

## Exploring homosexuality in "Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe" novel by Benjamin Alire Sáenz

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### *Abstract*

*The aims of this study are to analyze the homosexuality that depicted by the main characters in Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secret of the Universe (2012) novel by Benjamin Alire Saenz and to reveal the effects of homosexuality through the main characters in the novel. Homosexuality is a sense of romantic, commonly as sexual attraction and behavior expression that happened between individual or in the same gender such as lesbian or gay. Besides, the homosexuality tended to have more negative than positive effects on personal and society. The object of this study was novel and the data were analyzed through words and quotations that used Queer Theory by Annamarie Jagose's (1996). Descriptive qualitative approach is used on this study in order to analyze the data and to reveal the effects of homosexuality through the main character in the novel with the result in the form of an essay. The results of this study indicated the homosexuality through the main character that showed sexual attraction and behavior expression in their daily life. Furthermore, the writer also found the effects of homosexuality through the main character finally experienced personal effect and social effect in their life.*

**Keywords:** *gay, homosexuality, queer theory.*

### **A. Introduction**

Homosexuality is a sense of romantic, commonly as sexual attraction that happened between individual or in the same gender such as lesbian or gay. Therefore, the same-sex attraction can be called homosexuality. Moreover, homosexuality such as gay was something taboo before, but it became a normal condition today in society. Many people have committed homosexual acts and some have even legalized it in western countries. The commonly seen the phenomena of homosexuality in bar or discotheque. Homosexuality phenomena not only happened to ordinary people but it was also found in public figures.

The member of homosexual usually does not expose their same sex relationship in public places, because many people still see that homosexuality as moral disease. The communities of homosexual have spread in many countries and United Kingdom is one of those countries which has influenced of homosexual. According to Asrita (2020, p. 106), "Homosexuality happened to UK famous singer such as Sam Smith who declared as a homosexual or gay in 2014". Therefore, the public was shocked by the publication of Sam Smith status of

homosexuality. In that condition he can still work and the British people still like him. According to Faishal (2021, p. 19), "Homosexuality also happened to Hollywood public figures such as Elton John with David Furnish who have been a gay couple for a long time ago since 1993". Moreover, it didn't matter because of the UK government has legalized same-sex marriage for LGBT and even homosexual couples can adopt the children. Homosexual problems were not only present in reality but also existed in literary works, one of which is entitled *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012) novel.

There were many kinds of homosexuality that could be contained in the novel, however it could be found in words and quotations. Therefore, one kind of the literary work which contained the homosexuality issue was *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012) novel written by Benjamin Alire Saenz. Saenz was an American novelist, poet and writer. Besides, he also declared as a gay in 2009, after 15 years marriage to a female from the El Paso family that he filed for divorce with his wife before in court. Furthermore, Benjamin Alire Saenz published his phenomenal novel entitled *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* which contained the homosexuality issue in 2012 (Burns, 2013).

The novel was originally published in New York by Simon & Schuster, Inc. The novel has been sold more than a million copies worldwide. According to Peterson (2013), the novel also has many literary awards such as Stonewall Book Award for LGBT fiction, Michael L. Printz Award honor for Young Adult Fiction, Pennsylvania Young Reader's Choice Award, Lambda Literary Narrative Medal for Latino fiction, DeutscherJugendliteraturpreis, Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award honor, Lincoln Award, Pura Belpre Award, and Les Incorruptibles. Therefore, the writer tries to analyze depiction of homosexuality and to reveal the effects of main characters experiences with homosexuality that contained in the novel by using Queer theory (1996) by Jagose.

## B. Method

In conducting this study, the writer used qualitative approach in conducting this study to analyze homosexuality through the characters that reflected in "Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe" novel by Benjamin Alire Saenz that used Queer Theory (1996) by Annamarie Jagose's. Creswell (2009) stated that qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The writer is making interpretations of the meaning of the data. Therefore, the writer produces a narrative or textual description of the social phenomena or human problem in this study by analyzing words, sentences, and reporting any detail information about the study. Through this approach, the result of the data analysis is conducting in descriptive form of an essay. The writer used primary and reference sources to support and finish the study. The primary source was the words and quotations in the novel. Then, the data were taken from "Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe" (2012) novel written by Benjamin Alire Saenz. The writer analyzed the characters, which focused on homosexuality by using Annamarie Jagose's (1996) theory of Queer.

Data Collecting  
In conducting the study, the writer followed several steps to collect the data:

- Reading the novel "Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe" repeatedly.
- Searching for some the issues of Homosexuality.
- Identifying the homosexuality of main characters in the novel.
- Classifying and determining the relevant data.

The data which has been collected then will be analyzed into three steps. The first step was categorizing the data based on the words and quotations in the novel. The second step was

interpreting the data whether it was suitable or not with the topic. Then, the last step was analyzing the data based on the perspective that was evaluated in theoretical framework. After all, the writer accomplished all of steps then created this study.

## C. Findings and Discussion

### 1. Effect of Homosexuality in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* Novel

#### 1.1. Personal Effect

The homosexual one is affected his personal identity. In personal terms he would like the same sex, not the opposite sex. Therefore, the effect of homosexuality tends to be negative. However, there were also the positive things that depend on the people to respond their acts. This can be shown in the following quotation:

The thing is I love my dad. My mom too. And I keep wondering what they're going to say when I tell them that someday I want to marry a boy. (Saenz, 2012, p. 193)

The quotation above described the personal effect of homosexual or being a gay. Dante told Ari that he loved his parents very much but he was afraid to disappoint them if it turned out that he liked boys more than girls and wants to marry a boy someday. Dante's closeness and experience on friendships that tends to be more comfortable with men. Therefore, it changed him into a homosexual or gay in psychologically. In the phrase "*I want to marry a boy*" it indicated that Dante experienced the personal effect in his homosexual life called the desire to marry the same-sex or being a gay couple (men to men), when he was talking with Ari.

In his life, Dante felt a personal effect such as become like the same-sex (men to men) than the opposite sex (men to women) because some experience that he had. It can be shown in the following quotation:

Dad, I have something to say to you. I like boys. Don't hate me. Please don't hate me. I mean, Dad, you're a boy too. (Saenz, 2012, p. 194)

The quotation above described Dante told his father that he currently liked boys and being gay. Dante hoped his father would understand and did not hate him, because of his only son not being a boy who normally liked girls. He had hidden his gay identity to his parents for so long. In the phrase "*I like boys*" it indicated that he was brave to tell the truth about himself was a gay to his father even though he was worried that his father might hate him later.

Furthermore, when Ari became like Dante that sometimes he fantasized a naughty things about Dante in his mind. It was a personal affect that shown by Ari to Dante. It can be seen in the following quotation:

I could see that my mom and dad were holding hands. Sometimes they would glance at each other. I looked out at the desert. I thought of the night Dante and I had smoked pot and run around naked in the rain. (Saenz, 2012, p. 243)

The quotation above described Ari saw affection of his parents while in the car. He suddenly fantasized something dirty about a boy running naked in the rain who was Dante. In the words "*I thought of the night Dante and I had smoked pot and run around naked in the rain.*" it could be assume the effect of seeing his parents' affection and also Ari's love for Dante made him fantasize something naughty about the two of them.

At the moment, Ari felt the naughty things again about Dante. In his dream, he kissed Dante. This personal effect can be shown in the following quotation:

That dream that I was kissing someone. When I woke, I wanted to touch myself. Shaking hands with your best friend. That was Dante's euphemism. (Saenz, 2012, p. 248)

The quotation above described Ari kissed someone who was most likely the person in his dream that was Dante. Because when he woke up from his dream, the one he remembered was Dante's euphemism. In the phrase "*that dream that I was kissing someone.*" It can be assumed that Ari kissed Dante in his dream because only Dante always pictured in his mind. "*That was Dante's euphemism*" it was the effect of Dante's euphemism that something memorable in Ari's mind.

Sometimes someone did a sacrifice to the person that he loved. In this case, Ari performed more than one sacrifices to Dante such as risk his own life. This personal effect can be seen in the following quotation:

Why would you risk your own life to save Dante if you didn't love him? Why would you go and beat the holy crap out of a guy who hurt him? Why would you do that? You love that boy. (Saenz, 2012, p. 288)

The quotation above described Ari had a conversation with his parents, who believed that Ari loved Dante for so long. Then, Ari was willing to sacrifice risk his own life for Dante because of his love to him. In the phrase "*risk your own life*" it showed the effect of Ari's love for Dante making him able to sacrifice his life to save Dante and beat out a guy who hurt Dante. "*You love that boy*" that can be assumed his father believed that Ari loved Dante very much based on the attitudes that Ari had shown so far.

Furthermore, Dante psychology changed because his homosexuality that he felt worries about losing Ari, who is a boy that he loved so much. Therefore, the effect of homosexuality tends to be negative. However, there were also the positive things that depend on the people to respond their acts. This can be shown in the following quotation:

I'm a little worried that we won't be friends when I get back. I guess I have to deal with these things. I hate lying to people, Ari. I especially hate lying to my parents. You know how I feel about them. (Saenz, 2012, p. 193)

The quotation above described the personal impact of homosexual or being a gay. Dante worried about that he would losing Ari if Ari knew that he was being a gay. In the phrase "*little worried*" showed that Dante experienced emotional discomfort about the fear of his new identity. In the words "*I especially hate lying to my parents*" indicated that he loved his parents very much but he was afraid to disappoint them if he was being a gay in the family.

In another case, Dante felt a personal impact such as did not attract again with girls because he only attracted with boys. It can be shown in the following quotation:

But what if you fall in love with a girl? That's not going to happen, Ari. They'll always love you, Dante. He didn't say anything. And then I heard him crying. (Saenz, 2012, p. 212)

The quotation above described the personal impact of homosexual or being a gay. Ari said to Dante about how if Dante fell in love with a girl someday. In the phrase "*That's not going to happen, Ari*" it indicated that Dante's answer was clearly that he would not attracted

to any girls in his life because his personal changed become a homosexual person. This condition occurred because of many things, one of which was because of their loneliness and only boyfriends could cover it.

In his life, Dante felt a personal impact such as become like the same-sex (men to men) than the opposite sex (men to women) because some experience that he had. It can be shown in the following quotation:

When you left for Chicago, Dante told me that someday he wanted to marry another boy. I looked around the room. Or at least kiss another boy. (Saenz, 2012, p. 250)

The quotation above described the personal impact of homosexual or being a gay. Ari told about Dante's secret to Dante's parents about their son's changing or abnormal sexual condition. In the phrase "Dante told me that someday he wanted to marry another boy" it indicated that the effect of Dante's closeness and experience on friendships that tend to be more comfortable with boys. As the result, Dante preferred to marry another boy than girl that called the desire to marry the same-sex or being a gay couple (men to men).

## 1.2. Social Effect

In this study, there was not only personal effect caused by homosexual relationship. However, homosexual relationship would also affect social or public relations. Therefore, marginalization and devaluation was the impact of homosexual in the society. Homosexual is considered to have a negative influence on society. Frequently, people would isolate gays or their communities that they were considered disturbing. It can be people would do insulting and bullying them.

There were also positive things that depend on the people responding it such as acceptance, encourage and support in society especially from their parents or family. This can be shown in the following quotation:

Yeah, I'm gay and I want to kiss you. And then he got this really disgusted look on his face and said: I ought to kick your ass. (Saenz, 2012, p. 173)

The quotation above described the social effect of homosexual or being a gay. At this moment, Ari met an insulting and provoking boy who wanted to beat up him because Ari claimed to be a gay and wanted to kiss the boy. In the words "*Yeah, I'm gay and I want to kiss you.*" It can be showed that Ari claimed to be a gay and wanted to kiss the boy. Ari received insulting and bullying from the boy, this is a negative form of society towards gays. Where, gay often received insults and bullies from the public. In the phrase "*disgusted*" and "*I ought to kick your ass*" indicated that Ari experienced the social effect in his homosexual life called insulting and bullying, when a gay was confront with the people in the public.

One day, Ari would get a social effect such as insulting from public because he had a gay friend such as Dante. It can be shown in the following quotation:

Why are you hanging out with that queer? If you can't stick by me as a friend, Ari, if you can't do that, then maybe it's better that you just, you know—it would kill me. (Saenz, 2012, p. 209)

The quotation above described Dante explained his rules to Ari that he never left him as a friend when someday Ari might be teased by someone, for being friends with a queer or gay person such like Dante in society. In the phrase "*Why are you hanging out with that queer?*" it can be assumed a form of insulting from the society that Ari would get later if he

continued to be friends with Dante, whose declared a gay. In the phrase "*that queer*" it indicated Dante experienced the social effect in his life called homosexual satire in the public when he has a gay friend.

Furthermore, Dante got violence from some boys such as beaten by them because they saw Dante kissed a boy in an alley. Violence was a kind of social effect to a gay people. It can be seen in the following quotation:

We stood outside the hospital. Mrs. Quintana looked at me. Dante and another boy were kissing in an alley. Some boys were walking by and saw them. And— She tried to smile. Well, you saw what they did to him. (Saenz, 2012, p. 253)

The quotation above described that Dante had been an incident which made him being hospitalized. The beating happened because some boys saw and caught Dante and another boy kissed in the alley. In the phrase "*Well, you saw what they did to him*" that indicated Dante experience the social effect in his homosexual life called violence in the public by got a beating incident from some boys because he was a gay.

At the moment, Ari got an acceptance for his love to Dante from his parents. They also gave support to Ari about his relationship with Dante. This was a positive form of social effect that happened to Ari in society, especially from his parents. It can be shown in the following quotation:

Dante's in love you, he said. That's obvious enough. He doesn't hide that from himself. I can't help what he feels, Dad. No. No, you can't. (Saenz, 2012, p. 287)

The quotation above described that Ari had a conversation with his parents about Dante, whose Ari's close friend. In fact, Ari's parents knew that Dante has loved Ari for so long. Although it was a forbidden relationship that was homosexual or gay (men to men) but on the contrary, Ari's parents approve and support their relationship. In the phrase "*Dante's in love you, he said*" it indicated that their parents wanted to see their son both happy rather than depression being a homosexual couples. It was a positive form of society towards gays. Where, the parents understand about the other side of gay such as gay person can be depressed because their relationship was not acceptance which could lead to death or even suicide.

In the same-sex love of relationship, they sometimes ashamed to be known by society such as their parents about their truth feeling. However, in this case Ari got an acceptance for his love to Dante from his parents. They also encouraged Ari relationship with Dante which was called as being a gay couple. This was a positive form of the social effect that happened to Ari and Dante in society, especially from his parents. It can be shown in the following quotation:

Ashamed of what? my mother said. Of loving Dante? I'm a guy. He's a guy. It's not the way things are supposed to be. Mom—. (Saenz, 2012, p. 288)

The quotation above described that Ari had a conversation with his parents about his relationship with Dante, who was Ari's close friend that he loved. In fact, Ari's parents knew that Dante had loved Ari for so long and Ari loved him too. Even though it was a forbidden relationship that a gay (men to men), but on the contrary in the words "*Ashamed of what? my mother said. Of loving Dante?*" indicated that Ari's parents accept and encourage him to be not ashamed with their love which was forbidden or taboo. It was because they want to see

them both happy rather than depression. Where, the parents understand about the other side of gay person can be depressed because their relationship was not acceptance which could lead to the suicide or even death.

Moreover, Dante got physical violent by some boys while outside because they saw Dante's gay activity that was kissing a boy in an alley. Physical violent was a kind of social impact to a gay people in society. It can be seen in the following quotation:

He smiled at me. They beat him, he whispered. They beat my Dante all to hell. They cracked some ribs, they punched his face. He has bruises everywhere. They did that to my son. (Saenz, 2012, p. 251)

The quotation above described the social impact of homosexual or being a gay. At this moment, Dante had an incident of being beaten by some boys that resulted Dante was being hospitalized. In the phrase "*They beat my Dante all to hell*" it can be assumed a form of physical violent from some boys when Dante was caught kissing another boy in the alley. As the result, this is a negative form of society towards gays. Where, homosexual especially gay often receive physical violent from the public. In the phrase "*They cracked some ribs, they punched his face*" it showed how brutal the self-judgment acts of society in general was against homosexual acts or gay people who were the minority.

Afterward, Dante got inhumanly treatment when he was helpless after being beaten badly by some boys in society. Inhumanly treatment was a kind of social impact to a gay people. It can be seen in the following quotation:

They hurt Dante, They cracked some of his ribs. They left him lying in an alley. Like he was nothing. Like he was a piece of trash. Like he was shit. Like he was nothing. And if he would have died, they wouldn't have cared. (Saenz, 2012, p. 264)

The quotation above described the social impact of homosexual or being a gay. In this case, Dante had an incident of being beaten and inhumanly treatment by some boys that resulted Dante was being hospitalized. In the phrase "*Like he was a piece of trash. Like he was shit. Like he was nothing*" it can be assumed a form of inhumanly treatment by treating a gay like the trash and filth of society. Even when a homosexual or gay person died was nothing important in the eyes of society. Therefore, this is a negative form of society towards homosexuals or gays. Where, they often receive inhumanly treatment from the public.

Furthermore, Ari got an acceptance for his love to Dante from his parents. They also gave support to Ari about his special relationship with Dante. This was a positive from of social impact that happened to Ari in society, especially from his parents. It can be shown in the following quotation:

I think you love him more than you can bear. Dad? Dad, no. No. I can't. I can't. Why are you saying these things? Because I can't stand watching all that loneliness that lives inside you. Because I love you, Ari. (Saenz, 2012, p. 288)

The quotation above described the social impact of homosexual or being a gay. In this situation, Ari had a conversation with his father about Dante, who is Ari's close friend. In fact, Ari's father knew that Ari loved Dante for so long. Although it was a forbidden relationship that was gay (men to men) but on the opposite, Ari's father approved Ari's feeling because he wanted to see his son's happy rather than loneliness. In the phrase "*I think you love him more than you can bear*" it can be assumed a form of acceptance from Ari's parents to support his

love to Dante. Thus, this was a positive form of society towards gays. Where, the parents understand about the other side of homosexual such as gay person can be depressed because loneliness and their relationship did not accept which could lead to the death or even suicide. In the phrase "I can't stand watching all that loneliness that lives inside you. Because I love you, Ari" it indicated Ari experience the social impact in his homosexual life called depression because of loneliness. Consequently, Ari's father accepted and supported his son relationship with Dante as a young gay couple. It was because the great love of his father, who did not want to see his only son suffer in running his life.

#### **D. Conclusion**

This last section of the study describes gay relationship between teenagers. There are three characters really showed the same-sex relationships such as Aristotle (Ari), Dante and Daniel. Homosexual could occur because of many things, such as being affected by psychiatric disorders, the environment, and also to your own desires. Therefore, the sexual attraction of gay couple depicted masculinity and femininity through physical contacts in their daily life. Moreover, the behavior expression of gay couple in their daily life depicted masculine behavior, feminine behavior, and non-physical contacts were emotion, jealous, share a sensitive topic to their partner, seduce, care, love to each other, and so on.

Furthermore, it is not only a depiction of homosexuality, but the effects of homosexual or same sex relationships are also shown in this study analysis. Generally, the character of men liked male characters was unusual behavior, but in this world that there were many unpredictable phenomena. The personal effect of homosexual in this study could be ways of dressing, of talking, distinctive gestures, distinctive acts with an understood meaning, and its own jargon. For the social effect of homosexual could be the people do insulting and bullying them. However, there are also positive things that depend on people responding it such as acceptance, encourage and support in society especially from their parents or family. Suggestion.

For the students who are interested in the same study, they should find other topic or object to enrich their knowledge. The difficulty when writing this study is to determine the depictions and effects of homosexuality. Besides, this is something taboo in society to discuss, which the writer needs more references to solve the problems in the study. For the next writer, they are suggested to analyze different data sources that the study will be more interested. It is better for the next writers to apply more complete concept of homosexuality in analyzing the literary works. Finally, the writer hopes that this study will be useful to sharpen student's understanding of homosexuality.

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