

Original Paper

The L Word, the Television Series: Analysis of Its Lesbian

Subjectivity

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Abstract

In January 2004, Showtime, a pay cable network, launched the first-ever lesbian-themed serial drama, The L Word, which boldly showed lesbians' sex life and brought lesbian discourse into the narrative center of queer-themed series. This essay tries to analyze how The L Word presented lesbian subjectivity through the image as well as body construction, and narrative and also discusses some arguments towards the lesbian body presentation in The L Word.

Keywords

the l word, lesbian, lesbian subjectivity, female subjectivity, television series, lesbian discourse, bodily writing, gaze

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, with gay liberation movements and the sitcom lead character Ellen Morgan coming out in 1997 (Note 1), the atmosphere toward queer-themed shows became more and more embracing (Note 2). From the first gay kiss in *EastEnders* to a whole series about gay life, *Queer as Folk* (1999-2005), gay people have gradually become regular sightings in TV dramas. After the American version of *Queer as Folk* got successful in America, Ilene Chaiken, who later became the director, scriptwriter as well as executive producer of *The L Word*, pitched her idea for a lesbian ensemble drama to a Showtime executive and succeeded (ibid.), bringing the female queer community into the center of the narrative discourse in queer-themed television series.

Showtime's television series *The L Word* (2004-2009) is the first lesbian-themed drama series with immense popularity in the history of American television series (Note 3). The lesbian community is constructed as the subject of narrative with female subjectivity in *The L Word*, in which the life of

lesbians in Los Angeles including but not limited to their sex, love, and careers are presented. While *The L Word* was praised for its pioneering significance in presenting lesbian images and subjectivity in television drama and offering an enlightenment spirit to later queer-themed television series, the broadcasting of the show provoked intense discussions on the presentation of lesbian sex and their bodies (Note 4). Therefore, this essay aims to analyze how *The L Word* showed lesbian subjectivity through rebellion in the narrative and the presentation of lesbian bodies, and discuss some criticism of it.

2. Deconstruct and Rebel Against the Patriarchy

One of the obvious ways that *The L Word* presented lesbian subjectivity and took lesbian discourse into the narrative center is to deconstruct the male image and rebelling the heterosexual or patriarchal norm in the story.

2.1 Image Construction

Queer theory seeks to construct a real sense of broad equality against the gendered politics and power system that oppress the queer community (Note 5). As an important part of Queer theory, post-feminism states that the traditional established relationship between male and female and the patriarchal family is the basis for the patriarchal society's existence, which fundamentally excludes females from the power system and makes women subordinate to men as non-existent non-man (Note 6). According to Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, "He" is the "Subject" and the "Absolute", while "She" exists as the "other" (Note 7). Thus, the core spirit of queer-themed television series is the rebellion against the patriarchal society with heterosexual norms (Note 8).

However, the dominant role of men in society still existed in queer-themed dramas, of which producers are mainly heterosexual and homosexual males. It was not until the lesbian producer Ilene Chaiken made *The L Word* that lesbian discourse and subjectivity were at the center of the narrative (ibid.).

Before *The L Word* appeared, lesbians as females were still constructed as the subordinate and passive "other", being belittled to be laughed at. In the queer-themed sitcom *Will & Grace*, lesbian images were presented as clumsy and pot-bellied to accentuate the male gay image as a sophisticated and intelligent modern yuppie (ibid.). However, *The L Word* constructed its lesbian characters variously as active and confident with independent and thoughtful minds. Though not all of the lesbian characters in *The L Word* are affluent superiors like Bette Porter and Helena Peabody, the former is the director of California Arts Center and the latter is a billionaire heiress, most lesbian characters advance their lives through their own abilities, not like the patriarchal narrative in which women are either service or punished for having successful careers. The life change of Tina Kennard also well showed lesbian independence and subjectivity in the story. Before giving up her career to prepare for pregnancy with Bette, Tina was a successful film producer. After her relationships with Bette and later with her ex-husband fell apart, Tina

realized the importance of having her autonomy and started to assert herself instead of being controlled and determined by her romantic partners, and she rebuilt her successful career in Hollywood eventually. As a female image, Tina left subordinating to anyone, neither to the lesbian female nor to the heterosexual male, and became a true “person” who is equal to all males and females, heterosexuals and homosexuals, which rebelled against patriarchy’s limiting or destroying the label of “career women”. Meanwhile, male characters in *The L Word* are constructed as assistants and other inessential or downgraded roles, such as assistants of Bette and Helena.

The main way of constructing the queer community into the absolute center of narrative discourse is to place hegemonic heterosexual patriarchal norms into subordination, absence, and even deconstruction (Note 9). It is noticeable that the presentation of the “father” image in *The L Word* is marginalized, which could be explained by Judith Butler’s theory of performativity that gender and sex are performative, non-natural, and socially constructed in parodic contexts (Note 10). Shane is a tomboy in *The L Word* who had sex with numerous people but tended to avoid being in a relationship. Due to the absence of her father in childhood, Shane was afraid of failing others, falling in love with others, and being betrayed. Shane tended to fall in love with mature married middle-aged women, who made up for the lack of Shane’s feelings of parents in her childhood. When Shane decided to get married to her girlfriend, she caught her father cheating, and then Shane escaped from her own wedding because her father insisted that he and Shane were alike and that they could never be faithful. When it comes to intimate relationships, Shane chose to escape again and again, and those behaviors were more or less related to her father. The absence of patriarchy influences the parodic contexts of lesbian characters’ gender performance in certain fields. Additionally, Bette’s father was presented as a selfish and cold father who always refused to acknowledge and disrespected Bette’s relationship with Tina for over 8 years, and his daughter’s pursuit of freedom and happiness meant nothing to him. When lesbian characters gathered to choose a word to describe their fathers, such as invisible, dying and distant, those words directly expressed *The L Word*’s notion of deconstructing the patriarchal norms in the family that the role of “father” is no longer the symbol of authority. *The L Word* deconstructs the centrality of patriarchy in the family system through the absence of paternity and the degradation of father images.

2.2 Lesbian Discourse Construction & Conscious Reflection

Lesbian subjectivity was also presented by showing lesbian characters’ reflections on certain events in *The L Word*. When Jenny listens to her straight male classmate reading his writing, in which he turns all the women into nameless, faceless, body part whores, Jenny sharply points out that the reason why he belittles the sex act between women by turning it into pornography is that men can’t handle the fact that these women can have the amazing, beautiful and mind-blowing orgasm without a cock (Note 11). Lesbians’ accusation and exposure to the male gaze at lesbians is expressed through the characters’ mouths. As a writer, Jenny always writes things reflecting tightly on her feelings and her experience

with self-awareness. According to Hélène Cixous, who promoted bodily writing, women must write themselves and let the body be heard (Note 12). Jenny's writing about her pain, desire, and body feelings constructs a lesbian discourse, rebelling against the phallogocentric discourse. After Jenny finds her straight male roommate secretly recording their lesbian private lives through hidden cameras for weeks, which stimulates her childhood memory of being sexually violated by her stepfather, she started to look at her family photos, asking her grandma about how her Jewish family members being tortured in the Nazi concentration camp with very descriptive questions that full of specific feelings on bodies, which shows Jenny's inner feelings after being violated again, reflecting female subjectivity consciousness on their bodies. Later, she goes to a strip club, showing her body completely nude on the stage, men below all yell at her with twisted faces and widely opened mouths, as if they would gobble up her. When Shane asks why Jenny did that, Jenny says it's important to herself because "it's my fucking choice when I take off my top, my pants and show my breasts and pussy. I stop when I want to stop. It makes me feel good because I'm in charge." (Note 13) This reminds her of all the violating things that have happened to her and this time at least she can have autonomy. Leaving Jenny's self-destructive tendencies aside, when Jenny stands nudely in front of men and presents her body for the male gaze, she is never a woman being objectified because she's exploring her experience or feelings about her body with her subjectivity consciousness. Seems like *The L Word* merely presented Jenny as a toy being sexualized by males, which is one of the criticisms of *The L Word* (Note 14), while this essay wants to state that Jenny is also scorning men who can only objectify and sexualize females' bodies. When subjectivity is forced to be violated, constantly feeling and reflecting on one's self that is objectified and sexualized is also a representation of subjectivity.

When Jenny's straight male roommate Mark seeks her forgiveness, Jenny's words have well shown female subjectivity even if females are forced to become the "Other" in the story. From a lesbian's perspective, Shane forgives Mark because she knows how rare it is to have a heterosexual male's understanding of lesbians. While Jenny stands from a women's perspective, "It's not a fucking woman's job to be consumed and invaded and spat out so that some fucking man can evolve." (Note 15) These words also express the female or lesbian community's predicament in that they hope for understanding and equality, but they know that is difficult to achieve in reality. Later in the story, Jenny's script about lesbian life being changed to a heterosexual ending also reflects the lesbian community's realistic predicament.

3. Lesbian Bodies in Sex Presentation

There are lots of sex scenes in *The L Word*, where lesbians' bodies are not only the subject of desire but also the object of desire. At the beginning of *The L Word*'s first season, Jenny sees Shane and his girlfriends naturally taking off their clothes and making love in the pool. Their private parts are

straightly exposed to the camera, to Jenny, to the audience, and especially to the gaze of heterosexual audiences. The bold presentation of bodies in having sex challenges the social mainstream acceptance of sex acts on the screen, especially bodies presented in sexual minorities' sex acts. However, some sex scenes are decried by some feminists as soft porn, deliberately titillating the heterosexual male audience (Note 16). Criticism argues that in *The L Word's* opening representation of lesbian sex which has been mentioned above, at that time Jenny was a heterosexual woman, and the audience is forced to spy on Jenny spying on lesbian sex, which is a reified heterosexual gaze for male audiences (Note 17). While critics have argued that some sex scenes are presented through the male gaze for heterosexual audiences' pleasure, this essay states that *The L Word's* presentation of lesbian bodies gratifies both heterosexual and queer audiences. It can't be merely explained as falling into the trap of a heterosexual constructed perspective, because its way of presenting lesbian sex not only makes mainstream heterosexual audiences gradually understand "the other" in their eyes but also provides the opportunity for lesbian audiences to recognize themselves or the community they belong to through the fantasy of authenticity (Note 18). Therefore, *The L Word's* sex scenes can also be seen as bodies presented under the lesbian gaze for lesbian audiences' pleasure. Additionally, lesbians in *The L Word* can freely talk about sex life and nicknames they give to the pussy at the breakfast table. Moreover, to avoid the male-gaze way of consuming and objectifying lesbian bodies, *The L Word* uses camera movement to interrupt the pleasure of gaze, deconstructing the power relationship of gaze. When Jenny and Mark chat behind the fence, Mark takes a final peer through the fence at the naked girls playing in the pool, which is not shown from a male gaze, instead, audiences see Jenny hit him: "Don't look". Mark as a heterosexual male gaze, initially voyeurs lesbian sex life through hidden cameras. But later in the story, when Shane brings girls into her bedroom, the image Mark zooms in on is not lesbians who are making love, instead, he is concerned about Shane sitting in the corner. It's presented through the behavior change of the heterosexual male to rebel against objectifying lesbians and concern about them as the real "human" instead of gazing at them as sexualized spectacles for pleasure.

4. Conclusion

As the first television series to revolve around a group of lesbian characters, *The L Word* boldly presented lesbian subjectivity by rebelling against patriarchy and reflecting lesbians' body consciousness. Though it received some criticism, it is undoubted that it brought lesbian discourse into the narrative center of queer-themed series through lesbian subjectivity construction with great significance.

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Notes

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