

HOMOPHOBIA HAILS 'HOME'PHOBIA: A QUEER AND PURE INTERROGATION INTO SARAH SCHULMAN'S NOVEL *THE CHILD*

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Abstract:

*This paper explores how familial homophobia makes 'home'phobia in children who are homosexuals, with special reference to Sarah Schulman's novel *The Child*. Homosexuality being a taboo topic raises heated debate. In reality, the term to refer to fear of homosexuals is not homophobia but homo-sex-phobia. Etymologically, homophobia means fear of the same and not fear of the same-sex (homo-sex-phobia). But academic world generally prefers the term homophobia over homo-sex-phobia to refer to unreasonable fear of homosexuality. The word 'Home'phobia can be used to refer to the fear of home in homosexuals fabricated by homophobes in the family. The homes of Stew and Eva, homosexual characters in Schulman's novel *The Child*, are transformed into chambers of phobia by the homophobes in the family. There is no need of fear of Homosexuality as it is not pathology but a way of life. The negative responses of the family members to the "Coming out" of Stew and Eva, as homosexuals, make their homes places of phobia and puts their lives in psychological and physiological chaos. Homophobia is despicable as it is a morbid expression and prejudice of heterosexual culture. Education and third party intervention are necessary in erasing the societal intolerance connected with homophobia, as it stems from ignorance, even though it might be a long and strenuous process. Once the homophobia is taken out, the humankind will be viewed not as heterosexuals and homosexuals but as human beings. Schulman through her novel *The Child* breaks open the door of the closeted toilet and invites the readers to lend their ears to hear the piercing lamentations of homosexuals from the closet of homophobia and exhorts to rationalise on the erasure of irrational fear (phobia) towards homosexuals.*

Keywords: Homophobia, Coming Out, Prejudice, Education, Third Party Intervention

Introduction

How does the negative response of homophobes in the family create 'home'phobia in children, who are homosexuals, is the question explored here, with special mention to Sarah Schulman's fiction *The Child*. The forbidden topic homosexuality posits burning discussion inside and outside of literature. In common parlance, the term homophobia points to the fear of homosexuals and the term 'home'phobia can be used to indicate the fear of home in homosexuals created by homophobes in the family. Homophobes in the families of Stew and Eva, homosexual characters in Schulman's novel *The Child*, transform their homes a place of phobia for Stew and Eva. Fear of Homosexuality is unwanted as it is not pathology but a way of life. Homo-negativity of the family members to the "Coming out" process of Stew and Eva as homosexuals makes their homes locations of phobia and puts their lives in psychosomatic turmoil. Homophobia being a cooked up demonstration and prejudice of heterosexual culture is contemptible. Though it consumes time and enduring effort, the best tools to eradicate the familial and societal intolerance towards homosexuals are education and third party intervention. The non-existence of homophobia will help everyone to look at the other not as a threat but as human beings. Schulman, through her novel *The Child*, strives to invite audience's mind to the unnoticed sobbing of the homosexuals in the closeted rooms in the family of homophobes and to hold the hand to alleviate the undeserving pain they undergo and expects a dawn spreading the rays of equality.

Discussion and Results

Applying the concept of binary opposites, one can define heterosexuality as sexual orientation towards individuals of the opposite sex and homosexuality as the sexual orientation towards the individuals of the same-sex. Homosexuals, who have same-sex orientation, are called in different names in different places and cultures. Some of the synonyms of homosexuals mentioned in the article *A Homophobia* are "Butch, Dyke, Faggot, Queer, Man-Hater, Femme, Diesel-Dyke, Bulldagger, Pervert, Feminist, Amazon, Sissy, Fairy, Witch" (13). Psychologists presented homosexuality as a disorder. "Most psychiatrists have considered homosexuality a neurotic disorder" (Gramick, 1983, p.137). Religions present it as a sin. "Churches take a strong stand against homosexuality, placing it squarely among the major sins" (Dadisman, 1991, p.25). Researchers also looked at

homosexuality as pathology. “Anti-gay scholars regard homosexuality itself as a form of pathology” (Stacey and Timothy, 2001, p. 162). Until the 1960s, therapists were hell-bent on changing homosexual patients' sexual orientation into heterosexuality. “In December 1973, APA’s Board of Trustees (BOT) voted to remove homosexuality from the DSM” (Drescher, 2015, p.571). Homosexuality was removed from the International Classification of Diseases in 1990 by the WHO. To keep the homosexuals closeted, Hegemonic heteronormative society injected the venom called homophobia in the minds of people.

“The term homophobia was coined by the psychologist George Weinberg in the early 1970s in articles he wrote for a New York newspaper, GAY” (Wickberg, 2000, p.46). The correct name for fear of homosexuals is not homophobia because the literal meaning of homophobia is fear of the same. “It should properly have been termed homosexphobia” (Gramick, 1983, p.137). As homosexuality is natural, “Homophobia is an unreasonable fear of homosexuality” (Gramick, 1983, p.137). Homosexuality is natural as it is motivated by an impulse or drive. “The sex drive itself is innate and instinctive” (Gramick, 1983, p. 139). Inability of the psychiatrists to reverse their homosexual patients’ sex drives also proves its naturalness. If homosexuality is natural then who created homophobia to closet homosexuals?

“Homophobia is not caused by gay people. There is nothing that a gay person can ever do to justify it. Homophobia is a pathological manifestation of heterosexual culture. As a pure prejudice, it is wrong and as social currency within and outside of the family, it is despicable” (Schulman, 2009, p.23). People become homophobic as a result of being told and schooled to be such. They are under the grip of a large, yet invisible societal power. “Intra-family relationships are defined by means of power structures, through attempts at framing, controlling and monitoring sexuality, seeking to make it compulsorily heterosexual” (Braga et al., 2018, p. 1225). “If Mary had stayed closeted, her silence would have protected her from this punishment, the pain of coming out. When she heard the word consequences, she ran into the bathroom. She hated that word. It was a symptom of false sociality” (Schulman, 2008, p. 199). This invisible societal power operates in different forms. In the article titled *A Homophobia*, it is indicated that “Those who are considered the Norm set the standards, make the rules, written and unwritten, which control the life of the Other. Those who clearly belong to the Norm consider themselves right, and this rightness, this privilege gives them another right: to control the other” (1984, p. 12). Thus, this invisible power causes homophobia. This invisible power creeps into family contagious disease.

Homophobic families create ‘home’phobia in homosexual members through their negative responses. “Homophobia within a family means that some members will experience emotional and material deprivation because they are homosexual” (Schulman, 2009, p. 53).

How gays and lesbians are treated IN families is far more influential on the quality of Individual lives and the larger social order than how we are treated AS families. There are two experiences that most homosexuals share... One is “coming out”, a process of self – Interrogation in opposition to social expectation that has no parallel in heterosexual life. The second common experience is that we have each, at some time in our lives, been treated shoddily by our families simply, but specifically, because of our homosexuality. (Schulman, 2009, p. 1)

Homosexuals try to share about their homosexual orientation to the family members. The response of the family members to the coming out decides the wellbeing of homosexuals in the family. However, “the most powerful tool they have for overcoming antigay prejudice is the tool of coming out to the people that are close to them” (Dadisman, 1991, p.25).

In most cases, disclosure is made to friends and family, and the reactions of these individuals, especially if negative or violent, can affect the person’s healthy development. It may have an impact on their health and quality of life. It is proved that in the process of “coming out of the closet,” families had refusal, suppression, and silencing reactions, revealing that heterosexuality is manifested as a sexuality regulation mechanism. “There was a threatened aloneness to homosexuality” (Schulman, 2009, p. 126). Some families dismiss homosexuality as a mental illness, attempting to prevent the expression of gay feelings by suppressing homosexuals. Negative responses of families can be seen in Hockey’s dialogue to Eva. “You were sixteen when your family threw you out. Stew is fifteen” (Schulman, 2008, p. 97).

Familial homophobia converts the homes to places of phobia for homosexuals. Eva remarks “a lot of gay people felt like aliens in their families” (Schulman, 2008, p. 162). In Stew’s life “The parents are a nightmare, and the kids at school hate him” (Schulman, 2008, p. 58). “Families disown them, and they have very few resources from which to draw. Mental health and substance abuse issues are often consequences of the stressors they face daily” (Turner-Frey, 2014, p. 281). In *The Child*, David tells to Stew “If you leave home, you’ll be poor forever” (Schulman, 2008, p. 21). Homosexuals are verbally and physically abused. “Gays and lesbians often share stories of instances when they have been teased or ostracized, when they have had their cars tampered with, when they have been denied jobs, even when they have been beaten” (Powell, 2001, p.79). In families, they are treated as second class individuals. “Eva’s family remained committed to earlier, stupid cruelties that they just didn’t have the decency to undo. So as each event retreated into the past and there was a chance to let her back in, they would come up with some fresh, new reason to keep her out, a new wound. It was

like trying to reconcile with a battering ram” (Schulman, 2008, p. 91). “Families are more likely to “tolerate” homosexuals, that is, to keep them in a position of lesser value and punish than to learn from them and be elevated by their knowledge... Because of the twisted nature of dominant behaviour, gay people are being punished within the family structure even though they have not done anything wrong” (Schulman, 2009, pp. 2-3). It is mentioned in *The Child* “The real point was that he was being punished but hadn’t done anything wrong” (Schulman, 2008, p. 34). Short-sighted slights, varied degrees of isolation, severe attacks that deform the homosexual person’s life and direct and indirect cruelties that actually kill that person’s existence are all examples of family crimes. Stew’s father accuses him. “You are the problem. You are wrong. You’re a wrong kid” (Schulman, 2008, p. 70). His father attacked him physically too. “He pushed Stew down on the front step and slammed the door” (Schulman, 2008, p. 171). “Another typically vulgar false accusation is the charge that gay people should be kept away from children” (Schulman, 2009, p. 7). In *The Child*, Eva asks to Mary “do you think it’s a child abuse to keep your kids away from their lesbian aunts?” (Schulman, 2008, p. 78). Eva’s comment about her sister Ethel is noteworthy. “She gets more out of manipulating my mother’s prejudices than any of her own” (Schulman, 2008, p. 91). To impose homophobia, false accusation is used as a plan and shunning is its execution.

Shunning is when people are cut out, excluded from participating in conversations, communities, social structures; are not allowed to have any say about how they are treated; and cannot speak or speak back. Shunning is a form of mental cruelty that is designed to pretend that the victim does not exist and has never existed. Shunning is an active form of harassment. Shunning is the most common form of homophobia and the easiest to carry out (Schulman, 2009, pp. 10-11).

Eva’s mother Nathalie understood that “The only way to have a family was to shun Eva... To get in with the parents Ethel had to be anti-Eva on all questions, no matter what. Eva’s removal from the family benefited Ethel on all fronts” (Schulman, 2008, p. 137). In Stew’s case, “Everyone wanted Stew out of the house; they were all in together” (Schulman, 2008, p. 81). Even his mother told him. “It’s over for you Stew, Nobody wants you here” (Schulman, 2008, p. 134). Homosexuals become scapegoats as they lack support from family and society. “Very few experience their personhood, lives and feelings to be actively understood as equal to the heterosexual family members” (Schulman, 2009, p. 19). Families respond to homosexuality either through excluding the homosexuals through outright ban or through letting them have some participation with conditions. Stew was also excluded. “It had been years since Stew had looked into his father’s eyes and seen anything but avoidance” (Schulman, 2008, p. 39). Exclusion from the family has become an unquestioned way of responding to the coming out. “The one thing Eva could never outturn. Her exclusion from her family” (90). “They humiliated her for being gay, so she became alienated” (Schulman, 2008, p. 94). Education and third party intervention can play an important part in eradicating homophobia.

Education is the means to emancipation. “Homophobia is largely the result of ignorance” (Powell, 2001, p. 82). Ignorance is darkness which doesn’t allow a person to see the truth. Education spreads light of knowledge and expels darkness made up of ignorance. “Education is essential in eradicating the social intolerance associated with any taboo behaviour, even though it can be long and tedious undertaking” (Gramick, 1983, p. 139). Sex education has to include all types of sexualities. “Sound sex education in the family, schools, churches and social work agencies is a societal responsibility” (Gramick, 1983, p. 139). Apart from education, third party intervention can help in erasing the cruelties on homosexuals.

When homosexuals are dropped out from their jobs, expelled from the homes, and denied opportunities, intervention of the third parties will let them face the situation more courageously. Eva said to his friends “Stew went through police, courts, and social workers, and no one did anything about that crazy homophobic family” (Schulman, 2008, p. 204). It is not homosexuality that is pathological but the irrational fear towards the homosexuals. The dominant group exerts power to persecute the powerless as there is neither family nor society to support the powerless. “When the family is excluding and persecuting a gay person who is asking for intervention, people who know and come into contact with that family have a moral imperative to tell them that what they are doing is wrong” (Schulman, 2009, p. 102). In the novel it is said that “People were treated unjustly. If they didn’t have enough power to protect themselves, others had to intervene and help. It was the primary responsibility of being human. It was the reason to have society. Now if only someone would intervene for Eva with her family. It had to happen some day. Maybe her niece/nephew would be the one to put a stop to this” (Schulman, 2008, p. 111). Perpetrators manipulate the homosexuals as they think that no one will stand for them and views the silence of others as a green signal. “The visibility of gay people has not significantly changed this situation. Change lies with third party interventions to create a critical mass of consequences for the perpetrators of shunning, scapegoating, and bullying” (Schulman, 2009, p. 168).

Conclusion

As homosexuality is natural, there is nothing much to do than accepting the homosexuals as they are. But as homophobia is an irrational fear and makes ‘home’phobia, there is much to do to eradicate it. Education and third party intervention can work effectively to make people aware of the fact that it is an irrational fear. Family members are to be given awareness about the fact that their homophobia inflicts deep psychological and

physiological wounds in the minds of the homosexuals and urge them to understand and care for them. Psychologists and social workers can play the leading role in rectifying this irrational fear. Eradicating homophobia is everyone's business too. Because, there may be homosexuals among everyone's dear and near ones. There is no justification for familial homophobia. One's intervention will leave a drop of goodness on the earth and never forget the fact that several drops of water makes an ocean.

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