



Homosexuality in Andrew Sean Greer's *Less* Novel

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Abstract

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The aim of the study is to analyze the issue of homosexuality which is shown by the main character in Andrew Sean Greer's *Less* novel (2017). This study uses Queer Theory by Annamarie Jagose in her book entitled *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (1996) regarding homosexuality. Meanwhile, this study applies a qualitative and textual approach that presents an analysis in the form of essay. The results of this study found out the causes of homosexual, exploring the social life and past life. Therefore, it impacts the main character's sexual orientation as a homosexual and the way he struggles against social judgments. The impact of the struggles, Arthur Less undertakes self-acceptance process regarding his gay identity, dealing with discrimination, and becoming a gay writer.

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, homosexuality is a greatly sensitive issue that is being polemic in society. They say this phenomenon is a disease; people called this a LGBT case. Some people argue this case as a mental illness that should be healed and followed up. Meanwhile, this is not justified by Freud (1951, p. 423) who said, "homosexuality is assuredly no advantage, but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it cannot be classified as an illness; and consider it to be a variation of the sexual function produced by a certain arrest of sexual development." However, the foregoing should not be interpreted as an argument that sexual minority individuals are free from mental illness and psychological distress. Indeed, giving the stresses which are created by sexual stigma and prejudice would be astonishing if some of them do not manifest psychological problems.

Homosexual is a troubling moral and social phenomenon (Guyana Chronicle The Nation's Paper, 2013, para. 1). Seeing that, the interpretation of the same-sex relationship condition itself, increasingly seen as something neutral or even good. Some proponents stated that men and women with homosexual tendency must be accepted

with respect, affection, and sensitivity, as appropriate as the heterosexuals. Nonetheless, they are contrary to natural law. According to Sullivan (1997, p. 82), “marriage has long been a social institution defined by relationships between men and women.” This means, a relationship that can be accepted by each social institution is the relationship between men and women, not the same-sex mates, and it had been a tradition that is measured in millennia.

The issue of homosexuality has become a phenomenon in many countries in the world, not least the superior country like the USA. Approximately five point one percent of American women and three point nine percent of American men have a tendency towards LGBT (Newport, 2018). Moreover, it is still being a controversial topic in the USA, polls and surveys regarding moral acceptance or legalization of same-sex marriage show a clear tendency towards acceptance and tolerance of LGBT communities among Americans. It is allowed in several states, such as; New York, Connecticut, or New Hampshire, while others recognize same-sex relationships but do not show them openly. However, while tolerance is on the rise, Rick Santorum’s statement as quoted in Procon (ProCon, 2019, para. 3) stated that “legalizing gay marriage will increasingly damage institutions that are important for the welfare of our children and society.” This refers to a study by Regnerus (2012) that found children raised by parents who had same-sex relationships suffered more difficulties in life; including sexual abuse than children raised by intact biological families.

Meanwhile, the image of homosexuality found in Andrew Sean Greer’s *Less* novel (2017). This novel was first published in 2017 under the auspices of Little, Brown and Company in the USA, before finally being re-published by Hachette Australia in 2018. Hereafter, this novel won the 2018 *Pulitzer Prize for Fiction*, even, *Less* also was a *New York Times Best Seller*. The title takes its etymology from the last name of the main character which contains abundant meanings, including the life of Arthur Less who always feels ‘less’. Moreover, the gay identity of Andrew Sean Greer as the author makes Arthur Less even stronger because it is based on Greer’s personal experiences. Meanwhile, for the first time, Greer wrote *Less* is only for his own satisfaction who wants to provide a happy ending story for a gay character, as he said in an interview that it is important for him to give a happy ending for Arthur Less as a queer character because he had long wanted to read that kind of story, but, he could not find it. Thus, the title of this study is *Homosexuality in Andrew Sean Greer’s Less Novel*.

Furthermore, the objectives of the study are to explore the causes and the struggles done by the main character about his sexual preference as a homosexual reflected in Andrew Sean Greer’s *Less* novel. Meanwhile, the study took the Queer Theory from Annamarie Jagose (1996) regarding the homosexuality. Through the novel, the main character possess homosexuality causes based on his social and past life, while the struggles are regarding self-acceptance, dealing with discrimination, and becoming a gay writer.

The studies which use the homosexuality as the object of analysis have been conducted by several college students and writers. Those related studies analyzed the same subject; the homosexuality towards the works of literature. Meanwhile, all the related studies used as a comparison in this study.

The first study was conducted by Bendel (2013), Colorado State University, whose study was entitled *A Queer Perspective: Gay Themes in the Film Interview with the Vampire*. The study focused on gay lifestyle toward the main characters within the United States’s culture of the mid-1990s. This study used narrative technique and

sexology homo binary theory from Chris Brickell which says that the gay man is always played against a straight or 'straightened' character. As for, the result of this study indicated that there are some themes of gay lifestyle experienced by the main characters within the United States's culture of the mid-1990s.

The second study was conducted by Rarasati (2014), Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, whose study was entitled *The Issue of Homosexuality in Annie Proulx's Brokeback Mountain and its Film Adaptation directed by Ang Lee*. The study focused on the feelings felt by the main characters about their homosexuality. This study used qualitative analysis and abnormal psychology theory from Carl Jung which says that can be characterized by three main specific features: the level of integration between the conscious and the unconscious mind; specific features of conscious attitudes; and the degree of freedom each person has to master behavior and organize life as a whole. Meanwhile, the result of this study indicated that there are some positive and negative feelings felt by the main characters toward their homosexuality.

The third study was conducted by Wulan (2019), Universitas Diponegoro, whose study was entitled *Homosexuality in the Novel Maurice by E.M. Foster*. This study focused on the main characters life condition as a gay man. This study used library research and queer theory by Annamarie Jagose which says that homosexuality is commonly and widely understood to describe sexual attraction for those of one's own sex. For the result, this study indicated that there are two kinds of homosexuality experienced by the main characters, that are: natural and conditioned homosexuality.

To sum up, similarly, all the studies focus on analyzing the homosexuality by characters in literary works. Meanwhile, the use of perspectives and the object are different. This study used Andrew Sean Greer's *Less* novel as an object, and Queer Theory by Annamarie Jagose as the theoretical framework. Although the homosexuality is also analyzed in characters, however, the factors which lead characters to the experienced same-sex attraction are assortment depending on the perspective or object selected in analyzing it.

METHOD

The approach used in this study is qualitative research because this study analyses the social issues in the novel which reflects the social life. As Flick (2014) defines that qualitative approach is used to analyze factual cases in the domestic and impermanent thew and started from reader's expression and events in a specific framework. Meanwhile, this study focuses on the process of analyzing the case of same-sex relationship stated in the background of the study using the Queer Theory from Annamarie Jagose, analyzed the causes and the struggles of the main character about his sexual preference as a homosexual in Andrew Sean Greer's *Less*. Eventually, the data of this study is presented in a form of essay. Thus, according to Lincoln (2002), they state that qualitative research emphasizes the importance of context in analyzing data.

Meanwhile, there are some steps in collecting the data. Firstly is reading the object repeatedly in order to understand the whole story well. Secondly is understanding fictional devices and the main issue of the object. Thirdly is marking the essential parts of the object that related to the theory. Then, lastly is taking the essential parts from the data and some notes from references. Moreover, the data presents in the form of essay.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Homosexual Causes of the Main Character in *Less*

Social Life

Many causes are supporting a person to become homosexual, one of which is social life. Among others, lifestyle and promiscuity are a major influence on the formation of a person's social life. This is what experienced by the main character in this novel. Arthur Less is being a homosexual since he became good friend with Carlos Pelu who is a gay, and hereafter, it leads him to more frequent encounters with his community which later made him also has this similar orientation. Along with Carlos's penchant for making parties with mostly gay man guests, Less is often involved in.

Let us land ourselves in mid-2000s San Francisco, a house in the hills, on Saturn Street. One of those creatures on stilts, a glass wall revealing a never-used grand piano and a crowd of mostly gay men celebrating one of a dozen parties that year. Among them: a thicker Carlos, whose longtime lover left him real estate when he died, and who turned those few lots into a property empire, including far-flung holdings in Vietnam, Thailand, even some ridiculous resort Less heard about in India. (Greer, 2017, p. 10-11)

The quotation above shows how the social life of Arthur Less as a friend of Carlos Pelu is supported by the surrounding environment and dominated by the homosexual community. The setting which written in the first sentence: '*mid-2000s San Francisco*,' it refers to a specific city that is known to have the highest LGBT population since 1900s. The city where the main character grows, which makes him very possible to be influenced by that environment at the time. Meanwhile, the setting of place '*a house in the hills*' shows how private their gathering event. Seeing that, everybody can easily come to the garden party, but, only certain people can come to the hills party. It proves that the setting of place already set only for those who can attend, also, it shows their way to create the private party hidden from the public to avoid any negative judgments. Furthermore, by the words "... *a crowd of mostly gay men celebrating one of a dozen parties that year*," it shows that the guests who attended the party were mostly homosexuals. The words '*a dozen parties that year*' indicate that they do have this kind of annual event, as a form of representation of how strong their community in which the main character is involved in it. The party itself was held by Carlos, an elite gay who sponsored the event. It can be shown by the words "... *one of those creatures on stilts... Among them: a thicker Carlos...*" This explains that Carlos is the one who held the party, seeing that, he inherited the wealth of his dead lover, as it is shown here "... *whose longtime lover left him real estate when he died.*" Thus, the annual event which held by him is systematically arranged, because it is also supported by his financial condition.

Past Life

Another causes that drive homosexual preference in the main character in this novel is the past life based on his family background. His childhood that did not escape his mother domination made him feel always in control. In fact, the role of his father as the head of the family seems powerless than his mother who is also more dominant in the family. Seeing that, his mother is a boss in her own company, thus, she always thinks that

she has more power than his husband, even less his son. Because of that, Arthur Less never feels comfortable with any women because he always thinks that woman likes to control as his mother. Thus, his mindset eventually creates a tendency to dislike women.

Once when he was twelve, on a family trip that took path to various countries, all he remembers (in his childish exhaustion) is his father lugging old fashioned suitcases (including his mother's mysterious makeup kit). His mother, often tried to coax other memories from Less (sitting beside): "Don't you remember the landlady with the wig that kept falling off?" ... "Yes," he said every time, just as his mother's workman always did. (Greer, 2017, p. 73)

From the quotation above, it indicates how the power of Arthur Less's mother dominated him, even less his father. On the family trip which should be a fun moment to remember, but, what Less remember is only his exhaustion as it is explicitly written in parentheses here "... *all he remembers (in his childish exhaustion).*" This extra information shows that Less did not feel happy in his past life because of his 'exhaustion' and seemed not to enjoy that trip at all. Meanwhile, by the words "... *his father lugging old fashioned suitcases (including his mother's mysterious makeup kit),*" it shows how Less's mother treats her husband like a lackey. Seeing that, only him in the quotation who carried the suitcases, even the makeup kit, while his mother had nothing to carry. The next line when Less's mother asked him with a few questions, he answered "yes" only, as it reflects what always he does that is just to be obedient to his mother. This is sharpened by the following words "... *just as his mother's workman always did,*" it indicates that his mother was a boss with several employees, which is mentioned as '*workman.*' Thus, as a boss in general, she is always bossy and demands that others who have powerless than her should obey. Furthermore, this also applied to her family life.

The Struggles Done by the Main Character toward His Sexual Preference in *Less*

Self-Acceptance

Self-acceptance is a way of how people accept themselves as they are, both strengths and weaknesses. However, that would be very difficult to do for homosexuals, considering their status which is still as the minor in society. Many individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) experience stigma, prejudice, and/or discrimination because of their sexuality. According to these experiences, it can contribute to any difficulties with self-acceptance of sexuality foremost. Thus, Arthur Less as a homosexual main character in this novel, he did a lot of struggles in the process of self-acceptance. Despite his self-justification consciously confirmed that he is a gay, this does not make him live in peace for an instant. Many things depress Less in the process of self-acceptance that he realizes he is being gay and tries to come out.

And he feels none; he feels only the shiver of delight when there is nobody around to judge you. It is a bad musical, but, like a bad lay, a bad musical can still do its job perfectly well. By the end, Arthur Less is in tears, sobbing in his seat, and he thinks he has been sobbing quietly until the lights come up and the woman seated beside him turns and says, "Honey, I don't know what happened in your life, but I am so so sorry,"

and gives him a lilac-scented embrace. Nothing happened to me, he wants to say to her. Nothing happened to me. I'm just a homosexual at a Broadway show. (Greer, 2017, p. 22)

From this quotation, it shows how Arthur Less feels as being gay when he is alone. By the words "*and he feels none; he feels only the shiver of delight when there is nobody around to judge you,*" Less reveals that 'he feels none' which can be indicated as a feeling that does not know how to do and what should be. He realizes that he is someone who is not fully accepted by the major in society, thus, he feels more comfortable when he is alone, just as he expressed that comfort in parable '*the shiver of delight.*' Meanwhile, the words "... *when there is nobody around to judge you*" indicate how society treats him based on his sexuality, knowing he is being gay. The word '*judge*' itself always has a negative meaning. Therefore, the next sentence shown "... *Arthur Less is in tears, sobbing in his seat,*" it is the act that finally blows up Less's deepest feeling as being gay, though he was able to accept himself as '*queer*'. Moreover, when the woman tried to calm him down, he was out of words. Seeing that, the homosexuals usually cover their identities in order to avoid prejudice. Meanwhile, by the words "*nothing happened to me, he wants to say to her. Nothing happened to me. I'm just a homosexual at a Broadway show,*" it is something he wanted to say, but, he did not feel brave enough to say. That '*Broadway show*' itself refers to the parable of how life is like as being gay in America at the time which can be interpreted as a show full of drama.

The term 'coming out' for homosexual perpetrators is the act of telling others about their sexual orientation. It only happens when they reached some levels of self-acceptance. Meanwhile, Arthur Less never feels worried to tell others that he is gay, but, in some conditions and for any reasons, he worries about what others think knowing that he is gay. Thus, he comes out only when he wants to, and he does it with his own way. "Arthur Less did not publish his relationship until he was in his thirties. By then, he had lived with the famous poet Robert Brownburn for years in a small house—a shack, they always called it—halfway up a steep residential stairway in San Francisco." (Greer, 2017, p. 27) The quotation indicates the time when Arthur Less finally came out from hiding his same-sex relationship with Robert Brownburn. By the words "*Arthur Less did not publish his relationship until he was in his thirties,*" it identifies that before he was thirty, he did not publish the relationship. In other words, at those times, he still covers up his sexual orientation as homosexual. It proves that for most homosexuals, coming out is the effort which is not easy to do. It is a very personal decision that usually full of fears and stresses, as they worry about discrimination, rejection, disapproval, and even violence.

Dealing with Discrimination

The next struggle done by Arthur Less as a homosexual main character in this novel is dealing with discrimination, including gay bashing. This cause makes Less always feels 'different' from others, outside of the community. Seeing that, until a decade ago, homosexuals were an invisible and hidden population in society. Although the legal persecution was repealed in a few countries, the discrimination never ends. Meanwhile, as an author who explores gay characters in his novel, Less has received several rejections and unfair treatments. He also received several 'name-calls' that

refer to gay bashing action toward his sexual orientation because he is gay. Nevertheless, Less continues to face it all and struggles to gain acceptance of his novel.

Why him? Why did they ask Arthur Less? A minor author whose too old to be fresh and too young to be rediscovered, one who never sits next to anyone on a plane who has heard of his books. Well, Less knows why. It is no mystery. A calculation was made: what literary writer would agree to prepare for an interview and yet not be paid? How far down the list did they go before someone said: "What about Arthur Less?" (Greer, 2017, p. 8-9)

From the quotation above, it shows that Arthur Less is a writer who is only called as a last option for the unpaid interview, while other writers perhaps do not want to accept that offer. This is how Less is often discriminated. Knowing that other writers are paid high for the one-time interview, he is not even paid. Furthermore, besides he is just a minor writer like it mentioned here "*a minor author whose too old to be fresh and too young to be rediscovered,*" he is also a homosexual. That is, how Less is often getting unfair treatments. Meanwhile, by the words "*well, Less knows why. It is no mystery,*" it indicates that Less is no longer wonder why he is treated that way because it was not something new. Indeed, it has happened many times since he was being gay.

Becoming a Gay Writer

Becoming a gay is enough to depress Arthur Less because of the difficulty of living as a minority. Moreover, becoming a gay writer, Less gets a lot of pressure, both on his own inner struggles and the expectations from his community. In addition, the prejudices of the publishers. Meanwhile, Less poured much of his feeling as gay into his writings which mostly depicted the sorrows. It also revealed how struggling he has been with and the hopelessness of living in the heterosexual environment.

It took five years for Less to take Robert's advice to write. Just labored short stories at first. And then, almost at the end of their lives together, a novel. *Kalipso*: a retelling of the Calypso myth from *The Odyssey*, with a World War II soldier washed ashore in the South Pasific and brought back to life by a local man who falls in love with him and must help him find a way back to his world, and to his wife back home. "Arthur, this book," Robert said, taking off his glasses for effort. "It's an honor to be in love with you." (Greer, 2017, p. 27)

The quotation above shows Arthur Less's first process of becoming a gay writer. By the words contained in the first sentence "*it took five years for Less to take Robert's advice to write,*" this indicates that to be a writer is advice from Robert, his former same-sex partner, then Less finally took his advice five years later. Meanwhile, the first novel written by Less was about gay characters, as it described here "*... and brought back to life by a local man who falls in love with him.*" This clearly proves that the character made by Less was gay. Therefore, this is how the way he becomes a gay writer in the long run, that is, he writes stories about gay characters in his novels.

CONCLUSION

The story of *Less* novel by Andrew Sean Greer reveals the causes and the struggles done by the main character as a homosexual. The main character experienced the social and past life causes that impact to his sexual orientation. Knowing that his circle of friends and the places he likes to visits are the main causes of his homosexual preference. By reason of his mostly friends are gay, and he likes to visit any gay bars to meet them, it finally drives him to has a similar orientation. As for, he has experienced to being dominated and controlled by his mother in the past life, then, his social life eventually made him feel more comfortable living with men. Therefore, it formed his desire to be in relationship with his same-sex mates.

Meanwhile, the struggles done by the main character include self-acceptance, dealing with discrimination, and becoming a gay writer at last. The main character struggles hard to accept himself as being gay and comes it out to the people based on his own way. Indeed, the discrimination experienced by him was mostly about his sexuality. The way he struggles hard to dealing this in his work area, and also dealing with the gay bashing just because he is a minor in the society. Thus, people from a gender majority group seem to have more power to do that all. Also, as the minor, the main character thinks that he has only little chance to speak up. Therefore, he becomes a gay writer in order to speak his mind as a homosexual and to present the homosexuals' expectation to be equal as well as the heterosexuals.

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