



Uluslararası Sosyal Arařtırmalar Dergisi

The Journal of International Social Research

Cilt: 7 Sayı: 30 Volume: 7 Issue: 30

www.sosyalarastirmalar.com Issn: 1307-9581

INTOLERANCE TO MINORITIES AND ANTI-GAY VIOLENCE IN PERCIVAL EVERETT'S *WOUNDED*

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Abstract

Percival Everett's novel *Wounded* concerns about anti-gay violence, hate crimes and discrimination against minorities which indicate hatred and prejudice towards otherness while raising awareness of these issues. Any type of offensive behaviour can be called as hate crime and antigay victimization is the most prevalent of the hate crimes based on sexual orientation. The purpose of this study is to reveal intolerance and discrimination against nonheterosexual males as well as minority groups in U.S. and hate crimes the novel explores. Traditional gender role ideology and homophobia directly influence incidents of hate crimes based on sexual orientation. Cultural value systems and beliefs which view homosexuality as immorality encourage hate crimes against individuals who perform non-traditional versions of gender identity.

Keywords: Hate crimes, anti-gay violence, discrimination, minorities

Introduction

Intolerance to minorities and anti-gay violence are issues demanding attention in today's society. The violence towards nonheterosexual males doesn't only indicate the individual hatred but also manifest an extreme disfavor of homosexual behaviours. Intolerance to minorities and racism are also promoted by the society in order to maintain the hierarchical race dichotomy. Thus, aggression on nonheterosexuals and other minorities generally exists as a learned form of social control of deviance rather than a defensive response to personal threat.

Everett's texts often concern about multifarious social problems and his novel *Wounded* can be read as an experiment in sociology in which Everett emphasizes the discrimination of racist and homophobic society and hate crimes against nonheterosexual males and other minorities. This paper scrutinizes intolerance to minorities, antigay victimization and hate crimes the novel explores.

The novel is set on the Wyoming plains and it tells the story of a black rancher, John Hunt who is confronted with hate crimes against homosexuals and Native Americans. In the beginning of the story Hunt learns of the murder of a young-man, who is strung up on a tree, his throat cut. Hunt's ranch-hand Wallace, who is also gay, is arrested ironically for this homophobic act of murder. John Hunt actually doesn't believe Wallace murdered the gay man, but not wanting to get involved either. This crime leads to a hate crime rally that draws young gay men, David along with his lover Robert, to town. David happens to be the son of an old

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college roommate of John. Later on, David decides to stay in John's ranch to solve his issues with his father who does not approve his son's sexual preferences.

Though John is referred to as the "black rancher" by town people, he does not conform to these racial clichés. He is different from the white-supremacist bigots that carried out the murder of homosexuals. The bigots are clearly as responsible for the murder as they are for killing the cows of a Native American rancher and painting 'red nigger' in their blood. Although Hunt does not want to get involved in the first place, he is unable to stand aside when these rednecks kidnapped David.

Everett's objective in *Wounded* is to reveal the intolerance and discrimination against otherness namely, homosexuals and ethnic minorities in U.S. While cultural value systems and homophobia influence incidents of hate crimes against individuals who perform non-traditional versions of gender identity, racism and discrimination aggravate hate crimes against ethnic minorities.

Any type of offensive behaviour can be called as hate crime. Craig describes hate crime as "an illegal act involving intentional selection of a victim based on a perpetrator's bias or prejudice against the actual or perceived status of the victim. Victims of hate crimes include ethnic and religious minority persons, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, as well as the physically and mentally challenged" (2002: 86). Antigay victimization is the most prevalent of the hate crimes based on sexual orientation. Due to the diversity and multicultural formation of the United States, violence motivated by hate is on increase. Craig criticizes the lack of scholarly attention that has addressed these crime incidents since their "potential to advance our understanding about how people think, influence, and relate to one another" (2002: 86).

Moulton and Seaton argue that the federal hate crimes bill does not include gender identity as one of the motives for hate crimes (2005: 15-25). However, gay individuals, especially gay males are subject to a great deal of discrimination. According to the many researches regarding the discrimination of gays show that sexual orientation of gay individuals makes them targets of verbal abuse or physical assault (Berrill 1990, Herek 1989, Levine 1979, Paul 1982). Furthermore, Haymes points out that variety of hate crimes committed against transgendered individuals can be anything from verbal harassment to murder (2001: 13). A research carried out by Lombardi *et al.* proved that there is a need of hate crimes legislation for transgendered individuals since "59.5% of the sample experienced either violence or harassment (26.6% experienced a violent incident), and 37.1% reported some form of economic discrimination" (2001: 95).

1. Intolerance to Minorities and Anti-Gay Violence in Percival Everett's *Wounded*

Percival Everett's *Wounded* reveals the severeness of violence towards the victims of gay hate crimes. In the beginning of *Wounded*, a gay college student was found brutally murdered in a nearby canyon in Wyoming. The residents described his murder as a dreadful crime: "he was strung up like an elk with his throat slit" (Everett, 2008: 12), "whoever did it stretched him out like Christ" (14).

This murder incident in *Wounded* reminds a real event happened in the fall of 1998, to a gay student of University of Wyoming, who was tied to a fence, and beaten and ended up dead in hospital five days after the assault. Loffreda points out two different and opposite aspects of the perception of Wyoming in the media regarding the torture and death of this gay boy, as "just like everywhere else" in America and "more homophobic, more primitive, more violent and hate-filled than the rest of the nation" (2007: 159).

In *Wounded* when the protagonist John Hunt read the papers regarding the gay boy's murder which was implied that "the crime was symptomatic of some rural or Western disease of intolerance", he thoughts simply: "Yes, it's called America." (Everett, 2008: 34). But Hunt also

questioned "why the reported rash of fifty rapes in Central Park was not considered a similar indicator of regional moral breakdown." (Everett, 2008: 34).

John Hunt, the novel's black protagonist, is a middle-aged widower and a black horse trainer living in his ranch with only his elderly uncle Gus for company in Highland, a small rural town near Laramie, Wyoming. Everett always prefers to create his characters avoiding the desires of publishing market regarding stereotypical blackness. Thus, Hunt isn't a stereotypical black character since he is not only ranch owner but also sophisticatedly educated. He went to prep school in New Hampshire and studied art history at Berkeley, and owns an original Paul Klee and a Kandinsky hanging on the wall of his ranch house. It is his choice to raise horses in the middle of nowhere.

Everett, most of his novels does not reveal his character's race unless it is essential in the course of the theme. In *Wounded*, Everett mentions John Hunt's race in a casual way and how his small town perceives him: "I of course, realized that I was referred to as the black rancher. I suppose had I been extremely handsome, I would have been the good-looking, black rancher" (2008: 49). Though Everett usually chooses his subject matters outside of racism, in *Wounded* he deals with the issues of intolerance to minority people while demonstrating racist male hegemony in society. As Julien asserts that "*Wounded* looks at American society from a racial perspective. Its strong suit is that it meets the challenge posed by the introduction of racially motivated retaliation into a fiction that succeeds in upsetting the way Americans like to think of themselves with respect to minority people" (2010: 202).

Despite the general Western intolerance towards African Americans, most locals respect Hunt as one of their own. However, especially in Western states African Americans suffer from hostility and discrimination. John Hunt's uncle Gus is an example of this discrimination since he was given an unfairly long prison sentence because the man he killed for raping his wife was White. Everett writes: "Uncle Gus had spent eleven years in a state prison in Arizona for murder. He killed a man who was raping his wife. The fact that the man had been white was Gus explanation for his time in prison. Gus would say that the reason you never saw any black people in the state of Arizona was because they were all in prison." (2008: 9).

In Western states, it is anticipated that a black man owns a ranch. Hunt hired a White boy as his new help "in spite of his obvious surprise at discovering [Hunt] was black" (Everett, 2008: 5). This statement proves the discrimination of African Americans and violated expectations of community.

In *Wounded*, discrimination and western intolerance has not only been seen towards gays and minority people but also towards animals. Hunt felt sick when he saw a coyote den has been burned where ranchers have no sheep to protect which made him hate people more. He tried to save the puppies but only the female one with a badly burned foreleg has survived.

Aggression is not limited to animal slaughter since the violent incidents resulting from the homophobic non-racial bigotry are among the main concerns of the novel. After the murder of the gay Wyoming student, John's new ranch hand, a little dumb and young boy called Wallace was arrested for this crime. However, he was innocent and killed himself in the jail and John Hunt found out that he was also homosexual when he gave the sad news to the Wallace's brother. David, the son of one of Hunt's university friend's arrived in the area with his boyfriend Robert for "a gay pride rally" (Everett, 2008: 50) because of the gay boy's killing. In the rally some "rednecks" driving an old rusted BMW attacked Robert and David which was stopped by a deputy (Everett, 2008: 61).

Like in *Wounded*, gays are perpetrated against people because of their sexual orientation as Herek et al. states in *Victim Experiences in Hate Crimes Based on Sexual Orientation* that "A gay or bisexual individual who encounter an expression of hostility because of his or her sexual orientation does not know in advance how the incident will end. She or he may be attacked

with words, a raw egg, or a deadly weapon (2002: 336). In *Wounded*, though this attack is stopped in time, there are other incidents that end more violently.

Despite suffering from prejudice from society for being gay, Robert discriminates African Americans as well. Robert was both "confused" and "disappointed" when he found out John Hunt's intellectual university education (Everett, 2008: 51, 52) and asked "how many black people live out here?" Hunt answered it with a question that made Robert stumble "how many black people live in Chicago?" he continued "I've never counted people around here, Robert. Black or white. A whole bunch of Indians live over that way." When asked by Robert if he had any problems with race, Hunt said: "Of course I have, son. This is America. I've run into bigotry here. Of course, the only place anybody called me nigger to my face was in Cambridge, Mass...There are plenty of stupid, narrow-minded people around. They are not hard to find. There are a lot of ignorant people, a lot of good, smart people. Is it different where you come from?" (Everett, 2008: 52). What Hunt implied is that bigotry could be everywhere and people should respect one another in spite of their race or gender non-conformity.

In one scene when Robert kissed David in front of John's guests, making a show of his being gay, Robert became offensive of their reactions. Robert asked Duncan whose horse John trained: "Do we make you uncomfortable?" Duncon responded:

No, son...The two of you don't make me uncomfortable, but you alone do", [he continues] "I'll give it to you in good old cowboy talk. I ain't never been around any homosexuals. Not to my knowledge, anyway. I'm just assuming that's what you are. I ain't never given it much thought, and I reckon I don't approve of it, but I can't say why. Still this is a free country and, to my mind, you can do what you want. (Everett, 2008: 78)

Being kind to David, Duncon warned Robert for his own sake: "There are people around here who might shoot you for what you are. I don't know why, but I've no doubt that they would. People are bad like that and we've got our share" (Everett, 2008: 79). This statement proves the degree of bigotry and intolerance of the local people towards non-heterosexual individuals. Gender role stereotypes lead homophobic societies and cultural heterosexism. Herek describes heterosexism as an "ideological system that denies, denigrates and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship or community" (1992: 89). Cultural values and beliefs of heterosexism have an impact on anti-gay violence. Since local people in the novel perceived homosexuality of David and Robert as violating of traditional gender roles Duncon warned them for the risk of violent acts.

Later in the novel, having problems with his family and breaking up with Robert, David returned to live in the ranch. David, being a gentle boy, was suffering from a kind of estrangement from his father. David thought his father hates him since he openly condemned his homosexuality. As Herek (1991) pointed out in *Stigma, Prejudice, and Violence against Lesbians and Gay Men*, because of their sexual orientation individuals may experience psychological distress which affects their coping skills since they lack adequate social support and approval. David, neither was encouraged by his father nor built a healthy relationship with him, returned to the John's ranch where he felt comfortable and was treated with respect and dignity. Though he felt psychologically peaceful, this tranquility would have been disturbed by homophobic attackers.

As the novel progress, a series of racist incidents towards Hunt and his Native American neighbors and local hostility and oppression towards gay people, especially to David increased. In one of these incidents, Hunt bumped into someone who fought David and Robert in the gay rally before. The redneck called him "nigger" and Hunt gave him a punch on his nose (Everett, 2008: 102). This proves that homophobic assailants are not only offensive towards gay males but also African Americans. In another incident, Daniel White Buffalo's cow was killed and there were the words "Red Nigger" in the snow written with the blood of the cow (Everett, 2008: 111). Hunt's Indian friend who distrusted sheriff came to John for help because

no one cares for Natives. Hunt admitted that "Indians get treated like shit" (51) and received more discrimination than him. In another scene, Hunt heard Duncan's homophobic joshing in the diner. When Duncan realized Hunt, it was too late despite his regret of his words. Hunt got offensive to Duncan's words as he might have made "the nigger jokes" (Everett, 2008: 188). Hunt was surprised that he was not angry or disappointed and expecting this kind of incident. He felt "as if the whole world upside down ... [and he was like that] three-legged coyote" (Everett, 2008: 188). His wholeness was fractured and everything he believed turn out to be false. He realized that he had deceived himself, the kindness and decency of local people had been false and they had been hostile to otherness of every kind.

David's father Howard came to the ranch with his girlfriend who was younger than David and announced their plans of marriage. Broken up with his boyfriend, David was in depression. David and his father had a big fight and David ran out with no coat or boots in a freezing snowy midnight. David's father didn't realize the situation's seriousness because of his drunkenness. Once Hunt realized David's disappearance, he rode his horse to search him out. When he found him in the woods, he was stiff with cold with his clothes wet. Since they were closer to a cave than the house, Hunt decided to bring him to the cave. He "took him deeper into the cave away from the opening and the wind" and took off his clothes as well as David's and used his body heat to warm him up since it was the only warmest thing he could find (Everett, 2008: 149). David and Hunt shared a homosexual moment in the cave:

He began to mutter things, more sounds than words. I tried to take that as a good sign. David moved his face in front of me and he pressed his icy lips against mine. It took me a few seconds to realize it was a kiss. I had never been so confused. I let him kiss me, felt his shivering face soften to mine. I just wanted him warm, warmer, I couldn't pull away; I was trying to save his life. (Everett, 2008: 149)

Later in the novel Hunt talked to David about the kissing happened in the cave since he thought it put distance between them. David apologized about that:

"But I'm sorry. I'm sorry I kissed you." Saying it was hard for him. And to tell the truth, it was hard for me to hear. "Did it make you feel weird?" It was not so much a question as a lashing out.

"I suppose it did," I said. "I'd never kissed a man before." ...

"Did you feel anything when we kissed?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Did you feel anything?" He asked again.

"You were in bad shape," I said and realized I was repeating myself. (Everett, 2008: 164)

This statement indicates that Hunt may have feelings towards David even he can not confess himself. Hunt said he was flattered about David's feelings but he wanted to stay as friends and he didn't have to leave. They also developed a father-son relationship and when Hunt called David "son", David said: "When you call me son, I almost believe it. At least, it sounds like it makes sense. My own father only called me son when he was angry and even then it sounded strange in his mouth" (Everett, 2008: 165).

Hunt's girlfriend Morgan suspected that something had happened that night David disappeared because Hunt has been acting weird since then and asked him if there was something between the two. Hunt told her:

"I have to admit David's pretty cute, but he's too young for me, don't you think? And then there's the fact that he's a man."

"I'm being silly," she said.

I kissed her. "You're not being silly. For some reason, I'm over attentive to the kid. I like him a lot." (Everett, 2008: 172)

When Morgan insisted if something happened that night, Hunt eventually confessed that David kissed him and he was embarrassed remembering it.

"What was it like?" Morgan asked. I could identify her tone.

"What do you mean?"

"Did it feel good?"

"It didn't feel like anything," I said. I thought that perhaps I was lying, that maybe the kiss had felt in some way good. "I was scared he was going to die." (Everett, 2008: 172, 173)

Psychological implications of homosexuality is beyond the scope of this paper but it is significant to acknowledge that even a masculine character like John Hunt may suspect his heterosexuality and question his feeling towards a gay man and his prejudices towards homosexuals.

Hunt's ultimate refuge in *Wounded* is represented by the cave, a location that symbolizes both fear of death and desire. While Suzy, John's deceased wife would always be scared to go in, Hunt had sex with Morgan in there for the first time after his wife's death, and it was also the place where David kissed Hunt when he brought him to save his life. Hunt likes caves since its isolation, privacy and darkness that allow him to withdraw from the world.

Kera Bolonik asks Everett about the caves in an interview for Bookforum, mentioning that "It's the site of epiphanies, intimate encounters, rejuvenation...The cave conjures all sorts of psychoanalytic implications", while Everett states that he explored lots of caves when writing this novel:

As I went through them (the caves), I became interested in that threshold where the cave stops being a place to get out of the weather and starts being, well, a cave-that tension between safety and fear and the unknown. I understand being safe and I understand being afraid, but it's that gray area between them that the cave offers, and the more familiar you become with the cave, the deeper that zone goes, but it's still there. (Bolonik, 2005: 52)

Mason indicates cave's function as a shelter: "David's visibility as an openly gay man is what leads to his demise: the neo-Nazis abduct and murder him, targeting David after witnessing him holding hands with his boyfriend. On Wyoming's landscape, visible and away from the cave's shelter ... David's otherness is exposed, observed, and marked for destruction"(2011: 44).

David like other gay males in the novel was victimized by perpetrators because of their bias against otherness. Heterosexuals often categorize gay males and only see characteristics that are congruent with their prejudices about them while ignoring to see incongruent ones and put them into stereotypes. Likewise hostility towards otherness and seeing an individual through the color of his skin causes categorization which ultimately leads stereotyping. Thus, these stereotypical beliefs distort perceptions of individuals and lead to create hatred feelings towards otherness of every type. In the novel gay males as well as other minorities like Native Americans and African Americans were exposed to aggression because of stereotyping. Furthermore, whether or not the victim perceives himself as a member of these stereotypes or categorized group perpetrators identify him as a member of contempt group because of their bias and his victimization serves a symbolic message of intolerance and discrimination to all members of the group to which the victim belongs.

Gay males generally become easy target since either they rarely can defend themselves and fight back or victimized when they are alone though though they are physically strong. In

small towns and urbans like Wyoming they are easy to be exposed and become victims of hate motivated crimes. Perpetrators mostly prefer to assault in groups to demonstrate their masculinity to their victims.

David, who was being watched by a group of homophobic white men for a while, disappeared when driving alone to town for Gus's medicine, leads to terrifying climax of the novel. David's abduction when he was alone by a group of homophobic assailants indicates their tendency to attack in groups while the victim is defenseless. In addition, anti-gay violence provides an opportunity for these rednecks to prove their manhood and serves as a resource for affirming their masculinity. Alden and Parker find a strong relationship between race and hate crime since most hate crime perpetrators are young, white men and most of these violent incidents towards gays occur as a reaction of the loss of white male privilege in society as demonstrated in previous researches (2005: 338). In *Wounded*, attackers are also a group of white men who are not only aggressive towards gays but also African-American and Native American males.

The sheriff ignored John's concerns about the rednecks in the blue BMW and didn't investigate David's disappearance thoroughly. Ineffective search of David indicates that the lawmen's lack of interest when the victim is gay. As Haymes asserts, the victim is sometimes victimized by the police themselves by their failure to act and wrong detention (2001: 25). While police officers weren't ungrudging in searching for David and it led his death, Wallace, who was also gay and arrested for the murder of the gay boy and killed himself, is an example for wrong imprisonment.

Hunt and Gus found the homophobic bigots who had abducted him in a cabin with the help of an Indian. Gus, disregarding Hunt's instructions to wait and then call the police if needed, killed one of the men with a gun. One of the abductors told David's whereabouts and John found David unconscious in a cave like place. While Hunt took David to hospital, Gus stayed behind and killed the other two bigots. Actually the novel doesn't reveal whether Gus or the Indian killed them all or the Indian merely helped Gus to hide the evidence.

When Hunt asked what has happened when he returned the cabin Gus said: "Talking is over," which meant he took justice in his hands, "This is the frontier, cowboy," Elvis, the Indian told John. "Every place is the frontier. Take care of your uncle" (Everett, 2008: 207). This final statement of the novel implies that Wyoming is hostile to otherness like everywhere in U.S. This hostility and violence in rural places is not different from to the rest of America since intolerance is dominant in the whole society.

Conclusion

In the novel most of the characters are wounded both physically and psychologically and it is not easy to heal these wounds: Gus is dying of cancer and spends long time in prison for murdering a man who was raping his wife; Hunt's first wife, Suzy dies when she attempts to prove herself to Hunt by riding an untrained horse. David is hurt because of his boyfriend's rejection and unapproval of his sexuality by his father, and he develops platonic love for Hunt and is beaten brutally and killed by homophobic thugs. Hunt feels responsible for his wife's death and it takes time for him to develop a relationship with Morgan and though he was a masculine character, he has doubts about his sexual preference because of the kiss with David in the cave, and a three-legged coyote burned and victimized by cruel torture of the neo-Nazis.

At the beginning of the novel, Hunt seems to maintain reason while avoiding involvement in most events. However, when the novel approaches to a climax, he has no choice but to make a move due to the inaction of police to hostility towards minorities and David's abduction by homophobic neo-nazis.

Victimization of David as well as other gay males is a symbol for assailants to demonstrate their commitment to hegemonic masculinity and male gender norms. Traditional gender role ideology and homophobia directly influence incidents of hate crimes based on

sexual orientation since gender stratification is controlled due to the impact of anti-gay attitudes. Cultural value systems and beliefs which view homosexuality as immorality and violation of gender norms encourage hate crimes. Thus, anti-gay victimization serves as an extreme expression of the dominant cultural expectations of heterosexism.

In conclusion, anti-gay violence, hate crimes and discrimination against minorities, which the novel concerns, are among the significant issues of the society that should not be ignored any longer. Everett, in *Wounded* addressing these issues, critiques homophobic and racist society and questions the society's beliefs and prejudices towards otherness while raising awareness of hate crimes. The racist and homophobic mindset is mostly seen in Western states like Wyoming where the novel takes place but it doesn't change the fact that it is also common in the rest of U.S. As long as prejudice against non-traditional versions of gender identity and intolerance to minorities exist, they will continue to experience violence and discrimination.

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