

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the Study

In the journal of Population Reference Bureau, the President of the Population Association of America and the senior statistician in the U.S. Census Bureau for the Fertility and Family Statistics Branch states that during the 1950s in the United States, there was one dominant-shared-common image of what an 'ideal' family must look like: a homemaker-female mother, a breadwinner-male father, and children of their own (Bianchi & Casper 2000, p. 5). In other words, the society highly upholds the belief that it takes both the male father and the female mother to balance the child's development (Rogers 2005, p. 4).

That is because the differences between the female mother and the male father can be very stimulating to the infant so that the absence of neither will affect the physiological and emotional aspect of the children (ibid.). Studies show that fatherless children are twice as likely to become school dropouts, whereas children raised in motherless homes are 56 percent more likely to produce daughters who experience teen pregnancy (ibid.). As such, the so-called ideal family formation seemingly comes up with one agreement that it is only opposite sexes or the heterosexuals who are able to build the ideal functional family.

There comes the role of sexuality in the notion of family-hood. As a result, same-sex parenting or homosexual parents will never work out in the eye of the society. It can also lead to the idea that such kind of the 'ideal' family formation

remains exist in the society until today. It is evidenced with the fact that, in 2008, the California government passes Proposition 8 or more likely cited as “California Marriage Protection Act” (Text of Proposed Laws 2008, p. 128).

Moreover, under Proposition 8, it is “only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California” (ibid.). That way, the homosexuals are declared unfit parents since they cannot legally marry, unlike the heterosexuals. It infers that such Proposition bases its content on one’s sexuality. Due to that, the homosexuals have their rights legally taken away which causes them not having the same rights as the heterosexuals. This means one’s sexuality becomes the “central foundations for social identity” (Wilchins 2004, p. 51).

Regarding that, the notion of the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ sexuality prevails because the ‘bad’ homosexuals are not treated as equal as the ‘good’ heterosexuals. Such matter of the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ sexuality is thoroughly explained by Gayle Rubin in her book *Thinking Sex*

Sexuality that is ‘good’, ‘normal’, and ‘natural’ should ideally be heterosexual, marital, and reproductive...It should not involve roles other than male and female. Any sex that violates these rules is ‘bad’, ‘abnormal’, or ‘unnatural’. Bad sex may be homosexual, unmarried, or commercial (1984, p. 165).

The quotation serves the idea that the value of sexuality itself is more likely a binary opposition since the term ‘good’ and ‘bad’ have been determined. More importantly, the binaries imply that one term is inferior to the other since it is political, about power, and create hierarchies that produce winners and losers (Wilchins 2004, p. 41).

As such, sexuality comes with the consequences of the emergence of a hierarchy or ranking system within the society. Or in Rubin's word, sexuality is being stratified. In sexual stratification, one term of sexuality should be on top and the other should not. Thereby, there is an imbalanced power between heterosexuality and homosexuality as being on the top first level of sexual stratification means having greater power in which is used to control the one in the lower level.

Unknowingly, in that way, sexual stratification extends its system more crucially other than just showing that there is a ranking system in sexuality. Since those who have the greater power in the society such as the State and police routinely intervene in sexuality, the *sex law* prevails as the most adamant instrument in sexual stratification (Rubin 1984, p. 173). Sex law is used to make homosexuals include in one of those criminalized groups which many of their rights to full citizenship are legally denied.

Those various concepts of sexual stratification are well-documented in *Milk* a film directed by Gus Van Sant released theatrically in 2008. New York Times Website (2008) lists that *Milk* has won 42 awards and got nominated in 63 others in which the most precious is Best Actor in a Leading Role for Sean Penn and Best Original Screenplay for Dustin Lance Black in the 81st Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Awards or famously known as Oscar.

This Focus Features production is a dramatised true-story film about the struggles of a self-identified gay man named Harvey Milk, starring by Sean Penn, to get actively politically involved in San Francisco bureaucracy during the 1970s after

closeted for 40 years back in New York. He then moves to the Castro, a former Irish Catholic neighbourhood in San Francisco, with his younger lover Scott Smith and decides to live as an openly gay. Under any circumstances, Milk with all gays in the neighbourhood are engaged in various modes of oppressions.

After three times failure, Milk eventually is inaugurated as the first openly gay City Supervisor through his coming out strategy. In line with the explanation, the movie itself is rich of portrayals of sexual stratification towards gays. Besides, the movie main gay character, Harvey Milk, who used to be at the very bottom level in sexual stratification, gradually succeeds in breaking the gay sexual stratification so that he is ranked on the level as equal as the heterosexuals. Having Milk in the official public office prominently impacts on legally allowing the gays and others in the bottom level of sexual hierarchy have their full citizenship.

In that way, this film becomes “a specific means of producing and reproducing cultural significance” (Turner 1999, p. 48) regarding the fact that it is released in the same year as the pass of Proposition 8 in California. In addition, the film’s setting of time is the year 1970s which indicates that it happens right a year after the most remarkable gay liberation movement: Stonewall Riot. This 1969 three-day riot at New York’s most famous gay bar, the Stonewall Inn, involves “over 2,000 protesters doing battle with 400 police officers” (LGBT Pride Solidarity 2008, p. 2).

Although such event “did not literally initiate the movement which came to be known as gay liberation” (Jagose 1997, p. 31), it commemoratively acquires such significance because it is able to spark the consciousness-group-raising which leads to

the emergence of gay pride (Jagose 1997, p. 38). Due to this, the Stonewall Riot is perceived as an achievement of gay rights movement. Its most notably achievement is marked by the removal of homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)-III* list in 1973 (Lehrman 2005, p. 80).

Regarding all the above explanation, *Milk*, under the gay director and script writer's intentions, is targeted to be the film which practically functions as a social critique towards Proposition 8 by presenting the real-life story of the first openly gay elected in California bureaucracy. It can also explain that this movie significantly proves that the gays are still heavily stigmatized on the ground of their sexuality, in spite of the success of Stonewall Riot and of the fact that homosexuality is legally removed from DSM's list. *Milk* is, therefore, arguably feasible to analyse.

Furthermore, *Milk's* main theme of sexual stratification, which becomes the focus analysis in this study, is examined using queer theory. It is mainly because queer theory enables to disrupt the long-term traditional understandings and concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality in the context that someone's sexual orientation is unfixed and fluid. It voices the idea that a couple is no longer occupied only with a man and a woman. The role of the two opposite sex can be possibly taken over by the role of the same sex. Queer theory intends to deconstruct all those stigmas attributed to the gays as well as other sexual marginalised groups.

In order to explore in-depth sexual stratification in this movie, two underlying questions are taken into consideration. The first is how sexual

stratification faced by the gays is portrayed in Gus Van Sant's *Milk*. The second is how Harvey Milk as the key gay character attempt to break the sexual stratification throughout the movie. The questions are, thereafter, examined mainly using Gayle Rubin's queer theory proposed in *Thinking Sex*. In regards to the main object of analysis in this study, narrative and non-narrative film elements are applicable too for the way the film is visualised cinematographically.

B. Statement of the Problems

According to the background above, the statement of the problems proposed in this study is as follows:

1. How is sexual stratification faced by the gays portrayed in Gus Van Sant's *Milk*?
2. How does Harvey Milk as the key gay character attempt to break the sexual stratification in the movie?

C. Objective of the Study

Regarding the statement of the problems, the objective of the study attempts:

1. To reveal the portrayal of sexual stratification faced by the gays in *Milk*.
2. To examine the struggles of Harvey Milk in breaking the sexual stratification.

D. Significance of the Study

One of the central aims of this thesis is to contribute to the existing study of queer, generally, in Faculty of Humanities of Airlangga University in the case of sexual stratification towards gays specifically. More importantly, this thesis is expected to encourage more research on this particular topic since no previous similar thesis has been found yet in the faculty. In addition to the significance of the study, aforementioned in details in the background of the study, sexual stratification in the film is a cultural universal phenomenon which may happen or, even, still exist in present days.

Hence, there are several advantages of this study as summarised below:

1. To acquire broader knowledge and understandings of sexual stratification in cultural, more specifically, queer studies dimension.
2. To conquer those long-maintained popular beliefs of the life of homosexuals who have been commonly viewed as social rubbish.
3. To evoke further cultural sensitivity to any sexual minorities in the means of empowering each individual unexceptionally.

E. Definition of Key Terms

Gay : a man who is physically, psychologically, and sexually attracted to other men.

Homophobia : an extreme or irrational fear, hatred, and aversion to homosexuality.

Queer : a simple label to explain a complex set of sexual behaviours and desires.

Sexual Stratification : a hierarchical system within sexuality which is imbued with conflicts of interest and political maneuvering.

LITERATURE REVIEW
CHAPTER 2