

BECOMING A LESBIAN AND ITS AFTERMATH: AN EXPERIENCE OF HOLLAND JAEGER

Mr. Mane Sanjay Rajaram

Yashwantrao Chavan Mahavidyalaya Islampur, Maharashtra.

E-mail – sunjjoyrmane@gmail.com

Abstract

The research paper aims to explain the stages of lesbian identity development process and its aftermath experienced by Holland Jaeger, the protagonist of Julie Anne Peters's *Keeping You a Secret* (2003). The researcher uses lesbian feminism and some supporting theories to support his research paper. The lesbian identity formation theory of Vivienne C. Cass is taken into consideration for analyzing the research question. Lesbian feminism theory is also applied for the analytical study of lesbians' sexuality, identity and community. The accrual of the research shows the process of becoming a lesbian and the consequences of it experienced by Holland. The aftermath of becoming a lesbian comes from being the victim of rejection, homophobic exploitation, violence and alienation. Those consequences explain the story of the rejection of the society of her becoming a lesbian due to the patriarchal structure of the society.

Key Words: Lesbian Identity, feminism, aftermath, homophobic exploitation, rejection.

Overview of Feminism:

While tracing the development of women liberation movement, one can easily notice the contribution of European countries and America. Both have been the epicenters of women liberation movement. The first form of women liberation was feminism. Feminism is a social and political movement that advocates for rights of women on the grounds of equality of sexes. Feminists tried to define society from a women centrist point of view.

Feminism is divided into three waves: the first, the second and the third wave. Emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the first wave of feminism relates the issue of suffrage, i.e. the right to vote (Castle 94). The political exclusion forced them to raise their voice for political reformation especially right to vote. They believed that the weapon of voting could be vital in fighting women oppression and promoting equality of rights.

Radical in character and occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, the second wave continued the same spirit of feminism. This wave mainly focused on social and economic equality.

While, in third wave feminism the issues of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity etc. became of prime importance. Fernandez, aptly figures out the quality of the third wave feminism in this way, "...the impact and breadth of this new surge of writing and activism by feminists of colour led to the characterization of this work as a new wave of feminism. Further, she adds that, "Dominant narratives of third wave feminism tend to focus on three central paradigms- multicultural inclusion, identity politics, and intersectionality. (Fernandez 98-99)

Thus, sexuality becomes one of many focuses in third-wave feminism. It lifted the study of sexual orientation in the society and it activates the issue of homosexuality in literary circles.

Sexual orientation:

Sex is an instinct, and for that, every human being aspires. It is a natural phenomenon that satisfies the hunger of the body and functions for reproduction. On the surface level, it is divided mainly into two kinds- heterosexual and homosexual. In the guise of morality, society has categorized one as good while the other as bad. At the beginning, homosexuality was condemned as psychological pathology, mental illness and disease. Homo sex is discriminated on the ground that it is unnatural and against an order of nature.

Sexual orientation is a biological phenomenon and natural. This fact is purposely side-lined while taking into consideration the matter of homo-sex. A person's sexual orientation is a hallmark of his /her sexual identity. It is a glue that binds human being on emotional and affectionate level at its best. The idea is well defined by Herek who says, "Sexual orientation is not simply about sex. Because sexual attraction and expression are important components of romantic relationships, sexual orientation is integrally linked to the close bonds humans form with others to meet their personal needs for love, attachment, and intimacy." (274)

Lesbian sexual orientation:

The issue of the control of lesbian sexuality, by male control, is very aptly stated, "For centuries now sex has been defined by men. How sex should be done, with whom, and how often has been determined by men's sexual needs. Women have never been consulted about what in sexuality makes sense to us. It is no accident that our voices have been unheard, it is the result of sexism. (Loulan3)

If hetero-sex is valid, then what is wrong with lesbianism? Why is it considered unnatural? To understand the entity called lesbianism, it is necessary to throw light on a definition. According to Bidy Martin, (In Brodzi and Schenck)"Lesbianism, understood to be first and foremost about love for other women and oneself as a woman, becomes a profoundly life-saving, self-loving, political resistance to particular definitions and limitations in these narratives."(280)

Lesbian studies:

Lesbian literary criticism is one of the offshoots of feminist literary criticism. These branches have a common agenda which represents the oppressed women. Lesbian literary study focuses on the "novel written by lesbians for lesbians featuring lesbian characters and reflectinglesbian political concerns" (Borghi156).

Lesbian Identity Formation:

Sexuality, identity and community are the cardinal elements of lesbian studies. Many theorists have developed lesbian identity development models. Lesbians develop their identity through various stages. The researcher intends to use Vivienne C. Cass's model of identity development that includes six stages- confusion stage, comparison stage, tolerance stage, acceptance stage, pride stage, and synthesis stage.

In the confusion stage, the person gets confused about his sexual practices. He/ she face a dilemma about his/her real sexual identity- homo or hetero? The comparison stage initiate a possibility to accept homosexual identity and feels its consequences. Accordingly, he/ she open up to close friends and relatives, feeling isolated. The tolerance stage is a stage where a person accepts the probability of his/ her homosexual existence. Lesbian, in this stage starts to feel companion of other homosexual persons.

Acceptance stage is a stage in which a person accepts gay or lesbian identity and start to be familiar with gay and lesbian culture. It is the stage in which a gay or lesbian person regards his/her homosexual identity as legitimate and normal.

The pride stage is marked for its fully merging of self-identity into gay and lesbian culture. In this stage a person boasts his/ her homosexual identity and feel pride in come out process. Synthesis stage a stage where a person develops holistic view of self-identity by synthesizing homosexual and heterosexual identities.

The Lesbian Identity Development Process Experienced by Holland Jagger:

The lesbian identity of Holland Jagger develops when she experience that her sexual preferences are different than other people. She goes through all the stages of lesbian identity development. The first two stages are important in her transformation from heterosexual to homosexual. These stages clearly express Holland's dilemma of her journey to become lesbian.

Confusion stage clearly marks the mental confusion of Holland as per as her sexual identity is concern. Her behavioral changes indicate the confused state of her mind. In this transition phase, she still holds her heterosexual identity and at the same time aspires for homosexuality. She has a boyfriend Seth, an indicator of heterosexual relationship, "Babe!" Seth called across the crowded cafeteria. He loped to the double doorway to meet me. Kiss me. "We're over here." He thumbed toward the vending machines, snaking an arm around my waist and steering me along. (Peters 2)

However, after living in heterosexual relationship and having enjoying sex, she is unhappy with it and she felt that she had never experienced 'feeling, the strings, the awakening senses' with him (ibid:102). This remarkably show her inclination towards homosexuality. Holland's homosexual clash took place on the first day of Southglenn High school, when she meets Cece for the first time. The baseball cap was gone; now her hair flowed around her shoulders. Her eyes darted across the studio and stopped on me. I wanted to look away, but couldn't. She held me somehow, spellbound. (ibid: 5)

Nevertheless Holland is not sure about her homosexual inclination. That is why she questions to self-regarding her sexual identity. Her denial of new identity is become important when she expresses thus, "I had the strongest urge to follow her. More than an urge. A need." "A need?" I questioned my brain out loud. "Grrl, the only thing you need is to get your azz to work." (ibid: 38)

The comparison stage initiate a possibility to accept homosexual identity and feels its consequences. Accordingly, a person opens up to close friends and relatives. In this stage, Holland experiences social exclusion, for violating societal norms (of hetero-sex), by members of society including family. The social alienation, one can notice, in the treatment meted to her by her step mother. Holland's mother is unhappy with her relationship with Cece. Secondly she face the same alienation in her school,

when there arise a matter of establishing Gay- lesbian student club. Holland's social environment, where she faces alienation, is not only limited to family, but also her friends, schoolmates and society are the sites of such alienation. The fact is well recorded here thus, "And I wanted to be with her, like all the time. Eliminate the obstacles, the people and things in our lives that were keeping us apart: Brandi, Seth, Kirsten, society, me. Me? Make that my fear. What was I afraid of, exactly? What other people would think? I guess, a little. (ibid: 127)

During her transition period, Holland even looks back in her life to trace out signs of her homosexual identity. Her homosexual attraction for Cece Goddard is visible in her words, when she says, "The sensation was stirring. It aroused me in a way... almost as if... As if I was falling for her. Okay, that didn't shock me. I'd had crushes on girls before. I mean, who hadn't? I'd see a girl in the mall or at swim meets and think, Wow, would I ever like to meet her. I wouldn't act on the impulse or anything. I'd stop myself. (ibid: 83)

Almost in similar fashion Holland remembers her attraction, while tracing the past traces of homosexual inclination, for her school friend Leah. She remembers the incident thus, "There were other times, too. Ms. Fielding, in German class. I was so in love with her. I used to pretend I needed help so I could stay afterschool. She wasn't gay, I don't think. Just beautiful. And Leah. God. I had a torrid crush on Leah in sixth grade. Seventh grade. Eighth grade... (ibid: 102)

In her travel towards new sexual identity, at one point, pondering on past and present situation she felt that she is bi. She declares herself thus, "Was I? Gay, I mean? If so, what was I doing with Seth? Maybe I was bi. That would explain it. An open heart, willing to give and accept love wherever it came from. The feelings, the stirring, the awakening senses with Cece, though, I'd never experienced those with Seth. With any guy. (ibid: 102)

Further, in comparison stage, a state appears before her where she tries to feel the loss of her heterosexual attributes in the forms of family, wedding and children etc. She felt the loss of her sister, Hannah who has been darling for her, and being deprived from kids, in her way towards new identity. The account of Holland's unhappiness and pain over the loss gets reflected thus, "A sudden surge of grief seized me. I might never have kids. This pain ripped through my core. Kids. What about kids. (ibid: 174)

Finally, after much pondering over the real sexual orientation, a tipping point of confession of homosexual identity surfaces in comparison stage. In her endeavor Holland discloses her new (lesbian) identity to friend and the friend is none but Cece.

The tolerance stage is a stage where a person accepts the probability of his/ her homosexual existence and start to feel personal and emotional need as homosexual and seek for lesbian communities. In this stage, a person longs for homosexual relationship that includes, according to Hernita Oktarini "body exposure, erotic dream, and physical contact... love confession... physical contact and self-legitimizing identity. (77) The lesbian relationship is deeply conscious that Holland, displays longing and desire for it even in dreams. Holland is so obsessed with 'Her' (Cece) that in a dream she expressed her desire thus, 'that night I had a dream. An erotic dream. There was me in the pool, nude, and ahead of me another swimmer, just out of reach. I lengthened my strokes to catch up. Grabbed an ankle and pulled myself alongside. She turned and smiled. Cece. She was naked too, and instinctively our bodies come together. Our legs intertwined (ibid: 105). A strong 'bond' of a lesbian relationship is seen between Holland and Cece. A bond is expressed thus. She feels 'she' is only for me. She feels, 'And I wanted to be with her, like all the time' (ibid: 127)

In tolerance stage a person seeks for lesbian communities. After having been expelled from family and discarded by heterosexual society, it becomes important for lesbians to search for likeminded people. Holland was socially boycotted by her family especially mother, so naturally her search for shelter stops at lesbian gay Centre. She recounts thus, "The center was the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Resource Centre. It was an innocuous brick building located in a strip mall next to a Kinko's copy shop. I wouldn't have noticed it at all if it hadn't been for the rainbow flag. On the door were two signs: SAFE SPACE and LOVE SPOKEN HERE. I clung to Cece as we entered. (ibid: 195)

Acceptance stage is a stage in which a person accepts gay or lesbian identity and start to be familiar with gay and lesbian culture. In this stage a gay or lesbian person regards his/her homosexual identity as legitimate and normal. In contrast to heterosexual expectations, lesbians talk about acceptance. Holland shows a remarkable quality of acceptance for her lesbian identity. Holland is bold and courageous. She does not care about people and society and what they think about her new identity as a lesbian. She says, a LESBIAN? a new identity. A label. All I knew was I loved her" (ibid: 160). She is profoundly happy with

her new identity-lesbian as she says, "I had discovered this part of me at the centre of my being that made me feel real and alive."(ibid: 171)

Holland, is introduced to lesbian culture and community through Cece. Cece asks her take part in dance party thus, "She caught the end and held it. "We're going to a dance at RainbowAlley, if you want to come.""What's Rainbow Alley?" I peered over her shoulder at the girls."It's a gay teen centre," she said. (ibid: 45)

The pride stage is marked for its fully merging of self-identity into gay and lesbian culture. In this stage, a homosexual person boasts his/ her homosexual identity and feel pride in come out process. In the narrative, the protagonist Holland, in her expedition, shows a pride for sexual identity.

In an overtly homophobic American society, coming out to family, especially parents have been a difficult, dangerous, and risky task for people with different sexual preferences. On the first level, it creates personal trauma and secondly it damages psychology as well. Holland's parents are the best example that represents the heterosexual mind-set of American society. Holland's stepmother, Tanith has no reservations about heterosexual relations between Holland and her boyfriend Seth. Rather she encourages Holland to have such relation but on the other hand, she displays a strong objection to lesbian relations between Holland and Cece. However the objection of her mother is retorted by Holland thus, "Say it, I thought. Stop denying the truth. "Yes, Mother, I am. I'm gay." (ibid: 243)

Synthesis stage is a stage where a person develops holistic view of self-identity by synthesizing homosexual and heterosexual identities. In this stage is person adopts a lesbian perspective and is ready to bear the consequences of lesbianism. Therefore a person gets ready to accept loss of heterosexual attributions.

In Holland's case she had to pay heavy price- in the form of the loss of home, family and friends- for her lesbian identity. However, Holland has cut the avenues to retreat, hence, in her eyes, lesbian identity is not loss but a prize. She is profoundly happy with her new identity-lesbian as she says, "I had discovered this part of me at the centre of my being that made me feel real and alive."(ibid: 171)

Becoming lesbian and its aftermath faced by Holland Jaeger:

Holland's endeavor towards developing lesbian identity was a difficult and challenging undertaking as she has to gone many trials and tribulations. In an overtly homophobic American society, to be lesbian is a difficult, dangerous, and risky task. They became victims of homophobic comments, discrimination, rejection, alienation etc.

The humiliation and exploitation of lesbians took place at different levels viz- family, friends, school, and society etc. Because the heterosexual mind set is all pervasive in the American psyche, so hurt and humiliation of lesbians is an everyday practice. When Holland disclosed her lesbian identity to her mother, Holland was humiliated badly by her mother thus, Mom yelled at me, "I didn't raise you to be a lesbian!" She made it sound like the filthiest word in the English language. "It's sick. Perverted. You're perverted." (ibid: 180)

Along with family, Holland was badly treated by her friends. She suffers from homophobic taunting and bad remarks of humiliation by her friends. Kristen her friend called her a "dyke" while Seth, her boyfriend treated her like "dirt". (ibid: 214) In similar way Holland's homophobic friend, Coop shows contempt and disregard towards homosexuals.

At the workplace, people with different sexual orientations are tortured. Cece works at her uncle's shop where she was sexually harassed and forced to kiss by some guys.

Rejection is the second resultant of becoming lesbian. It starts with family. Holland's homophobic mother rejected, kick out and denied financial right to Holland when she come out to Tanith. She said, "Go? Go where?" I asked. "Go to hell," Morn answered. "Mom —" "Go," she shrieked. "Get out, get out. Get. Out!" (ibid: 181)

After knowing about Holland's lesbian identity she also experienced the same treatment of rejection from her friends- Leah, Kristen and Seth, her boyfriend.

Kristen her friend called her a "dyke" while Seth, treated her like "dirt". (ibid: 214)

Violence is the aftermath of being lesbian. It could be happen verbally or physically. Kristen attacks verbal violence at Holland when her sexual orientation surfaces to Kristen. She abuses her thus, "She cocked her head. "So you are." Hoisting her purse onto her shoulder, she shoved by me out the door. Halfway through, she twisted back and added, "And now we all know what your pleasure is. Dyke." (ibid: 212) In similar way, Cece, also was humiliated first in school by painting threatening message on her locker. It was spray-painted with 'DIE DYKE' (ibid: 79) and then her car tires were slashed.

Like Cece, Holland became the victim of physical violence. Holland was slapped and hit by her mother. The account of it goes thus, "A burning sensation exploded in my head before I

realized Mom had slapped me. Tears sprang to my eyes — more from shock than pain. "Mom, you don't understand?" I moved toward her. "I love Cece." She hit me again, harder, and I stumbled out into the dining room, my hip ramming the credenza. (ibid: 180)

Alienation is the blot which lesbians have to experience in their day today life. Alienation, according to Cambridge Dictionary, is "the feeling that you have no connection with the people around you or that you are not part of a group." Because of the homophobic mindset of American society, lesbians suffer most in family, school and in public life. The school is an important institute for the identity formation of youth. Julie Anne Peters throws light on the role of schools in the humiliation of lesbians. In Holland's case she was badly alienated when her sexual orientation disclosed to whole school. She remembers the incident thus, "Then suddenly, at school, everyone knew. Nobody actually confronted me, or said any-thing. But when I walked down the halls, it felt as if people could see it on me — a brand, or a mark, or a flashing red "L" on my chest. Their eyes lingered a little too long, and I could sense them judging me. Casting me out. The worst part was, I couldn't even defend myself. (ibid: 178)

Conclusion:

The novel *Keeping You a Secret* (2005) deals with the lesbian world of Holland Jaeger. The story portrays the lesbian love between Holland Jaeger and Cece Goddard and their search for a self-sexual identity and the hurdles to surpass to prove that new identity. Holland, the protagonist of the novel goes through a great ordeal to prove her self-identity. For her sexual identity Holland has to fight with her family, friends and society. On these fronts she suffers most. The US Hetero-sexist society exhibits a great disregard for lesbian love. When the secret of Holland, being lesbian was disclosed to her mother Tanith, Holland was hit, hurt, and humiliated. Along with family, Holland was badly treated by her schoolmates and friends. She suffers from homophobic taunting and bad remarks of humiliation in school and public life. The aftermaths of becoming a lesbian results into rejection, humiliation, violence and alienation.

References

1. Borghi, Liana. "Lesbian Literary Studies" in Theo Sandfort, Judith Schuyf, Jan Willem Duyvendak, and Jeffrey Weeks (eds), *Lesbian and Gay Studies: an Interdisciplinary Approach*. SAGE Publications Ltd, London 2000. Print.
2. Castle, Gregory. *The Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. Print.
3. Fernandez, Leela. "Unsettling "Third Wave Feminism": Feminist Waves, Intersectionality, and Identity Politics in Retrospect" in Nancy A. Hewitt (ed) *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*. NJ: Rutgers University Press. 2010. Print.
4. Herek, Gregory M. "Why Tell if You're Not Asked? Self-Disclosure, Intergroup Contact and Heterosexuals' Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men" in Linda D. Garnets and Douglas C. Kimmel (eds), *Psychological Perspectives on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Experiences*. Columbia University Press. NY, 2003. Print.
5. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/alienation>.
6. Loulan JoAnn. *Lesbian Sex*, Spinsters Ink, San Francisco, 1984. Print.
7. Martin Bidy. "Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference[s] in Brodzki Bella and Schenck Celeste (eds), *Life/ Lines*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1988.
8. Oktarini, Hernita. *The Process of Becoming a Lesbian as Experienced by Holland Jaeger in Julie Anne Peters' Keeping You a Secret*. 2012 Yogyakarta State Uni. PhD dissertation.
9. Peters Julie Anne. *Keeping You A Secret*, Little Brown and Company, New York Boston, 2003. Print.