



A SINGLE DAY OUT: THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY IN CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD'S *A SINGLE MAN*

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Abstract

This paper aims to shed light on Christopher Isherwood's novel *A Single Man* in terms of main character, George's one-day experience of identity. From the very beginning to the end, novel covers one-day story line and George's sense of experience both as a homosexual and unique character. Why he should be regarded as a unique character is because of the fact that his regaining and losing his identity in one day can be analyzed in an existential point of view. In addition to this point of view, his uniqueness is possible to be related to his being homosexual. Single but not perfect because of his sexual preference, George's one-day experience is determined by these dilemmas. In order to analyse the character, some existential and queer theories are applied to Isherwood's *A Single Man*.

Keywords: Existentialism, Queer Theory, *A Single Man*, Christopher Isherwood, Identity.

1. Introduction

This paper intends to reveal insight into Christopher Isherwood's novel *A Single Man* regarding main character, George's one-day experience of identity. Throughout the novel, one-day story line and George's feeling of experience both as a gay and unique character might be a starter point for this study. Why he ought to be viewed as a unique character is a result of the way that his regaining and losing his identity in one day can be interpreted in an existential point of view. Besides, his uniqueness is conceivable to be identified with his being gay. As Mark A. Wrathall and Hubert L. Dreyfus state in the introduction of the book *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, "For existentialist thinkers, the focus is on uncovering what is unique to that individual, rather than treating her as a manifestation of a general type." (Wrathall and Dreyfus, 2006: 4) This state of being unique is also stressed in queer theory, especially related with Vedanta, which is a school in Hindu philosophy. Les Brookes in his book titled as *Gay Male Fiction since Stonewall: Ideology, Conflict, and Aesthetics* relates this philosophy of school with George's uniqueness:

...George is both unique (the "single" man of the novel's title) and archetypal. This is made clear in the novel's opening paragraph, where the waking George, emerging from the undifferentiated state of being we all inhabit during sleep, slowly acquires the name, features, and social identity that give him his place in the world...These allusions to the Vedantic idea of the oneness of life, the universal consciousness that subsumes the ego of individual identity... (Brookes, 2009: 45)

As stated in the quotation above, George's entity is on the spot in the novel. Sleeping or fainting is a notion that can be regarded as a non-entity position in which individual is purified from all differences. For this reason, waking up is an act to wear upon individual's title in the society and beginning to gain an identity. Novel's opening sentences stand for this gaining act and it goes through with social status in the outside. Being 'in the closet' and coming 'out of the closet', therefore, requires different sense of experience. In the closet, George faces with his own waking-self and laments for his dead lover, Jim. House, for this reason, becomes both a glass and a closet. It is closet because no one can invade his private rooms and no one can see or observe what he is doing there. It is also glass because everyone can look through the glass of the house; however, they see what George wants them to see. Invisibility and excess of seeing are acquired with the help of guardian role of the house. Out of the closet, George is more close to society, and becomes a member of it. Being a professor contributes much to his social status and there can be observed a close intimacy between him and some of his students. Nevertheless, he is still regarded as "cagey" by his students despite his being 'out of the closet'. After socialised enough, he returns home with a younger male character,

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whom is a figure for George to seduce. All entity behaviours come to a conclusion when he again goes to sleep in the end as Brookes states:

Similarly, in the novel's closing pages and at the end of his waking day, George sinks back into sleep, where (in a condition that, as Isherwood reminds us, resembles death) the trappings of his identity fall away and he becomes a "non-entity" (158). (Brookes, 2009: 45)

As seen in the above, the closing of the novel is a return to the starting point of the novel. With the same circulation, George's regaining and losing of his identity will be discussed thoroughly with the help of the terms and ideas such as 'in the closet', 'out of the closet', loss of identity, miserable future of older gay man, and inevitability of death.

2. The Day Starts

Sleeping is a way of passive position in which individual erases all the suffering and pain. Waking up is a way of being active both bodily and psychologically. George's first act is to question time itself. It is alike passage from timeless realm (sleeping) to a level in which time is the determinant (waking up). "I am, I am now." (Isherwood, 2010: 1) is George's first reaction to ticking of clock. Questioning of time extends to the points of time periods as past, present and future. Like non-existent relationship between reason and cause in existentialism, time periods have no distinction:

But *now* isn't simply now. *Now* is old reminder; one whole day later than yesterday, one year later than last year. Every *now* is labelled with its date, rendering all past *nows* obsolete, until - later or sooner - perhaps - no, not perhaps - quite certainly: it will come. (Isherwood, 2010: 1)

Concern of time periods may find a reason under a gay male's worries of being old as Dustin Bradley Goltz asserts in his book titled as *Queer Temporalities in Gay Male Representation: Tragedy, Normativity, and Futurity* as "the gay future is constructed as sacrifice and punishment" (Goltz, 2010: 56). George, in the novel, seems to be so highly aware of this sacrifice that he distinguishes his home, which he once has shared with his lover Jim, as a well-guarded shelter from the eyes of his neighbours. Description of his house by Isherwood as being "tightly planned little house. He [George] often feels protected by its smallness; there is hardly room enough here to feel lonely." (Isherwood, 2010: 3) leads to contrasting ideas of George's case. On the one hand, he feels secured 'in the closet' considering heteronormative hegemony. On the other hand, he is a lonely gay man as title of the novel suggests though George thinks that there is no room in the house to be lonely. Despite the implications of the opening pages of the fact that George is contented to be 'in the closet', 'out of the closet' still is an urge for George to achieve his identity on the grounds of "the way the one cannot exist without the other" (Brookes, 2009: 58). Nevertheless, a question arises when George keeps his position 'in the closet' due to the fact that his security in his home as well makes him as an alien and monster to his own society. This question is asked by Isherwood as such: "...through glass, this figure [George] who sits solitary at the small table in the narrow room, eating his poached eggs humbly and dully, a prisoner for life?" (Isherwood, 2010: 6) George's being prisoner seems to be one-sided. From outside point of view, no one can detect any sign of misery in George's life; however, he seems to have a loss of identity after his lover's death. The reason why he is viewed like without having any misery is that he has drawn a boundary between his life 'in the closet' and outsiders such as his neighbours. To give an example, it can be presented that "(They [his neighbours] can see his head and shoulders from across the street, but not what he is doing.)" (Isherwood, 2010: 7) while he is literally emptying his bowels. This concept of boundary gives a chance to George both to be free in whatever he does and be in a prison considering George and Jim's first attempt to buy this house for the sake of "...the surrounding trees and the steep bushy cliff behind shut it in like a house in a forest clearing. 'As good as being on our own island,' George said." (Isherwood, 2010: 9) Island, as a symbol, may stand for introverted individual surrounded by the outside world. Yet, island is described as "the refuge from the menacing assault of the 'sea' of the unconscious, or, in other words, it is the synthesis of the consciousness and the will (33)" (Cirlot, 1971: 160) by Jung according to *Dictionary of Symbols* by J. C. Cirlot. "At the same time, the island is also a symbol of isolation, of solitude, of death" (Cirlot, 1971: 160) is the following sentences after Jung's description. This contrasting symbolism can be a contribution to George's position in his house. On the one hand, it is his own decision to shut himself up in the house to protect himself from the society and on the other hand, being 'in the closet' carries loneliness and inevitable death in the end. As for the neighbours, George is pitied and seen as monster owing to his having been lived with another man, which is a sign for neighbours to George's being a homosexual. The



reason why a homosexual is seen as a monster is that society believes that homosexuals spoil order of the society since they are different from so called normal people. "...homosexuals were constructed as a corruptive and infectious force, which threatened to contaminate 'the good of society' through recruiting, perverting, and distorting the natural order." (Goltz, 2010: 31) states Goltz. This kind of threat by homosexuals is alike threats by the monsters to well-built societies in the written books. For that sake, George thinks that he is described as "a mean old story-book monster" (Isherwood, 2010: 10) by his neighbours. Mr Strunk and Mr Garfein believe that they live in a well-built kingdom, namely society, and they "are proud of their kingdom" (Isherwood, 2010: 15). However, Brookes expresses that there is a "mutual dependence of homosexuality and heterosexuality" (Brookes, 2009: 58).

3. Existential Pursuit through Homosexual Identity

One cannot exist without the other as an individual depends on another one to feel that he/she is alive. Although George is aware of this fact, it is assumed that Mr Strunk and Mr Garfein are not as stated in the novel:

They [Mr Strunk and Mr Garfein] are afraid of what they know is somewhere in the darkness around them, of what may at any moment emerge into the undeniable light of their flashlamps, nevermore to be ignored, explained away. The fiend that won't fit into their statistics, the gorgon that refuses their plastic surgery, the vampire drinking blood with tactless uncultured slurps, the bad-smelling beast that doesn't use their deodorants, the unspeakable that insists, despite all their shushing, on speaking its name. Among many other kinds of monster, George says, they are afraid of little me. (Isherwood, 2010: 15)

As in the quotation, "homosexual panic" is visible in their perspective of life. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes this "homosexual panic" in her book *Epistemology of the Closet* as such:

a defense strategy that is commonly used to prevent conviction or to lighten sentencing of gay-bashers- a term, as well, that names a key analytic tool in the present study. Judicially, a "homosexual panic" defense for a person (typically a man) accused of antigay violence implies that his responsibility for the crime was diminished by a pathological psychological condition, perhaps brought on by an unwanted sexual advance from the man whom he then attacked. In addition to the unwarranted assumptions that all gay men may plausibly be accused of making sexual advances to strangers and, worse, that violence, often to the point of homicide, is a legitimate response to any sexual advance whether welcome or not, the "homosexual panic" defense rests on the falsely individualizing and pathologizing assumption that hatred of homosexuals is so private and so atypical a phenomenon in this culture as to be classifiable as an accountability-reducing illness. (Sedgwick, 1990: 19)

The unspeakable of George's being a homosexual is followed by "speaking its name" despite that kind of defense that Sedgwick expresses above. George's "being out" is achieved by his social ties such as being a professor in a university although Mr Strunk seizes George's social position with a word: "Queer, he [Mr Strunk] doubtless growls." (Isherwood, 2010: 15) Admitting his being a monster and "queer" in the eyes of others, "...that he can cope proves his claim to be a functioning member of society. He can still *get by*." (Isherwood, 2010: 20) Even so, he never forgets and forgives heteronormative hegemony which he blames for Jim's death. "All are, in the last analysis, responsible for Jim's death; their words, their thoughts, their whole way of life willed it, even though they never knew he existed." (Isherwood, 2010: 26) His sadistic dreams of revenge on those just keeps its boundaries in his house, namely 'in the closet'. In contrast to heteronormative hegemony, he creates his own one in his wishes in order to take revenge of Jim's death. Yet, as a functioning member of the society, he should get some social roles and take aside his sadistic wishes and dreams only in his closet. For there is "a perpetual battle between gay men and the ticking clock" (Goltz, 2010: 63), "In ten minutes, George will have to be George; the George they have named and will recognise...With the skill of a veteran, he rapidly puts on the psychological makeup for this role he must play." (Isherwood, 2010: 26-7) It should be paid attention that existential case is minimized with some cards that the names of the individuals are written. To give an example, identity cards or parking cards are the



symbols of the fact that individual is alive and an existential being. "George slips his parking-card into the slot (thereby offering a piece of circumstantial evidence that he *is George*)" (Isherwood, 2010: 28) or "this card is his identity" (Isherwood, 2010: 30) are such illustrations that existence is achieved through that kind of cards. Those cards are the tickets for the social members to take a place on life stage as a performer. "He [George] is all actor now; an actor on his way up from the dressing-room, hastening through the backstage world of props and lamps and stagehands to make his entrance." (Isherwood, 2010: 29-30) Being on the stage is the last perform of George's to gain an identity in society. Even if he knows how to perform all his roles in that stage, he cannot prevent his homosexual side by looking at young males with seducing eyes. After arriving campus and identifying himself with parking card, he realizes two young men playing tennis. One of them takes George's attention much that he describes him as being "sweet-naturedly beautiful" (Isherwood, 2010: 37). That kind of attitude is said to be based upon his being older. Goltz states that "The older gay male body is coded with sexual predation, trolling the streets for young boys to cruise and abuse" (Goltz, 2010: 65). In spite of the fact that sexual predation cannot be sensed visibly in George, he is in a situation of getting visual satisfaction through young men's athletic bodies. "From his heart, he [George] thanks these young animals for their beauty." (Isherwood, 2010: 38) As it is seen in the novel, there is a sharp line between old and young like homosexual and heterosexual. In queer theory, being an older gay male is a miserable situation because of both the future and relationship. As it has been expressed before, future of a homosexual keeps its misery and inevitable death in itself. Moreover, there is no room for a new love and sexual relationship after a certain age. As an older gay male, it becomes a must for individual to find a partner in the same age despite of its infrequency. As a result, older gay male turns face to younger ones, which cannot be accepted surely and develops an obsession to youthful. This obsession is reflected even in his lectures he gives at university such as the myth of Eos and Tithonus. "But Eos was so stupid, she forgot to ask him to give Tithonus eternal youth, as well." (Isherwood, 2010: 47) says George when he lectures on Aldous Huxley's novel titled as *After Many A Summer*. George's seducing of younger males goes on even in a social institution like hospital. On the way visiting Doris, a woman with whom George thinks that Jim once slept, he comes across with a young male nurse "(who has very sexy muscular arms)" (Isherwood, 2010: 73) Visiting Doris in the hospital reminds George of the heteronormative hegemony which he blames for Jim's death and dreams of sadistic revenges on it. Lying on the bed without any performing action, Doris still is the trace of natural order that hegemony insists on: "I am Doris. I am Woman. I am Bitch-Mother Nature. The Church and the Law and the State exist to support me. I claim biological rights. I demand Jim." (Isherwood, 2010: 75) George both hates Doris for he believes that she has once tried to take Jim from him and pities her for being in such a tragic situation in the hospital. In a way, Doris' situation may be a reflection of George's now that Jim is gone forever and both of them have lost him. The absurdity of life is visible when every choice comes across with the same end.

4. End of the Day

Through the end of the day, George begins to lose his gained identity when he again remembers the days that he has spent with Jim. "What is left out of the picture is Jim, lying opposite him at the other end of the couch, also reading; the two of them absorbed in their books yet so completely aware of each other's presence." (Isherwood, 2010: 91) Jim's presence has been a rest for George to be aware of his own existence. Now that other's presence is gone, George's existence initiates to fade away. Furthermore, George feels himself more close to the end, which is sensed when he talks about past, present and future with Kenny, one of his students, in a pub. "'The Future - that's where Death is.'" (Isherwood, 2010: 127) says George in a way supporting Goltz's ideas on gay male's futurity as such: "gay male presented as the punished, and the ongoing tick of the clock that reminds all gay males that Freddy forever waits in the shadows of their futures." (Goltz, 2010: 61) As an eternal circle, George's being a non-entity in a sleeping position is achieved through the end of the novel after he and Kenny dive into the waves of the ocean with naked body. "Kenny and he are the sole sharers of the element." (Isherwood, 2010: 132) Analyzed from the point of Vedanta philosophy, this case of sharing reminds of the fact that there is no difference between individuals. Taking aside his social status, he and Kenny's resistance to the big waves shows a fact that all his attempts to gain an identity is an empty and absurd attempt. That kind of Vedantic approach is described by Brookes as such:

"with an allusion to the Vedantic idea of the oneness of life, the universal consciousness that unities all humankind. George's isolation, embodied in his role as homosexual outsider, reinforced by his constant awareness of Jim's recent death, and dramatized in his visit to the hospital (where Doris, his fast-fading link with the past, is dying of cancer), is countered by an urge to



reconnect with life and humanity-an urge that surfaces sporadically throughout the novel and with particular force in the final pages.” (Brookes, 2009: 59)

At the end of the novel George returns to his beginning point, which is sleeping. “And if some part of the non-entity we called George has indeed been absent at this moment of terminal shock, away out there on the deep waters, then it will return to find itself homeless.” (Isherwood, 2010: 152) Like the beginning of the novel, it ends with sleeping, which is a resemblance to death.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that Isherwood’s novel is a circulation of gaining an identity and losing it in the end with future’s perpetual getting hold of George. Both the beginning and the end should not be a matter of misery that homosexual brings along with it. It should be analyzed from the point of existential being, which is to be an entity or non-entity. What is more important with the end is that Isherwood makes George fall apart all outside factors that make him a social being. Reaching out a non-entity level is above all the hegemonies and orders that are bound in the nature. Yet, in the view of homosexuality, unified self seems more important than being a heterosexual in perfection. In one-day story line, Isherwood creates a cycle for George in which he gains his identity with the daily routines and loses it when the clock ticks the night. In that cycle, he also presents George’s crisis for his homosexual identity both within and outside the home.

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