

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Gender is always understood to emerge from the construction within society rather than by nature. With gender comes gender roles, in which gender is assigned to perform a set of behaviors that are deemed acceptable to fit into the group that the society told them they belong in. Like masculinity, for instance, where boys are taught that in order to be a real man, they need to acquire some set of masculine behaviors and act the way boys are expected to be, such as being stoic, strong physically and mentally, a heterosexual, and rejects any display of femininity (Joseph and Black 2012). An American actor named Justin Baldoni explained in his TED Talk speech how all his life, he has been told what kind of a man that he should be. Naturally, as a boy, he wanted to be liked and accepted by his peers, and to achieve that, he had to adapt the conventional mindset of masculinity and femininity: women are weak while men are strong (TED 2018).

Most of the time, what men seek is the validation that comes from their same-sex peers. It is the need to obtain approval from other men that enables them to perform acts displaying their accomplishments to manhood, such as sexual conquest, wealth, power, or status (Kimmel 1994). If they are unable to meet those expectations, it can

result in them acquiring the feeling of shame and humiliation (Joseph and Black 2012). However, it is important to note that way conventional masculinity is perceived can be different according to where it occurs, considering social and cultural context are crucial to how gender is constructed. To illustrate, as Connell said in her book entitled *The Men and the Boys* (2000), some might regard homosexuality as a regular part of masculinity (Herdt 1984), while some might see it as a deviation. Thus, different patterns of masculinity are born and created a hierarchy and hegemony within them.

Among the different patterns of masculinity lies the one who holds domination over the others, being the type of masculinity that is enacted by the majority of men under each social context. In America, the dominant culture of masculinity defines how a white, middle-class, early middle-aged heterosexual man becomes the standard for other men to follow (Kimmel 1994). According to Erving Goffman (1963), the kind of masculinity that every American male wants to achieve is married at a young age, white, a heterosexual, fully employed, Protestant father of college education, having the complexion, weight, and height that fits America's beauty standard, and having records in sports (Kimmel 1994). This type of masculinity then is what will be recognized as the hegemonic masculinity, in which it's the type of masculinity that holds the most power to become the standards for men to follow in order to acquire the 'real men' title (Connell 1987).

This study is using Netflix's series entitled *Sex Education* as the object of the research. *Sex Education*, which was released in 2019, is a comedy-romance series

created by Laurie Nunn circulating 16-year-old Otis Milburn and his journey in high school exploring love, friendship, family, and of course, sex education. The show currently has two seasons, with season three coming in the way in 2021. This study is focusing on a specific character from the series named Adam Groff. Adam Groff is one of the students in Otis' school, mostly known as the son of Moordale Secondary School's Headmaster, Michael Groff, and the typical high school bully. On a daily basis, he bullies the openly gay student Eric Effiong, who is also Otis's best friend. Adam does not have a great relationship with his father; they often fight, and this even leads his father to send him off to a military school.

Another object that is similar to *Sex Education* (2019) is a series entitled *Euphoria* (2019). Both *Sex Education* (2019) and *Euphoria* (2019) explore the world of teenagers and friendship, love, drugs, sex, and mental health. Not only that, but both series also have a character who has toxic masculinity. In *Sex Education* (2019), it is Adam Groff, while in *Euphoria* (2019), it is represented by Nate Jacobs. Compared to Nate Jacobs, not only Adam shows a significant homophobia issue, but he also portrays some developmental stages of how a man can change in regards to his sexuality. What the writer wants to convey from this study is not only limited to the representation of homophobia on the character but also its accordance to a type of masculinity and how Adam's change of sexuality undergoes stages of shifting. Thus, the theory most suited for this study is types of masculinity by R.W. Connell and homosexuality identity formation by Vivienne C. Cass.

Sex Education (2019) also brings a fresh kind of race representation in which it doesn't include stereotypical tropes that usually surround People of Color, such as 'the funny, Black sidekick' or 'the smart Asian'. The show tackled the issue that some Black people face, which is double discrimination—the injustice that happens to People of Colors who are at the same time, Queer. This issue is represented by Eric Effiong, Otis' best friend who has a significant link with Adam Groff who is the focus of this study. *Sex Education* brings a more thorough character depth to the usually stereotyped character tropes, which is shown alongside the search for sex, identity, and gender whose old ideology is nowadays being challenged (Toomer 2019). As the creator, this is what Nunn wants to convey—the representation of how old ideologies are being challenged in today's society.

Netflix, which is the online platform that *Sex Education* is broadcasted in, is known for its continuous act of representing LGBTQ+ characters in their original movies or series. GLAAD, an American non-governmental media monitoring organization, reported in 2019 that Netflix has doubled the number of queer characters among their scripted originals, which can be seen on shows like *Sex Education*, *Elite*, *The Haunting of Hill House*, and *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (Opie 2019). Netflix brought a fresh perspective of LGBTQ+ representation through their non-stereotyped narration and authentic way of exploring the theme. It can be seen that Netflix somehow has become an ally for the LGBTQ+ community in broadening the representation of those who are Queer, seeing at the number of representations that

Netflix has done that even they started to receive backlash for featuring too many ‘unnecessary gay characters’ (Greenwald 2020). Netflix received criticism in the form of a meme from a Twitter user in 2020, calling Netflix's LGBT characters representation in their series as unnecessary, implying that Netflix only added those characters to receive viewers and attention. Despite that, Netflix continued to become an ally to the LGBTQ+ community by continuing to create gay characters in their shows.

Studies regarding masculinities have been surfing up and developing each day. The most accepted standard of masculinity a few years ago might undergo some changes and become a different type of masculinity in today's society. To give an example, the definition of manhood fifty years ago was restricted to the achievement of young boys in accomplishing whatever it takes to be considered a real man (Tosh 2005). Institutions like public schools in Britain played a part in the creation of manhood by establishing a rite of passage indicating one's validation to manhood, such as applying painful physical tests for boys (Tosh 2005). Despite that, what was once a marker for someone's turning into manhood has evolved. Masculinity, now with its many patterns and diversity, can be related to sexuality, ethnicity, and consumer choice (Tosh 2005).

In Britain, it has already been decided by scholars that the conventional way of masculinity that involves classifying men as heroes nor breadwinners is not relevant anymore (Baker and Levon 2015). Two new dominant representations of masculinity

in the British society that have emerged in the past twenty years (Benwell 2003) are called the new man masculinity and the new lad. The new man masculinity, which emerged in the 1980s, differs from the traditional image of masculinity in a way that men can be caring about their physical appearance and willingly do their share of domestic labor without being deemed as inferior. The effect that comes up from the emerging of the new man masculinity is the increasing representation and launching of men's style magazines such as *Arena*, *GQ*, and *Esquire*—no doubt are marketed towards modern, urban men (Baker and Levon 2015). The new lad, however, rejects the feminization that the new man masculinity has and instead brings up male dominance done by privileging traditional masculinity that is based on sexism, homophobia, and eluding behaviors that are considered 'unmanly' (Baker and Levon 2015).

Even with the sheer amount of different types of masculinities that have emerged in the past few years and considering today's society is more open to gender diversity, it cannot be denied that mistreatments to some communities are still prone to happen, especially towards homosexuals. Those who have an attraction towards same-sex people have to face discrimination or violent harassment because of their differences in sexuality (Bettinsoli, Suppes and Napier 2019). According to previous studies on attitudes against homosexual men and lesbians, gay males are generally disliked more than lesbians (Bettinsoli, Suppes and Napier 2019). Groups of men who have a different take on the idea of mainstream masculinity may be labeled as weak or,

in other words, men who resemble women's personalities. Moreover, non-heteronormative behaviors—such as same-sex attraction—may be perceived as inferior by men who are imbued with a traditional perception of masculinity, and could be justified to define the position within a social hierarchy (Ray and Parkhill 2020).

It can be seen that masculinity has a deep relation to homophobia. The connection between the two arises around the 20th century in which men began to see desires for women as a part of what makes them real men (Diefendorf and Bridges 2020). Heteronormativity plays a part in how society maintains a perception of gender and sexuality, in which it sets apart the boundaries that men and women are expected to express themselves following their gender norms (Ray and Parkhill 2020). Gay males are perceived as breaking heteronormative norms and posing a challenge to social hierarchy stability, resulting in mistreatment from those who see them as a threat (Ray and Parkhill 2020). Schools are the place where youth mostly experience being discriminated against or bullied, whether for reasons of physical appearance, race, religion, or sexual orientation. According to recent studies, non-heterosexual students report being taunted about their sexual orientation more frequently than heterosexual students (Orue and Calvete 2018). Another research found that a large number of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students reported discrimination in the preceding 12 months in 2015, and many LGBT students in the United Kingdom have faced violence at school since the 2016 US Presidential Election (Berry 2018).

Many past researchers have conducted a study focusing on masculinity in general and how it is represented in a character, TV show, or movie. Past researchers have also conducted a study on masculinity and its relation to homophobia (Cleland 2016, Diefendorf and Bridges 2020, Kimmel 1994). This study, however, specifically covers the process of how the character Adam Groff portrays homophobia as a form of one of the four characteristics of masculinities proposed by Connell and how the process of change in his sexuality emerges, which is analyzed using homosexual identity formation theory. This study is conducted in the form of qualitative research by analyzing the narrative and non-narrative aspects of the show.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Based on the explanation of the background of the study above, the research question will be formulated as follow:

1. How does Adam Groff's character in *Sex Education* (2019) represent homophobia?
2. How Adam Groff's shift into homosexuality is portrayed in *Sex Education* (2019)?

1.3 Objective of the Study

According to the statement of problems, the objective of the study is as follow:

1. To reveal the ways Adam Groff's character in *Sex Education* (2019) represents homophobia.

2. To reveal how the process of Adam Groff's shift into homosexuality is portrayed in *Sex Education* (2019).

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study is expected to give a wider knowledge of homophobia and how it is perceived in today's society. The writer hopes that by giving an insight on how homophobia and homosexuality are portrayed in an individual, it will spread more awareness on how gender and sexuality are complex and dynamic—and most importantly, there are times where a change can happen unintentionally. The writer also hopes by choosing *Sex Education* as the object of the thesis, this study will be able to continue spreading the ideology that the creator of the show, Laurie Nunn, wants to convey; which is to normalize the healthy conversation about sex education to teenagers as a part of preventing misconceptions and other things that may damage young people. At last, this study is expected to be a contribution to the discussion of gender studies in the English Department, Universitas Airlangga.

1.5. Definition of Key Terms

- Gender: The social process of dividing up people and social practices into categories of sexed identities (Beasley 2005)
- Homophobia: Fear, discomfort, or hatred towards homosexuals caused by internalized negative perspective of homosexuality (Griffin, et al. 2007)

- Homosexuality: A sexual preference in which one is attracted to another person of the same sex (Tamagne 2006)
- Homosexual Identity Formation: The process which a person goes through to later classify themselves as acquiring the identity of “homosexual” (Cass 1979)
- Masculinity: An ideal existence of men or a deep essence within men (Connell 2000)