

Inside the Psyche of LGBTQ+ Community: A Pensive Voyage Through an Asian Graphic Novel

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Abstract:

Over the past few years, the LGBTQ+ community has reached exceptional milestones, but yet, they need to achieve more to find and establish their place in this world. A similar aspect lies with Graphic novels that they need to find and establish their place in the vast field of literature, though they are recently being printed and produced in massive numbers around the world. There seems to be no perfect medium than the Graphic Novels to voice the mental agonies faced by the LGBTQ+ community and its people. With the combination of the LGBTQ+ community and the graphic novels, this paper aims to act as an intermediary to convey the trouble and pain the LGBTQ+ community has to undergo, to the reading public. The analysis is performed upon My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness (2017) authored by Kabi Nagata, a Graphic Novel that comes under the gradually developing Queer Graphic Novels. The central idea is to point out the importance of keeping the mental health of the LGBTQ+ people intact and providing social support like that provided to any other individual in this supposedly brilliant and advanced world. A much broader picture of social issues concerning the LGBTQ+ community is illustrated and discussed through the analysis of the Graphic Novel and thereby stating its importance among the humankind and economy. Through this, the paper provides a better understanding by dwelling deeper into the psyche of LGBTQ+ individual and their struggles.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, mental health, graphic novel, depression, eating disorder, gender expression, gender identity, sexual orientation

Introduction

Deteriorating mental health, grievously, continues to be stigmatized and viewed as a taboo in this synthetic and supposedly progressive and developed society. It is still considered an unhealthy part that a human being could ever possess. Society fails to understand that declining mental health is a serious issue that should be taken seriously and still treats it as a stigma which in turn makes many people turn away from seeking medical help. They tend to forget the fact that mental health is as important as one's physical health, and only its balance would help one lead a better and peaceful life. Studies prove that LGBTQ+ individuals are forced to experience mental illness at greater rates, which mainly happens due to the stigma that surrounds mental illness making it hard to seek help. Identity, one of the most important factors that concern the growth of a normal human being, plays a major role in this case. It is said that we can live our life wholly when we accept our own identity and that only through its acceptance, an individual can lead and live life in its full glory. Being accepted and loved as to how one truly is, is one of the greatest wins of his or her life. This increases their self-esteem and decreases their chance to fall into depression and other severe mental illnesses. When one feels connected to their society, they start to feel vibrant and spirited, highly engrossed with the joy of living in a community that accepts them for who they are – more like a validation for the marginalized LGBTQ+ community. Many LGBTQ individuals are at risk of mental issues due to social stress. The reality that their problems are not brought out before the public sphere increases the chances for the community to remain unnoticed and undercover. Expressing the issues bothering the LGBTQ+ community through the medium of literature is proving to be effective enough with both homosexual and heterosexual writers penning down thoughts about and for the community and its people. With the increase in publications of works about and for the LGBTQ+ community, their problems are laid bare before humankind, one by one, such that they are worked on and resolved for the betterment and progress of the community.

Being gender - diverse in an Asian panorama: Identity, Rights and Literature

All human beings, queer or not, have four key elements in common – biological sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, gender expression. Biological sex refers to the physical anatomy with which humans are born. Gender identity is the personal feeling and conceptualization of one's gender on the spectrum between male and female. Sexual Orientation refers to the gender to which a person is attracted romantically or sexually, regardless of that person's gender. Finally, Gender expression deals with how people prefer to outwardly show their gender identity. Society, culture, and humankind have laid emphasis only on the recognition of two biological sexes and gender identity, 'male' and 'female', for ages. Though there are instances that date back to 300 and 400 BCE concerning the presence of homosexuality, it has always remained a taboo. It was many years later, in the 1990s, the presence of more than one gender, sexual orientation, gender expression came to more significant limelight and started to gain attention around the world. This further led to the formation of the LGBTQ+ community.

LGBTQ+ is the abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and other similar communities like an intersex, asexual, ally, etc. Lesbian refers to a female homosexual or a woman who is

interested in a romantic or sexual relationship with another woman. Gay generally refers to a homosexual trait or person. Even though the title is used to denote a homosexual man, it can also be used to refer to a homosexual woman. An individual who is attracted romantically and sexually to both males and females is referred to as a bisexual. Transgender is mainly an umbrella term used to refer to people who change their sexual identities which were assigned to them at birth. The term 'Queer' denotes the gender minorities as a whole. The '+' clearly signifies that specific initials cannot capture the whole of gender orientation, gender identity and expression among humans, and the presence of other similar communities in the society. Adapted from the initialism LGB which began about in the 1980s and being a term commonly in use since the 1990s, the initials LGBTQ+, a variant of LGBT, was put out to replace the term gay and represent the community as a whole. The long initials which represented the whole community were later covered up by a one-word alternative, Queer, during the late eighties and the early nineties. Though the word Queer was used as rather an insult against the diverse members of the community, in recent years, it became an umbrella term to denote almost all people, things, and topics in connection with gender identity and sexuality. The term successfully expresses the vast and multitudinous culture and community of the queer – a diversity of gender identity and sexuality-based culture. The term is used to denote any human who is non – cisgender or non – heterosexual and not just exclusively to people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

The LGBTQ+ community had remained suppressed in various countries around the world for thousands of years. It remained unacceptable and remains illegal in few countries which consider homosexuality and same-sex marriage as an unforgivable sin. Abbreviated as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer, the LGBTQ+ community represents same sex orientation which completely stands outside of Cisgender and Homosexual orientation. It is a vast community sphere widely developing and growing with time. However, LGBTQ rights, homosexuality, and same-sex activity only started to gain prominent acceptance in the majority of the countries a few years back.

Eastern countries, Asian countries, in particular, have always had a distaste for accepting varied gender identities like Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer. As a result of this indifference, LGBTQ+ rights remain limited in comparison to other countries around the world. Majority of the humankind feels restraint to accept and admit the queer community and provide them with equal space and rights in society. There are bullied, left behind, and neglected by the individuals who consider themselves straight. Be it education, employment, or family life, almost all representatives of the LGBTQ+ community face discrimination and violations of basic human rights. There is great dislike, fear, hatred, discomfort, and prejudice against its members. It is this dislike, fear, hatred, discomfort, and prejudice which pave the way to legal restrictions and building up of a huge range of negative attitude and emotions towards homosexuals.

It is of crucial importance that the conditions of the LGBTQ+ community are shared and given voice through stories, thereby providing and showering them with immense support from society. Writers encompass their personal experiences and events or else create a storyline involving queer relations such that the readers get a taste of the queer life and struggles and thereby pushing the readers to circulate the information's in and around different social groups. Through this, the people from different spheres understand, evaluate, relate and empathize with the queer community, their lifestyles, and their battles with hatred, avoidance, and tortures. The stories not only educate and enlighten the readers about the conditions of the LGBTQ+ community but also makes them wonder about a different path in life the LGBTQ+ readers may not have thought practicable. LGBTQ literature thereby has an everlasting and significant impact on its readers.

Though mentioned in books from ancient times, queer or homosexual themes are finally emerging as a major part of contemporary literature due to the increased visibility of the queer community and their struggles in the contemporary era. But regardless of this rise in the number of books covering homosexual themes, factors like censorship force LGBTQ literature to remain denigrated and diminished. Arguments that the contents of LGBTQ literature are rather a niche and that is it not commercially feasible, successful or workable have further cheapened its value and standard in different genres of literature.

LGBTQ+ literature includes Lesbian literature, Gay literature, Bisexual literature, Transgender literature, Queer or Questioning literature, and Literature embodying other genders. They portray varied themes like their living conditions, the ups and downs, their romantic life, the constant battles warred against the community, and mainly, their mental, emotional and physical condition and struggles. Lesbian literature focuses on lesbian themes encompassing lesbian characters and their interest topics. Lesbian works are not alone written by lesbian authors who have first-hand knowledge of their situations, but also by heterosexual authors who read, watch and study the element of queerness. Literature produced by or for the LGBTQ community focusing on male homosexual themes and involving homosexual plot and characters come under Gay Literature. Though the word 'gay' is commonly used to represent homosexual males and females in general, with the incoming and uprising of a separate genre of literature, Lesbian Literature, focusing on lesbian themes, Gay Literature started to mainly centre around homosexual males and their relationships. Bisexual literature encompasses and addresses the topic of bisexuality. Bisexuality in both men and women is pointed out through plot, characters, dialogues, and themes. Transgender literature comprises literary works that have been written about, are written by, or represent and portray people of diverse sexual or gender identity.

Analysis

The novel is the memoir of a young girl named Kabi Nagata, who spends her early twenties in the obscurity of depression, turning against university education and unable to find a proper job and, at the end when she finds the energy to do something, she writes manga. To her, each day is a struggle, unsure about herself, anxious about the future that she barely tries to stand living in the present. It all begins with her binge eating problem to losing her job at the store and the bakery, her emotional distancing from family, essentially her abstinence from social interaction and sexual expression made her decide to hire a female escort from the lesbian escort agency. For her, the first sexual encounter is not just about the impact it gives, but to check on something that the most sexual narratives present. The author takes a great deal of pain in expressing her story, she produces before us a tabloid of her struggles on the way to becoming a successful manga artist, which includes an extensive description about her eating habit, various problems encountered at various jobs, personal hygiene, sleeping habits and inability to communicate with her family members. Kabi blends and adds further details of her first experience at the love hotel and how she felt during the entire process. In this novel, the author is trying to portray the difficulties faced by a young woman while exploring her mental health growing up. The foremost thing while reading the novel is that the author does not hesitate to expose her private life to create an interesting manga. Her writing process involving the true feelings and emotions in her own life, forms a perfect narrative.

Loneliness is very unique and a personal thing, the concept of being lonely in the early twenty is more of a compact thing. At that point, life feels stagnant and alone. Kabi very realistically illustrates various stages of this problem. She portrays a time when she completely neglected her hygiene and sleeping habits when she was enclosed in the pangs of depression. At times when she fails to recognize herself as a beneficial adult or when she finds her as non-productive, she punishes herself by eating too much. Her eating disorder has gone far to a level that she used to steal foods during her part-time job and used to stuff her mouth with dry ramen, as it will take time to cook, ending up in the bleeding of her gums. This self-punishing behaviour is seen as her way of responding to the anticipation of society.

“Here I am, twenty-eight years old I have never dated anyone, never had sex – and on top of that, never had a real job. And I am face to face with a woman from a lesbian escort agency”. (4)

This very beginning line of the novel solely represents the situation and the problem that our narrator is facing. At present, we find her face to face with a woman she hired from a lesbian escort agency, which is said to be her first awkward sexual encounter, then she begins to narrate her story backwards to certain incidents that made her to this point. The sense of not belonging anywhere and her desire to change herself to fit into the world as a normal human being made her fall into the pit of mental illness and severe depression. The point is that she lived in a society where mental health issues are treated as a dishonour. Factually people who are recognized with this disorder too fail to seek medical help as it is something shunned by family and friends. Society views these people as lazy and good for nothing. Here, in the novel, we can see Kabi struggling to cope with the two worlds. On one way to live a life that pleases her family and on the other hand to please herself by living a life as she is. Her mother often looks down upon her as she is not able to get a proper salaried job even though she got enough money at her part-time job.

In the novel, Kabi genuinely portrays her eating disorder as one of the major hurdles in her life. Eating disorders begin with a high obsession with food and then to unhealthy eating habits, considered as a psychological condition which should be treated under special guidance, if not, sometimes leading to death cases. We can see that when Kabi develops this problem of binge eating, she began to eat continuously without knowing her limit to a point where she eats dry ramen because she always needs something to be in her stomach. She is diagnosed with disorder as a development of her depression, which is a most common psychological disorder seen in many young peoples.

“Knowing I didn’t belong anywhere—that I had nowhere to go every day—made me extremely anxious” (9)

Her great desire to belong to the community, being loved as she is, is one of the most powerful wishes she upholds. The cause of these conflicts is not her disillusion with her identity. Rather, it is due to the lack of acceptance by others in the community. These patriarchal stereotypes and other traditional practices play an important role in this case. Even her parents are not ready to accept her for who she is and they fail appreciate her wins and achievements and surprisingly, her mother is taken aback by this. She says, ‘Incidentally it seems my parents didn’t want to accept that their own child was sick.’ (18)

Love and care are the two most important factors that affect the life of a human being. Every human deserves that, but in some cases, these are forcefully taken away from some group of individuals only due to some labels put forward by our society. Here, Nagata Kabi honestly and painfully describes the incident in which her

own family denies her presence. She is not valued or respected for the achievement and effort she made. Even when she was capable to pay for her family with her earnings from the part-time job, her mother criticizes her by saying to find a proper salaried job. This lack of acceptance from the family itself is the prime reason for the development of mental issues in many people. Since family is something that comes as a major part of every human beings' life. Everyone secretly wishes their family to be at their side when everyone else opposes them. This is not the story of Kabi alone, instead, it is the story of many other similar individuals who are suffering from this same issue in different parts of the world. Homosexuality is something that is treated as a sin in many places and as a result, these people are abandoned and shunned by society. Kabi herself was afraid to be backed by her parents. She says "I wanted my parents to approve of me", filled with her ardent desire to be accepted by the family and society.

"Whenever wherever—I was always uncomfortable one way or another" (28)

Her discomfort in living such a hard life is exhibited realistically which made us, the readers, too feel the same discomfort. We can see that Kabi was never able to stand at a proper place or job until she finds her ability in writing manga. She shifts through a lot of jobs and always experiences a hard time. As she decided to go against university education, she was not able to get a proper good job and as a result, she needs to switch several part-time jobs, at first at a bakery and then at a store. Even though she had a hard time dealing with the depression and all she still manages to cling to the job she has. She was really happy when she realizes that she was able to contribute money to her family's needs. For her, that money means everything because she had to put her whole life into it, even when she was not at all comfortable there. Apart from this the serious binge eating problem and hair-pulling disorder subscribed to a greater part of her mental illness. It was a genuine problem that she used to steal foods and keep them in the locker room as she always needed something to stuff her stomach.

Chapter two, Prequel, moves to Kabi's realization of her own identity and her sexual needs. To her, her parents' opinion was everything and she needed her parents to approve of her, which was her sole driving force in her life. To do that she starts to live like a normal person which made her stop herself from the binge eating problem. Even though it was hard for her she would take endless walks to get control over herself in which she finally succeeded. She started to live like a normal person eating only three meals a day and finally, she made it to the next stage, which was finding a job. Her work at the bakery was very smooth, working five days a week she was able to get proper money. To get the approval of her parents she turned away from herself, she was not able to listen to her feelings or listen to her opinions. When thinking about becoming a 'salaried employ' she became very uncomfortable as she achieved only a high school diploma. Suddenly she lost her will to go to work, even getting up from bed was a difficult job. Find a new job was indeed hard and the interviewer at a clinic asked about her interests and for the first time in her life, she was able to talk about her interest in writing manga. This incident was one of the turning points of realization in her life. She came to know that the feeling of opening up was too nice that suddenly tears started to bawl from her eyes. Even when she was able to get enough courage from the interviewers she was still confused about the decision of her parents. But she knows clearly that if she was going to think about her parents, she will never be able to get to the path she wants.

"But even though it was uncomfortable it was different from the discomfort of trying to make myself better—or the pain of not understanding how I really felt" (38)

She knows that the problem was only the discomfort of accepting herself and it was always better than all the things that she had done before. A place that accepts her the way she is, a thing that she always desired for. For three years she contributed to newcomer creator contests along with her part-time job. After quitting her part-time job, she was jobless for almost two years. After going through a series of interviews she was still unable to get a job. She was too much with all the things in her life that she would run away from the place. She began to feel that she has done too much all over the place that she was even scared to pick a phone call. She began to think that,

"I am so bad at being alive... I guess I have to die, after all" (40)

Even though her life sucks she was able to make a comeback by working on her debut, which made her feel like she made her way out of a deep cave, and for the first time in her life she feels like a new person. But the path was never smooth as her head began to feel empty and was not able to think properly. And for the first time she took some prescriptions finally resulted in good, she was able to read again. But was always curious about where the pain came from so she began reading many articles which finally ended with a book on mental illness in pubescent children. Although she never experienced domestic violence the illustration made her startled. It shows about a child excessively clinging to her mother which made her think of herself. A point of her second realization, the illustration made her think that if she was the model seen in the book.

"I might have gotten bigger but I still cling to my mother.

I hated my mom, but I cling to her, even as I talked about how I despised her" (44)

Among all these oscillating moments, comes the discovery of her sexuality and her realization that she has some sex drive based on a need to feel comforted and cared for. She begins to understand that apart from the general concept of mother she wants something else. Even though now she is a grown-up girl, she still likes to cling to her mother. Then she read an article about others responding to how they feel the same thing, and she knew that only a younger woman will fix it. Through the article, she was able to find her aching hole in her heart. All she knew was that she needs someone to hold her. And when she thinks about it there are so many instances of her wanting to be held. But to be held is such a hard thing in today's world, people often harm themselves on the path of chasing that comfort. To achieve that comfort, she needs a woman, who would be able to hold her close. The majority of young people experience this type of alienation from their families which makes them feel that they are unable to fit for this world. They are likely to express higher rates of depression and anxiety and have a great risk for suicidal behavior. Often these people's childhood will be rooted in discrimination from people around them which makes them fall victim to these psychological disorders. We can see that Nagata Kabi coming to grips with her sexuality at the end, make her resolve the problems of anxiety and depression.

"I am so, so ready for someone to comfort me, to melt away my years of loneliness" (74)

And finally, she was able to get the comfort that she needed all these years and that happened in the form of a lesbian escort agency. The tranquility she experienced was carefully expressed, ultimately when she made the appointment at the Lesbian escort agency, she felt much relieved. The experience at the love hotel was new to her, she suddenly felt everything to be unreal but at the end of the day, she was completely happy. She was able to publish her lesbian escort manga on 'Pixiv' and was able to overcome the communication issues. At the end of the day, Kabi was able to get the happiness and comfort that she always desired. She realized the importance of self-love even though her mind was flooded with the guilt of her right to think and acting according to her own sake. She understood that spending time and money, keeping oneself neat and clean is also an act of self-love. And there is nothing to be ashamed of putting yourself first. Lack of parental approval, depression, and anxiety play an important role in her inability to identify her self-worth and needs as an independent person. For our protagonist, knowing and understanding her real self and desires paves the way to escape the clutches of depression, self-harm, and sufferings and further have more confidence to live only for herself, forgetting the detrimental desire to please her family, or even the society she lives in.

Conclusion

Vulnerable, self-focused, and self-reflective, Kabi Nagata's autobiographical graphic novel *My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness* dwells deeper into the psyche of a twenty-eight-year-old young woman's notions, confusions, and sufferings regarding her sexuality, mental well-being, family strife, eating disorder, her recurring feelings of not belonging anywhere and her ardent desire for a place to belong. With suggestive artworks evoking varied emotions, the reader gets a glimpse of a woman battling depression, yearning for acceptance in a socially constructed surrounding, and her experiences in coming to terms with her sexuality. Kabi Nagata, through her work, becomes a representative of the distressed majority of the LGBTQ+ community, mirroring their mental anguish and psychological pain. Knowing that they are different from the rest, facing insults from all the heterosexuals around them, not being accepted or given equal privileges like the rest of the human race – these are just a numbered few of the agonies that the LGBTQ+ community is subjected to face daily. Like any other human being, they crave genuine connections; people who would appreciate, accept and acknowledge their gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. Having support indeed plays a major role in the overall well-being of a person, chiefly their mental health. A support system is what Kabi mainly lacked in her life, as depicted in the Graphic novel, which leads to all her torments and excruciating lifestyle and living conditions. By analyzing the conditions of the LGBTQ+ community through a Graphic Novel, we seek to open up more possibilities and opportunities for the community such that their voices are heard across all spectrums of the world. Like any other individual, they deserve to be respected, prized, and valued.

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