

## Questioning Sexual Diversity in Andre Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name* and Brent Hartinger's *Geography Club*

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**Abstract.** This paper discusses sexual diversity exposed in Andre Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name* and Brent Hartinger's *Geography Club*. Both novels tell stories about sexual orientation and its impact on the daily lives of the main characters, who are high school students. In *Call Me by Your Name*, Aciman depicted Elio as a teenager who admires people of the same sex, and in *Geography Club*, Russell Middle Brook disguises his sexual orientation because he is gay. Using Sociology of Literature as an approach, more specifically queer theory as a means of carrying out queer criticism, this research aims to discuss sexual diversity exposed in these two fictions. It also talks about the heteronormative pressures experienced by the two figures above during their high school years as students who had different sexual orientations. The research results show that although schools and society always emphasize diversity, sexual diversity is not yet accepted. The heteronormative pressure that the experience of Elio and Russel comes from their close environments, such as parents, friends, and school. Elio and Russel need to keep their true sexual identities because showing sexual diversity for high school students is taboo. They also have to keep their sexual orientation to safeguard their lives from rejection and bullying. Selecting the two novels as the data sources helps to understand each text individually and acknowledge how different authors approach similar themes.

**Keywords:** *heteronormativity, queer theory, sexual diversity, sexual orientation, sociology of literature*

## INTRODUCTION

Based on physique and anatomy, sex consists of male and female. Sex refers to the human genitals, both the penis and vagina. Peases (2001: 72) believes that the time of fertilization determines human sex but that sex can develop differently when the fetus reaches six to eight weeks of age. Pease further says that the basic pattern of all fetuses is female, including the body and brain; it signifies the appearance of nipples and mammary glands in males (2001: 72)

Humans and sexuality are two related things. Therefore, sexuality becomes a person's identity. According to the World Health Organization (WHO; 2002), in their lives, humans always deal with sexuality, including sex, sexual orientation, intimacy, gender identity, pleasure, eroticism, roles, and reproduction. Sexuality appears in various forms in the human mind, such as desires, fantasies, behavior, beliefs, roles, attitudes, practices, values, and relationships. Biological, cultural, social, psychological, political, economic, ethical, religious, and spiritual elements greatly influence human sexuality. Nowadays, when people talk about their sexuality, what they usually mean is their sexual preference or sexual orientation.

Sexual orientation is an attraction to the opposite sex, same-sex, both sexes, or more than one sex. This attraction takes the form of emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction that a person feels towards another person. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), a person cannot determine their sexual orientation. It means that sexual orientation is not something by will, even though the reality is that sexual orientation is unchangeable. Some people have known their sexual orientation since childhood, but some may need sexual experience to identify their sexual orientation. It does not depend on sex and gender. In general, a person will find out their sexual orientation during adolescence or early adulthood without any previous sexual experience. Therefore, those who have a sexual orientation different from the majority or other than heterosexual need to disguise their sexuality and act straight.

Diversity refers to differences. Diversity is a condition in a society where there are many differences in every aspect of life, such as in race, religion, culture, sexual orientation, etc. Diversity means understanding that each individual is unique and recognizing the differences of other individuals. Sexual diversity is diversity in expressing sexual orientation, such as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and transgender. Accepting sexual diversity means recognizing various aspects of sexual orientation to gender identity. It also means recognizing its existence and celebrating it because of its power. However, not all social groups can accept diversity in sexual orientation. For them, there is only one sexual orientation, namely heterosexual. Telling about sexual orientation and sexual diversity is also found in young adult literature. Andre Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name* and Brent Hartinger's *Geography Club* talked about the life of gay teens who have to keep their sexual orientation because people cannot yet accept a teenager who likes the same sex. They have to hide their sexual orientation to avoid being bullied by their friends. Both authors show readers how society treats teenagers with different sexual orientations that promote diversity and equal rights regardless of race, gender, and sexual orientation.

There are several studies discussing homosexuality and sexual orientation in literary works. The first previous study is by Kartika Rachmah of Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta. Her paper is entitled *The Representation of Homosexuality in Beauty and the Beast Live Action Film*. In her article, she talks about the characterization of Le Fou. Le Fou is described as a homosexual character and against conventional society stereotypes. She further discusses how society in the film is a portrayal of apathy and ignorance of the homosexual community. The second previous study is by Nezwa Shukhufi Maula and Thoyibi. Their article entitles *The Influence of Social Environment on Individual Sexual Orientation in Call Me by Your Name by Andre Aciman*. In their research, they discuss the influence of social environment on sexual orientation consisting of two types of social environment: family environment and society environment. The depiction of the social effect on sexual orientation shows characters, settings, events, and styles. Another previous study is by Matthys J. Uys of North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa. His paper is entitled *A comparative analysis of the depiction of queer characters in Hartinger's Geography Club and Entin's film adaptation*. Uys shows how Brent Hartinger depicts queer characters in his 2004 queer text in *Geography Club*. The comparative analysis of the novel and the film includes Entin's 2013 film adaptation. Hartinger (2004) and Entin (2013) depict their queer characters accordingly to inform readers and possibly change ingrained perceptions of various gender identities. The other previous study is Yuliana Filmafiroh's *An Analysis of Homosexual Lifestyle of the Main Character in Allan Hollinghurst's The Line of Beauty*. In her research, she found out that homosexual life is a secret practice. The cause of choosing a homosexual lifestyle, among others, is the lifestyle of the upper class, those who are free to do anything.

Though these four previous studies talk about homosexuality and sexual orientation, none of them discusses sexual diversity. The understanding of sexual diversity in society is a question by the two authors mentioned above. In *Call Me by Your Name*, Andre Aciman describes how the parents of Olivo and his surrounding environment understand his attraction to the same sex. On the other hand, the *Geography Club* of Hartinger portrays the opposite. The main character, Russell Brook, tries hard to hide his sexual orientation in front of society. Homosexuality is unacceptable because it is considered a sexual disorder in society.

How society is in the two literary works is by what Wellek and Warren explained. Quoted from De Bonald (1956:95) in *Theory of Literature*, Wellek, and Warren stated that literature is an expression of society. It means Literary works not only tell stories about someone's life but also reveal what is happening in society. Literature is an institution or social institution that uses language as its medium (Chamamah, 2003:25). It means that a literary work is a work of art. Its medium is language. And its content is about humans and humanity. Humans and their lives are the main objects. Rowaida Ahmadi states that through the author as an intermediary, literary work can become a forum for society to express life, values, thoughts, and ideas (2020: 129). The author is a member of society who captures phenomena that exist in society and then describes them through dialogue, actions, and descriptions. As a member of society, the author portrays the life around him and conveys it in written form. One of the portraits of life described by the author is the life experience of a teenage boy who has a different sexual orientation from a heteronormative society. In a society that celebrates differences and schools that teach differences and emphasize that each individual is different from another. However, a high school student must hide his different sexual orientation. Through their fiction, the two authors asked the meaning of being different. If the differences in sexual orientation are a disgrace, a mistake is unacceptable.

This research discusses a portrayal of a gay's life by using two specific characters in *Call Me by Your Name* by André Aciman and *Geography Club* by Hartinger. The main character in *Call Me by Your Name*, Elio, has a big sexual desire and wild imagination for Oliver, his father's guest. Oliver lives in Elio's house for six weeks, revising a book manuscript and helping Elio's father, a professor, with his academic paperwork. The character interaction is complex because it is unacceptable in society. This forbidden love has another side. Not all people can understand and open their minds about this side. A very different reality happens to Russel in *Geography Club*. The main character has to hide his sexual orientation from his family and society. He can only be open to his fellow gay friends. This difference is one of the reasons why it needs investigation. The writer hopes the result of this research can help the readers be open-minded about homosexuality problems in social life.

## RESEARCH METHOD

According to Chamamah, the method in literary studies has its scientific measure that signifies its characteristics as a system (2003:19). The research on *Call Me by Your Name* and *Geography Club* relates to reading the text from the reader's point of view. Text research like this is called research with a reader's perspective and is problem-based in society. It is qualitative research and emphasizes the subjective experience of the researchers as members of society to understand problems that appear in the text analyzed (Donovan, 2015:77-78). Thus, the appropriate approach used in this research is the sociology of literature and Queer theory. There are some steps in collecting the data. The first step is reading and understanding the theme, character, and setting. The next step is Identifying the words, phrases, and sentences relating to the theme. In this study, the writers

conducted close reading and then proceeded with accumulating data in the form of texts that relate to sexual orientation and sexual diversity. Finally, the writers analyze the data using the sociology of literature approach and queer theory.

In his book *Critical Theory Today*, Lois Tyson proposes the application of the queer perspective in analyzing literature work. Tyson states that "queer theory defines individual sexuality as a fluid, fragmented, dynamic collectivity, of possible sexualities...sexuality is a dynamic ray of desire" (320). Tyson argues that heterosexuality is straight while Queer is "fluid" or a collective "of possible sexualities" (320).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Disguising Sexual Orientation

In *Geography Club*, Brent Hartinger began his story by characterizing a high school student named Russel Middle Brook. Russel is a 16-year-old and lives with his parents in Boise, a small town in Idaho, USA. Russell has two close friends at Good Kind High School: Gunnar, a Norwegian descendant, and Min, a Chinese American. The three of them are Nerdy Intellectual students. Russel is a teenager who has a different sexual orientation from his classmates. As a homosexual teenager, Russel does not have any courage to declare his sexual orientation in front of his friends.

Russel tries hard to hide his sexual orientation from anyone. He does not discuss his gay identity except with fellow gay friends he met in cyberspace. Russell understands that talking about sexual orientation, especially orientation that is different from the majority of society, will put him in danger.

I knew that any wrong action, however slight, could expose my deception and reveal my true identity. The thought made my skin prickle. The enemy would not take kindly to my infiltration of their ranks, especially not here, in their inner sanctum. (Hartinger, 2003: 6).

He knows if he acts, his classmates will find his real identity, and he will be hated and bullied by them. Even though his mates do not know that Russell is gay, one of his friends calls him out, "Hey, Middlebrook!" Kevin said to me. "Nice ass!" Leon and Brad and Jarred and Ramone all laughed..."Middlebrook!" Kevin said, all teeth and whiskers and dimples. "You are such a fag!" (Hartinger, 2003: 7). Fag is from the word faggot, a term of abuse and insult aimed at gay people and usually used by homophobes to demean and dehumanize gay people. Even though none of his friends knew about the sexual orientation of Russell, some students bullied him by saying that he was gay.

One thing that makes Russell feel safe and comfortable talking about his sexual orientation is through groups on the internet. He realized a long-held wish by talking to other gay people via the internet. He says, "I might go to a gay chat room and maybe even have a private chat with a guy or two" (Hartinger, 2003: 11). Because he has no friends to talk to, Russel always feels alone and lonely as he only

freely talks about his life as a gay-teen online. Russell cannot talk about these things in his daily life because he has no gay friends. He is even afraid to talk about his sexual orientation to his parents. He will feel more depressed if he sees the disappointment of his parents and is angry when they find out that he is a homosexual.

### **Parent's Disapproval and Getting Bullied**

Talking about sexual orientation for teenagers, homosexuality, and attraction to the same sex is not easy. People believe that the only sexual orientation that exists is heterosexuality. Some believe that sex is a way to have children. Producing family successors can only be done by heterosexual couples. Therefore, the pressure on heteronormative relationships has long prevented society from giving other sexual orientations opportunities to appear. Likewise, parents always hope to have children, both boys and girls, who have a heterosexual orientation. It seems Russell's parents are the same way. Russell is discouraged from telling his orientation to his parents because he is afraid his parents will be disappointed and angry. Another thing that worries Russell is getting bullied at school.

In high school, being different is a problem. If there is a different student, he will become the subject of bullying by his friends. Just being different and people will start bullying. He is aware and afraid that people will bully him. It makes him disguise himself as gay. Bullying at school does not just happen once or twice. It happens almost every day. There are no friends who defend. Instead, they join in the bullying and laughing. There is something even crueler, namely blaming the victim. These are things that make Russell unwilling to discuss his sexual orientation openly with his friends. Being a victim of bullying is not easy. Being different is harder. "Because I know people would treat me like that if they knew the truth" (Hartinger, 2003: 11). Therefore, Russell tries not to be intrusive and pretends to be straight. He decides not to let anyone know, not even his family and his close friends, the truth about his gay identity.

### **Questioning Himself**

The act of questioning his sexual orientation is found in Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name*. In this fiction, Aciman characterized a teenage boy named Elio Perlman. Elio is 17 years old and living with his parents in northern Italia. He is the only child of -an American and Italian couple. Young, handsome, bibliophile, and reliable musician, he is a music genius who can transcribe music, plays the music in various versions, and is good at playing piano and guitar. As a teenager, Elio loves being alone rather than hanging out with friends. He prefers telling his experiences and feelings in a diary rather than talking to his friends.

Elio realizes that he admires the same sex when he is attracted to Oliver. In his diary, Elio talks about his first impression of the physical appearance of Oliver.

The color on Elio's palms of his hands was the same as the pale, soft skin of his soles, of his throat, of the bottom of his forearms, which hadn't been exposed to much sun. Almost a light pink, as glistening and smooth as the underside of a lizard's belly. Private, chaste, unfledged, like a blush on an athlete's face or an instance of dawn on a stormy night." (Aciman 2007:5)

Elio always dreamed of Oliver. But he also does not know why he is attracted to him. He says, "I never knew to ask" (Aciman, 2007: 05). He suppresses his desire to date Oliver so that it appears in a dream. In his dream, Elio has sexual intercourse with Oliver. His admiration for Oliver makes him want to be touched by him. This feeling haunts Elio when Oliver is close to him.

Elio asks himself why he is not attracted to women but to men. He says, "He couldn't possibly have known" (Aciman. 2007: 27). Eliodoes does not realize that feelings of attraction to the same sex are because of hormonal changes within him. Becoming adolescent, Elio experiences drastic hormonal changes, as stated by Granger, Schwartz, Booth, and Arentz (1999). Although the most frequently studied hormone-behavior relationships are in adults, the fact is that hormonal changes occur. These changes are the most dramatic because they relate to sex steroid concentrations (quoted in Tackett, Herzhoff, Harden, Page-Gould, and Josephs (235: 2014).

### Questioning Sexual Diversity

Even though same-sex marriage is legal in several countries, there are still some members of society who disapprove of homosexual relationships. For them, same-sex relationships are against nature and religion. Those who have different sexual orientations are people who suffer from sexual disorders. They have strange sexual behavior. Through their works *Call Me by Your Name* and *Geography Club*, Andre Aciman and Brent Hartinger convey a message to society, especially readers, that teenagers who have different sexual orientations also suffer because society cannot fully accept them. People don't know what happened. They can only judge without knowing the cause.

In his *Geography Club*, Harthinger describes what happens to a student if he is different. Harthinger criticized life in high schools where institutions should celebrate diversity in various ways, but if there are students who are different. They would be in big trouble. Schools should teach and accept differences in many things, including sexual diversity. Like at school, Harthinger also criticized the role of parents at home. Some parents do not understand the problems their children face. The family is a support for children and teenagers. Parents protect children and provide love, but they are also the place where a child talks about the problems he is facing. Russell's parents love Russell, but they cannot necessarily accept the reality that their son is gay. In a society that emphasizes heteronormative relationships between men and women, they will be embarrassed and feel guilty because they are deemed unable to educate their children.

Different from Russel, the parents of Elio accept sexual diversity. In *Call Me by Your Name*, Andre Aciman describes his father as open-minded. He sees someone from their sexual orientation. He values friendship without looking at socioeconomic background. For Professor Perlman, the sexual relationship between Elio and his assistant, Oliver, is a unique relationship. Their relationship is “rare, how special, what you two had was.” (Aciman, 2007: 223).

Elio, who is described as an introvert and mostly pours out his feelings in his diary, finally dares to tell his father about his tendencies as a person who likes the same sex. By saying 'I am here' (Aciman, 2007: 224). Professor Perlman is a father who knows the problems his son faces. He is the person his child shares experiences and feelings with. Aciman told readers that homosexuality in nature has cunning ways of finding our weakest spot (Aciman, 2007: 224). When a boy grows up, whether he becomes gay or not depends on his hormones. Different from the parents of Elio, the people depicted as accepting sexual diversity in *Call Me by Your Name* are his friends.

Vimini and Marzia are two of his female friends who accept sexual diversity. Vimini knows about Oliver and his relationship from his story. Vimini is an open-minded person. Therefore, she does not judge Elio. When making friends, he also does not differentiate between one another. Likewise, Marzia admires Elio. She secretly loves him. When she finds out about Elio's relationship with Oliver, she does not hate Elio. She remains friends with Elio even though her love is unrequited.

The female characters, Vimini and Marzia, in *Call Me by Your Name* are people with a high tolerance. Even though they are still teenagers, they are women who have the freedom to determine their attitudes. A person's sexual orientation is the person's choice and must be respected.

## CONCLUSION

*Call Me by Your Name* and *Geography Club* are two young adult fiction about teenage boys who tend to like people of the same sex. Through the two main characters and their problems, the two authors, Aciman and Hartinger, describe sexual diversity in society. Both authors want to show the readers that gay teens have to face double problems, the problem of understanding themselves, and heteronormative pressure from society.

Sexual diversity signifies parents and the surrounding acceptance of the reality that sexual orientation is not only heterosexual but can be the same sex, namely gay and lesbian, as told by Aciman in *Call Me by Your Name*. On the other hand, sexual diversity is unacceptable if society believes that there is only one type of sexual orientation, namely heterosexual orientation. In this society, a man who declares himself homosexual will experience discrimination and be ostracized because he has a different sexual orientation. He is considered an abnormal person from the rest of the society.



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