

The Formation of Dysfunctional Social Interactions amidst Excessive Homosociality: An Analysis of Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways*

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ABSTRACT: *The paper is an analysis of Sunjeev Sahota's novel The Year of the Runaways through the lens of the theory of homosociality. The concept of homosocial desire has long existed in different socio-economic setups but it gained significant interest after Eve Sedgwick explained the theory in her book Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire. This paper aims to read Sahota's depiction of homosociality as bearing undesirable social-economic outcomes on the immigrant experience. For this purpose, this paper will make an attempt to read the characters in order to unearth the causes of their subjugation. The objective of this study is to unearth examples where the characters suffer due to their homosocial desires. These examples include discrimination, lack of sexual appeal, and a general sense of dislike for men who are seen with other men. The theory of homosociality which is used as a tool to gauge the negative impacts of male friendship has been explained thoroughly by Eve Sedgwick. By attempting to explore the primary text through this theory this research aims to dismantle the traditional treatment of male bonding. Male bonding is seen as a way in which men secure power in a given society. Sahota, however, depicts that men especially immigrants experience a distorted social life because of their homosocial bonds. This paper suggests a reconsideration of the treatment of homosocial desire and the way in which it is anticipated.*

Key Words: Community, Discrimination, Homosociality, Male bonding, Social life

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Introduction

Sunjeev Sahota is a British novelist who is known as a strong commentator of the issues of immigrants in the United Kingdom. His writing style is characterized by a frank criticism of the immigrant policies and he borrows few words from the Hindi language. His most powerful characters are mostly men who are struggling to secure work in a foreign land. This choice of characters initiates a discussion on the ways in which men suffer in a foreign world. His characters are rooted in the physical location. However, as they leave their respective countries in search of better opportunities in the UK, they face a bitter dislocation. This dislocation forms a consistent pattern in his collection of works. Sahota depicts that it is a trauma that is intergenerational. He remembers how he and his brother often felt alienated among their English peers although they were born and raised in the UK.

Critics have also seen that the concerns of Sahota are largely humanitarian. It is worthwhile to examine the ways in which Sahota paints his characters (Dugan). His male characters attract sympathy of the readers. In *The Year of Runaways*, this sympathy is seen when these male characters indulge in a trickery of some sorts and try to steal chickens from a local vendor (Sahota 1044). Secondly, Sahota's prose is almost lyrical. The tone of the novel is almost gloomy and melancholic.

Wilson Janet, a critic, has made an attempt to discuss the nexus of poverty and deprivation. She reads the stories of the immigrants amidst the popular perception of immigrants. However, this novel is not a, "social realist work" (Wilson 12). The reason she gives is that it does not show the social interaction between the Indians and the native whites. This comment provides an apt opportunity to discuss the ways in which the immigrants become invisible in the English society and it will be discussed that Sahota often depicts that the immigrants hide from raids and cannot participate in social activities (639).

The Year of the Runaways offers an opportunity to study male homosocial bonds. The novel depicts the ways in which homosociality is forced upon men for they are immigrants. In the foreign land they are denied to form heterosexual relations and are forced to live with other men.

Research Questions

The research aims to generate a response to the following questions:

1. Is it true that immigrants are discriminated because of their homosocial desires?
2. How do people react to men who indulge in homosocial desire?
3. How are women who prefer the company of other women treated in the novel?

Literature Review

Homosociality is different from patriarchy because it encapsulates a broad spectrum of male desire. It suggests that men form bonds with each other and that these bonds can be sexual or platonic. The American critic Sedgwick describes homosociality in her book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (11). Her book is a study of the male bonding in the literature of the golden age of English literature. She explores the hidden desire of characters for a male bonding in works varying from Shakespeare to Charles Dickens (27).

In order to decipher the workings of homosociality Sedgwick describes the presence of four key figures in the sonnets of Shakespeare. Sonnets are according to the theorist a collection of, homoerotic pieces of literature. Sedgwick says that there usually is a poet, a gallant man, a contemporary poet and a woman in the sonnets (29). The poet is attached to the woman as well as the gallant youth. Here the idea of a heterosexual bonding is dismantled. The poet further suggest that the youth can love another woman but still the poet will appreciate the love of the youth for

him. Men's homosexual desires are ambiguous as they are hidden behind the cloak of a heterosexual union.

Sedgwick has expanded on the triangle that was earlier provided by Girard. He suggested that two men battle for a single female. Recently, new research has adopted this triangular structure in different ways. Layla Abdullah-Poulos has made an attempt to study it in her paper. She has explored this triangle in a unique genre of literature that is written by Muslims (Abdullah-Poulos). She deciphers that in most of these novels God is meditating entity. In *Areebah's Dilemma*, the female protagonist sacrifices her love for her lover belongs to a different faith. She concludes that in this genre of literature, God acts as a central figure in the idea of union between two people (Abdullah-Poulos). Charlotte Holgersson in her paper, "Recruiting Managing Directors: Doing Homosociality" makes an attempt to study homosociality from the point of view of Swedish male managers who, "are aware of the adverse conditions women face" (451). In her paper she studies the job market in Sweden. It is suggested that managers have a preference for men when they are hiring because they are well aware of the fact that women are overworked (451). This she believes is similar to the idea of discrimination on the basis of gender. Homosociality is seen as an idea that benefits men and ease their movement in the society. However, this paper will read homosociality as a phenomenon that can be harmful for men and the society in which they live.

Along with depicting the phenomenon of male bonding in classical text, Sedgwick in *Between Men* studies it as an economic activity (60). She reads it as a currency between an aristocrat and his less fortunate male counterpart. She suggests that men of higher standing often exploited men of lower standing. This exploitation could be sexual or otherwise. Often aristocratic men gave their poor servants the moral responsibility of their own wrongdoings. Sedgwick studies the character of Adam in Adam Bede to conclude that he is indeed helping his master (147). Adam

assumes the moral responsibility of Harker by marrying the woman that he left. He tries to clear the wrongdoings of his master by helping Hetty.

Research Methodology

Homosociality is used to critique on the social implications of male bonding in the primary text. Homosociality is not a new concept. However, it is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's understanding of the concept that is used in this research paper. She reads homosociality as a broad concept which problematized a lot of societal functions such as marriage. The aim of this paper is to read the ways in which homosociality tarnishes the social fabric.

The primary text for this research study is *The Year of the Runaways* by Sunjeev Sahota. This novel documents the journey of a number of Indian men who leave their homeland in pursuit of better work opportunities. The framework that is used to critique this novel is borrowed from Kosofsky musings on homosociality in her book. *Between Men* describes the working of male bonding throughout the history of English literature. The research is based on linguistic and descriptive analysis. It forces on the characterization and the kind of diction that makes up the novel.

Analysis

Homosociality influences a number of social activities. It has a direct impact on the ways in which men are treated by the society. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the response of society to men who have strong social bonds. It reads the impact of homosociality on the process of socialization. Men who rely on emotional support of other men are seen as childish. Randeep is one memorable character in the novel. He has come to the United Kingdom for work. However, he is emotionally deprived for his mother never loved him. She sent him to the UK without considering his wishes. He tries to find emotional support from other men such as Avtar and Tochi. Tochi often insults him for he has seen his dependence on Avtar. In

chapter 1 Tochi is very rude to Randeep. The former however, “looked annoyed with himself” (Sahota 60). Randeep is not able to stand up for himself and he ignores Tochi for a while. Tochi later apologized to Randeep. It is inevitable that men who have desires for other men are not welcomed by men in general.

This paper reads how other men treat men who believe in the concept of bromance. Bromance is a popular term for friendships between men. It includes affection of some sort and is mostly present in pop culture. Sedgwick refers to the male bonding that was successfully concealed through the power of money and status. She refers to Oscar Wilde and how his life was a secret before he was convicted. She says that, “the ability to command secrecy... This role is closely related to-is in fact, through Oscar Wilde...” (173). This suggest that people with power could afford to indulge in male bonding and still hide it away. However, Sahota’s characters do not have such privileges. Avtar is not inclined to the idea of homosociality yet at times he has to succumb to it only because of his love for his friend’s sister. Randeep is his friend and he has an affair with his sister. Lakhpreet has asked Avtar to look after her brother. However, Avtar does everything on his own. He planned to steal chicken from his owner’s shop. The act seemed such cleverly planned that his owner is impressed by his guts.

In *The Year of the Runaways*, Avtar fits in the definition of an alpha male. He is disinterested in forming friendship with other men and this is what attracts other men to him. His owner is impressed by him. Likewise, men who indulge in homosocial bonds are seen as weak. Other men don’t prefer their company. Randeep, for instance, is known as an emotional and clingy person. He tries to be nice with everyone. He even tries to be friends with Tochi who belongs to a lower class than him. However, Tochi rejects any kind of friendship with him and even insults him. Tochi, just like Avtar, prefers to stay alone. Lastly Gurpreet is similar to Randeep in the way that he too wants

to form emotional friendship with other men. However, the moment Randeep realizes it he runs away from him. In chapter 9 Randeep says to Avtar that, "I don't want to be on my own with Gurpreet" (Sahota 7).

Homosociality is a complex phenomenon. Men who stay with other men are seen as weak and destitute. Tochi prefers to stay alone. He works for an Indian family. The family respects him for he seems like a decent person. The tables would have turned had Tochi indulged in the habit of roaming around with his male friends. Near the end, Randeep and his friends try to find shelter in Narinder's apartment. They are met with a stern no as she believes that it will look odd. Narinder believes that it might sound odd if someone finds out that she is living in an apartment with three men. The author says that "she was worried her family would hear she was living in a house full of men" (24).

Men who indulge in homosocial bonds are seen as less fit as husbands or provider. This is important because Sedgwick too suggests that such men were often hedonistic. Late nineteenth centuries saw the emergence a notorious form of social bonding. It often included a rich aristocrat and his servants. This group also comprised of prostitutes and gypsies. Men who indulged in this lifestyle were seen as reckless. Thus, it is assumed that the aristocrat will spend generously on the people around him. This shows that the person in question, the aristocrat, is not responsible enough to bear the burden of marriage. Wilde is renowned for the hedonistic life that he lived.

The male characters in the novel are misjudged by the society. Tochi is the perfect example of a provider. Sahota has built his character in such a manner as to show that he was generous and responsible towards his family. He never formed any friendship with other men. Harbajan who is famous for trying to form friendship with other men spends generously on them. He lavishes Avtar with everything he desires. Tochi however is very different and responsible.

Even when he came to the UK, he kept himself busy with making money. Randeep and Gurpreet are of the view that other men can help them. They try to form friendships with them and accommodate them. Society looks down upon them because they seem irresponsible and hide behind the cloak of their stronger friends. Thus, they are not desired as partner as they are not seen as potential breadwinners.

Modern critics view sexuality as fluid and it is this flexibility that create troubles for the society. A sexuality hidden away is more dangerous for a society that so strongly believes in compulsive heterosexuality. Sedgwick says that since the nineteenth century term gay was associated with aristocrats (105). However, their relation with other men were seen as temporary deviation. This idea of temporary deviation put other men in danger. Men who were not indulging in such activities were thought in the same terms as their homosexual counterparts. This ambiguity is also present in TYOTR. Randeep and Harbajan are not accepted by society because they feel the need to form emotional bonds with other men. In this process, all immigrants who are forced to live together are also seen as homosexuals. This leads to a lot of problem for them. One reason that Tochi does not talk to anyone is because he does not want to be seen as a troublesome man. Homosexual panic is perhaps his motive to avoid any contact with his roommates.

Sedgwick borrows the concept of the male desire from Girard (31). The desire of a man for another woman is based on his friends' desire for that woman. If the rival desires the woman, the former will also have desire for her. Since men in TYOTR are competing for jobs more than they are competing for a woman's love, it becomes inevitable to study the rivalry surrounding job. Men like Randeep follow what his close friend Avtar does. He has no direction of his own. Tochi however finds his own ways to earn money. Tochi even steals the job of Avtar due to a grudge that he had for the latter. Men in the novel are keen to establish their desires by watching what their peers are

doing. This is problematic because they often lose good opportunities. For instance, Avtar left a decent job offer just to be close with his friend Randeep. This rivalry for the same jobs is their ways of expressing their desire for each other.

Homosociality imagines a world without women. Sedgwick says that, "women are...the vehicles by which men breed more men, for the gratification of other men" (43).

The novel has a lot of male characters and very few but powerful female characters. Men see women who will help in bringing other men in this world. In the end Tochi is married. It is mentioned that he has a son but there are no details about her wife. The novel depicts a lot of men but only two to three women. Narinder is an exception for she breaks this cycle of mistreatment but then she is also seen as an object who will satisfy some need of a man.

Female homosocial bonds are socially acceptable. Furthermore, they make women more appealing than men. Sedgwick says that the idea of female friendships is less threatening. Women are free to bond with other women and the bond is less restrictive than a male bonding. There is no policing because the fear of homosexuality is not present. In the novel, Sahota describes a female character who attracted the attention of Randeep when he was in India. The first and foremost thing that made her seem socially accepted was the fact that she was seen with her female friends. It is a magical moment captured by Sahota as he says that she was, "at the center of her group of girlfriends" (24). Later he describes the feminine qualities surrounding the young lady. This shows that women who are keen to make other female friends are seen as attractive and social. The trouble however is for men because of the hidden idea of homosexual inclination.

Homosociality impacts a lot of things that a person does. It becomes worthwhile to study the impact of male bonding

on one's relationship with his/her parents and/or children. The novel depicts that men who are more inclined to bond with other men have dysfunctional relationship with their own family members. Avtar forms close friendship with his course instructor. Dr Cheema lives with his wife, his mother and his son (Sahota 695). It seems that he does not have a healthy relationship with his wife and son. His wife says that before Avtar her husband brought a young girl. His intentions were pure and he wanted to help her find job just as he is helping Avtar. However, people especially elderly women talked behind his back for it was eerie to bring a young girl at home. This shows that bonding between a man and woman is also treated as inappropriate. Dr Cheema seems to have a philanthropic vision. He also says that people in ancient times were willing to open the doors of their homes to help other people who were in need of a refugee. However, it seems that his need to help other people stems from a yearning to form meaningful relationship with someone. Dr Cheema and his wife share a bitter relationship and their son is mostly away. Dr Cheema goes out of the way to help Avtar. He wants him to stay with him. When Avtar says that he is leaving, Dr Cheema's wife asks if her husband will let him go (701).

At this moment he feels like he is held hostage in the house. Dr Cheema is a respectable man and it will seem odd if he keeps Avtar at his home without any purpose. Thus, he builds the story of how he is helping a young Indian man in need. Male homosocial desire is seen as a menace and to form a bond with other man, it is necessary to form a purpose. Avtar has told Dr Cheema that he needs a steady job. Dr Cheema takes him at a shop where the young boy is offered a good job. It is strange and it seems that Dr Cheema has arranged this job for him because it is not easy for an illegal immigrant to find this type of job offer.

Male homosocial bonds are seen with such disgust that men can not admit their desire for other men. Men have to create opportunities to express their desire for other men.

Dr Cheema has a desire for Avtar but it seems that he is very careful with his words. He says to Avtar that he should not worry for he is with his own kind. This suggests that he is doing all these favors because of the idea of a shared nationality. However, Dr Cheema is a lonely man just like Harbajan. Harbajan too tried to help Avtar but he also wanted his company.

It seems that male homosocial bonds inculcate favoritism. Men like Dr Cheema ignore the illegal status of Avtar and try to facilitate him in extending his stay in the UK. This favoritism is however rejected by Avtar who is depicted as an alpha male throughout the novel. Avtar leaves him and goes to Randeep just because the latter's sister has urged him to go. For Avtar his heterosexual relationship is of the topmost priority than his homosocial desire. Avtar is very clear in his mind about his desires. However, men like Randeep, Dr Cheema and Gurpreet are very unclear. They have desire for other men. Yet all of these men try to indulge in heterosexual relationship just to hide their true intentions. Randeep almost harassed Narinder in order to prove that he is a heterosexual man. He flirts with her and almost checks her wardrobe in her absence. Dr Cheema has kept an unwilling woman as his wife. Gurpreet uses violence to depict that he is an alpha male. Lastly, Harbajan who is a close friend of Avtar visits the house of ills to establish that he has heterosexual inclinations. These examples show that homosocial desire creates a pathological condition. Men try to hide their true desire by succumbing to socially unacceptable values such as visiting the house of ills or using violence to depict that they are masculine.

Some of the aforementioned characters such as Dr Cheema are expected to reunite with the idea of heterosexual bonding. Homosocial desire is seen as a temporary transgression. The optimal state of sexuality is heterosexual. Critics such as Sedgwick saw Shakespeare's sonnets as a document of transition from the idea of male bonding to heterosexual union. They divide the collection

of sonnets into, “the dark-lady sonnets and the young-man sonnets” (Engle 46). Each category represents a different inclination. However, men like Gurpreet die when they actually realize that they can form a positive bond with women such as Narinder.

Sedgwick suggests that homosocial temperament manifests itself through a process of a total erasure of women. For this purpose, she reads Shakespeare’s early sonnets. In these she observes that there is almost no reference to a female figure. This kind of absence manifests itself in the larger trajectory of things. Since ages women have remained hidden in the background. Sahota plays with this motif to a certain extent. The immigrants share an apartment and there are no women around. Dr Cheema deliberately ignores his wife and she too avoids him. He wants her to look after his family but he never suggests that he needs her attention too. The removal of a female figure is a kind of micro aggression that stems from the homosocial desire of men.

Sedgwick begins the introduction of her book, *Between Men*, with an important statement. She suggests that as men and women share unequal power in a given community. This leads them to exercise their sexuality in different ways. Women have different gender roles such as acting coy. Moreover, both gender’s sexuality will manifest in a different manner. Sunjeev Sahota paints a world in which there is unequal division of wealth and power. However, it is important to read the ways in which this influences the relations between men. Men such as Dr Cheema are powerful intellectuals. However, men such as Gurpreet and Harbajan are illegal immigrants or weak characters. Both group of men differ in the way they approach homosociality. Dr Cheema can express his desire for men like Avtar without facing any serious consequences. Gurpreet however has nothing to offer to his friends. He cannot make friends because he too is in the same condition just as them and at times he is at their mercy. Gurpreet cannot express his desire for

companionship even if it is platonic. He is rude to the men who he wants to establish cordial relations with because he knows that they do not want to form any bond with him. Gurpreet was initially very kind towards Randeep and he wanted to make him his friend. However soon Randeep started ignoring him. Gurpreet still talks to Randeep but he is almost bullying him.

Homosocial bonds are based on the idea of power struggle. Homosocial bonds are based on the idea of give and take. They are not genuine friendships. The idea of exploitation lays at the heart of these bonds. The bonds that the men in the novel share are based on the idea of a vertical homosociality. This kind of homosociality suggest that men form cordial ties between each other for transactional purposes. Thus, the friendships that are formed in the novel are temporary except for the bond between Randeep and Avtar. One never hears of Dr Cheema again. Even Michael, who was a friend of Randeep never contacted the young boy. Randeep gave good company to him when the former lived in India (Sahota, 2015). Later, Randeep visited him at his residence. However, he was met with a bitter response from the old man. Randeep was almost forced to leave when he needed the support of the old man. However, Avtar and Randeep are still friends because the former does not indulge in excessive homosociality. From the very beginning he knew that he must not have an excessive desire to make friends of his own gender. Secondly, Avtar is now the brother-in-law of Randeep so now their relation has changed and they must remain friends.

Conclusion

The discussion concludes that homosocial bonds are an important part of the human existences. However, it also imitates a discussion on the misuse of male bonding and the ways in which it is misinterpreted. The novel reveals the ways in which male friendships are treated as a censored form of a homoerotic desire. The above discussion opens up a discussion about an in depth analysis

of the kinds of bonds that men want to form and the pathological implications if they are denied to form such bonds. These pathological implications later translate into the ways in which misogyny operates.

By comparing the discourse on the early English society as explained by the theorist to the modern world of immigrants, this paper has made an attempt highlights the issues of immigrants. It reads the ways in which they are treated by people of the status quo.

Homosociality creates different problems for different men. The traditional view is that homosocial bonds act to benefit men just like patriarchy. However, both the terms are very different. Homosociality encapsulates desire and this desire can be complex. Men like Gurpreet are not aware of their fondness for other men. This desire is complex and misunderstood by the subject as well as the society. The ambiguity created gives space to all kinds of speculations and men who have strong bonding with other men are often treated in a bad way just because they have a different preference. Homosociality does not ease the process of men's socialization into a given society. Rather they are seen as outcast and mysterious figures.

The exploitation and alienation of the immigrants from all important activities highlights the ways in which they are treated as non-humans. Their emotions and feelings are disregarded. They are exploited by their families and employers. All characters are integral to the discussion of homosociality for they are all struggling at different levels. The analysis of the friendship that Randeep and Avtar share suggests that an optimal level of male homosocial desire is possible in the midst of the chaos surrounding the idea of homosociality.

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