



Deconstructing Fixed Sexualities in Yumi Cox's *Shelter from the Storm*

Dr. Ramaswamy J

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Rohini College of Engineering & Technology
(Autonomous), | Kanyakumari, (Affiliated to Anna University, Chennai)

Email: rajasj25@gmail.com

Atheesh. N

Research Scholar (Reg. No. 23213154011014), Department of English, S.T. Hindu College, Nagercoil –
629 002, (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abisekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627 012)

Email: atheeshn1998@sthinducollege.com

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary society, conventional heteronormative perceptions are prevalent. This research paper highlights the diluted identity of fixed sexual orientation. Individuals who identify as heterosexual, when faced with constrained resources or influenced by environmental factors, become sexually diverse in their choices. Considering Yumi Cox's *Shelter from the Storm* (2020) as a primary source, the paper supports this argument by citing the case of Dawson, a cisgender man attracted to a transgender woman, Michelle. Stating this, the study further highlights situational homosexuality occurring in same-sex environments such as carceral settings, educational institutions, and hostels. Examining the two different dimensions of sexuality and the behavioral patterns, the paper questions the idea of cissexism and condemns the practice of homophobic behavior in society, along with the surrounding discrimination. On the whole, the paper tries to advocate for equality in society in regards to sexual orientation substantiating that the concept of heterosexuality is fluid.



Introduction

The understanding of sexuality in contemporary societal discussions and social setup is often rigid and rooted. It is stuck between two main ideas: binary categories and static theories. This condition is echoed in *Introducing a Hermeneutics of Suspicion: Reading Sarah and Esau's Gender (Failures) Beyond Cisnormativity* by Jo Henderson-Merrygold. Henderson argues that, “Binaries predominate in the conceptualisation of gender and sex. They are also largely treated as immutable – masculine or feminine; male or female; man or woman; and even trans or cis; binary or nonbinary” (1). These beliefs frequently reinforce heteronormativity, which propagates the notion that the only acceptable, natural, and natural way to be is to be heterosexual. Cis-normativity is the other idea that is interwoven and exercised in society. In this context, the notion is that a person’s biological gender identification is expected to align with the sex they were assigned at birth. The notion that love should only develop organically between a man and a woman is likewise supported by these conventional perspectives.

Yumi Cox’s narrative of sexual relationship in *Shelter from the Storm* (2020) challenges these conventional concepts of sexuality. Yumi Cox’s romance novella thus provides a compelling story line. The rigid heteronormativity construct is questioned by Cox. Considering this as a case, the current study analyses the romance between a cis-gender man getting attracted to a transgender woman questioning the socially constructed hetero-normative and cis-normative frameworks. The primary argument of the paper is to explicate that human desire is far more intricate and highly malleable, changing and adapting to different situations.

Through the portrayal of the character Dawson Jones, Cox establishes the porous boundaries of heterosexuality and challenges the very idea of fixed sexual orientations. Citing Dawson Jones’s case, the paper argues that sexual orientation of a person is indeed mutable and can exceed the socially constructed narrow parameters. Diving through this context, the article explores Dawson’s case of attraction alongside sociological phenomena such as situational homosexuality and the performative nature of homophobia, and calls for a broadening of the category of sexuality to allow for non-hierarchical, non-exclusive understandings of sexuality.

Challenging Heteronormativity and Cissexism through Dawson's Character

The basic heteronormative views include defining heterosexuality as the sole typical or natural sexual orientation. On the other hand, cissexism which is also known as cisgenderism, discriminates transgender people and the rest of the LGBTQIA+ community by elevating cisgender identities to the



norm. Cox's portrayal of Dawson is primarily, a cisgender man in *Shelter from the Storm* but his attraction to transgender woman Michelle Handley is a crucial technicality to the plot's development. On the initial encounter Dawson's idea towards Michelle Handley is to have a good time with her since he counts her as a woman, "While Michelle was in the ladies room, I ordered another two drinks. I didn't want to miss this chance to spend time with this incredible woman" (8). When Dawson learns that the bar transforms into a "transgender night club," his internal response is one of affirmation as he thinks, "Oh, that makes a lot of sense" (8). Here in this context, it is evident that Dawson is into sexual exploration rather being cis-gender man. This judgment free response to the events in the narrative as described is critical towards his infatuation. Dawson's subsequent remarks to Michelle are centered only on her beauty, "She was tall, around 5ft 10 in, and had a slim build but with quite a large bust... I found her captivating." There is no mention of any cognitive conflict or process of revising his sexuality post learning about Michelle's identity; rather, his sexuality is depicted as unceasingly desired and cisnormatively charged.

Moreover, Dawson's previous encounters highlight an attraction that goes beyond boundaries. When Michelle inquires if he's had his "first rodeo with a drag queen," Dawson responds, "People are people and I've met most types," and further explains, "I've entertained clients from the ladyboy bars of Pattaya, to the newhalf bars of Shinjuku and the waria bars of Kuta. So, this was quite mild by comparison" (10). These quotes depict a considerable ease with and attraction to gender diverse people. Ritch C. Savin-Williams' *Mostly Straight: Sexual Fluidity among Men* identifies these peculiar problems and asserts that some decisions are conscious, "Few of these fluctuations were conscious choices the guys made; rather, they were the result of a growing reflection on their true self. Most felt their fluidity was a natural feature of their self- development" (30). Dawson in this context is a typical reflection of Ritch C. Savin-Williams. Dawson here self-identifies him as heterosexual and his experiences as presented by Cox. This case however suggests a fluidity in his attractions that, arguably, defies the idea that 'heterosexuality' requires a rigid exclusion of transgender women. Nevertheless, Cox framed this as a simple heterosexual romance especially his attraction towards. This very fluctuation of sexual orientation can also be viewed as a reflection that attraction is possible with and across the gender identity spectrum without fundamentally changing a person's sexual identity. In *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women's Love and Desire*, Lisa M. Diamond argues that sexual behaviour is less about a person's identity and more about finding the right partner and the right context, "I would argue that their same-sex experiences were made possible by sexual fluidity—they were neither 'phases' nor 'choices'



but authentic desires facilitated by the availability of the right person in the right situation” (19). Therefore, this particular case challenges the rigid framework of heteronormativity.

Situational Sexuality: Undermining Fixed Orientations

Dawson, a cisgender man getting attracted to a transwoman is a case of fluctuation in sexual orientation. The case of fluctuation in Dawson’s character and his fluidity is endorsed in *Mostly Straight: Sexual Fluidity among Men* by Ritch C. Savin-Williams, “Mostly straight youth are sexually or romantically fluid in that, consistent with the first meaning, they have the capacity for erotic and romantic responses to other males, their non-preferred sex. They either defined themselves as mostly straight or said that less than 100 percent of their sexual and romantic attractions are to women” (29). In *Shelter from the Storm* by Cox, the character Dawson’s sexuality becomes situational. A similar observation of study is made in sex-segregated contexts where purported heterosexuals participate in same-sex sexual acts because of the setting. Studies on prison sex, for example, often report heterosexual inmates engaging in sexual relations with fellow inmates (Tewksbury 1989 as cited in PREA Resource Center). This context proves that the idea of sexuality as an innate and immutable characteristic since their orientation becomes fluid or situational.

The study by April Terry study suggests that roughly 25% to 40% of male inmates who identified as heterosexual participated in consensual same-sex sexual relations while in prison (PREA Resource Center). Such acts tend to be motivated by loneliness, desire for companionship, affection, or even the availability of certain goods, rather than an actual change in the sexual orientation they profess to hold (PREA Resource Center). The term “situational homosexuality” was created specifically to describe these acts, suggesting that behaviors motivated by certain contexts are not the same as a deeply held identity (ResearchGate, “Situating Sex”). In contrast, this article “Situating Sex: Prison Sexual Culture in the Mid-Twentieth-Century United States” by Regina G. Kunzel argues that “all homosexuality is situational, influenced and given meaning and character by its location in time and social space,” suggesting that sexuality is more contextual and adaptable, rather than a permanent core essence (Katz 1976 as cited in ResearchGate, “Situating Sex”).

Similarly, compared to people in coeducational settings, those in single-sex environments—like boarding schools or colleges—are more likely to report same-sex sexual behaviour or even identify as a sexual minority (ResearchGate, "Single-Sex Schooling"). This further decouples sexual behaviour from a strict, innate sexual orientation, even though it may partially reflect pre-existing gender non-conforming



interests. It also highlights how environmental factors can influence sexual expression and possibly identity formation (ResearchGate, "Single-Sex Schooling"). The constructed nature of our sexual categories is exposed by these examples, which show that sexual attraction and behaviour are far more flexible than essentialist conceptions of sexuality imply. They frequently adjust to social contexts and availability.

Homophobia as a Performance and the Cultural Erosion Fallacy

The claim of a fixed, inborn nature of sexuality is paradoxically maintained by individuals who, although calling themselves heterosexual, practice homophobic behavior, often in the name of defending cultural values or avoiding cultural erosion. Homophobia, characterized as negative attitudes, fear, or hatred of homosexuality, is deeply entrenched in gender culture beliefs and underpinned by heterosexist assumptions that place heterosexuality as the only acceptable and natural type of relationship.

Such homophobia is not only individual-level prejudice but social performance to reaffirm one's own straight identity and reproduce social order. "Homohysteria" is the phenomenon explaining heterosexual men's anxiety about being "homosexualized" and stereotyped as gay, which leads them to conform to hypermasculine ideals and disengage from anything marked as homosexual (McCormack and Anderson 2014, 109-120). Such fear, as a result, may result in the active undermining of gay men and women (McCormack and Anderson 2014, 109-120). As stated in the previous concept by McCormack, Mark, and Eric Anderson, there are social constraints on the reluctance to reveal one's sexual identification. Sam Allberry identifies and describes a comparable example in his book, *Is God Anti-gay?: And Other Questions About Jesus, the Bible, and Same-Sex Sexuality* and reveals the reluctance of a homosexual man to disclose his sexual orientation, "It sounds clunky to describe myself as 'someone who experiences same-sex attraction'. But describing myself like this is a way for me to recognize that the kind of sexual attraction I experience are not fundamental to my identity. They are part of what I feel but are not who I am in a fundamental sense. I am far more than my sexuality" (ix). Such homophobic behavior by "heterosexuals," therefore, may be an act to perform a reinforcement of their own "straightness" and privilege in a cissexist and heteronormative society, and not an instinctive distaste due to an innate sexual preference. The fallacy that LGBTQ+ identities represent "cultural erosion" is just that: according to historical scholarship, the fixed conceptualization of homosexuality as a static identity is itself a relatively recent Western invention, not an ancient practice in the process of erosion asserts Thomas Viola Rieske (ResearchGate, "Homophobic Others"). Performative homophobia likewise disintegrates the idea of fixed, inherent sexualities as dynamic, socially enforced constructs. People with



diverse sexual identities are socially marginalized. In *Is God Anti-gay?: And Other Questions About Jesus, the Bible, and Same-Sex Sexuality*, Sam Allberry argues that scriptures play a crucial role in this context, especially the interpretation which is advocated by the spiritual leaders:

Paul describes both lesbian and male homosexual behaviour as “unnatural”. This is clearly a massive thing for the Bible to say, and correspondingly a very hard thing for many people to hear. Some have wondered whether “unnatural” might refer to what is natural to the people themselves. If so, Paul would be talking about heterosexual people engaging in homosexual activity and thereby going against their “natural” orientation. Paul would therefore not be condemning all homosexual behaviour, but only that which goes against the person’s own sexual inclinations. But attractive as it may be for some, this view cannot be supported by the text itself. The words for “natural” and “against nature” do not describe our subjective experience of what feels natural to us, but instead refer to the fixed way of things in creation. The nature that Paul says homosexual behaviour contradicts is God’s purpose for us, revealed in creation and reiterated throughout Scripture. (19)

Conclusion: Going Beyond Sexual Hierarchies and Essential Identities

The depiction of the character Dawson being sexually drawn to Michelle in *Shelter from the Storm* by Cox is a compelling illustration of the fluidity of human sexuality. This ideal narrative pushes back against the limiting boundaries of cisgender heteronormativity. Dawson’s easy rapport with a transgender woman, along with his sexual history with gender-diverse people, means that patterns of attraction are much wider than traditionally accepted categories. This literary observation is echoed in more general sociological data: the commonality of situational same-sex activity in sex-segregated contexts, where people act beyond their avowed selves in accordance with context, supports that sexual acts don't necessarily equal a stable orientation. In addition, the performative quality of homophobia, specifically from those who position themselves as defenders of “cultural values,” demonstrates how sexuality can be a social construct enforced by discrimination and fear, instead of an untainted, instinctual preference.

Ultimately, what this paper supposes is that there is no ‘proper’ sexual orientation per se, no natural sexual hierarchy of assorted sexualities. The labels people use themselves and others often reflect social upbringing, historical context, and power dynamics more accurately than any innate biological tendency. In order to embrace the flexibility of sexuality, which is subtly demonstrated by Dawson’s character and glaringly confirmed by sociological research, cissexist and heteronormative notions must be critically dismantled. The analysis of the character Dawson’s and his attraction to Michelle in *Shelter*



from the Storm is a clear illustration of the flexibility of human sexuality that defies the restrictive boundaries of cisgender heteronormativity. On the whole, the study advocates for an inclusive society that accepts people like Dawson and Michelle of diverse sexual orientations.

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