

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1. Background of the Study**

Social and cultural appropriation of a community related to gender and sexuality often leads to social rejection and ostracism to members who do not fit in the norms and values of the community. The struggles of someone having a different sexual orientation from heterosexual people still exist to date due to the existence of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity becomes a hegemony which segments heterosexual as the normal and dominant sexual orientation while queers as the deviant and “other” sexual orientation. Queer is a product of theoretical and specific cultural norms which results in non-heterosexual identity (Jagose 1996). The hegemonic heteronormativity dictates and obliges people to have a sexual orientation toward the opposite sex (Thurmond 2015, 2). In her journal, Cohen (1997, 440) posits that the existence of heteronormativity depicts heterosexuals as dominant and controlling gender rather than non-heteronormative or queer who are seen and believed as marginalized and invisible in society.

Non-heteronormative gender and sexuality are seen as indecent of being human (Thurmond 2015, 1). Dewi (2016, 47) unveils that heteronormativity causes men and women to limit their sexual orientation. Nearly all non-heterosexual individuals live under the oppression of heteronormativity (Aragón 2008, 11). Heteronormativity is both fundamental practices and institutions legitimizing and privileging heterosexuality as necessary, right, and “natural” within society (Cohen

1997, 440, Thurmond 2015, 2). The most visible privileges obtained by heterosexuals are the right to have a legal marriage, adopt children, get a job, use public facilities. Yet, some of these rights cannot be achieved by non-heterosexual people due to their sexuality. The oppressions experienced by non-heterosexual people include employment discrimination based on sexual orientation, the same-sex couples marriage that is considered as illegal, the unfulfilled right of gay men and lesbians to adopt children, and the harassment toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual students in public schools (Griffin, et al. 2007, 197). Other cases showing the oppressions for being non-heterosexual people are the probability to be fired for being queer/non-heterosexual in the majority states of America and experiencing familial rejection resulting in 40% of homeless youth are queer and trans kids in the United States of America (USA) (Tatum 2015). If heterosexuality is believed and maintained as the "natural" emotional and intimate affection between two people, the homosexual will be seen as peculiar, as irrational, or as sensually and emotionally underprivileged (Rich 1980, 652).

From the definition of heteronormativity by Cohen and Rich, it can be comprehended that heteronormativity causes men and women to comply with the heterosexual orientation. Rich also apprehends heteronormativity as the massive pressure to be heterosexual placed on young people by their surroundings, such as families, schools, and all the forms of media. Heteronormativity turns to be an oppressive social structure and forces that ensure the values and effort to be acclaimed, visible, and accepted in society (Thurmond 2015, 2). Heteronormativity is embraced by the heterosexual community who maintains heterosexuality as the

most natural sexual orientation within various forms of society and media. Heterosexuality cannot be viewed as the norm in opposition to determine sexual identities (Dobie 2015, 113).

In short, heteronormativity is a norm enacted by nearly every country which requires people to be heterosexual. The maintained heteronormativity also leads oppressions experienced by non-heterosexual people, including men and women attracted to their same-sex. This oppressive heteronormativity leads non-heterosexual persons to fight for the right of same-sex marriage that has not been granted by many countries.

Heteronormativity is not only believed in Western countries. This belief is also maintained by non-Western countries. The variety of norms, culture, and ethnicity of non-Western countries create inevitable extensive oppression toward Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer (LGBTQ). This phenomenon may occur since non-Western countries are more conservative to their norms, values, tradition, and beliefs than Western countries. All Asian cultures marginalize gender and sex differences to allow traditional space for expression according to the culture of each country (Laurent 2005, 167). Besides, Laurent (168) adds that religion believed by Asian countries has a stronger influence on maintaining beliefs and frameworks than in Western countries. Non-Western culture and traditional ideas, about sexuality and same-sex relationships, lessen the value on non-heterosexual rights (Laurent 2005, 164). The act of neglecting one's rights can be perceived as the simplest example of oppression toward non-heterosexual. An example of non-Western countries maintaining heteronormativity can be seen from Lee's Study

(2016, 2) which unravels the phenomenon of the LGBTQ social movement in Taiwan which faced opposition from heteronormative groups of the society. Another example can be seen in conservative politics and norms in Iran, which impose heteronormativity based on Islamic values (Hoffman-Reyes 2015).

Multiple countries that maintain heteronormativity proves that heterosexuality is considered as the most ideal and appropriate sexual orientation. This global phenomenon may be the outcome of homophobia experienced by the heterosexual. Homophobia is the irrational fear and hatred of homosexuals such as gay and lesbians (Renzetti and Endleson 2008, 336). Homosexuals are considered as sick, evil, and as sexual predators to induce youths surrounding them to be LGBTQ (Tyson 2015, 305). Heterosexual people are sure that homophobia is a pathological dread of same-sex love.

With the presumptions of homophobia in society, homosexuals find it difficult to express their sexuality/gender publicly and freely. The representation of homosexuality in media and culture is not always identical to its practices in society (Walczak 2014, 6). In short, a homosexual person is known as someone who is sexually attracted to the same-sex person. Thurmond (1-2) claimed if a broad number of societies conceive non-heterosexual as a pathology and as an inappropriate way of human beings, then they also repress non-heterosexual people. Repression toward non-heterosexual has numerous forms, such as the existence of homophobia, that are merely part of the results in maintaining heteronormativity.

The oppressions experienced by queers force them to undertake strategies and negotiations to be accepted and recognized in society. The most commonly used

strategy for queers to be accepted in heterosexual society is by maintaining two identities as a single person. For lesbians, Rich (1980, 659) coined the term “women double-life” which means that lesbians could not live wholly as lesbian, but they also have to live as heterosexual women since they are not accepted in their society. Women’s double-life is the outcome of the lesbian continuum posited by Rich in her journal. This phenomenon proves how the oppressions of heteronormativity extensively affect the feeling of calm and freedom of queers to live freely and wholly as who they truly are. Queers are oppressed since society has taught their future generations to idealize heteronormativity over queerness, and retains heterosexual as the most ideal and normal sexual orientation.

The original studies dealing with gender and sexuality were initiated by several theorists, such as Judith Butler, Cathy J. Cohen, Adrienne Rich, and others who are originally from Western countries. Many queer theories mostly exclude non-Western societies and limit its relevance to third world activism (Badruddoja 2008). It comes as no surprise if further studies tend to stress the development of heteronormativity and queer in Western countries.

Numerous scholars had attempted to provide deeper discussion and analysis related to the heteronormativity that exists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In his study, Goldsmith (2016) showed that the roles of gender and sexuality are clearly defined under heteronormativity embraced by Americans. Gender is vividly bisected into prescriptive masculinity obliged for men and prescriptive femininity for women. American queers find the process of coming out hard to be actualized without feeling dread of being rejected by their family (Thurmond 2015). Family is just a

minute agent in the act of oppression toward queers. American lesbians are aware of the discrimination they may experience in several fields, such as employment, housing, healthcare, and any other social fields (Aragón 2008). They also attempt to present themselves as heterosexual at work (Albro and Tully 1996).

Besides, studies related to this thesis discussing lesbian continuum are also conducted within the context of Western countries. Schechner's study (2018) points out that the implementation of heteronormativity in France differentiates lesbian from other heterosexual people. A study conducted by Fauziyyah (2017) stresses that American lesbian tend to romanticize their relationship sensually and erotically besides its main purpose to empower themselves as lesbians. Those studies present that lesbian continuum becomes the strategy to overcome the alienation experienced by lesbians in Western countries from the heterosexual community.

The conducted studies are vividly Western-biased discussion since most of these studies were undertaken, initiated, and discussed by Western origin scholars. The discussed objects are mostly within the context of heteronormativity in Western countries which are mainly in American and European countries. Undertaken studies to examine lesbian friendship have typically prioritized White women's perspectives (Siraj 2018). Scholars explore inequality in race, gender, and class to reveal how power and control work to preserve abusive relationships and maintain social hierarchies. Studies in Western countries show how coming out in heteronormative society becomes the most complicated and exhausting problem faced by queers. Meanwhile, queers in non-Western countries may experience more

complicated, complex, and intertwined issues and oppressions since non-Western countries tend to preserve the religion and norms that exist in their countries.

The overtly discussed issue in the context of Western countries causes a lack of comprehension regarding issues within non-Western countries for the implementation of lesbian continuum may not be completely in line with how Western society performs it. Hoffman-Reyes (2015) discloses lesbianism between Iranian girls is restricted due to their religion's value which considers same-sex relationships as haram. Her finding shows that queers in non-Western countries deal with their culture, society, religion, and the laws surrounding them. Siraj (2018) uncovers that British-Pakistani lesbians are distressed by societal validation and acceptance from their family, friends, and community. Vanita (2007) also adds that lesbianism in India has many similarities with those in the West, yet it has a few different aspects, especially at the rate of same-sex couple suicide. White LGBT scholars often dismiss queer in non-Western countries like South Asian countries which are considered conservative countries. This attitude identifies South Asians' culture to buttress the liberal Western cultures (Adur and Purkayastha 2017). Aside from scholars, numerous writers also bring heteronormativity as the main theme of their literary works.

Recently, considerable literature has been discussing queer issues, which is considered taboo in society, to increase the criticism of public opinion about equality of human rights. The various genres of young adult literature may coincidentally contribute to the practice of heteronormativity and homophobia (Walczak 2014, 115). She also adds that queerness in young adult literature has

been related to punishment, rejection, and misery (41). Walzack (46) argues that heterosexism and homophobia in the novel represent the real problem in society related to those two issues. Queer issue in young adult literature is not merely about its representation, but also about their ways to overcome the maintained traditions and social expectations (Goldsmith 2016, 12).

In January 2016, there were 102 LGBTQ printed newspapers, magazines, and journals in the United States (Deschamps and Singer 2017, 137). 12 of 16 protagonist characters in 16 Young Adult lesbian novels from Lambda Literary Award's 2011 nominees pursue intimacy with other women to achieve sexual desires and depict emotional intimacy or love (Cook, Rostosky and Riggle 2013, 156-157). Malinda Lo (2019) reveals that numerous mainstream publishers released 108 young adult books, with LGBTQ as the main narrative in 2018.

The most salient struggle and oppression represented in queer-themed novels are the heteronormativity in which they live. Trying to break out from gender role dichotomies and heteronormativity is the strategy of nearly all lesbian characters in YA lesbian novels. Homophobia remains an issue in the narratives of young adult literary works (Walczak 2014, 117). The narratives of sexual identity and gender presented in young adult novels are as complex as the public, political, social realities, and cultural surrounding LGBTQ rights in the United States related to the released date of the novels. Novels bringing issues of lesbianism in America can be seen in *If You Could Be Mine*, *Valmiki's Daughter*, *I Can't Think Straight*, and many more. Different from most queer-themed novels, the novel analysed in this study titled *Marriage of a Thousand Lies* tells the narrative of a lesbian in the



second generation of Sri Lankan-American immigrants which is inspired by the true experienced of the writer, S.J. Sindu.

S.J. Sindu is a Tamil-American author and educator who released the hybrid fiction and nonfiction chapbook entitled *I Once Met You But You Were Dead* which is a hybrid chapbook of fiction and nonfiction that juxtaposes girlhood, womanhood, and cultural gender politics with war and violence. Her chapbook won the 2016 Split Lip Press Turnbuckle Chapbook Contest. Later in 2017, Sindu released her first novel titled *Marriage of a Thousand Lies* that won the Publishing Triangle Edmund White Award for Debut Fiction and the Golden Crown Literary Society Award for Debut Fiction. The novel gained remarkable good reviews related to how Sindu attempted to bring up the narrative of queer, same-sex marriage, and multiculturalism between Sri Lankan and American.

In her interview with NBC News, S.J. Sindu claimed that her first novel was inspired by her true story as a queer experiencing the arranged heterosexual-marriage by her family years after she came out to her family (Gandhi 2017). Her childhood was spent in Boston, the same city as the main character in the novel. The city boasts one of the largest LGBT populations on the East Coast with neighbourhoods such as the South End and Jamaica Plain. The novel also takes place in Jamaica Plain as the house of lesbian rugby players. According to Wexler-Romig, a Program Administrator at the Massachusetts Commission on LGBTQ Youth, Jamaica Plain is the epicentre of queer in Boston. Boston ranked in the sixth most populated Sri Lankan-American immigrants in the USA in 2015 with around 1000 population (Pew Research Center 2017). Although Boston is not the most

populated Sri Lankan-American immigrants, the preference of Boston as the setting of place in the novel could also remind that Boston is the capital city of the first state in the U.S. to legalize same-sex marriage. The setting of the novel is in 2012 before the election for the 57<sup>th</sup> president of America in which Barack Obama and Mitt Romney were the nominees. The setting of time and place of the novel relate to the social issue in the USA during 2012 regarding the discourse of same-sex marriage uttered by Barack Obama during his interview with ABC News in 2012.

The intertwined real issue of Sri Lankan-American immigrants and the discourse of same-sex marriage during the setting of time of the novel leads to be an exciting story. The novel contains complex issues revolving around the intersection of religion, culture, immigrant, and sexuality that affect Lucky, as the main character, who claims herself as a lesbian. The novel tells a story of Lucky, a lesbian in the second generation of Sri Lankan-American immigrants living in Winchester, Boston, who experiences heteronormativity from her family. She is the third of three siblings, her father decided to marry another woman after divorcing, and her mother lives with Lucky's grandmother.

Her family, especially her mother named Amma, still upholds their Sri Lankan norms and cultures. Lucky's family several times claim that they would vote Obama to run his second period, yet, they do not support the rights for LGBTQ regulated by Obama. Lucky's entire life is being spent by pretending to be a heterosexual woman in her family. She marries Kris, who is gay, but their marriage is set to cover their true sexual orientation from the heteronormativity of the Sri Lankan community. Lucky wants to make a life with Nisha, her childhood best friend and

ex-lover, preparing her marriage with a heterosexual man arranged by her family. Both Nisha and Lucky maintain their intimate and passionate relationship furtively. The pretending game to be a heterosexual woman was ended when Nisha's mother caught up Lucky and Nisha sleeping with no clothes covering them. The premise of the novel which tells the story of a lesbian in the Sri Lankan-American community who is stuck in a closet to fulfil the pretension of her family became the reason to choose *Marriage of a Thousand Lies* as the object of this study.

The portrayal of the heteronormativity of Sri Lankan-American immigrants experienced by Lucky in the novel accords with Badruddoja's (2008, 162) argument stating that members of South Asian-American LGBTQ community find it tremendously perplexing to establish fluid identities within the believed LGBTQ discourse. Besides, the negotiation undertaken by Lucky as the second generation of Sri Lankan-American immigrants toward it becomes the main issue that is analysed in this study.

This study applied the lesbian continuum theory to discuss the representation of heteronormativity and lesbian continuum. By revealing the depiction of heteronormativity and the relationship between women portrayed in the lesbian continuum, it is expected to open society's points of view that queers should not be seen and treated as someone who has sexual disorientation although the majority of individuals in society are heterosexuals. *Marriage of a Thousand Lies* was considered as the primary data of the study. In addition, journal articles, thesis, and other books are used as the secondary data to support in analysing the issue of the study.

The studies discussed in the literature review were written by Firnanda Fauziyyah (2017), Puspita Dewi (2016), John Goldsmith (2016), Laurie Barth Walczak (2014), and Catherine Lynn Thurmond (2015). To support those studies, several journal articles written by Schechner (2018), Proehl (2018), Albro and Tully (1996), Lisa Hoffman-Reyes (2015), Adur and Purkayastha (2017), and Siraj (2018) were also selected to comprehend the theory, issues, and topic related to this thesis.

Most of these studies discuss heteronormativity existing in Western countries, especially in America. The difficulties queers attempt to overcome are unveiled in Walczak, Thurmond, and Goldsmith studies. Even if numerous studies have been undertaken to embrace queer issues, only a few studies focus on lesbian and its continuum under heteronormativity. Most studies focus on the implementation of heteronormativity to non-heterosexual people in general ranging from gay, lesbian, transsexual, transgender, bisexual, and queer. Only a few studies analyse the representation of lesbians and their struggle to lessen the oppression they experience.

Fauziyyah and Proehl observed literary works discussing lesbians around the 1950s to 1970s in America. Proehl revealed that American lesbians in the early twentieth-century stressed the psychological bonding between two women to support the racial injustice issue. Meanwhile, Fauziyyah concluded that in the 1950s, patriarchy with its oppressions toward women became one of the reasons behind the existence of the lesbian continuum in America. The phenomenon observed by Fauziyyah was in line with Dewi who disclosed that lesbian continuum

emerged since women felt the lack of emotional and comprehension from men. Due to the unfulfilled comprehension from their opposite-sex, women tend to find emotional support in friendships between women.

Friendship becomes the means for lesbians to heal their feeling of lost, disruption, and troubled familial relationships (Proehl 2018, Hoffman-Reyes 2015, Fauziyyah 2017, Schechner 2018). Albro and Tully revealed that nearly 68% of American lesbians experienced rejections by their families. Dewi's study unveiled that Chinese lesbians experienced additional oppression from their culture. Hoffman-Reyes discovered that religion believed by Iran family becomes another main restriction for being a lesbian. Most of those related studies discussed heteronormativity and lesbianism in the context of non-immigrant families. Meanwhile, this study stressed to discuss lesbian in Sri Lankan-American immigrant family. Adur and Purkayastha uncovered that South Asians in America resurrect and use their version of tradition, including religion and cultural symbols, as an important tool in their discourse of queerness.

Although extensive research has been carried out on lesbian oppression and the lesbian continuum in literary works, only a few studies focusing on the issues experienced by lesbians in the context of non-Western countries in the twenty-first century. Moreover, there are few studies concerning the depiction of the lesbian continuum experienced by lesbians coming from immigrant families. This study attempted to observe the portrayal of lesbians in the twenty-first century among the second generation of Sri Lankan-American immigrants whose country of origin was from South Asian countries.

## 1.2. Statements of the Problem

The dominant issue of heteronormativity and the negotiation undertaken by queer people are vividly captured in the novel. After reading and comprehending the novel, two questions are formulated to reveal how the author portrays lesbian in the novel. The study sought to answer the following specific research questions:

- a) How is the lesbian continuum depicted in S.J. Sindu's *Marriage of a Thousand Lies*?
- b) How does Lucky as a lesbian in the second generation of Sri Lankan-American immigrants negotiate the heteronormativity she experiences in the novel?

## 1.3. Objectives of the Study

- a) To reveal the depiction of lesbian continuum in S.J. Sindu's *Marriage of a Thousand Lies*.
- b) To reveal how Lucky as a lesbian in the second generation of Sri Lankan-American immigrants negotiates the heteronormativity she experiences in the novel.

## 1.4. Significance of the Study

In general, this study is expected to give a contribution to gender studies and lesbian studies in literature, in specific. Moreover, this study aims to provide more discussion about *Marriage of a Thousand Lies* novel. In searching for the references to this study, few previous studies discussing this novel. Numerous scholars

produce related studies discussing heteronormativity and lesbian continuum, yet none of those tell a story with the Sri Lankan community as the background of the characters. The purpose of this study has been to fill the gap with several related studies obtained since this study focuses on the heteronormativity in Sri Lankan American immigrants and the relationship between Lucky and her female friends seen from the lesbian continuum conceptual framework.

Implying focus toward the lesbian characters, this study is also expected to wider and broaden the knowledge and understanding of the representation of friendship among lesbian negotiating their sexual identity in heterosexual society. This study also intends to make a major contribution to research on the heteronormativity by demonstrating the cause and effect of it toward queer people. This study is hoped to contribute to improve awareness towards lesbian in society since they may struggle to openly and liberally come out with their gender/sexual orientation.

This study also contemplates contributing to the development of literary studies, especially in Universitas Airlangga. Many literary works have been discussed for undergraduate thesis, yet few studies focus to discuss lesbians and the struggles faced by them. Since lesbianism is not much chosen, this study desires to embrace queer issues considered as taboo in Indonesian culture.

### **1.5. Definition of Key Terms**

This paper contains various terms that might not be familiar to the readers. To broaden the knowledge of readers and to ease the process of comprehending this study, several key terms are defined below:

Terms	Definition
Double-life	Women do not merely describe themselves as heterosexual but also as lesbians (Rich 1980, 659).
Heteronormativity	Both fundamental practices and institutions legitimizing and privileging heterosexuality as necessary and “natural” within society (Cohen 1997, 440).
Lesbian Existence	The presence of lesbian in the past and the continuing understanding of the definition of lesbian in present (Rich 1980, 648).
Lesbian continuum	The range of women identifying women to share their emotions and feelings to give support to each other despite the fact that a woman may consciously crave to have a genital sexual experience with another woman (Rich 1980, 648).
Queer	Something odd and considered by heterosexual society as abnormal (Warner 1991).