

The Mask We Wear: Society's Pressure on LGBTQ+ Individuals to Conceal Their Truth in Annie Proulx's *Brokeback Mountain*

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Abstract

The insightful story *Brokeback Mountain* by Annie Proulx examines the psychological suffering and emotional loneliness that LGBTQ+ people who are compelled to hide their identities due to strict social conventions endure. The story, which is set in rural America in the middle of the 20th century and is conservative and hyper-masculine, centers on two cowboys named Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist. Their close, personal relationship is overshadowed by their dread of violence and social rejection. Proulx utilizes these figures to illustrate how people are pushed to hide their actual identities behind metaphorical masks in order to avoid criticism due to internalized homophobia and the pressure from society to comply. Ennis marries Alma and makes an effort to live a life of social acceptance, but one that is emotionally constrained and confused, as a result of his childhood trauma and ongoing fear of being exposed. Jack, who is more idealistic and longs for unrestricted acceptance, eventually experiences tragedy, illustrating the peril and pointlessness of opposing deeply rooted biases. Proulx juxtaposes the liberation of nature with the oppression of social norms through potent symbols like the entwined shirts and the mountain scenery. While the everyday world continues to be a place of pain and repression, the mountain transforms into a haven where love is unadulterated and unimpaired by outside forces. This essay explores how *Brokeback Mountain* reflects the larger struggle LGBTQ+ people face in a critical society, highlighting the psychological harm brought on by fear, the emotional toll of enforced secrecy, and the disastrous effects of a society that denies people the freedom to live authentically. Keywords: LGBTQ+, societal pressure, masculinity, identity concealment, trauma, repression.

Introduction

Human expression in the form of words is called Literature. It helps to transmit the people's culture throughout the world. The literature represented the culture and traditions of the people or language. These literatures were named as American Literature, British Literature, Russian Literature, African Literature, etc., Literature that was produced or written in the United States is called American Literature. Drama, Novels, Short Story, fiction are some of the genres that exist in American literature. Most of the American Writers mainly focused on their culture, politics, economics and status. Some of the writers focused on the harsh reality of America, where most of the writers refused to speak.

The concept “The Mask We Wear” represents this society's pressure towards the LGBTQ+ communities which makes these people keep their identity secret. These people were forced to act like heterosexual in society to avoid discrimination, judgments, or harm. Wearing a mask not only represents hiding one real identity but also speaks about how they suffer psychologically to make them fit for the society where they live. People fail to understand that there is a great difference between Sex and Gender. Gender is not a matter of choice or intentional decision, but it is socially constructed. Gender is flexible, fluid and subject to change is the theory which is developed by the Queer Theory Scholars.

Works of Judith Butler are key to understanding these concepts. According to her “Gender is Performative”. Even though this theory has existed for many years, the majority of the people are not ready to accept this. People of the Society see their feelings as a devilish act, which makes them hide their feelings and act to be heterosexual. We can trace such situations in one of the works of Anni Proulx.

Anni Proulx is an American Writer. She was born in 1935 in Connecticut. She focuses on how their social belief and culture affected the people of the society. Her writing portrays rich details with a keen observation of human flaws, which makes her writing and voice stand unique in America. She mainly focuses on the rural background and the working class life in her works. In 1988, she published *Heart Songs and Other Stories*, which is her first short story collection. In this, she explores the small towns of America and lives of rural people. Following her first

collection she published her second novel *The Shipping News*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, The National Book Award and The Irish International Fiction Prize. In 1997, one of her short stories, *Brokeback Mountain* was published in New York. She won a National Magazine Award and the first of two O. Henry Awards.

Interpersonal Trauma

This short story revolves around two cowboys, who developed secret relationships for life long, and it portrays how they were feared expressing their love towards each other in their society, it is because the view of their society over homosexuality is, it is an evil act and they take serious actions against them, which makes them maintain their true love of each other in secret. The setting of the short story is in western America, which focuses on the love between the protagonists, Ennis Del Mar and Jack. Due to societal penalty and personal shame both are forced to lead a double life. In the very beginning of the story, Proulx states the cruel reality of the society where the protagonist lives. Both characters were well aware of the dangers of their relationships in their society.

“There was these two old guys ranched together down home, Earl and Rich I was what, nine years old and they found earl dead in a irrigation ditch. They’d took a tire iron to him, spurred him up, drug him around by his dick until it pulled off, just bloody pulp” (*Brokeback Mountain*, p.13)

From his childhood memories, Ennis recalls the murder of the two ranchers who are in a homosexual relationship. This particular incident creates a great impact in his mind from his childhood regarding homosexual relationships. While he is well aware of the consequences of being openly gay in his society and that is the main reason why he maintains his relationship with Jack in secret. Ennis often remembers the image of the way the ranchers died, where it shows he has a deep-seated fear that forces him to hide his feelings to be a gay. In the research paper of Mehak Dua he explain this conditions as

“Childhood trauma occurs when a child experiences overwhelming negative experiences in their childhood, experiences that can affect a child are abuse, neglect, violence and this

is also called as interpersonal trauma”(*Relationship between Childhood Trauma and Quality of Life in Adulthood*,p.2)

This Interpersonal Trauma created psychological impact in Ennis from his childhood, where he was not able to come out of the fear even in his adulthood. Where Jack is totally opposite to his fear, he is willing to live in all the possible ways as a couple. He keeps on requesting Ennis that they could build their life together away from the perceiving eyes of the society. But the interpersonal trauma of Ennis creates a view that it is impossible to escape and this conflict of fear makes it impossible to escape from reality. So they decided to get separated and lead their life.

The Mask of Masculinity

Masculinity serves as the major theme in this short story. It plays a critical role in shaping the characters of the individual in the society, where it is displayed through the societal norms of the Ennis where he lives. The Mask We Wear, which shows how the men of the society conform themselves inside the expectations of the society in the name of traditions and social structures. Where this mask represses their emotions and it decides how they should behave in the society, where it totally leads to the burial of their real feelings as like Ennis in this story. Here people start to lose themselves in the name of traditions and norms but unfortunately most of the people are not aware of it, even though they are aware they are not allowed to question it. If they questioned they were addressed as anti- socialist.

“The gender norms of masculinity in the United States of America creates an environment in which men feel they must conform to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, even when that does not benefit them. This creates patterns of violence and untreated mental health issues in men. The culture of “being a man” in the United States impacts men’s mental health” (*The Impact of Masculinity and Gender Norms on Men's Mental Health in the U.S.: A Liter s Mental Health in the U.S.: A Literature Review*, p.17)

During the 20th century in West America heterosexuality represents Masculinity. Such masculinity makes men to be emotionless, silent and strong. As men they should possess these qualities to fit into society. Where Ennis too forced to wear this mask as a man of masculinity. From the moment of his birth, it began from father’s lesson and ended with the societal experience

which keeps on teaching him how man should be. They never consider the feelings of the individuals. There is a fixed road laid down by their forefathers; which they have to follow it without any questions. If they come forward to question those people, they will start to doubt whether they belong to a different gender. Before the 21st century people considered there are only two genders which are masculinity and femininity. People who do not belong to traditional genders, that had been socially constructed, were considered as evils. So they were executed for their identity.

An example of such an incident showed up in this short story of the murder of the two homosexual guys. From the very beginning of the story this mask starts to shape the life of Ennis, where he went to earn money, his decision to marry Alma, and the decision to start a family for the sake of the societal expectation of what a man should be. Where he couldn't show up full commitment to Alma due his love towards Jack. When Jack is totally reversed to Ennis, he is not ready to wear such a mask. He is ready to live openly as a gay in this typical society, but at the end of the story he is no more, where it stands as another example against the homosexuality. Where his tragic end of his fate highlights the dangers of challenging the norms of masculinity. This mask of masculinity led Ennis to be isolated and broken. Where he lost everything, from his free will up to his love.

Marriage Life

“Alma and me’s gettin married in December”(*Brokeback Mountain*, p.7). Ennis' marriage to Alma used to stay as a significant event in this story, where it represents the conflicts between the personal truth and the expectations of the society. He tried to conform himself to societal norms which demanded that he be a heterosexual but he could not, which led to many problems in the family. Heterosexual marriage is seen as an important milestone in the life of a person during the middle 20th century in West American Society. Where its impact can be seen in the highly masculine environment of the Ennis where he lives. Ennis believes that marriage with Alma will help to repress his feelings towards Jack and he believes that he will be safe from the dangers of being openly gay. However Ennis does not feel any emotional attachment with Alma as with Jack.

“A character must deal with his or her own mixed feelings or emotions. Thus, it can be explained that an external conflict is related with an internal conflict and internal conflict can be influenced by an external conflict”(*An Internal and External Conflicts Study on Cormac M – Repository UNAIR*. p.4)

The sacrifices made by Ennis for the norms of the society starts to create some internal conflicts between the sense of duty towards his family and his obvious love towards Jack. The murder of the homosexual guys in his society creates immense barriers in his life to express his real feelings. This burial made him to be a heterosexual which resulted in the internal conflicts in Ennis. Alma discovers that Ennis is a gay, resulting in lots of dilemmas between them. So as a failed man in his marriage, life reminds him the painful truth that he cannot have life again with Jack, because he is no more.

Psychological Imbalance

“Anxiety and fear have been described as common companions to loneliness in later life”(*The Psychology of Loneliness*, p.15). The Anxiety of Ennis towards his wife and love create some psychological imbalance and his fear over the societal norms over homosexual people creates depression in him. Consequently, he found himself in the crossroads, eventually he was shattered therefore he himself detached from the society and found himself in a secluded place. The loneliness of Ennis in the end of the story is palpable. He is totally haunted by the incidents of the past, desperate for redemption or no hope for the future. The loneliness that Ennis undergoes not only due to loss of Jack but also due to his inability to be successful and true to himself. He does not feel only for the loss of Jack, he feels he failed in every aspect of human needs which shattered him.

Role of Shirt

After knowing that Jack is no more, Ennis went to see his parents, where his father knew about their relationship. As per the request of Jack’s mother, he visited his childhood bedroom. This incident remains iconic, which shows the depth of Jack's love towards Ennis. He found some relics. The main thing is the blood stained shirt of Ennis which he lost in the Brokeback Mountain.

This shirt stays as the symbol of their bond and affection towards each other. Jack preserved the shirt safely inside of his own shirt. It represents their unconditional connection between them. Entwined together in a hidden place inside his closet, shows their secret relationship. When Ennis found the shirt the way Jack preserved it, he was emotionally and psychologically affected. These shirts start to bring back his memories and feelings with Jack in Brokeback Mountain. This is the moment Ennis overcomes his fear and removes his mask of Masculinity.

The shirts which placed one inside the others, conveys the powerful image of their attractions over each other. The image of the both shirts, with Jack's inside and the Ennis shirt over it represents how Jack enjoyed the moments with Ennis and how he enjoyed his relationship with him. This openly showcases to us how Ennis stays very close to Jack's heart. The presentation of the shirt in the closet represents both the sweetness and the tragedy of their love, which flourished between them and how they buried it in themselves for the norms of the society, which function in the name of the tradition.

When Ennis found the shirt, he took it with him and decided to keep it with him as a cherished reminder of Jack. At last Ennis hangs the shirt in his own closet. Where he started to preserve it as a token and the symbol of their love. It will keep on speaking loudly about their love and the memories they had together in Brokeback Mountain. Ennis considers it as one of the ways of honouring their love. Jack's preservation of the shirt and after Jack the way Ennis considers it will portray to us that love will exist even after death in this world in a form of objects which carries lots of memories.

This heterosexuality society keeps on saying that LGBTQ is against the role of nature, where they all forgot the basic need of nature. The main need of nature is true love between each other. We can notice such needs missing in this heterosexual society, but they used to project it in the name of traditions, but in reality? It still remains as a question. The love between these homosexual guys, Ennis and Jack which shows us the depth and power of the love. Both used to hide their true love due to societal norms, but in reality the love between them is true and holy. Their love will stand for many decades and speak loudly over this heterosexual society.

Role of Brokeback Mountain

Brokeback Mountain is not only a place that is physically present, it is the place which serves as the symbols of love. It is represented as a sanctuary, where true love of the people was produced from this heterosexual society. Only in this mountain, Ennis and Jack were able to stay true to themselves in some rare opportunities. They feel free from the oppressive constraints that are built by this society that defines their daily lives. While they are in the isolation at this mountain they have the freedom to openly express their affection for one another, which is not at all possible outside of this mountain. Nevertheless, even in this isolated place they have the fear towards the norms of the society which had straight actions against homosexuality. But this mountain helps them to overcome the barriers that are laid by this society in the name of masculinity and heterosexuality which keeps on dominating their lives and makes them hide their true identity through pressure in the name of traditions.

Traditions which are constructed to make people comfortable in the society where they live, but later these traditions were used by the superior over minors to control their minds and their lives. These cultures can be seen even in this 21st century. Tradition may change and need to change from generation to generation for the comfort of the people. Before our freedom, as per traditions, India women are fit only to take care of family and what about today? So suppressing people in the name of tradition is the act of controlling them. Such conditions are reflected in this story, the society where Ennis and Jack live strictly following the rule of masculinity, where there is no respect or freedom for an individual to express their views. They have to follow it, there should be no rejections.

Brokeback Mountain is the place where their relationships started and it gave them an opportunity to stay for themselves. This is the place where the rule of the society does not apply and their love for each flourished peacefully and they are able to express openly to each other without any fear. In this place, none of the judgments of the society can reach them and they are in the hands of nature where no traditions or norms can control them. Due to the societal norms both Ennis and Jack relationship were maintained in secret and they meet only occasionally, which reduces the affections between them in the middle of the story. This shows the inevitable decline of love due to the pressure of societal norms and time. After the death of Jack this mountain

became the testament for Ennis which carries the true nature of love. So this mountain is portrayed as the sacred space where one can be true to himself, where none of the rules given by this society are applicable.

That's the reason Ennis considered this mountain as a sacred place, where he goes for pilgrimage to this mountain to reconnect his memories with Jack which is preserved by nature. This mountain became the great chapter in the life of Ennis which took the major part that constructed his own feelings. So it acts as the symbol of love, freedom and authenticity, where Ennis and Jack have freedom to be true to themselves.

Conclusion

Annie Proulx's short story shows us how this heterosexual society makes people wear masks in the name of masculinity, where people are trained to hide their true identity and wear a fake identity according to the norms of the society. Society imposes rules on people in the name of tradition which keeps on suppressing them. The tradition that we have is the fixed road which guides us in a single way of how we need to travel in the journey of life. The way the traditions are constructed will not allow people to think of their own, where they used to follow without knowing the reason. In such a way, we are all only trained up with only two types of genders, so they consider it is the rule of nature. Even the people who belong to the heterosexual community wear these masks due to societal pressure over them. Through this article one of the mysteries is solved that the societal pressure that is given by this heterosexual society in the name of tradition makes people hide their real identity and force them to wear a fake mask that makes them fit for this society. People are losing themselves to make them self-identified in this society.

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