

# *On Homo-sociality: Sedgwick's Critical Theory*

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**Abstract**—Homo-sociality relates to social relationships between persons of the same sex, Male bonding is the embodiment of homo-sociality. Obligatory heterosexuality was built into male-dominated kinship systems, and homophobia is just a consequence of patriarchy. Sedgwick's theoretical system was based on sociology and anthropology. Based on the predecessors, Sedgwick shows the exchange and degradation of women have become a paradigm in our lives, she introduced the homo-social desire into literary criticism. The homo-social desire revealed by Sedgwick is almost everywhere in classical literature. Sedgwick's criticism not only transforms conventional interpretations of a number of beloved literary texts, but also begins to change our thinking set of reading as well.

**Keywords**—*Homo-sociality; Sedgwick; Male Bonding; Critical Theory*

## I. THE SOCIOLOGICAL MEANING OF HOMO-SOCIALITY

The notion of homoeroticism refers to same-sex desire whereas homo-sociality refers to same-sex relationship, the two concepts sometimes opposed but also interdependent. According to Corey K. Creekmur, homo-sociality “summarizes a way of life common in Victorian America that isolated men and women into ‘separate spheres’”. The word has been most influentially redirected by the critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to emphasize the continuum between homo-social institutions and homosexual desire, despite the apparent homophobia of many homo-social formations”. [1] As we know, the most important social relationships are people of the same gender except marriage, friendships occurs mostly in homo-social environments, brotherhood and “boudoir love” could share too much secrets, creating material and spiritual identification. Sedgwick has pointed out that “homo-social” was occasionally used in history and social sciences, and we have to realize that homo-sociality is distinguished from homosexuality. According to Sedgwick, homo-social is a special word “occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with ‘homosexual’, and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from ‘homosexual’. In fact, it is applied to such activities as ‘male

bonding’, which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality”. [2]

Male bonding is the embodiment of homo-sociality, which refers to the homo-social and heterosexual connections that are forged by men, and male bonding has been categorized as evolutionary necessity by Sociologists. Male bonding “can be conceptualized in a wider scope to encompass all beneficial relationships between men that exclude women. In an effort to emphasize the importance of male bonding to all social interactions, it has been categorized as an evolutionary imperative. As such male bonding has been theorized to have biological origins and to be the primary interaction of society”. [3] Although male bonding could not include women, women can never be absent. In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homo-social Desire*, Sedgwick suggests that male homo-social relationships reflect on the relationship between genders and the role of women in society, the situation of men sharing drinks and talking about women was all too familiar in male bonding. At the same time, homophobia characterizes male bonding. Men always refuse to talk about their feelings and they usually feel uncomfortable in situations requiring physical contact with other men.

Men and women differ in their access to power, so there are important gender differences, and the differences appeared in the social structure and constitution of sexuality. The opposition between the homo-sociality and the homosexuality “seems to be much less thorough and dichotomous for women, in our society, than for men. At this particular historical moment, an intelligible continuum of aims, emotions, and valuations links lesbianism with the other forms of women’s attention to women: the bond of mother and daughter, for instance, the bond of sister and sister, women’s friendship, ‘networking’, and the active struggles of feminism”. [4] For Example, there are not homophobia in the bond of sister, women’s friendship and even lesbians. As Sedgwick said, homo-social “as applied to women’s bonds need not be pointedly dichotomized as against homosexual; it can intelligibly denominate the entire continuum”. [5] It means there is no opposition between “women loving women” and “women promoting the interests of women”. However, there is obvious opposition between “men loving men” and “men promoting the interests of men”. Adrienne Rich once created a new word “lesbian continuum”, she use the terms lesbian existence and lesbian continuum, “because the word lesbianism has a clinical and limiting ring. Lesbian existence suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and

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our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence. I mean the term lesbian continuum to include a range—through each woman’s life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman”. [6]Obligatory heterosexuality was built into male-dominated kinship systems, and homophobia is just a consequence of such patriarchy. So, just as Sedgwick said, “there is an asymmetry in our present society between, on the one hand, the relatively continuous relation of female homo-social and homosexual bonds, and, on the other hand, the radically discontinuous relation of male homo-social and homosexual bonds..... in addition, that the structure of homo-social continuums is culturally contingent, not an innate feature of either ‘maleness’ or ‘femaleness’. Indeed, closely tied though it obviously is to questions of male vs. female power, the explanation will require a more exact mode of historical categorization than ‘patriarchy,’ as well, since patriarchal power structures characterize both Athenian and American societies. Nevertheless, we may take as an explicit axiom that the historically differential shapes of male and female homo-sociality--much as they themselves may vary over time—will always be articulations and mechanisms of the enduring inequality of power between women and men”. [7]

Sedgwick use “male homo-social desire” to name the entire spectrum of male bonds, including heterosexuals and homosexuals, she chosen “desire” rather than “love”, because love is more easily used to name a emotion but desire usually used to name a structure. In Sedgwick’s context, desire is not a particular affective state or emotion, desire means “social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotively charged, that shapes an important relationship”. [8] According to Sedgwick, male homo-social desire could be viewed as the ultimate source and truth of male motivations, identities and emotions, the impulse of male society. In order to understand Sedgwick’s neologism, “we might remember that, within patriarchy, some of us are first men who relate primarily to men, and then that desire may be involved, as a sort of afterthought. Alternatively, we might understand that phrase and experience rising in anxiety towards the end: the secure masculinity of some of us troubled by rivalrous homo-sociality in turn troubled by homoerotic desire.....we could also imagine that phrase pulling down, starting in the upper cultural realms of the ideal male superego, pulling down to the everyday ego and its homo-social relations and then dragged down to the id’s best-repressed desires”. [9]

## II. MALE HOMO-SOCIAL DESIRE IN LITERATURE

According to Heidi Hartmann, patriarchy enables men to dominate and exchange women. Claude Lévi-Strauss once said, in human society, men exchange women instead of men,[10] that is to say, “we might understand marriage to be less concerned with the loving relationship between the bride and groom and more about the exchange of the bride as a piece of actual or symbolic property between the groom and the bride’s male relatives. Thus, in many cultures, the groom seeks the father of the bride’s permission to marry his daughter. If

successful, the father of the bride then ‘gives her away’, often with a dowry as an economic incentive, or in exchange for gifts from the groom’s family, whilst the bride herself symbolically exchanges her father’s surname for her husband’s. All of these measures then have the effect that the bride and groom’s male relatives are newly united in an advantageously larger social network”. [11] Another scholar René Girard believed that “the bond between rivals in an erotic triangle as being even stronger, more heavily determinant of actions and choices, than anything in the bond between either of the lovers and the beloved. And within the male-centered novelistic tradition of European high culture, the triangles Girard traces are most often those in which two males are rivals for a female; it is the bond between males that he most assiduously uncovers”. [12] Based on the predecessors, Sedgwick shows the exchange and degradation of women have become a paradigm in our lives as well as in the homo-social desire of English literature.

According to Sedgwick’s analysis, Shakespeare’s sonnets are good illustrative material of erotic triangle. Although she insisted on heterosexual characters of Shakespeare’s sonnets, she also believed that the sonnets “present a male-male love that, like the love of the Greeks, is set firmly within a structure of institutionalized social relations that are carried out via women: marriage, name, family, loyalty to progenitors and to posterity, all depend on the youth’s making a particular use of women that is not, in the abstract, seen as opposing, denying, or detracting from his bond to the speaker. When we turn from the heterosexuality of the early poems to that of the final poems, on the other hand, we find threat and chaos. The most obvious difference is that this is a heterosexuality that includes women”. [13] Maybe somebody will think, Sedgwick never show us explicit argumentation, all her explanation just made Shakespeare’s sonnets more obscure. As a matter of fact, Sedgwick’s interpretation points out the key points. Firstly, homo-sociality and hetero-sociality, homosexuality and heterosexuality, all these may form erotic triangle relationship. Secondly, the symmetrical relationship is in a distorted state, because there are very realistic differences between men and women in acquiring power. In most cultural discourses, there is a central and marginalized pattern. The relationship of heterosexuality is the mainstream, and homosexuality is marginalized and even restricted. Third, the lack of symmetry is concealed by the projection of gender features, and the character image conceals the dominance and subsidiary relationship, and also rejects interpretation of potential ideologies. Fourth, hermaphroditic males appear to be both male masculine and female feminine features, but what is actually revealed is nothing more than this kind of symmetrical illusion. The relationship between sexual bond and power has always been constructed, so it is full of changeability.

In an analysis of William Wycherley’s *The Country Wife*, Sedgwick points out that the sexual relationship involved in adultery is based on such situation: heterosexual love mainly as a strategy for the homo-social desires. Cuckoldry became the main social engine of the aristocratic society, it means sexual trade between men and women and women are constantly being exchanged for property, which is an unstable and dangerous type of property. Generally, Sedgwick’s conclusion as follows, “the compulsory and double-edged

involvement of women in all the male homosocial bonds, the absence of direct genital contact between men, and the cognitively hierarchical, authoritarian, transcendent nature of the homosocial bond signaled by cuckoldry. The homosociality of this world seems embodied fully in its heterosexuality; and its shape is not that of brotherhood, but of extreme, compulsory, and intensely volatile mastery and subordination". [14]

In an analysis of Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy*, the relationship of gentleman and his servant "makes up in affective and class significance what it lacks in utilitarian sense", Sedgwick suggested that gentleman Yorick's bond to his valet is "the most sustained and one of the fondest in the novel", for most of this kind of novel, the homo-social bond is "articulated through various forms of the conquest and exchange of women.....Yorick, like Homer, has a free and potentially manipulative choice of roles, which is displayed as both attractive and somehow renunciatory in relation to the more rigid role assignments of others. Working people in Sterne, like the women in Wycherley, are offered no such flexibility, however. A difference is that Horner's personal control—even his compulsiveness about it—is visible to the plan's audience, while the manipulative potential of Yorick's position, even when he exerts and profits by it, is presented to the reader as well as to the other characters as a form of vulnerability and helplessness". [15]

The Gothic novels had an alluring reputation for decadence, Sedgwick remind us "the Gothic was the first-novelistic form in England to have close, relatively visible links to male homosexuality, at a time when styles of homosexuality, and even its visibility and distinctness, were markers of division and tension between classes as much as between genders". [16] So, the so called decadence is just a special form of homosexuality. Classical Gothic novels such as *Caleb Williams*, *Frankenstein*, *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, *Melmoth*, *Italian* contains similar plots, one male who is not only persecuted by another male, but also considers himself transparent to and under the compulsion of the male. In another words, persecution represents rejection of homosexual desire, Gothic novels embody strong homophobic emotion, "through these novels a tradition of homophobic thematics was a force in the development of the Gothic.....The Gothic novel crystallized for English audiences the terms of a dialectic between male homosexuality and homophobia, in which homophobia appeared thematically in paranoid plots. Not until the late-Victorian Gothic did a comparable body of homosexual thematics emerge clearly, however. In earlier Gothic fiction, the associations with male homosexuality were grounded most visibly in the lives of a few authors, and only rather sketchily in their works." [17]

A similar interpretation appeared in the analysis of the following works, James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Tennyson's *The Princess*, Eliot's *Adam Bede*, Thackeray's *Henry Esmond*, Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* and *Edwin Drood* and so on. Generally, the central theme of Sedgwick is to explore the changes in the male homo-social desire pattern in western literature for centuries, and she paid attention to the male friendship, guidance, rights, competition, heterosexuality and homosexuality according to class and

gender. She found the relation between male homosocial desire and the changing structure of women traffic, which makes homosocial bonds cohere.

### III. IMPACT AND RESPONSE

Sedgwick and her homo-sociality have also sparked debate in academia. Abigail Solomon Godeau believes that the use of terms such as "gay" and "homosexuality" to describe an object is not only making a mistake of the era but also inappropriate epistemology while examining historical figures and their behavior. Godeau suggested that, critic should be cautious, try to avoid speculating the author's sexual orientation, and use homo-social to describe the network of relationships between men, including power and desire, and their emergence in cultural production. [18] Although Sedgwick's judgment has been recognized by some people, however, it is inevitable that some people will oppose it.

A fierce debate occurred between Sedgwick and David Van Leer in 1989. David Van Leer attacked Sedgwick's homo-social desire, maybe his standpoint is homophobia, because he said, "I feel that despite the best of intentions certain discourses in certain situations simply get in the way. Whatever I think of the "place" of "the homosexual" in any theoretical enterprise, my most immediate concern (and conscious "group identification") lies with biologically endangered homosexuals at this moment in time. And if here my tone is negative, my temperament is reinforced by my environment. Gay men today live less in the closet than in the attic, listening for not a Nazi on the stairs but a virus in the blood. Unlike anti-Semitism, racism, and sexism, AIDS did not begin in discrimination. But the absence of blame does not lessen the presence of threat. The situation is not unique to gay men, and the crisis informs every life in some ways". [19] According to David Van Leer, Sedgwick invents a "more sophisticated definition" of homophobia, and her use of vocabulary is "troubling". "This injudicious use of terms is reinforced by Sedgwick's ambivalent relation to sexual clichés. Her point throughout, of course, is to overturn stereotypes, both by showing how the relations between men are much more complex than the terms 'homosexual' and 'homophobic' imply, and by demonstrating how all such categories are themselves historical constructions. Nevertheless, in her attention to social contexts, Sedgwick overinvests in (and therefore tacitly valorizes) the very stereotypes she rejects.....Sedgwick's use of prejudicial terminology and implicit reinforcement of sexual stereotypes is aggravated by her relation to her evidence. Although her use of feminist and Marxist criticism is of a very high order, she does not show an equivalent care when treating historical sources". [20] As an outsider, Sedgwick is unable to describe a authoritative male homosexual literary tradition, her Girardian "erotic triangles" show themselves actually to be Greimasian squares with the corner of "homosexuality" erased.

Sedgwick gave a clear response in *Trends and Trust*, treating David Van Leer's essay as "the absence of trust", because David Van Leer's interpretation is "180 degrees distant from what I experience as the intent of my writing; but in the intensely difficult and charged context of sexual identity politics, as in the politics of gender, such reversals are not astonishing. If his essay really is an enactment of this sort, it

has a certain kind of authority that is not subject to question. Specifically the question of whether Van Leer does justice to my writing, whether the writing has or has not some claim, unacknowledged by him, to make on his trust, in this particular sense becomes nugatory". [21] Sedgwick believes that nobody can experience their gender except through the particular forms of class, sexuality and race. There is no doubt that "differences of sexuality, like differences of class and race, have inveterately been represented and interpreted as and through differences of gender—and again vice versa, through all the permutations. A one-dimensional paradigm like Van Leer's is not unique—though it is by no means universal—in men's gay and anti-homophobic writing. Nevertheless, it seems to me coarse and unrealistic at a theoretical level, and unnecessarily bleak at a practical level, considering the richness of other paradigms available through the experience and analysis of other gay theorists, of Marxist-feminists, of women of color". [22] David Van Leer's standpoint seems coarse and unrealistic at a theoretical level, and unnecessarily bleak at a practical level.

Sedgwick's name often appeared in the press since 1991, but it was often negative, she was considered a more dangerous figure than Saddam Hussein. In fact, no one is homophobic, racist or masculine in a culture which was woven by homophobia, machismo and racism. So, it is almost inevitable that some form of homophobia will be involved in debate.

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