



Lily Search for Sexual Identity in Malinda Lo's Last Night at the Telegraph Club

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Abstract: This study explores the journey of sexual identity discovery in Malinda Lo's novel *Last Night at The Telegraph Club*, focusing on the main character Lily, a Chinese American teenager in the 1950s. The writer of this study used qualitative and descriptive research methods to examine Lily's experiences. By employing Vivienne Cass's model of six stages of homosexual identity formation and applies queer theory as a means for doing queer criticism. However, in this study, only five stages are found in the main character's journey, as Lily does not reach the stage of pride due to external rejections and societal pressures. This study highlights the intersection of cultural expectations and sexual identity, illustrating the importance of supportive communities on self-acceptance. Lily's story portrays the ongoing challenges faced by homosexual individuals in conservative societies, emphasizing the need for broader societal acceptance and change. Through this research, the study aims to contribute to the understanding of sexual identity development and the critical importance of supportive environments for homosexual individuals.

Keywords: *homosexuality, homosexual identity development, sexual identity, queer criticism*

INTRODUCTION

Sexuality involves our deep personal feelings and physical experiences. We know a lot about the physical aspects of sex and reproduction, but our understanding of how social processes shape sexual identity is less comprehensive. Researchers often define "sexual identity" as being attracted to the same sex, opposite sex, or both sexes. However, Tasker & Wren (2002:315) explain that sexual identity is more complex and includes biological factors, gender roles, and sociocultural influences. Sexual identity is important because it affects a person's sexual behavior and how they express their sexuality. Society's prejudices and expectations can pressure individuals to conform to certain norms, which can impact how they understand and express their sexuality. During our younger years, peer groups become important as young people seek acceptance and validation from their friends. The interactions and shared experiences within these groups can influence individual views on sexuality (Peçi, 2017).

Our society is influenced by various expressions of sexual identity and behavior. Sexual identity is often viewed as a personal and sensitive topic, and many people prefer to keep it private. For some, openly discussing their sexual identity is seen as inappropriate or unacceptable, especially if it does not align with traditional societal norms. Unfortunately, expressions of sexual identity, especially within the homosexual community, often face negative perceptions (Flores, 2019:5). These societal biases can make it difficult for individuals to accept and understand differences among people. As a result, individuals particularly in the homosexual community, may find it challenging to understand and define their own sexual identity, similar to solving a puzzle. Historically, this community has faced many difficulties in dealing with societal expectations and biases about sexual behavior.

"Last Night at The Telegraph Club" is a novel about a seventeen-year-old girl named Lily who is exploring her sexuality. At the age of thirteen, she first felt an unusual attraction to women, which is mentioned in the prologue. During the Miss Chinatown event, she sees a group of Chinese girls in glamorous bathing suits and makeup, which makes her feel uneasy. As time goes by, Lily is still unsure about her sexuality until she meets Kathleen Miller. Their journey takes an unexpected turn when they visit the Telegraph Club, a lesbian bar that leads into many events unfold each chapter after the Telegraph Club becomes a safe place for Lily. Parents, friends, and even strangers become part of Lily and Kathleen's journey of self-discovery as they navigate their lives as young adults.

In short, the researcher is interested in analyzing Malinda Lo's Last Night at the Telegraph Club because sexual identity development as a homosexual is reflected in the novel. Homosexuality is still unacceptable and sensitive topic aspect in societies. People believe that love is just between man and woman, while Lily experiences in the Last Night at the Telegraph Club talks about the other side of a sexual identity and relationship. Using Cass's model for understanding how people discover their sexual identity can be very helpful. She divides it into six stages: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis (Cass, 1979:222). The primary objective is to analyze how the main character, Lily, progresses through these six stages and gains acceptance in her identity. Through this analysis, the writer intends to illustrate that interactions with others can influence one's perception of their own sexual identity and how it is portrayed in the novel.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of sexual identity has been explored a lot in different academic fields, especially in literature. However, there is not much literature about how homosexual identity development in literary works. It is important to note that this topic has not been researched as much as other issues.

One of the researchers are Windriani and Pramesti (2021) discuss queer identity development in their study. They examined the causes and effects of the main character's homosexuality in the novel "Call Me By Your Name." The study looks at how homosexuality is shown in the novel, focusing on Elio, a high school student who admires his father's assistant. The researchers emphasize that Elio's desires, feeds by his imagination and teenage hormones, are key factors in shaping his homosexuality. Additionally, Elio's open-minded family, who never sees queer individuals as socially unacceptable, significantly influences his development. The study also reveals Elio's struggle to accept his own feelings, as he finds the situation too taboo and tries to suppress

his emotions despite the pain it causes. The results suggest that the author wants readers to understand that love in homosexuality is natural. The study also highlights the challenges faced by homosexual individuals, as it remains a taboo topic even with a supportive family and friends.

In another study by Adji (2021) titled "Heteronormative Pressure Against Gay Students in Brent Hartinger's *Geography Club*," the researcher discusses how heteronormative pressure influences the main character to hide his true sexual identity. The main character, Russell, knows he is gay from the start but understands that revealing his homosexuality could lead to serious consequences like rejection from his peers or bullying. As a result, he keeps his true sexual identity hidden. The researcher states that this reflects society's inability to accept sexualities other than heterosexuality. The study also shows that homosexual individuals feel forced to hide their true identity and feelings due to heteronormative pressure, adding valuable information to the broader conversation on this topic.

One aspect that distinguishes this research from the studies mentioned earlier is that it solely relies on Cass' Homosexual Identity Formation framework, considering both gender and ethnicity, as Lily, the main character, lives between two cultures. This study uses Cass' framework to explore how Lily, in the novel *Last Night at The Telegraph Club*," goes through the stages of homosexual identity development. Additionally, Lily faces similar challenges to the characters in the previous studies. She moves through the different stages of developing a homosexual identity and eventually becomes certain about her identity.

METHOD

This research used descriptive qualitative research to analyze Malinda Lo's *Last Night at The Telegraph Club*, as described by Hancock (2006:7) the focus is on developing explanations for social phenomena. To analyze the homosexuality in the novel, this study also take queer theory as a means for doing queer criticism (Jagose, 1996:6). The primary data source was the novel *Last Night at The Telegraph Club* authored by Malinda Lo as a narrative aspects for the analysis and the secondary data such as journal articles, books, and online resources added to provide to support comprehensive study. The researcher then highlighted and marked evidence relevant to the main issue – the development of homosexual identity in the character. The collected data were then classified with the stages characteristic of homosexual identity formation by Cass then analyzed and interpreted using the six stages of homosexual identity formation

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Lily's Sexual Development

The process of discovering one's sexual identity is one of the challenging issues within the homosexual community, especially if it is neglected from the childhood as Lily's portrays in the novel. Thus, to analyze this theme, the writer uses homosexual identity formation by Vivienne Cass. The framework provides guidance for understanding how an individual decision to embracing a homosexual identity (Cass, 1979:235)

1.1 Identity Confusion

In the novel *Last Night at The Telegraph Club*, the main character, Lily, is portrayed as a Chinese American girl who follows traditional gender roles.

Traditionally, gender roles within Chinese American communities emphasized modesty, passive behavior, and seen as caretakers and homemakers to societal and familial expectations, particularly for woman (Cheung, 2014). In the prologue, when she was 13, she experiences the awakening of her sexuality for the first time when she sees a group of Miss Chinatown contestants in town. Lily narrates feeling uncomfortable and needing to look away as she experiences a shrinking feeling inside her (Lo, 2021:13). As Lily grows older, at the age of 17, she becomes interested in a male impersonator she sees in a flyer. She keeps the flyer in her room and it fuels her imagination. This shows that Lily has always been uncomfortable seeing women, but she is also interested in exploring her feelings. Lily's internal conflict of her attraction to women clashes with cultural expectations, causing confusion and fear of rejection with herself and feels confused about her sexual identity. In Lily's case, she chooses to further develop her identity because of her curiosity and the discomfort she has felt since she was 13. When Lily meets Kathleen, who is a lesbian and will later help her in confirming her homosexual identity. This marks the beginning of Lily's journey.

"A question hovered in the back of her throat, tangled up with the paralyzing sensation of being on the cusp of connection. She couldn't put it into words" (Lo, 2021:52)

1.2 Identity Comparison

In the novel, Lily's conversations with Kathleen about the lesbian things illustrate her struggle to slowly reveal her true identity. For example, she hesitates to use the term "lesbian," feeling that the word itself can cause herself in danger. Her cautious approach is an attempt to test whether Kathleen shares her sexual orientation while managing her self-image.

"They kissed each other," she reported, and saying it out loud was thrilling; it made her blush. And yet she couldn't say the word the book had used to describe those kinds of girls: lesbian. The word felt dangerous, and also powerful, as if uttering it would summon someone or something—a policeman to arrest them for saying that word, or even worse, a real-life lesbian herself. She glanced at Kathleen sideways and asked, "Have you ever known any girls . . . like that?" (Lo, 2021:82)

Furthermore, Lily's internal struggle is further highlighted in her moment of vulnerability with Kathleen. The part where "... Lily felt as if her thoughts must be written in plain English on her face. "Are you like the girls in the book too? Because I think I am"" (Lo, 2021:89) following by the conversation where Lily straightly asked about Telegraph club that known as lesbian bar or male impersonators performed to Kathleen

1.3 Identity Tolerance

This stage marks a significant shift in an individual's self-image, moving more towards a homosexual identity and distancing slightly from a heterosexual one (Cass, 1979:229). To ease their doubts, individuals connect with others who may have similar experiences. According to Cass, individuals attempt to integrate with the homosexual subculture to reduce feelings of doubt and alienation (Cass, 1979:229). This is depicted in the novel when Lily creates a fake ID to enter the Telegraph Club, a lesbian club (Lo, 2021:97). Lily's purpose may have two meanings: witnessing male impersonators who influenced her sexuality and exploring the lesbian subculture to relieve her doubts. As Lily becomes more comfortable in the club, her perception of homosexuality shifts, and she begins to see it as an acceptable part of her identity.

Lily's growing comfort is reflected in her interactions with Kathleen, portraying her as a safe place for Lily. "She angled the Telegraph Club ad to better catch the light from her bedside lamp. The picture was so familiar... A spark of recognition, or a glow of hope" (Lo, 2021:113). Lily's comfort in the club and her interactions with Kathleen signify a shift in her internal struggle. Her increasing comfort and intensity of emotions are evident when she seeks reassurance from Kathleen, reflecting her growing boldness in discovering her sexuality. "I want to go again," she said. She watched a smile rise from Kath's mouth to her eyes" (Lo, 2021:147).

At last, Lily confesses her feelings to Kathleen due to her frustration. "No, I have feelings for you." Her words came out too loud—they seemed to reverberate in the empty street" (Lo, 2021:224). The quote shows Lily's emotions towards Kathleen and marks the beginning of her acceptance of her identity.

"She didn't know how long they kissed—not long enough—but at one point Kath drew back to take a breath, and Lily opened her eyes and saw to her right the dim glow of the street beyond their dark alley. She realized with a start what she was doing and where she was doing it and whom she was doing it with, and she knew she should feel ashamed, but all she felt was the heaving of Kath's chest against hers, and the tenderness of her lips where Kath had kissed her." (Lo, 2021:226)

1.4 Identity Acceptance

In the previous stage, Lily begins to accept her homosexual identity, especially when she confides in her friend, Kathleen. This leads to the next stage, identity acceptance, where she fully embraces being homosexual. The uncertainties from earlier start to fade away. According to Coleman, individuals at this stage see themselves as fully functioning members of society, showing openness, warmth, politeness, and attentiveness. This brings a new sense of self and the exploration of new social circles and deeper connections (Coleman, 1982).

In society, there are two opinions: one that accepts homosexuality openly and another that sees it as a private matter (Cass, 1979:231). As a result,

individuals may choose to pass as heterosexual, limit contact, or selectively disclose their sexual identity. The interactions with other homosexuals from the previous stage greatly influence this stage. Some may continue to pass as heterosexual, while others come out to trusted individuals, and some openly embrace their identity (L. D. Patton et al., 2016).

Lily decides not to reveal her sexual identity to her heterosexual friends, knowing that even a slight mention could put her in danger. She navigates life within both the homosexual community and heterosexual society, feeling a shift within herself despite seeming unchanged after kissing Kathleen.

“They only saw each other at school—or on the nights they went to the Telegraph Club. In retrospect, it seemed so obvious that their friendship had always carried the added weight of something that neither of them was equipped to address openly. It was easier and safer to pretend that their friendship was merely a casual one. But the time for pretending was over, and Lily was painfully aware of the responsibility that came with admitting how they felt about each other. It was risky to share this secret” (Lo, 2021:229).

As Lily and Kathleen kiss and start a relationship, they discuss their relationship dynamics and explore their sexual intimacy, growing closer. This shows Lily's acceptance of her lesbian identity, unbothered by earlier awkwardness and confusion, even though she does not openly disclose her identity. Lily's affection for Kathleen is clear in various parts of the story, including their shared intimate experiences. These moments show Lily's acceptance of her lesbian identity and her love for Kathleen, while also showing her reluctance to reveal her sexual identity.

“It felt different this time—weighted. They were making this choice together, and Lily felt the seriousness with which Kath touched her. It was extraordinary, Lily thought. There was nothing like this in the world. How different this was from when Lily was alone in her room. How different, and how much more: an overflowing amount of more..... Lily's cheek, and Lily stroked her hand over Kath's hair tenderly, feeling impossibly close to her. How precious she was, and how miraculous” (Lo, 2021:244).

1.5 Identity Synthesis

The analysis reveals that Lily does not go through the stage of identity pride as she does not feel proud of her homosexual identity. The heterosexuals around her show hatred and disapproval. Her mother and best friend react with anger and disbelief when they learn the truth from Lily. The identity synthesis stage signifies the individual's acceptance of their differences as a homosexual in contrast to heterosexuals. Increased interactions with supportive individuals, both homosexual and heterosexual, bring up a positive outlook. The individual does not differentiate their self-image in public and private things, recognizing the support they receive from their environment (Cass, 1979:234). This stage typically brings strong self-esteem, but not for Lily.

At the beginning of the story, Lily has low self-esteem due to her confusion about her sexual identity. This confusion begins when she feels

attracted to the Miss Chinatown contestants, conflicting with societal and familial expectations as a Chinese American girl. Traditional gender roles and heteronormative behaviors make her feel ashamed and secretive, further lowering her self-esteem. She feels isolated, knowing her feelings are not socially acceptable, leading to a negative self-view.

As the novel progresses, Lily's self-esteem improves, especially when she starts visiting the Telegraph Club, a homosexual bar. This space gives her a sense of community and acceptance. Here, Lily meets people like her and starts feeling less alone. Her interactions at the club and her relationship with Kathleen help her see that her feelings are valid. However, Lily still faces significant external pressures from society and her family. Each step toward self-acceptance is met with risks of rejection and alienation, sometimes causing setbacks in her self-esteem.

Ultimately, Kathleen is caught by the authorities, and Lily tries to hide the truth of their relationship, fearing societal judgment. The cultural and generational gap between Lily and her parents worsens the situation. Her parents view her homosexuality as shameful, clashing with cultural norms and family values. This lack of acceptance forces Lily to move to another city with her aunt, hoping she might revert to being straight.

"Lily watched the city of Oakland roll by, brick buildings and chimney stacks and the chrome glint of crawling traffic. She wondered where Kath was. She wondered if Kath could sense her, sitting here on this train as it took her away. Perhaps it was possible if she closed her eyes and sent out her thoughts along the steel track like a message along a telegraph wire. I love you. I love you." (Lo, 2021:322)

Despite the challenges, Lily remains true to herself, fully accepting her identity and not hiding it anymore. She stands strong, believing in herself even when facing rejection. She does not regret the difficult times with Kathleen and is thankful for discovering her sexual identity. Lily hopes to reunite with Kathleen and continue their relationship if possible. Through her experiences, Lily has learned to accept herself and find inner peace, even when society rejects her.

2. Lily's Sexual Identity Describes in Last Night at the Telegraph Club

The title "Last Night at the Telegraph Club" has a symbolic meaning in the novel. The "Telegraph Club" refers to a fictional place in 1950s Chinatown, Chicago. During this time, underground clubs and bars were important safe spaces for marginalized groups, including homosexual individuals. These places provided a sense of community and allowed people to express their true identities, though they had to do so secretly due to societal and legal restrictions.

The phrase "last night" suggests the fleeting nature of time spent at the Telegraph Club. For the characters, these gatherings are precious but brief moments of authenticity and freedom in a world that forces them to hide who they are. Each visit to the club might feel like the last chance for true connection and acceptance before returning to the everyday restrictions they face. Additionally, "last night" evokes feelings of nostalgia and remembrance. As the characters face

life's challenges and relationships, their moments at the Telegraph Club become cherished memories that shape their self-perceptions and understanding of their place in society.

In the novel, the 1950s setting highlights the strict rules around heterosexual identities and roles, especially in traditional communities like Chinatown. During this time, being homosexual was not only frowned upon but also illegal, forcing many to hide their true identities to avoid punishment (Rivera & D'Emilio, 1984). This fear made gay bars rare safe havens for the community. Lily, an American Chinese girl, cannot be as open as Kathleen, a white girl, due to cultural norms promoting shame and self-doubt. This forced Lily to hide her identity to avoid being labeled as abnormal, creating a cycle of hiding and holding back. The author shows how Lily struggled with feelings of shame and self-doubt about her sexual identity. Unable to share her true feelings with family or friends, Lily lived in constant fear of being exposed, knowing that revealing her true self could lead to serious consequences.

Lily found brief moments of relief at the Telegraph Club and other homosexual bars, which offered an escape from constant scrutiny and judgment. These bars were more than social places; they were havens where people with different sexual identities could feel a sense of belonging and acceptance. However, the safety of these spaces was always fragile, with raids and police harassment adding another layer of fear to Lily's life. Tragically, Lily's worst fears came true when her parents discovered her homosexuality. Overwhelmed by shame, her parents reacted with anger and forced Lily to leave Chinatown and cut all ties with her community. This expulsion highlighted the destructive impact of societal attitudes and legal restrictions on homosexual individuals and underscored the need for social change.

Despite these hardships, Lily's story is one of resilience. She continued to search for acceptance and a place where she could be herself, despite rejection and isolation. Her journey underscores the importance of creating inclusive and accepting communities where everyone can live openly and authentically without fear of persecution. Through Lily's story, the novel highlights the challenges faced by homosexual individuals in the past and the ongoing fight for equality and acceptance today.

CONCLUSION

Being different, especially having a different sexual identity from societal norms, is often seen as wrong. The homosexual community has historically faced many challenges in gaining acceptance, affecting adolescents like Lily in *"Last Night at the Telegraph Club"* by Malinda Lo. Lily, the main character, struggles to accept her sexual identity from the age of 13.

In *"Last Night at the Telegraph Club,"* Lily's journey to discover her identity as a homosexual is a story of self-acceptance and resilience. The novel shows Lily's process of developing her homosexual identity until she becomes sure of it. Using Cass's framework for homosexual identity development, which includes six stages: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis, we see that Lily does not go through the stage of identity pride. She never fully feels confident in her homosexual identity due to societal pressures and personal insecurities. From analyzing Lily's sexual development, we can identify three

major influences on her homosexual identity. First, her own perceptions and early attractions shape her confusion and curiosity about her sexuality. Second, her relationship with Kathleen, a classmate rumored to be a lesbian, provides a safe space for Lily to explore her feelings and gain confidence. Third, the Telegraph Club offers a sense of community and belonging, allowing Lily to witness and participate in a community that normalizes her experiences and desires.

The novel portrays Lily's struggle with her sexual identity through her interactions with Kathleen and the broader homosexual community at the Telegraph Club. Despite gradually accepting her identity, Lily is cautious about revealing it to her family and the heterosexual society. She faces strong rejection from both society and her family, making her journey even harder. This rejection highlights the harsh reality for homosexual people in a conservative time, hurting Lily's self-esteem and forcing her to figure out her identity on her own. This caution reflects the fear and stigma surrounding homosexuality in the 1950s, emphasizing the significant emotional and psychological effects on individuals like Lily.

In the end, Lily's story in "Last Night at the Telegraph Club" shows the courage to be true to oneself despite having a homosexual identity and facing societal rejection. Her journey portrays the reality that we cannot choose our sexual identity and highlights the difficulties of developing a homosexual identity. It also emphasizes the critical importance of supportive environments for self-acceptance. Lily's experiences remind us of the ongoing struggles faced by homosexual individuals and the need for greater acceptance and change in society. This novel inspires us to continue working toward a world where everyone is accepted for who they are.

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