



Internalized Homophobia in Ocean Vuong's *Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*

Manahil Amin

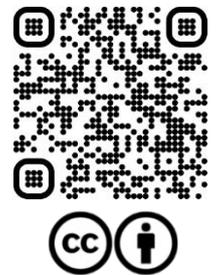
Department of English Literature, Lahore College for Women University, Pakistan

Received: 04 Jul 2023; Received in revised form: 08 Aug 2023; Accepted: 22 Aug 2023; Available online: 29 Aug 2023

©2023 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Homophobia is one of the most prevalent bigoted prejudices in present age. This paper aimed to study the incarnation of internalized homophobia in the character of Trevor in the novel *Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) by Ocean Vuong. By utilizing Pollack's argument on "boy code" and "gendered straitjacket", it has been observed that Trevor, despite being homosexual, tried to obscure and abate any softness in him by exorbitant performance of stereotypical masculinity such as meat eating, drugs, and misogyny that checks all the parameters of "boy code" set by society. It is also explored that manifestation of internalized homophobia in Trevor is happened as a result of excessive consensual gendered straitjacketing in relation to the heteronormative masculinity. Moreover, it is concluded that reason behind toxicity of Trevor towards his homosexuality was embedded in the roots of strict performance of maleness which resulted in digastric consequences such as self-hate, not meaningful relationship with partner and death.



Keywords— Homophobia, Internalized Homophobia, Masculinity, Ocean Vuong, Straitjacketing

I. INTRODUCTION

In early 1990s Queer theory emerged which challenged the stereotypical idea of considering heterosexuality as a norm and considered sexuality, gender and sex as a socially constructed idea (Bertens). The term 'homophobia' was first used by George Weinberg who is an American writer, and psychologist in his book *Society and the Healthy Homosexual* (1991). He defined it as "the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals." (Weinberg, 1991). Mark Freedman added to the description of homophobia by defining it as an "extreme rage and fear reaction to homosexuals." (1975). Byrne added more words to describe it in his book *Homophobia a History*. He defines: "Antipathy to them—and condemnation, loathing, fear, and proscription of homosexual behavior—is what we call homophobia" (Byrne, 2000). He added to the definition that homophobia not only means "fear" but also an attempt to prohibit it. In literary fiction homosexuality was mostly portrayed as an act of sin especially during 1940s to 1970's which was

worse time for homosexuals in America. The novels such as Isabelle Holland's *The Man without a Face* (1972) and Lynn Hall's *Sticks and Stones* (1977) show bad consequences suffered by homosexual characters in the form of heart attack and accident (Hutanan, 2020).

Homophobia prevalent in homosexuals is denoted as "internalized homophobia" which is defined as "the gay person's direction of negative social attitudes toward the self" (Meyer & Dean, 1998) and it causes a man to reject and hate his own sexual preferences. Moreover, "Internalized homophobia" is also explained as an inner struggle between the urge of having intimate relationships with same sex, and desire to be heterosexual or straight (Herek et al., 1997).

Herek (1986) connected homophobia with masculinity. He argued that heterosexuality is considered as an essential attribute of masculinity and men interiorize that ideological belief related to heterosexuality in themselves. When they can't act as per the parameters set

by society related to manhood, they start shedding hate towards homosexual males thence reassuring their own sense of masculinity (Herek, 1986).

Kimmel (1994, 2006) also asserts that in order to become 'masculine', it is mandatory to have heterosexual relationships and not to behave as gay. He argues that this maintenance of heterosexual behavior is the core principle, and demand of masculinity. Kimmel build his argument on the base of psychoanalytic theories and speculated that masculinity is "flight from feminine" and sexual desire for males was placed within femininity (Kimmel 1994, 2006). Like Herek, heterosexuality, for Kimmel, was also a defensive shield for males which they used to avoid humiliation of not being enough masculine (2006).

Pascoe (2005), unlike Kimmel's psychological chassis, used social framework to study connection between masculinity and homophobia. She made research on the use of word "fag" by students of U. S high school. Rather than connecting it with sexuality she related her study to use of "fag" as a sexualized slur used by males against other males in a social setup thus she connected it with gender and racism and called it "fag discourse". She goes in same direction with Butler's performative theory and argues that boys modulate others and their own normative heterosexual behavior by jokingly insulting one and other. She finally asserts that masculinity emerges from the relationship of "fag discourse" and "compulsive heterosexuality" (Pascoe. 2005).

Identity development theories among lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals suggest that internalized homophobia is commonly experienced by Sapphic boys during the growth of their sexual identity, and overcoming internalized homophobia is essential in the development of a healthy character (Cass, 1979; Fingerhut et al., 2005; Mayfield, 2001; Rowen & Malcolm, 2003; Troiden, 1989). It is shown by researchers that internalized homophobia has an extremely bad impact on the mental health of homosexual community, and it also pays hindrance in their happy lives. (Allen & Oleson, 1999; Meyer & Dean, 1998; Rowen & Malcolm, 2003). Rowen and Malcolm (2003) find out that "high levels of internalized homophobia among behaviorally homosexual men are associated with less developed gay identity and higher sex guilt" (p. 87). Those results also showed a link between internalized homophobia and variable of underestimation of one's own self (Rowen and Malcolm, 2003). Gay men try to assume the "heterosexual identities" essentially at the start of their discovery about sexuality, and this happens due to internalized homophobia which makes the acceptance of one's own sexuality a perplexing process.

Theodore & Basow (2002) made research on 74 college students and found that "masculine attribute importance" was the most leading forecaster of "homophobia". Men who hold "masculinity" as a characteristic of higher value, and consider female traits as of lower value were easily influenced by the societal expectations of biological roles, and hold bitter attitude towards gays and homosexual relationships and thus become a practitioner of homophobia. The enforcement of homophobia from society and culture in the name of masculinity affects men not only socially but also "individually". This type of situation creates a clash with in the person himself and he began to feel precarious about his own priorities (Theodore & Basow, 2000).

Furthermore, a study done on South African gay males showed an indirect effect between depression and non-confirming gender where internalized homophobia was intervening this relationship (Sandfort et al., 2015). This study asserts that those gay men who adhere to the attributes of hegemonic masculinity develop more depression than those who show flexibility in performing normative masculinity. It was deduced that gay men who adhere more strictly to masculine norms are more likely to develop internalized homophobia, mental stress, depression and other issues (Sandfort et al., 2015).

The afore-presented literature provides us with the base that normative masculinity is the root cause behind internalized homophobia which further results into severe problems like mental issues (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Sandfort et al., 2015). However, despite its exploration in social sciences, no one has yet tried to explore the dilemmas of gay masculinities in English fiction, and no work is founded on exploration of internalized homophobia in English Fiction. Only one work is traced that introspected four forms of homophobia in English fiction by utilizing Foucault's idea of "power" (Hutanan, 2020). In light of above mentioned gap and based on the literature gathered above, this paper imposes the question: Despite being gay, what made Trevor intolerable towards homosexuality in novel *On Earth we're Briefly Gorgeous*?

Due to lack of literary research on homophobia in fictive works, and by keeping research question in mind this paper will be utilizing qualitative approach of analysis to study the minor details in Trevor's dialogues, habits, and actions in novel through the lens of Pollack's argument of "boy code" and "gendered straitjacket". It is aimed to trace the manifestation of internalized homophobia in the character of Trevor in the novel. The paper will show that Trevor is suffering from internalized homo-negativity, and will analyze masculine performance as a triggering cause in the development of this *internalized homo-negativity*.

II. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The novel selected for analysis portrays homosexual relationship between a Vietnamese immigrant boy named little dog and American boy Trevor where both are polar opposites. The character of Trevor is not much developed in the book as the story is narrated in the form of unaligned sequence of unsent long letter of Trevor's boyfriend, little dog, to his mother. So the analysis is limited to the parts gathered and scrutinized in chronological order about concerned character.

Pollack (1998) mentions that there are four roles which are required by boys to perform that includes them to be emotionally unhinged, ready to take wild challenges, to not fail in any way, and to never do any girly activity. They are required by people to live like this that, according to him, is uncommendable and he calls out that parents should play their part to change it in case of their sons to help them envision better future.

In selected text, the first impression of Trevor gives reader an ambiguous understanding of his personality. He seems to confirm every parameter of boy code. He, from outer side, is completely unemotional, ready to take risks, and tried his best to keep himself away from any female related activity. At very first time he is portrayed as having a "boyish face" (Vuong, 2019, p. 95). The expressions on his face were communicating that he was hurt and angry due to some unknown reason because his squinted eye brows were giving his manly face a "harsh look" (p. 95). In the very next line narrator gives him totally disparate features quoted as "rounded mouth and pert lips sealed into a flushed feminine pout" (p. 95). Only his first appearance indicates that Trevor is fighting internally with himself in maintaining masculine look and hide the feminine or homosexual look for it is considered as similar to female gender (Provence et al., 2014). He seems to struggle in entrapping himself in role of a man. Later in novel, little dog gives us qualities of Trevor which he has been performing to get opinionated on. He says:

Trevor rusted pickup and no license...who fingered a freshman girl then tossed her underwear in the lake for fun ... who jams all his fries into a whopper and chews with both feet on the gas ...Trevor the hunter. Trevor the carnivore, the red neck not the pansy, shotgunner, sharpshooter, not fruit or fairy, Trevor meat eater but not veal (Vuong, 2019, p. 153-155)

Here he is shown as daring, and tough guy who was living as a standard masculine man. His appearance confirms every rule of "boy code" that which demands guys to be aggressive and violent. He had camouflaged himself so well that anyone who sees his outer shell sniff the aura of untamed and wild manliness. If observed

closely, he has been attributed with one quality, and intentionally negated the presence of other one in him which is less masculine such as "not pansy", "not fruit or fairy" (p. 155) which are other names for non-straight males. Parent and Moradi (2009) argued that masculine norms prescribe nine distinct traits from which Trevor is shown performing emotional control, violence, risk-taking, power over women, and heterosexual self-presentation. Execution of such traits by Trevor implicates his attempt to show his "heroic side" which is discussed by Pollack (1998) as that side of males which the society is willing to accept. Using word "not" with each and every weak quality seems like pleading for validation of people on his performance which highlights his insecurity towards his gender and sexuality. Only by his appearance it is clear that he was miserably trying to appear stiff, stern, and not girly which shows that he lived only by the parameters of manliness.

It is evident from his actions and appearance that Trevor is victim of consensual gendered straitjacketing. The term was used by Pollack (1998), for first time, in his book *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood* where he described it as society's limitations on boys to act according to "boy code", and those who fail to perform in certain way are humiliated and get shamed from the people around them. It can be understood as society's enforced regulations on person to perform the gender where he cannot move in freedom.

Here, Trevor has limited himself in an invisible restraint which aided in manifesting of homophobia in the form of self-denial through his severe adherence with the performance of hegemonic masculinity.

An instance of strict self-imposition of gender constraint can be seen in Trevor in the form of meat eating which is a merit of masculinity. Eating meat is linked with male identity and wildness which makes people "real men" (Rothgerber, 2013). Trevor eats meat, but he specifically likes beef because it comes from adult cow or bull. He hates veal, and he stopped eating it when his father told him that veal comes from the kid of cow, and he reacts upon hearing this in abhorrence "never veal, fuck that, never again" (Vuong, 2019, p. 155). Eating veal or beef is not a very big deal in normal person's life while Trevor exhibited such behavior because he seems to be insecure, and having fear of being called as gay or feminine. He liked burger king over McDonald's because smoke on meat makes the beef taste real unlike McDonald's. Little dog, his boyfriend, further says: "Trevor who, wild as he was, wouldn't eat veal, wouldn't eat the children of cows" (Vuong, 2019, p. 216). Hence, meat itself becomes the metaphorical symbol of manhood (Rozin et al., 2012) in life of Trevor and define position of man in male oriented

culture (Ricardo, 2014). This type of complex attitude shown by Trevor towards food indicates that he is struggling extremely hard to prove himself as a man by miserably quitting veal and McDonald's so that he could be labeled as "heterosexual masculine male" by the society.

The aforementioned acts of Trevor in masking his homosexual identity indicates his negative attitudes towards his gay self which becomes vivid in his intimated moments with little dog, hence became reason in development of animosity towards homosexuals.

It is clear that Trevor is under heavy influence of consensual straitjacketing which further lead to the development of homophobia internally. The episodes of intimacy in novel give insight about Trevor's behavior and his reactions towards his own homosexuality. After having sex, little dog says, that Trevor by turning away his side from dog "...cried skillfully in dark. The way boys do" (Vuong, 2019, p. 115). The way Trevor hid his tears is a firm unacceptance of his homosexuality which essentially means "internalized homophobia".

From this point to further on, stern aggressiveness of Trevor towards his sexual encounters with his partner is evident. He does not feel positive about his action, but he does not stop having sex with little dog second time again that shows that his true identity is homosexual, but he also hated being it. Moreover, Trevor yanked dog's hair during intimacy which was violent because dog never thought about violence as a part of sexual act. Pollack (1998) has also discussed rigorousness as only emotion that boys are permitted to show. Moreover, "anger" for being a homosexual starts finding its way out in the form of vigorous attitude during sex by Trevor which goes in affirmation with the study done by Bandenes-Ribera et al. (2012) where she concluded that higher "intimate partner violence" is result of higher levels of internalized homonegativity. So this act surely indicates manifestation of internalized homophobia in Trevor's character.

Moreover, Trevor always dominates himself over little dog because dominance is masculine, and he had to perform this attribute. Trevor asked little dog to be dominant in bed one day, but immediately he pushed dog back and said, "I dunno. I don't wanna feel like a girl. Like a bitch. I can't man" (Vuong, 2019, p. 120). The shame of sharing attributes with girls again indicates his negative attitude towards his own sexuality and this misogyny is response to same sex relationship since homosexuality is seen as similar to femininity. This dominance in bed proves that Trevor was suffering from internalized homonegativity because according to Carter (2015)

homosexuals who like to be on top or dominant are mostly diagnosed as internalized homophobes.

In above presented circumstances, boys themselves seek solutions to find inner peace in their lives as reported by Pollack: "They may run away from home, get involved in drugs or drinking, misbehave at school, get involved in fights, engage in promiscuous sexual relationships, fall into a depression or, worst of all, contemplate or commit suicide" (Pollack, 1998, "Being Different" section). The shame of failure of not being masculine and self-hate made Trevor to run from home. He used drugs to escape, and eventually died due to over dose which can be considered as suicide since he was alone in his room at the time of death. (Cart, 1997) writes about young adult novels that gays usually ends in very gloomy life or dies in car accident rather than suicide (Vuong, 2019, pg. 198). Although Trevor is neither killed in accident nor by obvious suicide, but with over dose of heroine which is alternatively self-annihilation. Unbuckling the straitjacket of masculinity could liberate him from internalized homophobia, but, it went in retrospect, the consequences of fear of failure in performing according to boy-code that is demanded by heteronormative culture. Hence, "internalized homophobia" completes its manifestation in the form of destruction in Trevor's life.

III. CONCLUSIONS

As it was asserted about Trevor's hatred on homosexuality, it is concluded that incarnation of internalized homophobia due to strong adherence with masculinity is the main reason behind his abhorrence towards gayness which goes in affirmation with the prior researches of social sciences which declared association of toxic masculinity with internalized homophobia (Herek, 1986; Kimmel, 1994, 2006; Pascoe, 2005). The fear of not living up to the normative standards of masculinity is established as the root cause behind development of internalized homophobia in Trevor, which ended up ruining his well-being, relationship, happiness, health, and consequently annihilated his life. To conclude, this paper anticipates to be a minor contribution in analysis of contemporary GLBT+ literary studies and the hope is maintained for more contribution in exploration of internalized homophobia in English novels.

REFERENCES

- [1] Allen, D. J., & Oleson, T. (1999). Shame and internalized homophobia in gay men. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 37(3), 33–43. https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v37n03_03
- [2] Badenes-Ribera, L., Sánchez-Meca, J., & Longobardi, C.

- (2017). The relationship between internalized homophobia and intimate partner violence in same-sex relationships: A meta-analysis. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 20*(3), 152483801770878. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838017708781>
- [3] Barnes, D. M., & Meyer, I. H. (2012). Religious affiliation, internalized homophobia, and mental health in lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 82*(4), 505–515.
- [4] Bertens, Hans (2001). *Literary theory: The basics*. Routledge.
- [5] Byrne, R. S. F. (2000). *Homophobia: A History*. New York, Ny Picador.
- [6] Cart, M. (1997). Honoring their stories, too: Literature for gay and lesbian teens. *The ALAN Review, 25*(1). <https://doi.org/10.21061/alan.v25i1.a.8>
- [7] Carter, E. R. A. (2015). Who's on Top? The Mental Health of Men Who Have Sex with Men. *The University of Arkansas Undergraduate Research Journal, 18*(1). <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/inquiry/vol18/iss1/5/>
- [8] Cass, V. C. (1979). Homosexual identity formation: A theoretical model. *Journal of Homosexuality, 4*(3), 219–235. https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v04n03_01
- [9] Fingerhut, A. W., Peplau, L. A., & Ghavami, N. (2005). A dual-identity framework for understanding lesbian experience. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 29*(2), 129–139. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.2005.00175.x>
- [10] Freedman, M. (1975). Homophobia: the psychology of a social disease. *Body Politic, 24*, 18–40.
- [11] Herek, G. M. (1986). On heterosexual masculinity. *American Behavioral Scientist, 29*(5), 563–577. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000276486029005005>
- [12] Herek, G., Cogan, J., Gillis, J., & Glunt, E. (1997). Correlates of Internalized Homophobia in a Community Sample of Lesbians and Gay Men. *Journal of the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association, 2*, 17–25. <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=1e176f3d511ff741d878ee93be9b723876451e3c>
- [13] Hutanan, N. (2020, December 1). *Homophobia in American Gay-Themed Young Adult Novels (2000-2010)*. Figshare.le.ac.uk. https://figshare.le.ac.uk/articles/thesis/Homophobia_In_American_Gay-Themed_Young_Adult_Novels_2000-2010_/13315490
- [14] Kimmel, M. S. (1994). Masculinity as homophobia: Fear, shame, and silence in the construction of gender identity. In B. H & K. M (Eds.), *Theorizing Masculinities* (pp. 119–141). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- [15] Kimmel, M. S. (2006). *Manhood in America* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- [16] Mayfield, W. (2001). The development of an internalized homonegativity inventory for gay men. *Journal of Homosexuality, 41*(2), 53–76. https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v41n02_04
- [17] Meyer, I. H., & Dean, L. (1998). Internalized homophobia, intimacy, and sexual behavior among gay and bisexual men. In *Stigma and Sexual orientation: Understanding Prejudice against lesbians, Gay men, and Bisexuals* (pp. 160–186). Sage Publications, Inc.
- [18] Parent, M. C., & Moradi, B. (2009). Confirmatory factor analysis of the conformity to masculine norms inventory and development of the conformity to masculine norms inventory-46. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity, 10*(3), 175.
- [19] Pascoe, C. J. (2005). Dude, you're a fag: Adolescent masculinity and the fag discourse. *Sexualities, 8*(3), 329–346. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460705053337>
- [20] Pollack, W. S. (1998). *Real boys: Rescuing our sons from the myths of boyhood*. Henry Holt.
- [21] Provence, M. M., Rochlen, A. B., Chester, M. R., & Smith, E. R. (2014). “just one of the guys”: A qualitative study of gay men's experiences in mixed sexual orientation men's groups. *Psychology of Men & Masculinities, 15*(4), 427–436. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035026>
- [22] Ricardo, G. C. F. (2014). Meat masculinity. *Sage Publications, 13*(4), 56–58. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24710553>
- [23] Rothgerber, H. (2013). Real men don't eat (vegetable) quiche: Masculinity and the justification of meat consumption. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity, 14*(4), 363.
- [24] Rowen, C. J., & Malcolm, J. P. (2003). Correlates of internalized homophobia and homosexual identity formation in a sample of gay men. *Journal of Homosexuality, 43*(2), 77–92. https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v43n02_05
- [25] Rozin, P., Hormes, J. M., Faith, M. S., & Wansink, B. (2012). Is meat male? A quantitative multimethod framework to establish metaphoric relationships. *Journal of Consumer Research, 39*(3), 629–643. <https://doi.org/10.1086/664970>
- [26] Sandfort, T., Bos, H., Knox, J., & Reddy, V. (2015). Gender Nonconformity, Discrimination, and Mental Health among Black South African Men Who Have Sex with Men: A Further Exploration of Unexpected Findings. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 45*(3), 661–670. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-015-0565-6>
- [27] Theodore, P. S., & Basow, S. A. (2000). Heterosexual masculinity and homophobia: A reaction to the self? *Journal of Homosexuality, 40*(2), 31–48. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v40n02_03
- [28] Troiden, Dr. R. R. (1989). The formation of homosexual identities. *Journal of Homosexuality, 17*(1-2), 43–74. https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v17n01_02
- [29] Vuong, O. (2019). *On earth we're briefly gorgeous*. Penguin Press.
- [30] Weinberg, G. H. (1991). *Society and the healthy homosexual*. Alyson Publications.