

NORMALIZING MASOCHISM: SUBVERSION AND REIFICATION OF HEGEMONY IN LARRY KRAMER'S *THE NORMAL HEART*

Tay Lai Kit¹ and Kamelia Talebian Sedehi²

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication

Universiti Putra Malaysia

e-mail: taylor5794@hotmail.com¹; cml.talebian@gmail.com²

ABSTRACT

In its broadest sense, hegemony is defined as a set of agreed ideologies practiced by prominent regimes and governments which influences people's minds. One of the practices which can be observed in most societies is the exclusion and rejection of homosexuals of their fundamental rights as humans. As such, the issue will be magnified in this paper through a satirical play written by Larry Kramer, entitled *The Normal Heart*. Parallel with the dominant hegemony, the homosexual characters in the play are mistreated and isolated within their own society. To retaliate, these characters consider themselves as victims and intend to counter the situation by masochism. However, the attempt seems to backfire and reify the preexisting hegemony. As such, this paper explores *The Normal Heart* in light of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony as well as Erich Fromm's masochism. To further specify, the paper examines the homosexual characters – their victimization and their fight against the dominant ideologies and how it all leads to their estrangement within the society.

Keywords: hegemony, masochism, reification, subversion, *The Normal Heart*, victimization.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, the term "hegemony" is derived from the Greek hegemon, which signifies a leader or a ruler, over a group of people or nation. Now, it is used widely in most fields of studies, especially in literary and cultural studies to illustrate how power is used to establish and elevate the position of governing bodies. In other words, hegemony can be defined as leadership and ruling over one's economic, political, military, or social status within subtle consent and permission. In this regard, the term has recently been questioned and pondered upon of its meaning and its actual impact on the people. Questions such as identity politics and cultural politics are some of the issues which are discussed greatly in this current age. Aforementioned, hegemony implies dominion of one group over another (this can be viewed differently on many levels and aspects) on the ground that there is, to a certain level, an agreement or allowance of the other group to submit itself to the higher power, so to say. However, "hegemony" can also be viewed and interpreted in different light apart from the one defined above. For instance, it is commonly used as a synonym for "superpower", as in the global hegemony of the United States. The emphasis is often on the pervading power, or its "total social authority" (Hebdige, 1979, p.15-16). In other words, the American culture has found its way to all nooks and parts of the world, just to have the countercultures accepting and embracing it.

One of the more prominent examples identified worldwide is the power which the government imposes upon its subjects. Governments are seen as the norm of respective nations, reflecting the "normal" cultures which they have set within the society. With the

established value system, it is easier for hegemony to pan out because subjects are then expected to comply the rules set without raising any questions. One of the social values, which is heavily attached with religion and has been strongly rooted and embedded is the marriage system. It is decreed that a marriage should and must constitute between a man and a woman but as time progresses, the traditional sanction is questioned and challenged when homosexuality comes into the picture. As is the case with our study, we are looking into the case of homosexual characters who are marginalized within their own society by their own government. As homosexuality is ignored by the society, Howson (2006) notes that “the treatment of women and gay people, should not be seen as an exigency of nature but as a product of human practice through history” (p.34). Homosexuality, or gay relationship is not considered as a legitimate one in the country, as the hegemonic practice of the culture is still of that between a man and a woman. Only heterosexual relationships are recognized in the eyes of the law of the country whereas those of same-sex do not have much right in the heteronormative system.

In *The Normal Heart*, we argue that the gay characters in the play amp up their masochistic desire as they are deprived of what was supposed to be a general constitutional rights for every citizens in the country – healthcare. To retaliate, they take on the role of victims to fight for their individual rights as they are marginalized by their own government. Mennel (1998) emphasizes, masochism is “a political reaction to the insistence on victimhood by minorities” through which they can gain power (p.2). Masochism helps in subverting the value systems which is root of all the problems they face in the society. However, there is also a negative side to the counterattack – victimhood, in return, reifies the ruling system. Because the measures to normalize their status as ordinary citizens are not drastic, they still play by the rules set by the government. As Sedehi and Rosli (2014) mentioned, the characters use language to shape their subjectivity (p.56), in which this case, they use language to declare their victimization and indirectly characterize themselves as masochists Alas, the victims do not have the capacity to change and overturn the predominant values set.

The term masochism was coined by Sacher-Masoch (1870) who wrote about the masochistic fantasies for the first time. Later on, the term was used and further developed by many others after him. Masochism indicates the deviant behavior or psychological illness whereby one takes pleasure in suffering. Krafft-Ebing (1886) used the terms masochism and sadism in psychology and Freud (1905) improved those concepts through his own clinical observation and experimentations. However, this paper will specifically focus on the definition of masochism based on Fromm (1942). According to Fromm (1942), masochists feel insignificant and suffer from inferiority complex. They have the tendency to belittle themselves. These people submit themselves to rules and regulations and they never voice out their needs. In most cases, they hurt, criticize, and accuse themselves unnecessarily. Fromm (1942) mentioned that “there are others, such as certain compulsive neurotics, who tend to torture themselves with compulsory rites and thoughts” (p.123). Ultimately, they depend on the other party for the gratification from the pain or humiliation inflicted upon them.

METHODOLOGY AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The primary text selected for this current paper is *The Normal Heart* by Larry Kramer. It is essentially a play written and published in 1985 which deals directly with homosexual experience post-Stonewall¹ age against the setting of the viral spread of HIV/AIDS (unknown virus still in the context of the play) in New York City. The “gay theatre” was performed as AIDS theatre “before the 1985 premiere of *The Normal Heart*” (Juntunen,

2007, p.133). Even though *The Normal Heart* centers on AIDS and the gay community, the disease itself was never mentioned in the text and the characters always use “virus, epidemics and the plague” for reference (Schultz, 1999, p.27-28). Readers should notice that *The Normal Heart* is, after all, a history play of the past five years: “a period in which thousands died” (Sorrells, 2000, p.72). The main concepts used for the purpose of this study are hegemony and masochism. By reading and analyzing this play through the lens of these two distinctive concepts, we intend to shed some light onto the correlation between hegemony and masochism, and how the latter proves to be a paradoxical solution in combating the norm. To further specify, we agreed on borrowing Gramsci's (1971) concept on hegemony following that of Fromm's (1942) notion of masochism.

The term ‘hegemony’ explains how the leaders of regimes or governments exercise their ideologies through various means to influence the minds of people. Gramsci (1971) notes that “spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group” (p.12). Moreover, Hoare and Smith (2005), in their explication of Gramsci's *Notebook*, agreed that hegemony is the manipulation of politics, religions, education, history, and cultures by the ruling elites. The methods are subtle and many are not conscious of the seeping ideology imposed. According to a doctoral dissertation by Tan (1971), he stated that “[h]egemony also means there must be a moral and intellectual leadership in order to enhance domination. In this context, moral can be inculcated through education and culture” (p.17). In *The Normal Heart*, the government is the representation of hegemony which imposes its cultural values unto the subjects and denies healthcare to those who are admittedly homosexual. As a result, these homosexual characters begin to show masochistic tendency in their effort to fight for their fundamental rights as citizens of the country as well. According to Fromm (1942), “[m]asochistic strivings are caused by the desire to get rid of the individual self with all its shortcomings, conflicts, risks, doubts, and unbearable aloneness, but they only succeed in removing the most noticeable pain or they even lead to greater suffering” (Fromm, 1942, p.132). Therefore, it is within our interest in this paper to argue that masochism has the potential to subvert hegemony, but at the same time reifies its position in society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Instantly after the premiere of *The Normal Heart* at the Public Theater on 21 April 1985, it became one of the most significant political plays in America which prided itself as one of the propelling factors in support of equal homosexual rights. In all its havoc, the play showed that the theatre was still a reliable medium for political uproar and social change. Such was the study of Juntunen (2007), who argued, “[in]1985, Public Theatre production of Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*, the emergent ideology was explicitly argued in the script and incorporated into the mainstream media, helping these ideas become part of the dominant ideology” (p.3). To simplify, he argued that mainstream theater supports and encourages the acceptance of emerging ideologies in the context of late twentieth century. His study was supported by ample proofs of the liberation of homosexual movements and how they gained their rights through protest which was potentially ignited by mainstream theaters (Juntunen, 2007, p.8-9). In relation to the study conducted by Juntunen (2007) which proposed that theatres propagate dominant ideologies, there is also a study found on *The Normal Heart* by Stock (2009) who discussed the play in terms of sexual citizenship. He brought in various definitions of citizenship and sexual identity and then propounded that, not only the play describes the diverse practices of citizenship but in

itself is the enactment of citizenship (Stock, 2009, p.10). Essentially, his thesis highlights the negotiation of sexual citizenship of homosexual characters in a gendered society (p.5).

To add on to the list, there is also a comparative study found between Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. While both are significant plays which deal with homosexual experience, Cohen (1998) performed his study under a more structural view – narrative disclosure. He explained that writing about love and politics required different approaches as both concern distinct values. He stated, “[w]hile a focus on love tends to privilege the individual and the couple, a focus on politics – and especially AIDS politics – generally privileges *collective* form of action” (Cohen, 1998, p.197). In other words, a love plot will be satisfied once there is a union of lovers and all matters of complication are resolved (Cohen, 1998, p.198). Thus, Cohen (1998) analyzed Kramer's works as a negotiation of love/politics binarism and traced how the plot in *The Normal Heart* underwent a transition from love plot to political struggle. Kramer (1985) wrote this play in order to portray gay men as normal humans as they too, are able to fall in love, suffer, and die, as all other humans go through these similar processes (Kistenberg, 1992, p.106-107). The only difference that marks the discrimination of homosexuals are of their natural sexual preference towards the same sex as compared to the traditional man-woman relationship.

To summarize, some of the concepts which have been used to analyze this play include propagating dominant ideologies through mainstream theatres, questioning and expanding the definition of sexual citizenship, as well as negotiating the love/politics binarism in drama. As such, we want to expand the scholarship of the play by viewing it under the concepts of hegemony and masochism. This study intends to shed some light onto the concepts aforementioned in terms of gender studies and sexual identities.

ANALYSIS

Masochism and Hegemony in *The Normal Heart*

As the play starts, the audience is informed of an anonymous disease that threatens the gays' health. The situation wreaks a pandemic panic amongst the homosexual community because the disease seems to be “attacking” people of their kind only. As such, they try bring the matter to light by voicing it out in any way they can. However, the situation falls on deaf ears as the government chooses not to engage in such a politically abhorrent “mess”. “The city doesn't exactly show a burning interest in gay health” (p.15). The government ignores the gay community as their sexuality is not considered to be normal or that within the defined sexual relationships. This is parallel with the heteronormative society where predominant hegemonic patriarchy has been set and practiced for a long time. This includes the binary system of sex/gender where male are supposed to act masculine whereas females presume the role of the counterpart. Same sex tendency, as shown clearly throughout the play, is an “act”, a “choice of lifestyle” which is not acknowledged by the government due to their deviant sexuality. Later on, one of the characters emphasizes that “who cares if a faggot dies?” (p.16). The kind of tone and diction show the oppressive ideology of the society which is imposed upon the gay characters. Within the same society of what we term as a human civilization, the gays are marginalized and ignored solely because of their sexual preference and the later consequence has serious gravity in their reaction.

The ideology of the ruling government is so powerfully perpetrated into people's minds that even medical officers do not care about these patients. “Doctors are extremely conservative; they try to stay out of anything that smells political, and this smells. Bad.” (p.16). The doctors are merely following the values which have been set and paved for

them by the government. As these gays are ostracized, they lose their sense of identity. Ned, the protagonist of the play, protests with much rage that within magazines and journals, the journalists "won't even use the word "gay" unless it's in a direct quote. To them we're still homosexuals. That's like still calling blacks Negroes" (p.17). As their sexuality is not acknowledged or respected, their identity is masked and rejected indirectly. As a result, they want to take action to have the same rights that all heterosexuals have, which is access to medical help. Ned complains that "I hate how we play victim, when many of us, most of us, don't have to" (p.19). Based on Fromm (1942), the masochists have the tendency to "submit to outside forces" which in this play is the ideology of the society and their indifference toward the gay (p.123). Therefore, they have decided to take upon them the role of 'victims', so that they can plea for the sympathy of the government but little did they know that the plan proves to be a backfire. This is because the government will only be more powerful for the attempt is not considered as drastic or radical enough to challenge the status quo of the society as well as the concurring power which the government hold. For the gay people, they intend to make a mark with their identity on the social and sexual spectrum which can be accepted by all. Much to their dismay, their effort comes up short and futility sweeps over them like a surge of powerlessness and they feel that their life has no significant value for the government and the general people.

Amidst the bleak situation, there is one doctor, Emma, who shows genuine concern about the homosexuals and advised them not to have sex anymore. Believing that it could be the cause of the viral disease, she cautions them to submit themselves and accept the fact that they are left alone by the government and that they should help themselves from caving in to their carnal desire – sex. Sometimes the dominant hegemony leads to inaction. Gramsci (1971) believes that "often powerfully enough to produce a situation in which the contradictory state of consciousness does not permit of any action, any decision or any choice and produces condition of moral and political passivity" (p.326-327).

The protagonist, Ned Weeks, is the only character who is fighting radically for their [the homosexual community] cause. Rampaging into the newspapers quarters, he laments, "[n]o one here wants to write another article. I've talked to half a dozen reporters and editors and the guy who wrote the first piece" (p.22). He and his friends should survive by ignoring their own needs and desires of having sex vicariously because no one knows the real cause of this disease. As these gay men are masochists, they have the feeling of "inferiority, powerlessness, individual insignificance" which are mentioned by Fromm as the symptoms of being masochist (p.122). In fact, people strengthen the values of the government by not supporting these gay men. The ideology just serves the interests of dominant groups and it is in the expense of subordinate ones (Gramsci, 1971, p.323); and in this play, the homosexuals are the victims of the dominant ideology. However, Ned is against this plan as these gay men should ignore what they fought for before. Therefore, Ned suggests them to "raise money and fight" (p.26). They should fight for independent identity to be approved by the society. When the gays lose their friends one by one to the widespread unknown disease, they contact the mayor and government; however, no one acts upon their request for proper treatment. "Hiram here just said they're aware of the figures. And they're still not doing anything" (p.63). It is clear from this excerpt that the government consciously choose to neglect the plight of the homosexual community in terms of medical healthcare. Despite the headlines on many tabloids concerning the unknown disease going viral, they choose not to lend out a hand and provide the necessary treatment which the gay men direly need.

Journalists and reporters can talk about different issues in their magazines and newspapers; however, homosexuality is a taboo topic. "I work all day for the city writing stuff on breastfeeding versus formula and how to stay calm if you have herpes and I work all night on our Newsletter and my health columns for the *Native* and I can't take it anymore. Now this..." (p.73). The gay characters are doing everything in their best ability to get their situation noticed by any kinds of platform but there is only so much they can do without the support and help of the fundamental organizations such as the media as well as the medical sector. According to Tay and Wan Yahya (2016), "[f]or hegemony to pan out, all members of society have respective social duties to uphold in order for the entire mechanism to function" (p.41). Drawing from the excerpt, the government represents the concept of hegemony sanctified and perpetuated within the society; ergo, refusing to provide the homosexual characters any medical assistance solely on the fact that this group is considered as a "disease" and a threat to the gendered norm. Worse, Ned has an older brother, Ben who is a lawyer and also one of the founders of an independent law agency who seems to be siding the government as well. Amidst a heated argument, Ned flares;

I'm beginning to think that you and your straight world are our enemy. I am furious with you, and with myself and with every God damn doctor whoever told me I'm sick and interfered with my loving a man. I'm trying to understand why nobody wants to hear we are dying, why nobody wants to help, why my own brother doesn't wanna help. Two million dollars for a house! We can't even get twenty-nine cents from the city. You still think I'm sick, and I simply cannot allow that any longer. I will not speak again until you accept me as your equal. Your healthy equal. Your brother! (p.47)

Truth of the matter is, Ben is stuck in an awkward position where he is conflicted of his role as a family member to a gay brother and a perfectly normal heterosexual man in the society. He also knows of the promiscuous lifestyle which the gays lead, thus his skepticism in taking his brother's case to light. Ben's refusal to help his gay brother could be seen as an act of complicity towards hegemony. Due to his reputable position in his own law firm, he cannot risk going against the norm by lending a helping hand to the gay community.

In the context of the novel, none of the characters knew that the spreading disease was in fact AIDS (as medical discovery proved later on) and the fact that the "unknown" disease was taking so many lives by storm, it had created a pandemic amongst the gay circle. As nobody has the knowledge about the disease, speculations flare and Dr. Emma is adamant that the cause derives from the promiscuous lifestyle of the homosexuals, sleeping around with multiple partners simultaneously. Furiously dejected, the gays take to such statement; "maybe if they'd let us get married to begin with none of this would have happened at all" (p.75). Blaming it all on the government, again they portray a sense of victimization which does not help them in their case and instead, reifies the predominant norm of homophobic hegemony. As illustrated over and over again throughout the lay, these gay characters do not seem to have any rights when it comes to proclaiming individual rights as per other (hetero) people in the society. Due to the accustomed tradition of marriage between a man and a woman, people of same sex tendency do not have that privilege to be unified in the eyes of the law. As iterated before, their situation in getting medical assistance got so bad that even "doctors refused to examine him to put a cause of death on the death certificate, and without a death certificate the undertakers wouldn't take him away, and neither would the police" (p.79-

80). We can then see how the social and political strata of society works in favor of the hegemony – without the acknowledgement of the government, the medical sectors cannot (and would not) do anything about the gay patients; and without the consent and approval of medical sectors the other forces such as undertakers and law enforcements cannot proceed with further actions. In short, hegemony in this case is a series of domino's effect on the lives the homosexuals – one bad incident after another. Pober (1996) notes that, in the play the reader observes how characters struggle with the unknown disease and they literally waste away (p.37). The gay men tried hard to contact the important people but none of them helped these gay men. Left to themselves, with neither doctors nor politicians to help them, they lose their friends, dignity, and identity, one by one. The value system of the government against homosexuality is so powerful that these gays have no chance of being treated as equally as with the heterosexuals. The story concludes with a death scene of Felix, Ned's boyfriend where he professes a heartfelt eulogy;

Why didn't I fight harder! Why didn't I picket the White House, all by myself if nobody would come. Or go on a hunger strike. I forgot to tell him something, Felix, when they invited me to gay Week at Yale, they had a dance... In my old college dining hall, just across the campus from that tiny freshman room where I tried to kill myself because I thought I was the only gay man in the world... (p.95)

Filled with regret, remorse, and sorrow, Ned's confession highlights the inadequacy of his attempts and those of his comrades in getting recognition for their social status and individual rights. Alas, it proves that victimization not only renders them powerless, but it reifies and reinforce the power of the hegemonic opposition.

CONCLUSION

In brief, hegemony refers to the government practice to exercise their ideologies within the society. In *The Normal Heart*, the government inadvertently goes against the gays, neglecting the strange plague which has taken many lives in the gay community by storm. The men are left bereft by almost all political organizations including those from media and medical sectors. As such, they are rendered desperate and powerless in overcoming their misfortune. With no choice but to take the battle into their own hands, they fight their way through the event the only way they know how – by causing a political and social uproar on any media which allows them such platform. Victimization, a role in which they involuntarily slip into, helps them in gaining the kind of attention from the public, shedding some light on their crisis which is enough to be noticed by the government body, specifically the mayor's assistant. However, as our study has pointed out across the analysis of this paper, masochism proves to be a double-edged sword which helped and severed their cause all at the same time. Their masochistic tendency in acting out their role in victimization could only garner so much help and attention from the public. To a certain degree, the gay characters are almost complacent with their marginalized position in the society that they do not do more than raising public awareness through their masochistic inaction. In other words, in their attempt to subvert the norm of hegemony which represses the lives of homosexual communities, they somehow reify the established dominant practice. To reiterate, hegemony functions in a way that requires implied agreement from general population. Hence, not only their effort in playing "victim" failed, but it did the exact opposite of what they set out to do – to gain a proper acknowledgement and acceptance from society.

Note

[1] Stonewall generally refers to the climactic historical event which took place at a tavern in Greenwich Village, NY, where the first radical and sexual revolution for homosexual liberation happened. This incident is considered by many to be the starting point for sexual freedom and equality.

REFERENCES

- Cohen, P. F. (1998). Strange bedfellows: Writing love and politics in *Angels in America* and *The Normal Heart*. *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 19(2/3), 197-219.
- Freud, S. (1905). *Three essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. New York: Cosimo Classics.
- Fromm, E. (1942). *Fear of freedom*. London: Routledge.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections for the Prison Notebooks*. Quentin Hoare & Geoffrey Nowell Smith (Eds.) New York: International Publishers Co.
- Hebdige, D. (1979). *Subculture, the meaning of style*. New York: Methuen & Co. Ltd.
- Hoare, Q, & Smith, G. N. (2005). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. New York: International Publishers.
- Howson, R. (2006). *Challenging hegemonic masculinity*. New York: Routledge.
- Kistenberg, C. J. (1992). *Theatrical intervention in the AIDS crisis: Performance, politics, and social change* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University.
- Kramer, L. (1985). *The Normal Heart*. New York: Plume.
- Juntunen, J. M. (2007). *Profitable dissents: The mainstream theatre of Larry Kramer and Tony Kushner as a negotiating force between emergent and dominant ideologies*. Retrieved from Proquest Digital Dissertations (No. 3283483).
- Mennel, B. C. (1998). *Seduction, sacrifice and submission: Masochism in postwar German film and literature*. Cornell: Cornell University.
- Pober, P. M. (1996). *Still angry after all these years: Performing the language of HIV and the masked body in The Normal Heart and the Destiny of Me* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Austin: University of Texas.
- Sacher-Masoch, L. V. (1870). *Venus in Furs*. Las Vegas: Tark Classic Fiction.
- Schultz, R. T. (1999). *When the 'A-word' is never spoken: The direct and subtle impact of AIDS on gay dramatic literature*. Detroit: Wayne State University.
- Sedehi, K. T. & Rosli Talif. (2014). Speaking characters in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. 3L: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies, 20(2), 55 – 66.
- Sorrells, D. J. (2000). *The evolution of AIDS as subject matter in select American dramas* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Texas: University of North Texas.
- Stock, M. D. (2009). *We will be citizens: The notion of citizenship in Tony Kushner's Angels in America and Larry Kramer's The Normal Heart*. Frankfurt: University Magisterarbeit.
- Tan, C. S. (2010). *Resisting hegemony and defending Chinese identity in selected novels by Malaysian Chinese writers* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Serdang: Universiti Putra Malaysia.
- Tay, L. K. & Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya. (2016). Hegemonic masculinity and the position of men in Kathleen Winter's *Annabel*. *International Journal of Comparative Literature & Translation Studies*, 4(1), 36-42.