

## Queer Space in Heteronormative Society: A Study of Sarah Waters's *Affinity*

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### Abstract:

This paper is an approach to peep into the Sarah Waters characters resistance to social norms, quest for identity in the demarcated spaces and temporality. This paper is about the internalization of body, the dichotomies between the inside and the outside of body. This dichotomy marks the limit between the world of social conventions on the one hand and freedom and the possibility on the other. Sarah Waters explores the changing role of women in the late 19th century and the move into the modern era. The weirdness that arises from unstable class identities extends Waters's novels of the late 1940s to broaden the framework of his assessment of heteronormativity in society. Waters uses past scenarios to question the heteronormative and patriarchal system of violence faced by her queer characters. These queer characters, who are always repressed in patriarchal and heteronormative society due to their internal queer feelings, are queer spaces their only outlet, where their queer imagination becomes possible. Instead of detaching themselves from reality and the heteronormative oppression that accompanies it, queer spaces are located within the system they want to transform. Waters' characters defy heteronormativity and fulfill their strange wishes. This project is an approach to present queer geography of queer characters in the light of Sarah Waters' narratives.

**Keywords:** Dichotomy, Temporality, Heteronormativity, Queer geography.

Sarah Waters is a Welsh novelist and was born in Neyland, Pembrokeshire, Wales in 1966. Sarah Water is a well known and critically acclaimed writer of provocative neo-Victorian novels that focuses on the sexual and romantic takes of her hybrid sexuality and protagonists who are lesbians. Sarah Waters received a BA from the University of Kent, an MA from Lancaster University and a PhD from Queen Mary, University of London. Her dissertation, titled *Wolfskins and Togas: Lesbian and Gay Historical Fictions, 1870 to Present*, paves the way for her future

narratives. Sarah Waters has written six novels: *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity*, *Fingersmith*, *The Night Watch*, *The Little Stranger* and *The Paying Guests*.

Sarah Waters focuses on the fluidity of gender and identity. Her works constantly provides new perspectives on history. Waters claims the missing voices of women in predominantly heteronormative patriarchal culture. Women, especially those who do not conform to the norms of society, are under constant scrutiny. Waters' novels problematize rigid definitions of gender and present them in a fluid and malleable way. Salina Dawes's amorphous spirit world in *Affinity* provides a metaphor for Butler's concept of the fluidity of sex, and Nan King, in *Tipping the Velvet*, poses as a rent boy, undermining the concept of a physiological basis for gender and sexuality. In Waters' novels, London comes to the fore as a major frontier area offering opportunities for transformation.

In the early 1980s, Adrienne Rich published an influential article, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, which suggested that lesbians lived with little access to history or a sense of continuity. Referencing a history of female resistance that has been fragmented and erased, Rich argues that all women are part of the lesbian continuum. She uses her terms to suggest a continuing presence in the story.

Sarah Waters' novels regularly portray or attempt to oppose personal and financial commitments to men. In her novels, the idea of Judith Butler as a performative genre has come to the fore. As Judith Butler argues, gender is something we do and not something we are. So there is no gender behind gender expressions. *Affinity*'s narrative is totally pregnant with metatextual space or queer space. The narrative starts with Margaret Journal which is full of emotions and it encourages us to empathize with Margaret. Margaret visits in Millbank Prison as an observer. But she turns from observer to be observed there.

The connection between Margaret and Selina is under constant domination and surveillance. The journals provide them some kind of queer space where they can flourish their homosexual desires. But the journals are also under surveillance of Ruth. So here also they are not free from the interruption of outsiders into their utopic world. *Affinity* follows Margaret's

various attempts to control the gaze she finds inappropriate due to her homosexual desire. Because of the gaze of matrons and prisoners at Millbank prison and constant surveillance of her mother over her, she finds solace for her homosexual desires in her journal. She wants to be totally objective in her journal writing, but find herself totally unable to control her subjective account about Selina. Somehow, it shows Margaret rebellious action against heteronormative codes. The affinities between Margaret and Selina provide solace to their homosexual desires. So *Affinity* treats the gaze as a powerful factor in restraining her both at home and in Millbank Prison. At home also, Margaret's mother tries to inverse the role of patriarchal domination. *Affinity* treats the gaze as a powerful factor in restraining himself both at home and in Millbank Prison. At the center of Waters' project are the liminal or marginal places and spaces of the city, in which her protagonists can assume the anonymity that allows them to explore sexuality, class and gender roles. The officially sanctioned society doesn't provide space to transgressive sexualities for fulfillment. So these transgressive sexualities try to find a space where they can live without any kind of interruptions. *Affinity's* narration and first-person perspective give the text a sense of intimacy and the women a direct voice.

The Millbank Prison Building is based on the Panopticon designed by Jeremy Bentham in 1785 and mentioned by Michel Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish*. As Mr. Shillitoe tells Margaret that he will see the logic of the design of the matron's office, a bright circular room filled with windows at the top of the tall tower:

...and of course, I saw it at once, for the tower is set at the center of the pentagon yards,

So that the view from it is all of the walls and barred windows that make up with the

Interior face of the women's building. (10)

Foucault writes in his book *Discipline and Punish* that the main effect of Panopticon is to provoke the intimate state of conscious and permanent visibility that ensures the automatic functioning of power. The prison is an extreme image of the city well controlled, ordered and contained. Selina tells Margaret: "All the world may look at me, it is part of my punishment." (47) The visitor's view of the prison is like that of tourists. Margaret visits him as a

visitor. So she was in the position of power. There was an inequality between the prisoner and the visitors whose gaze gave them a sense of control over the normally subordinate prisoner. The paper “Queer? I should a say it is criminal! Sarah Water’s *Affinity*” Sarah Water’s *Affinity* “examines Sarah Waters' novel *Affinity* in light of Victorian discourse on the nature of criminal women, lesbianism and their spirituality. Waters presents her protagonist Margaret Prior as Victorian and her own self as a contemporary lesbian author. The paper “She began to show me the words she had written one by one: Lesbian Reading and Writing practices in the Fiction of Sarah Waters” presents present day lesbian community and debates over lesbian invisibility and lesbian erotic representation. The invisibility of same-sex relationships in Victorian era is brought in front by Sarah Waters. She analyses the challenges which arises from the denial of compulsory heterosexuality and deals with flux and fluid identity or identity formation. The post-structural theorist argues that there is no organic whole and there is no such thing like universal truth. Truth itself is tentative because it is constructed by powerful one and power is transferable. There is no single stable identity of human being. They deal with binaries, transgressing identities and fluidity of sexual expressions. The binaries like heterosexuality and homosexuality advocate the idea of post-structural thinkers. In the hetero-patriarchal culture queer identities are being treated as sexually marginalized identities.

In *Affinity*, Sarah Waters states that the voices that are missing in the history are often the voices of those women who have different sexual orientations in heteronormative codes, maidens, women who have no identity without a husband. For Thomas Dowson, “Queer theory is certainly not limited to gay men and women, but to anyone who feels culturally, sexually, or intellectually excluded. As a virgin, Margaret is insignificant, defined in terms of something that she is not. Her mother reminds her, “You are not, in fact, Mrs Anybody. You are only Miss Prior.”(254) So according to her mother there is no way out for Margaret to live in heteronormative society except marriage. Prisoners in Millbank Prison are there because they are not conforming the society codes. Margaret sexuality is also suppressed because she is not conforming to society. Margaret is repressed because she is not permitted identification for her own desires. Her love for Helen is not fitted in society rules. So Margaret empathises with Millbank prisoners because she finds parallels between her life and their lives. The prisoners are

not allowed to say what they are feeling, they are completely deprived of their voice. Many prisoners at Millbank are stumbling because they are deprived by their voice since long time. Margaret can feel the pathetic condition of them because on many occasions she was also deprived of a voice by her mother.

The complexity and contrast between inside and outside space is presented by Sarah Waters in *Affinity*. Margaret feels suffocation in the presence of her mother. When her family visits to her sister's house, then she finds herself free as she has never before. Women's frustration is often emerge out of their non deserved incarnation by a heteronormative patriarchal culture. The rigid gender structure of the society sometimes creates a rebellious action by the oppressed. The voices become the noises in the rigid structure because it doesn't give a little heed to their subjectivity. Selina offers Margaret the possibility to escape from this complex world. So the silenced voice is claimed in this narrative by Sarah Waters.

*Affinity* presents the institutional confinement as inescapable. The societal regimes spread their net on human emotions and feelings. This kind of entrapment never provides liberation of queer sexual orientations. The heteronormative social codes control overtly and covertly the human's character and behave. *Affinity* questions the notion of fragmented representation of sexually marginalized group. Margaret starts visiting Millbank to divert herself from grief and there she finds herself unable to fathom the reason behind prisoners silence. The prisoners feel trouble when they are allowed to speak in Millbank because they are silenced since so long. They find themselves inarticulate when they have the opportunity now. Margaret estimates, "sometimes you wonder if your tongue ain't shrunk up or dropped clean off."(40)

Heteronormativity is a form of abstract power and normalization of power that applies pressure to both straight and gay individuals and accepted social norms. Sarah Waters challenges the set rules and emphasizes upon subjectivity and sexuality that includes multiple identities. In *Affinity* Margaret asserts that she wants liberty but she is afraid of it at the same time. There are many things that are without voice in the house. Margaret love feelings with Helen, twenty four hours surveillance by her mother, and grief over the death of her father are silenced. Margaret asks Helen:

If they expect it to be hard, why don't they change things, to allow it to be easier? I feel, if I might only have a little liberty\_

Liberty, she asked me then, to do what? (203)

Margaret always aspires for liberty but she is imprisoned by the twenty four hours surveillance. The strict heterosexual criteria are not letting her to create a new physical place where she can pour her emotions. So she finds solace only in her diary which she keeps away from the gaze of her mother. Diary writing itself is the act of liberating herself from societal conformity where she can pour her inner self, the homosexual desires for Selina Dawes and Helen. But this world is too not untouched by the intervention of Ruth. The actions of prisoners in Millbank prison is also the product of their gender conformity or rigidity.

So Sarah Waters is rebellious against closet and brings in front the silenced voices of those whose histories has been ignored and stifled. Waters tries to destabilize the established norms regarding of conformity of heterosexuality. She creates a new space for queer representation in the officially sanctioned society. The blurred boundaries of outer and inner space problematize the rigidity of gender. The silenced history comes through putting a lesbian character in the role of protagonist. She tries to destabilize the traditional notions of gender stereotyping. Sarah Waters tries to present a lesbian text as a performative rather than a descriptive text. Sarah Waters' stories are told from the perspective of marginal characters such as prisoners, women in mental asylums, or the 19th century pornography industry.

The invisibility of lesbian women lives, their unheard voices are the focus of Sarah Waters. She tries to blur the boundaries of class and foregrounds the performativity of gender. In *Affinity* Sarah Waters comments on the lack of the documentation of lesbian history and fragmentation of lesbian history. She paints a picture of this middle class as one which in many ways imposes more restrictions on women, the working class, imprisoning them in rigid gender role.

Sarah Waters complicates and develops a wide range of spaces. She thinks about the limitations or domination over the lives of women in the 19th century and the ways in which they struggled to break out of obsolete life patterns and find new ones. Restrictions on sexuality, gender, and social class are undermined in her novels. Sarah Waters in her narrative tries to subvert the concept of normality regarding heterosexuality only and tries to bring the queer sexual minority in the hegemony of normalization of power of heteronormative codes. Sarah Waters says that her narratives have more to do with feelings of queer ones than the plot. Because she tries to peep into the invisible area where there are many suppressed desires and feelings are struggling. Sarah Waters focuses on the covert desires which are not into the code of normalization. The dynamics of queer culture are the noticeable points of Sarah Waters narratives. She treats Margaret's lesbianism not as disease but as something normal. Queer desires have something to do with expression of independence also. The condemnation of queer relationship is kind of domination over human feelings too. So all queer one try to find their disappeared identity in the world of officially sanctioned identities. Sarah deals with the blurred identity in her narrative. The narrative provides a glimpse of comprehending relevance and radicalization of queer theory. Queer praxis moves towards the normality of all identities and discrimination on the base of deviance.

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