
William Mandella's Struggles in a Gender-Shifted World: A Queer Study on Joe Haldeman's the Forever War

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Abstract

A person will always be a part of society, regardless of whether he or she wants it or not. Each and every societies have its own set of rules and norms, and it is expected of the member of the societies to abide by those rules and norms, in order to be perceived as a proper member of the society. The norms dictates many things, and it includes the issue of gender and sexuality. There will be a distinction within certain societies about what kind of sexual behaviours that are considered to be acceptable and those that are not, which in turn will shape the overall perception of sexuality. In the novel *The Forever War* by Joe Haldeman, the main character Wiliiam Mandella went through the process of marginalization due to his sexual orientation, which contradicts the accepted norms in the society he lives in. Curiously, there is a change in the societal norms regarding sexuality that is being presented in the book, and the writer would like to see further into the issue. This article uses Queer theory, together with Charmed Circle theory to analyze the issue in the novel. The writer uses qualitative method by using close reading. After analyzing the issue that is being discussed in the article the writer finds out that the shift of societal norms regarding sexuality in the book reinforce the idea that gender and sexuality is socially constructed, rather than being innate on each individual.

Keywords: marginalization, queer, sexuality, social constructivism, heterocentrism, homosexuality

Introduction

Human is a social being, and like it or not, a person is part of a society, and in turn it will have its influence or impact toward a person, good or bad. One thing society has that has an immediate bearing to a person is that it has its own norm and set of rules, and it means that one is expected to be in line with what the society believes to be right. If one is considered to be different than the rest of the members of society, especially in a way that is not viewed highly, it could lead to problems, ranging from just a simple disgruntled look from people in the street, to public persecution to correct society's wrong. Generally, a person would try not to deviate from what his or her society accepts, so that they could have a sense of belonging into that society and be comfortable while living their life as part of it. However, it is possible for an individual to not be in accordance to what a society says and tells one to do, regardless of whether in which part of moral compass a person is.

The issue of gender and sexuality is one of the factors that could led a person not to be comfortable while living his or her life in the middle of the society they belong to. There are already sets of norm, written or not, that dictates how one's sexual preference should be in a society. In a heteronormative society for example, the majority of people see that being heterosexual is the right thing to be, that it is normal and every person living on that society should be like that. The view of such kind of society would put people who does not belong or have different sexual preference, people who are homosexual, bisexual, or intersex, to be viewed differently than others, if the majority happen to know about those people's deal. The people who are considered to deviate from the norm could be treated differently, or even if somehow people could accept the difference, there might still be some awkwardness that lingers in the interaction between the people who are considered "normal" and those who are not. Some might ended up become marginalized, or socially excluded, and they might not be considered to be the "proper" part of the society they lives in.

In Joe Haldeman's book titled *The Forever War*, which was first published in 1974, an issue that can be discussed is the marginalization of the main character of the book, William Mandella. The book is set in a science-fiction setting where humanity is at war against extra-terrestrial beings called the Taurans, and that Mandella is a soldier who get send to defend a base of Earth's forces in space. Due to certain issues, after he came back from the war, he founds out that society has changed so much compared to the one he knows before his time at the war. It turns out that the social norm has changed so much that Mandella has a hard time readjusting himself to the society, that he has become the minority in the new society, and because of that, he become somewhat socially excluded. At first the society is a heterocentric one, much like what most societies are, but when Mandella came back, the society has become one that encourages people to actually have relationship with those of the same sex, and that heterosexual people are the ones who are considered to be socially dysfunctional, the ones who need to be corrected. One of the most significant factors that lead to Mandella's marginalization is the fact that he is a heterosexual, but the society has become a homocentric society. Some people view him as the relic of the past that needs to be re-educated according to the new social norm.

Marginalization, the concept that is present in the novel itself is the process where someone is being pushed to the edge of a society, to be made marginal, or to be considered to be a lesser member of a group or society. Marginalization usually occurs on the people who are viewed as the minority of a larger part of society. In *The Forever War*, William Mandella is being marginalized due to his sexual orientation. Later on in the story, Mandella is being promoted and are given a task to lead his own company, but he has his own worries about how would his subordinates act toward him because all but him are homosexual. Parts of the novel explores Mandella's struggle to come in term with some set of new social rules and the problems he has in the process.

The marginalization of the character of William Mandella is one interesting issue to explore, because it depicts a homocentric society and the main character is a heterosexual man. Most literary works that have issue about sexual preferences would feature homosexual characters and their struggle in a homocentric society, but this novel reverses the spectrum. Further on, the social norm presents in the book is not always that way, that before, it was a heterocentric society, and there is a shifing of norm that becomes another issue that Mandella has to deal with.

The condition of the society in the novel, specifically regarding the change of the accepted sexual orientation, implies that gender and sexuality are not inherent in an individual from the moment he or she was born, but rather constructed through what the individual went through during the course of his or her life, which is akin to the concept of social constructivism. This essay would analyze the significance of the shifts in the social norm before and after Mandella went to the war, to further pursue the notion that gender and sexuality is in reality, socially constructed.

The theory that will be used as the main tool to look at the issues in the novel is Queer criticism. Queer theory is the most recent school of thought that is used to analyze literary works. The theory itself is influenced by other theories that has been around, like deconstruction, feminism, gay and lesbian studies, psychoanalysis, and postcolonialism. Queer theory refuses to accept that human nature is static, and that characteristic of a person has been there since he was born, but instead seeks to assert that aspects of a person like gender is socially constructed (Bressler 255). There are some questions that are usually being asked in queer criticism, like how are the characters' sexual identities shaped and formed, what prejudices exist about any character's supposed sexuality, what social forces or constructs determine sexual identity, and what is queer about the text (Bressler 260).

Gayle Rubin's theory regarding the charmed circle will also be used as the basis of the analysis of the novel, primarily the condition of the society in which the protagonist came back to after the war. Basically, the theory states that there is some kind of social hierarchy where a line is drawn between what considered to be "good sex" and "bad sex", which kind of sexual behaviours that are appropriate and accepted by society and which that are not (Rubin 152).

In order to analyze the issue presented in the novel, first and foremost the writer would do close reading technique to understand the plot and characters better, which would be necessary to tackle the issue within it. The writer would look at the condition of the society in which William Mandella lived in the beginning

of the story, what are the societal norms were before the events that lead to Mandella's departure and return to Earth. The next step to take is to take a look at the shift of societal norms that occurred during Mandella's period in space, what factors influenced the quite drastic change to the established accepted sexual behavior in the society, and subsequently what effects it bring into the character of William Mandella, how he finds himself in a world different from he ever known, and how he tries to cope with the condition. The writer then would attempt to relate the situations provided in the novel to the notion on how what kinds of accepted sexual behaviors and those that are considered to be improper depends on the societal norms adopted by a society.

Discussion

The Forever War is set in the futuristic version of the year 1997, considering the fact that the book was originally written and released in the 1970's. In the novel, 12 years before the beginning of the story, scientists have discovered collapsar jump, which serves as some kind of teleport device, which enables objects to travel between two collapsars if given enough speed while entering the collapsar. The discovery gave way for humans to travel to space in ways never before. Thus, began the era where humans would try to colonize the space, and it is done by sending spaceships utilizing the collapsar jump. Each colonists ships is accompanied by a an automated probe, which are programmed to come back to Earth should anything happen to the ships, the biggest fear initially was that the ships could crash into planets adjacent to the collapsar after the jump.

One day, an automated probe returned to Earth in a poor conditions, and after the data it contained were analyzed, it became apparent that one of the colonist ships where pursued and destroyed by another unknown ship, extra terrestrial being's ship, to be exact. Since the unforeseen accident happened in Aldebaran, part of the Taurus constellation, the enemy was dubbed as the Taurans. The protagonist, William Mandella, is part of the armed force of UNEF, United Nations Exploratory Force, comprised of men and women with Iqs above 150 and above average physical condition, to help defend portal planets near the collapsars from the impending threat.

In the start of the story, it can be observed that the society, or more specifically, the sexual norm adopted in it was the heterocentric principle. In fact, during the training period before the troops which Mandella was a member of would get sent into their designated location, which is Charon, it is commonplace for the soldiers, which consist of both sexes to hook up with different partners during the night, even just for the sake of sexual intercourse to relieve the stress and pressure they feel during the harsh training they have to endure. One thing to note is that the relationship only happen between people of opposite sex. The protagonist is no exception, because it is described that he had intercourse with at least two different woman. Moreover, most of the men of the troos adore one of female soldier, Maejima, and even Mandella noted that if given the opportunity any of the men would hook up with her:

“Better hurry, then. He's lusting after Maejima.” Well, that was mostly true. Everybody did.

It shows that the relationship between men and women was accepted during the period, that it was the normal thing to do, that heterosexual relations is the accepted, proper norm.

Long story short, after the series of rigorous training that even cost the lives of some of the soldier, Mandella finally got sent into Charon to defend it in case of Tauran attacks. During the campaign, Mandella developed a romantic relationship with one of his fellow soldiers, Marygay Potter. In Charon Mandella must go into some battles against the extra terrestrial adversaries, and eventually, after suffering some heavy losses, he and the rest of the troops that survived got sent back to earth. Because of the way collapsar jump works, when an object goest through the collapasar it will go through a time dilation. To put it simply, time doesn't work as usual after doing collapsar jumps, which Mandella and the troops did, so by the time they came back to Earth, it was already the year 2023, even though for the soldiers it's really only been two years from their departure.

During the stop at a UNEF's base called Stargate before the troops reach Earth, they discover that during that time, about a third of everybody in Europe and Europe are homosexual, that evn though the United Natios is neutral on the matter, most government actually encourage homosexual life because it's

the surefire way of birth control. The population of the Earth has doubled ever since the soldiers' departure, and because of the resources spent on the war against Taurans and the fact that only about a third of the populace are actually productive, governments feel the need to engrave this new norm upon its citizens. Rations have been low, and there are lots of riots just get a hand on supplies on Earth.

The first blow Mandella took regarding the new sexual norm where people are actually encouraged to have homosexual life was when he visited his mother. Mandella had found out that his father passed away, and one day, when he came into his mother's house and he encountered a middle aged woman named Rhonda Wilder. Through their conversations together, he found out that Rhonda is really his mother's lover, and it shocked him. Eventhough earlier in the story when he found out that homosexual life is the accepted way in the present, Mandella stated that he didn't really have a problem with homosexuals, as evident in his inner monologue during a part of the novel:

I never had much trouble accepting homosexuals myself, but then I'd never had to cope with such an abundance of them(p. 73).

But finding that his own mother had also embraced the new way of life, it startled him so much that he tried to get away from his house and seek shelter at Marygay's house.

During his stay at Marygay's house a letter came from the military that states that both of them must report and come back to active duty. Having difficulties adjusting himself at the new Earth, Mandella thought that going back to military work might wouldn't be so bad, even if it means he have to fight against the Taurans again. Because of his experience in the war, and the fact that due to time dilation Mandella is practically a war veteran, making him 200 years older after he fough in the space again, he rise through military rank to lieutenant eventhough he has only been in three campaign, and eventually a major who has his own troops under his command. By the time Mandella become a Major, pretty much everybody in Earth has become homosexual, save for few veterans and some incurables. Heterosexuality has been considered as an emotional dysfunction that is relatively easy to cure. An associate of Mandella told him that everyone in his company are homosexual with the exception of Mandella himself.

Mandella decided to sit down together with his subordinate officers and he decided to discuss about the issue that he is a heterosexual, something that is not common in the world anymore. He found out that there was period where heterosexuality was considered a crime, but in resent times it is considered as a dysfunction. The officers assured him that it won't be a problem, though later on he discovered that he has a nickname from his subordinates, *the old queer*. The troops' psychiatrist also suggested to him that he should cure his heterosexuality:

"You have a real problem, Major William."

"Not half the problem you'll have in the morning, Lieutenant Doctor Diana."

"Oh not really." She waved a drunken hand in front of her face. "Some vitamins, some glu...cose, aneensity cc of adren...aline if all else fails. You...you...have...a real...problem."

"Look, Diana, don't you want me to—"

"What you need...is to get an appointment with that nice Corporal Valdez." Valdez was the male sex counselor. "He has empathy. Itsiz job. He'd make you—"

"We talked about this before, remember? I want to stay the way I am."

"Don't we all." She wiped away a tear that was probably one percent alcohol. "You know they call you the Old C'reer. No they don't."

She looked at the floor and then at the wall. "The Ol' Queer, that's what."

The societal norm presented in the book could be looked at further by using Gayle Rubin's Charmed Circle theory. In the theory, Rubin created the sex hierarchy, whic includes the charmed circle and the outer limits. The charmed circle contains sexual behaviour that are considered as good, normal, natural, and blessed sexuality, for example heterosexuality, monogamy, or being married. The outer limits on the other hand, comprised of things that are viewed as bad, abnormal, unnatural, and damned sexuality, such as homosexuality, pornography, and cross-generational relationship (Rubin 152-154).

The concept could be applied as is in accordance to the norms adopted by the society in the book at the beginning, which is very much encourage heterosexuality. And eventhough the norms shifted into the

its total opposite, but the concept itself could still be applied, even though the contents of the charmed circle and the outer circle itself are different. The basic concept of the charmed circle theory is that society divides sexual behaviour into two, good and bad, and put them into the respective circles. To put it simply, with the shift that happens in the story the contents of the circle are inverted, that homosexuality is now considered the good and normal behaviour, and heterosexuality on the other hand as bad and abnormal.

The fact that how the distinction of the good and bad sex could be interchangeable related to the norms embraced by a society at a given time makes it related to the notion on how gender and sexuality is actually socially constructed.

The idea of social constructivism contradicts the other school of thought regarding sexuality, which is essentialism. Essentialism believes that a person's sexuality is unchangeable, that it was innate from the moment someone was born, in otherwise it believes that a person is born either homosexual or heterosexual. It dictates that "characteristics of persons or groups are largely similar in all human cultures and historical periods, since they are significantly influenced by biological factors." (Kaplan & Grewal 32). Social construction theory on the other hand "argues against essentialized views of identity in favor of historical and cultural approaches and methods." (Kaplan & Grewal 32).

The shift in the accepted sexual norm in the novel shows that sexuality is in a way constructed by the norm adopted by society. In the beginning of the book the norm is to have relationship with people of opposite sex, which is similar to most societies in the real world. But then, due to some factors, the accepted norm is to have a relationship with people of the same sex, to lead a homosexual life. The accepted sexual behaviour is adjacent to the idea embraced by society, because in the latter half of the story the amount of homosexual has significantly rise from a third into pretty much everyone in the planet, the idea that sexuality is innate from the moment a person is born isn't really accurate. Early on, because heterosexuality is the accepted norm, it is considered normal, sexual behaviours that are considered to deviate from the norm will be labeled as abnormal, dysfunction. But when the society tells that homosexuality is the norm, then anything other than that is in turn considered to be abnormal, just like what happened to Earth in *the Forever War*.

Because the accepted sexuality in the novel is dictated by the rules and norms that are being embraced and followed by the society at the time, which in turn is the complete opposite of the norms embraced by the society in the past, it is not far-fetched to say that gender and sexuality is in fact, socially constructed.

Conclusion

The distinguishment between sexual behaviours that are considered proper and accepted and the ones that are considered to be bad, comes down to the notion of what idea of sexual norm is adopted by a society. A kind of sexual behaviours that are considered bad in a society might very well be encouraged in other society. In the novel *The Forever War*, there is a shift in the accepted sexual norms in the society in which the protagonist William Mandella lives in. The heterocentric society turns into a society who actually encourage people to be in a relationship with those of the same sex, which in turn causes some issues for Mandella. The change doesn't happen overnight, but it happens gradually until the old norm were not embraced by people anymore. The change could signify that sexuality, and the notion of what sexual orientation or behaviour that is considered to be good and proper is not inherent, that it is not created or something that people were born with, but instead to be affected by the societal norms and rules that is being embraced by the people who are the members of the society, which in turn affect the development and the mindset of what is expected for the members of the society to behave and follow.

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