

Hentai vs. Harlequin: A Philosophical Critic towards Pornography

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Abstract

This short paper will analyze the values behind two distinctive erotic texts, Hentai and Harlequin-styled romance, seen from literary criticism point of view. As the introduction, a glance on how porn laws define pornography will be presented. Then the discussion will be displayed in two different subtitles, each is dedicated to each genre. Lastly, a conclusion is given to provoke further thinking.

Keywords: porn laws, hentai, harlequin-styled romance, feminism, male gaze

Introduction

Although most people easily refer pornography into something sexually explicit and arousing, the definition of pornography is not something simple to decide.

“Pornography is a term in popular use but can also be a legal term. For the purposes of simplicity in the present discussion, pornography is broadly defined as any sexually explicit material primarily developed or produced to arouse sexual interest or provide erotic pleasure. It can be so-called soft-core or hard-core and it can extend from pin-ups which might be offensive to XXX fetish or materials involving children (so-called ‘child-porn’).” (Diamond, 1999)

On the Planned Legislature of Republic Indonesia Regarding Pornography in Chapter, Pornography is defined as:

“Pornography is sexual material that is made by humans by form of picture, sketch, illustration, photo, writings, vocalizations, sounds, moving picture, animations, cartoon, rhymes/poems/prose/verse, lewd sexual gestures (straddling, blowing kisses, miming oral sex), eurhythmics or lewdness deliberately disguised as double entendre communications [simulated sexual acts] - communicated or transmitted via media communications and/ or public shows/ exhibits/ performances [implied: live] that arouses sexual propensities/desires/longings [implied: undesirable] and/or contravenes community ethics/decency/ morality [one word: kesusilaan].”

Shortly speaking, pornography is built on the basis of sexual arousal. A text is call porn if it is sexually arousing. However, problems might appear; for instance, what could be defined as sexually arousing? How do we define sexual arousal? What kind of sexual arousal is being referred?

***Hentai*, Pervert Porn for Heretics**

It is interesting to know that even though *Hentai* had become a superb representative characterizing Japanese literature; this category has never been discussed in the English studies of *manga* and anime. Perhaps it is because of *Hentai*'s absurdity and sexually offensiveness, but perhaps also due to the lack of understanding towards its significance of the realm of world literature. For centuries, in the world of English Literature, pornographic and erotic texts had never been granted as serious literary production, yet they have always become the most well spread and consumed readings. Despite its status as illegal and unacceptable in many regions of human habitats, still pornographic and erotic texts can be found in almost every civilization and culture around the world.

As a common consensus, the term '*hentai*' itself in Japanese language is often translated into 'pervert' or 'sexually abnormal'. Japanese dictionary defines of *hentai* in three meanings: change of form or shape; an abbreviation for '*hentai seiyoku*'; metamorphosis (as in the change from caterpillar to butterfly or in a chemical reaction).

"Since the Meiji period the use of the term *hentai* has had a parallel history in both science and psychology but the sense that *hentai* communicates of something being unusual or abnormal comes from the latter. It was first used in the middle of the Meiji period in the context of the developing science of psychology to describe disorders such as hysteria as well as to refer to paranormal abilities such as telepathy and hypnosis." (McLelland, 2005)

Shortly speaking, *hentai* would be generalized as a Japanese cultural based-erotic text presenting explicit and abnormal sexual activities to arouse sexual desire.

There are many categories within the framework of abnormal sexuality. American Psychiatric Association (APA) in their Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV TM) mentions three categories under the roof of sexual disorders and problems; they are sexual dysfunction, gender identity disorders, and paraphilias. Sexual dysfunction is "disruptions in sexual functioning found in people who are otherwise good psychological health." Gender identity disorders are used to describe people who think they are of the opposite sex. It is interesting that Durand (2006) relates sexual dysfunction and gender identity disorders closely. A man who thinks that he is actually a woman will have disruptions in his sexual functions when he is having sexual stimuli from the opposite sex. The third category is the most interesting one. *Paraphilia* comes from two words, *philia* means strongly attracted to or like, while *para* indicates that the liking is abnormal. (Durand, 2006) *Paraphilia* consist of many different subcategories, and it is interesting that *Hentai* provides such a wide range of abnormal sexual displays as if they only a matter of appetite.

DSM-IV TM states that *paraphilia* should be differentiated from the earliest aspect of sexual arousal; 'the use of sexual fantasies, behaviors, or stimulus for sexual excitement.' *Hentai* functions as provider for such stimulus, if someone browse freely for *Hentai*, it is easy to get a full menu with many options of *paraphilia* categories. According to DSM-IV TR, there is a category called **exhibitionism** which expose someone's genitals to strangers, usually it includes sexual activity either masturbation or intercourse. Another category is called **fetishism** that is using unanimated objects (for example women's underwear, stocking, or other wearing appeal) as the stimulus. The third category mentioned by DSM-IV TR is **frotteurism** that involves touching and rubbing against a non-consenting person. This category served a common term in *Hentai* named groping. Groping in *Hentai* is usually happened in crowded public places, the most popular scene is on train or in a station. The fourth category is **pedophilia**. Although some *Hentai* texts do not explicitly mention the age of the character, but the way they display physical characteristic of the female victim suggest a young age. Things like

small undeveloped breast, clear naïve eyes, school uniform, and high-pitched voice would constantly create an imagery of female character under the consenting age. The fifth and the sixth categories are inter-related to each other, they are **sexual masochism** and **sexual sadism**. There is a widespread category of *Hentai* called BDSM abbreviated from Bondage and Discipline, Domination and Submission, Sadism and Masochism. It involves many methods of causing pain such as spanking, being tied up, beating, etc. The only purpose both from the one conducting the act of causing pain and the one receiving pain is to get aroused sexually, 'to derive sexual excitement from the psychological or physical suffering.' The seventh category mentioned is **transvestic fetishism**. Usually a person with this abnormal sexuality will wear the opposite sex's dressing and masturbate while imagining that s/he becomes both the male and female subject. Cross dressing is not quite popular in *Hentai* because Japanese culture provides a more subtle imagery from its mythical character called *futanari*. *Futanari* is a depiction of hermaphrodite or transsexual, it could be a woman body with breast but has male penis and scrotum, or have both phallic genitalia (penis with scrotum, only a penile shaft, or an enlarged clitoris) and vaginal genitalia. The last category mentioned is **voyeurism** that is the act of 'observing an unsuspecting individual undressing or naked to become aroused.' (Durand, 2006) Video production from hidden camera in shop's dressing room is a trending phenomenon in *Hentai* categorization.

Other sexual abnormalities which do not meet the requirement produced by DSM-IV TR to be categorized are place in a category of paraphilia not otherwise specified. Some examples given in it are telephone **scatologia** (phones sex), **necrophilia**, and **partialism** (exclusive focus on part of body). However, DSM-IV TR does not mention homosexuality as a category of abnormal sexuality. Actually APA stopped mentioning homosexuals as abnormal in their DSM productions more as a political decision rather than an academic decision. In 1973, National Gay Task Force suppressed APA to declare that homosexuality will no longer be considered as abnormality. Before 1973, in DSM I and DSM II, homosexuality is an abnormality. Actually hundreds of APA members disagreed with this change. Thus, a voting needed to be held. Before the voting began, a letter signed by three medical doctors competing for the presidential chair of APA was distributing to all members. This letter strongly insisted the APA members to agree on the shift. Therefore, on DSM III, homosexuality is not mentioned as abnormal sexuality.

Nowadays world had gone absurd. It silently whispers evil lie that the word 'orthodox' and 'heretics' must be use in the opposite meaning. In the past, the shame is not on the orthodox, but on the heretic. An orthodox might criticize the way his environment gone wrong, and the honor went to him because he was able to see the truth beyond what everybody else perceived. Names carved in golden tint in the past history attained their glory for such deed. Remember when everybody was thinking that slavery was the only way to run their economy, but Wilberforce dedicated himself for liberating slaves from the land of America? Or perhaps when everybody thought that the world was flat, but Galileo put his name and head to insist on the round-globular earth planet? Indeed, people these days had believed in Abraham Maslow's pyramid and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis that sex is human's basic need. Thus, pornography and erotica are acceptable in some ways since they are our only escape for pleasure. Perhaps, it is our time to criticize the whole epistemology of our generation. As G. K. Chesterton described it:

"Nothing more strangely indicates an enormous and silent evil of modern society than the extraordinary use which is made nowadays of the word "orthodox." In former days the heretic was proud of not being a heretic. It was the kingdoms of

the world and the police and the judges who were heretics. He was orthodox. He had no pride in having rebelled against them; they had rebelled against him. The armies with their cruel security, the kings with their cold faces, the decorous processes of State, the reasonable processes of law—all these like sheep had gone astray.” (Chesterton, 1905)

A person holding firmly to one truth would be proud of it, having something to believe, keeping a faith is a prestigious right for a human being. Chesterton said:

“The man was proud of being orthodox, was proud of being right. If he stood alone in a howling wilderness he was more than a man; he was a church. He was the centre of the universe; it was round him that the stars swung. All the tortures torn out of forgotten hells could not make him admit that he was heretical.” (Chesterton, 1905)

Yet, changes on spirit of the age have brought a tremendous wind of philosophical shift in people’s paradigm. These days, it is considered impolite, stubborn, and absurd if a man stands up for something he believes as truth. The discussion of what truth is had become outdated and irrelevant. People neglect and even reject the notion of what is correct and right in philosophical basis. Being orthodox is a great shame to admit these lately. Instead, being heretic is the new orthodoxy. In the past, being heretic means being wrong and absurd out of the truth, but now it is perceived as being bold, brave, and open-minded.

“But a few modern phrases have made him boast of it. He says, with a conscious laugh, "I suppose I am very heretical," and looks round for applause. The word "heresy" not only means no longer being wrong; it practically means being clear-headed and courageous. The word "orthodoxy" not only no longer means being right; it practically means being wrong. All this can mean one thing, and one thing only. It means that people care less for whether they are philosophically right. For obviously a man ought to confess himself crazy before he confesses himself heretical. The Bohemian, with a red tie, ought to pique himself on his orthodoxy. The dynamiter, laying a bomb, ought to feel that, whatever else he is, at least he is orthodox.” (Chesterton, 1905)

In short, *Hentai* has no longer been considered as pervert pornography for people with abnormal psychology only; it is now presented as common consumption of porn on general basis.

Harlequin, Sweet Subgenre for Feminists

Harlequin was not a common term for calling a subgenre. It was the name of a Canadian publisher for paperback romance fiction. Harlequin publisher was founded on 1949, at the edge of a new era. Before 1949, issues on feminism were just a mere whisper, almost unheard, in the streams of literature thoughts. Virginia Woolf had been known as one of prominent feminist writer, yet the noise of 1st and 2nd World War distracted our attention to other matters such as humanities, technology, and poverty. However, at the same year when Harlequin was founded, a signal for the new era in literature was bursting. A French feminist named Simone de Beauvoir wrote that western civilization had always been unfair in their patriarchal system by defining what it meant to be human only from male point of view. Beauvoir called for women all around the world to reject being marked as the ‘other’, and strive for women’s rights to be autonomous. This caught the world’s eyes on feminist issues.

At first, Harlequin was a publisher for a wide range of genres; starting from cookbooks until romance fiction. It published books for the common readers with a very cheap price for the paperback mass production. As the time goes by, several developments on Harlequin's executive decision put this publisher to focus on contributing to romance wars in North America. Readers without scholar background would chew these paperbacks while sitting in front of fire-hearth, cuddling on bed, snacking on couch, and even sipping coffee on streets. They did not need to attain any prestigious background knowledge to be able to enjoy Harlequin's products. As a result, Harlequin had become the leading publisher in romance fiction.

Despite its success for Harlequin's first breakthrough in romance series, actually Harlequin also experienced failures because they were late to catch up some changes in literary interests. For example, in the late of 1970s, one of their editors rejected a manuscript by Nora Roberts who finally became a legendary author in such genre. Other publishing companies saw this reluctance to adopt new shift as a chance to compete against Harlequin. However, Harlequin would manage to win the war often by buying the smaller successful imprints. As a result, there are several different lines in Harlequin's novels. Take for example, *American Romance* line focuses its setting on small towns, *Harlequin Blaze* is a more explicit tone in sexuality, *Harlequin Ginger Blossom* is romantic manga (Japanese styled comic), *Steeple Hill Love Inspired* is romance fiction based on polite Southern gospel values, and African-American romance is under *Kimani Press* imprints. In 2002, Harlequin produced 1,113 romance novels, more than 50% of all romance novels released in North America, and far beyond its closest competitor who only produced 292 titles.

This economic wave of success had created jealousy in other publishers. Even in Indonesia, publishing companies tried to gain profit by creating a less-qualified novels on the subgenre. These lines of romance novels abided themselves into Harlequin style by attributing several key elements that characterized Harlequin-styled romance. At last, a new subgenre of Harlequin-styled romance appeared in popular publications. The question is what makes such readers prefer this Harlequin-styled romance out of any other literary works? What are the elements that abide them together in the subgenre?

As a product of economy instead of literature, Harlequin-styled romance focuses on what the market want, not what the literary standard says. This subgenre employs some special attributes to characterize its identity among other romance publications. These attributes are involved in a writing technique called *sweet writing*. Although different lines in Harlequins' might focus on different aspects, but some basic ingredients are constantly a must for the recipe. Basically, Harlequin romance provides a catharsis escape for the readers by allowing them to re-identify themselves as the heroine in the story. In order to do this, the setting of the story might be extremely various. Harlequin addresses for 'real-world contemporary issues' surrounding and contributing to 'the lives and loves of modern men and women'. As long as emotion becomes the solid foundation for conflict, almost any story can fit. (Logan, 2010)

"The storylines in the Sweet books are as diverse as you have ideas in your head. Heroes can be Alpha or Beta, heroines can have pink hair and tattoos, can be confined to a wheelchair, can be abused, can be CEOs richer than the hero, they can be pregnant with another man's child, they can have three kids, they can be mid-divorce. Setting can range from Outback Australia to the canyons of Wall Street and everywhere in between." (Blake, 2006)

Feminism issues criticize the way patriarchal society put ethic codes on what is meant to be a man, to be a woman, to be a human being, taken only from the point of view of the ruling sex; the male dominance. (Bressler, 1999) By having such a large criteria and

description of what a heroine should look like, Harlequin is actually declaring to the world that none can really define the ethic codes for becoming a woman. It is okay to be a soft hearted virgin with brunette hair and pale skin, just as it is okay to be a broad tattooed black-skinned assassin. A heroine might be working as a nude model or a house wife; there is no single definition on who women are and what role they might play in the society.

As it is mentioned before, this subgenre is not a pure production for the sake of literature; it is more an economic production to satisfy consumer's appetite. More than 80% of the Harlequin readers are women. Thus, the stories are told from the women's point of view, either the first singular person or the third all-knowing point of view. This kind of story telling enables the readers, who most of them are women, to not only feel engaged with the emotion roller coaster on the plot, but also to identify themselves as the heroine in the story, and therefore to 'steal' the characters' emotion and feelings. The main course of this subgenre is having two persons, a man and a woman, building romantic love relationship while having the entire world of readers savoring every detail of their intimacy and sexuality. Then, what would be the benefit if the readers? What goal do they want to achieve by taking over a fictional emotion and identity in a romantic pursue?

“Sweet readers want to be emotionally aroused above all else. For me, the best kind of emotion comes from simple, realistic conflicts that make you bleed inside rather than from overly complicated melodrama. Having your characters wave their arms around and make much ado about nothing is not a convincing substitute for true emotional punch.” (Logan, 2010)

'Sweet readers' which consist mostly of women are aroused in a different way from men. While pornography laws focus their definition of 'porn' on the erotic sexual arousal, according to Bancroft, sexual arousal itself is a system of overlapping and complex order.

“Sexual arousal is a complex state that involves: (i) information processing of sexual stimuli, involving both automatic (or unconscious) and conscious cognitive mechanisms; (ii) incentive motivation, which includes activation of the dopaminergic incentive motivational system involved in a variety of appetitive behaviors; (iii) general arousal, or activation of the central arousal system involved in most arousal states (e.g., pleasurable excitement, fear or sexual excitement); and (iv) genital response. It is the “genital response” that is the most specifically sexual component of this state although, in the relevant context, the information processing will be focused on sexual stimuli.” (Bancroft, 2011)

It is widely believed among scholars of sexuality that man and woman are different in distinguishing sexual desire and sexual arousal. For man, sexual desire is the only the first two steps in Bancroft's sexual arousal stages; that is information processing of stimuli and incentive motivation. Man tends to categorize himself to be sexually aroused when he has reached the fourth stage; that is genital response. On the other hand, for woman, sexual desire is often overlapped with sexual arousal. In fact, woman is more 'responsive' and 'triggered' rather than having 'spontaneous' arousal as in man. (Bancroft, 2011)

A man might be sexually aroused spontaneously at the moment he gets some sexual stimuli such as a woman displaying most of her private body parts, or watching a sexual activity performed on screen. Yet a woman would prefer to be aroused through a series of sexual triggered involving stimuli and some motivation for her appetitive behaviors. Women often get engaged in sexual activity not because of her own intrinsic sexual desire, rather from a state called “sexual neutrality,” a stimuli primarily motivated by non-sexual reasons, such as desire for emotional closeness with a partner. Thus, in

Harlequin, sexual activities are not always explicitly being involved, instead, sexual relationship is being described in such a way that the readers will feel intimate and get engaged first with the characters. Sexual activities might be explored whenever needed in the plot to support the conflict development. Once the readers had been closely intimate with the emotion presented in the story, the first stage of sexual arousal is begun.

Conclusion

Pornography had always been strongly associated with using graphic stimulus for sexual arousal. If sexual arousal is the major key to define pornography, then both *Hentai* and Harlequin-styled romance should be categorized into pornography. Both subgenres provide stimulus to arouse the readers sexually in different way. *Hentai* might look more prominently easy to ban in most regions, it focuses straightly on the last stage of sexual arousal; genital response. On the other hand, Harlequin-styled romance might be more difficult to categorize since it employs many undetectable vehicle to arouse the readers. However, both *Hentai* and Harlequin-styled romance are products of the occurring spirit of their age. The differences in presenting sexual arousal are only a matter of different underlying philosophy. Thus, based on the argument that pornography is defined on the basis of its function for sexual arousal, Harlequin-styled romance should also be defined as women pornography.

Last but not least, what underlying philosophy had become the basis for us to define and categorize literary texts and discourses into pornography? What is our basic belief on human sexuality? Do we believe in sexual needs as animal instinct hidden inside us? Do we believe in sexual needs as a socio-psychological production? What would we define the right sexual stimulus, our own real-alive sexual partner, or some kinky stranger in literature world?

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