a gifted pianist and a dutiful mother, who leaves her abusive, alcoholic husband Jerome Lee, for Terry, a white SGL woman, whom she falls in love with. Her husband Jerome Lee is characterized as the “black nationalist discourse incarnate” and enunciates masculinist and heterosexist ideologies (Lane ix). Renay manages to break away from her victimization by taking their seven-year-old daughter Denise and quitting Jerome and their repressive heterosexual marriage for her sexual and emotional affair with Terry.

During the course of their courtship in college, Jerome rapes Renay and the resultant pregnancy makes her decide to marry Jerome to escape social castigation. Once wedded, Renay is miserable as she has to conform to Jerome’s will and specific gender roles failing which she has to suffer Jerome’s violent beatings. Jerome becomes an alcoholic and doesn’t earn much. So, Renay maintains the household, raising their daughter and working in a supper club as a pianist to pay the bills. He misdirects his resentment over his inability to support his family and his abandoned dreams of finishing college and becoming a professional athlete, onto Renay, Jerome yells at her, beats her, and berates her.

Renay meets Terrence (Terry) Bluvad, a wealthy writer, at the supper club where she plays the piano. Renay receives a song request from Terry accompanied by a twenty-dollar tip. Terry also invites Renay to come and join Terry at her table, before going on a drive with her. During the drive, Terry confesses her desire for Renay. Renay reflects on Terry’s remarks but does not respond verbally. She thinks that within herself “a desire to be loved and to love existed” but she was not sure whether it “could it be met in this form?” (Shockley 23). After a decisive violent episode with her husband, Renay accepts Terry’s invitation for a drink after work and accompanies Terry to her house. Here, she tells Terry about her life with Jerome and her revulsion for him. She equates her life with him to a “drowning, a wish unfulfilled, a death.” In an act of consolation, Terry puts her arms around Renay. Renay “surprised by her [own] boldness,” does not

want Terry to remove them (Shockley 26); and, from there, Terry, after first receiving consent and affirmation, kisses Renay.

Shockley presents the passionate act of kissing between two women as a fulfilling one for Renay, as “she felt a warmth consume her – a warmth she had never known before. This deconstructs the heterosexist sensibilities that stigmatize and assign abnormality to SGL and assigns the connotations of pleasure, fulfillment and comfort that can be experienced by a woman in a mutually respecting homosexual relationship. That is why when Jerome sells Renay’s piano and hits her for asking him about it, she finally takes their daughter Denise and walks out of her abusive marriage to live with Terry.

In another instance, Shockley juxtaposes Renay’s sexual experiences with Terry against the roughness and the absence of desire in her heterosexual relationship with Jerome. Whereas Jerome’s kissing Renay had been marked by a roughness and absence of desire, the kiss shared between Renay and Terry is gentle and profoundly fulfilling. With Terry, Renay experiences feelings of undisguised passion, erotic longing and desire and for the first time orgasm (Shockley 27-28). Renay confesses: “It had never been with [Jerome]... It had always been over in seconds; then he would turn over and go to sleep” (28). The narrator, through Jerome, wants to show that in a heterosexual intercourse, the male counterpart invests solely in his own self-gratification, and exerts a level of dominance and power during sex over the female.

Shockley’s passage which delineates the passionate and tender love-making between Terry and Renay serves a dual function. Firstly, it legitimizes same-sex loving and destabilizes heterosexist hegemonic notions regarding sexuality and orgasm. Secondly, it shows transcending race. Renay’s ‘golden brownness’ and Terry’s ‘whiteness’ are mutually appreciated, locating their physiological and biological sameness. Alycee J Lane says in her foreword to the novel: “These moments of reflection become occasions for Shockley to construct desire as exceeding and transcending race or, more precisely, to construct the body as forgetting race in its quest for joy” (xii). This sexual union promises reciprocity in sexual gratification, mutual growth and therefore mutual fulfillment. With Terry, Renay feels “alive again, living to love, loving to live” (Shockley 39).

By fostering a relationship, inclusive of her daughter Denise, with Terry, Renay contravenes convention and nationalist ideology of nuclear family that comprises man-women and children and establishes a counter-paradigmatic model of family that transcends race. Even though Terry functions as the butch and Renay as the femme, their relationship is not oppressive or lop-sided. Terry fosters a close relationship with Denise, whereas Jerome was perpetually intoxicated and seldom home to cultivate a father-daughter relationship with her. Thus, the family unit of Renay, Terry, and Denise build alternative women-centered family/communities, de-legitimize black and larger nationalist constructions of the family paradigm and, subvert definition of ‘family’ that confines it within an exclusively hetero-patriarchal framework.

When Renay has abandoned Jerome, he feels that she must come back: “She was a commodity to him, something he had bought with a wedding license and, like all possessions, was a part of his many belongings. To him, losing her was a loss of property (Shockley 42). Renay’s emphatic statement: “I’m not coming back, Jerome Lee. Ever. I’m getting a divorce” (42), marks her progression from the position of the silent subaltern to a person who has finally gained access to her voice. Renay contemplates:

Why?" she asked. He had said nothing about being sorry. Why did he want her back?...to be the doormat upon which he could wipe his feet. Wasn't that what most black men wanted their women for? To take their anger at themselves and the world about them, hold their sperm, spew out their babies? This was what made them feel manly: the white man's underdog having an underdog too. (44)

Shockley thus brings out black male chauvinism and the kind of position it relegates women too.

Loving Her also addresses the homophobic attitudes of black men and women towards black SGL women: "For her to be in love with a woman who was white and a lesbian... Fran [Renay's friend] would never understand" (Shockley 31-32). Fran and Lazarius respond to the young transgender black man in a heterosexist, homophobic way. Fran uses the sexually derogatory term, "*Fag!*" while Lazarius asserts contemptuously that, "[s]omebody ought to take him out in the alley and beat the shit out of him" (153). Lazarius represents that section of the society which views violence as a 'corrective measure' for putative black sexual deviance.

Jerome too displays his intolerant of individuals, especially black ones, who transgress established heterosexual boundaries. Upon discovering, that Renay has left him, not for another black man but for a white lesbian, he confronts her derisively: "So! You're screwing around with bulldikers... You are turning into a queer....Wait until I tell the court about your he-she friends. You won't get Denise or a goddam... thing.... I ought to stay right here and wait for her and then kill you both!" (Shockley 127-130). Jerome's remarks illustrate not only his extremely heterosexist and homophobic attitude, but also his intensely violent condemnation of homosexuality. Rather than accept same-gender love within a black context, he articulates, instead, a willingness to resort to murder as an extreme "panacea" for the black sexual difference, which in the black community, is viewed as deviance. The author shows sexuality-based fears and hostilities of black nationalists and the black community at large through Jerome. Renay's having left him for a woman, not only emasculates him but, far worse in his estimation, undermines his role as a man; for, within the nationalist project, women's sexuality is regulated through men who have orchestrated control over female bodies and sexuality (Mayer 7). Jerome's desire to beat Renay, evidences his need to recover dominion over her and his 'lost' manhood as well.

Renay, despite threats of a violent beating, refuses to capitulate to Jerome or subscribe to societal proscriptions for women. Instead, she further delegitimizes Jerome's function as a black man as she asserts herself boldly and responds to him resolutely:

Yes,... You want to beat me, to trample on me, see me grovel because you despise what you can't change. A man should be able to control his woman—especially a black man who can't control anything else. But do you really want to know why you hate me? Because I've survived your male deterioration Survived! (Shockley 131-132)

In her bold, reprehensive and castigating remarks, Renay not only exerts her agency, but also her transcendent abilities because she is able to override Jerome's patriarchal authority. Renay staunchly articulates her refusal to leave Terry and return to Jerome and "the dirt." In her "talking back," (9) to borrow bell hooks' terminology, Renay denigrates Jerome to illustrate the ways in which he, even by certain nationalist standards, does not meet the requirements for manhood. To this end, then, Renay's 'back talk' not only demonstrates her unwillingness to be 'policed' but more importantly signifies her evolution and hence movement from objectification to subjectivity, being an actualized, empowered, liberated self.

Theresa and Lorraine, the two characters of the story, “The Two” from *The Women of Brewster Place* (1980) are not as lucky as Renay. What Lorraine suffers is a flagrant example of the deep-seated homophobia in the black community and the heinous physical and mental violence inflicted on SGL women. Barbara Smith opines that “the most personally devastating homophobia comes from straight people within our communities, to name another example of the oppressed being oppressive” (*Home Girls* xlvi).

Theresa and Lorraine are two women who love each other and live in Brewster Place. They had to leave Linden Hills and then Park Heights for fear of homophobic violence. This continuous changing of places of residence and descent from posh places is evidence of a continuous marginalization of sexual minorities. The two girls come to Brewster Place in the hope of having a peaceful life but both of them end up having extremely stressful and insecure lives. They understand that they “weren’t ever going to be accepted by [any] people, and there was no point in trying” (Naylor 163). Theresa believes in belonging to a strong party of homosexuals for her sustenance and that being a lesbian makes her different but Lorraine on the other hand, is emphatic that it does not make her “different from anyone else in the world” (165).

The story also deconstructs LGBT as a homogenized category by portraying Theresa and Lorraine as a lesbian couple where Theresa is insensitive towards the feelings of Lorraine and is more self-assertive. “When Theresa became angry, she was like a lump of smoldering coal, and her fierce bursts of temper always unsettled Lorraine” (Naylor 135). Thus, there exists an indelible element of oppression in the equation between Theresa and Lorraine.

Murray Lipp, a social justice activist, zeroes down on the three “root causes” for violence against LGBT people in “We Must Target the Origins of Homophobic Violence: Religion, Patriarchy and Heterosexism.” In the story, Naylor deals with all these three causes of homophobia or ‘reasons’ on which homophobia is ascertained. Lorraine’s father kicks her out of the house when she was seventeen years old as he found out about her sexual orientation. Lorraine lost her job as a school teacher in Detroit because the school authorities became aware of her sexual preferences. In Brewster, though some women like Mattie and Etta are not against the lesbian couple, they face anti-LGBT prejudice from women like Sophie, who condemns them because she believes that, as per the Bible, homosexuality is “an abomination against the Lord” (Naylor 140).

C. C. Baker, the unemployed and aggressive boy in the story, knows “only one way to deal with women other than his mother” (Naylor 161) and Lorraine’s presence makes him uncomfortable because “the thought of any woman who lay beyond the length of [his penis] power” is unacceptable to him and therefore he hurls insults at her, calling her “dyke,” “butch,” “lesbo,” and “freak” (162). Because he wants to avenge his insult of being laughed at, C. C. Baker and his gang of five boys brutalize Lorraine and then rape her. The brutality and the resultant physical and psychological pain and trauma of this gang rape left her insane and probably invalid for life (169-73).

SGL women have become more assertive about their sexual orientation and have become bold enough to be able to defy limited and myopic construction of identities. But homophobia remains a raging concern. It is responsible for keeping the status quo of the black female SGL as a sexual subaltern. Rightly, stringent laws have to be enforced against perpetrators of violence against SGL people so as to protect them and to help them live in peace. Audre Lorde’s advice in overcoming the latent fear of difference and be an emboldening factor for people trying to fight homophobia and its related violence seems to be the guiding light in overcoming this problem:

I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices. (113)

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