

The Hidden Realities of Love and Marriage: A Comparative Analysis of *Dear Ex*, *Brokeback Mountain*, and *Mar á de Zayas*

Luoran Wang¹

¹ School of International Studies, Jingdezhen Ceramic University, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi, China

ABSTRACT

This essay examines the evolving portrayal of homosexuality and mixed-orientation marriages in both contemporary cinema and classic literature, focusing on the films *Dear Ex* (2018) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) in relation to the 17th-century Spanish story “Mal presagio casar lejos (Bad omen to marry far away)” by Mar á de Zayas. By comparing the experiences of LGBTQ characters across cultural contexts and time periods, the essay highlights how societal norms, legal pressures, and family expectations have historically forced gay men into heterosexual marriages, with women as collateral victims of such arrangements. Through the stories of characters like Alma in *Brokeback Mountain*, the essay discusses the psychological impact and hidden suffering endured by both closeted husbands and their wives. It further explores the symbolic use of “outer spaces” — such as Bali in *Dear Ex*, Mexico in *Brokeback Mountain*, and foreign settings in “Mal presagio” — as metaphors for freedom from societal judgment. Ultimately, this comparative analysis reveals a shared, ongoing struggle for self-identity, acceptance, and the right to love openly.

Keywords: LGBTQ rights, Gay characters in film, Gay men’s wives, Spanish Golden Age literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century marks the dawn of LGBTQ rights. As a result, films depicting homosexual love, once taboo in the past, have flourished in recent years. The feature film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), directed by Ang Lee, stands as a representative work that opened the door to this genre. In February 2019, Taiwan introduced the first same-sex marriage bill in Asia, a legislative initiative aimed at granting legal protections similar to those enjoyed by heterosexual couples to same-sex couples. Previously, almost all Chinese films on the topic of homosexuality focused on the love between two men and had little to do with the social environment. Perhaps this is what makes the 2018 film *Dear Ex* so special—it addresses a ubiquitous issue in Chinese society concerning the LGBTQ community, a theme of great value and extreme sensitivity in Eastern society, thus bringing a unique shine to the Chinese-speaking film industry.

Until the early 21st century, discussions of homosexuality and mixed-orientation marriages

remained largely absent from mainstream cinema, both in Western and Eastern cultures. However, the exploration of these themes stretches back centuries and across continents, intriguingly finding resonance in Golden Age Spanish literature. This essay delves into the nuanced portrayal of homosexuality and marriage in *Dear Ex*, juxtaposing it with the iconic *Brokeback Mountain*. Moreover, it draws parallels and distinctions by analyzing how these cinematic narratives align with the intricate portrayal of similar themes in the literary work “Mal presagio casar lejos”, penned by Mar á de Zayas in her seminal collection *Desengaños amorosos* (Love disappointments) (1647). Through this comparative analysis, the essay illuminates the evolving perspectives on love, identity, and societal norms across different cultural and artistic mediums.

2. THE HUSBAND AND THE LOVER

Approximately 18-26% of gay men in the United States enter into marriages with straight

women [3], however, what distinguishes China is the staggering statistic that the vast majority, ranging from 80-90%, of Chinese gay men find themselves in or are destined to enter into Mixed-Orientation Marriages (MOMs) [3]. This phenomenon is deeply rooted in the complex interplay of social, cultural, historical, and legal contexts unique to China. Within the framework of traditional Chinese values, the paramount importance of family and lineage is deeply ingrained, often exerting immense pressure on individuals to conform to heterosexual norms. Furthermore, China's long history of Confucian ideology, which emphasizes filial piety and the continuation of the family line, amplifies these expectations. Legal restrictions, such as the lack of recognition of same-sex unions and limited rights for LGBTQ+ individuals, further exacerbate the situation. Consequently, many gay men in China feel compelled to enter marriages with heterosexual women in order to fulfill societal expectations of forming "normal" families and producing offspring, often succumbing to familial pressures and expectations.

From the perspective of the son, the film *Dear Ex* revolves around three adults in his life: the mother, Liu Sanlian (Ying-Xuan Hsieh), the father, Song Zhengyuan (Spark Chen), and a man named Gao Yujie (Roy Chiu), abbreviated as Jay. The father has just died of cancer, and Liu Sanlian, who was supposed to receive the insurance money, is surprised and outraged to find out that the money is going to a man unrelated to the family. She begins to visit Jay's house every day to ask for money. Through the process of various people tearing each other apart over money and feelings, the story of the three adults and the chaos gradually becomes clear, revealing a game of "who fell in love with him first," which is the original meaning of the Chinese title of the film.

Song Zhengyuan, a typical closeted man, is the source of all problems in the film. He was in a romantic relationship with the young and handsome Jay but chooses to marry and have children because he succumbs to secular and traditional societal thoughts. It is unfortunate because he always follows the "right" path dictated by what other people say, living in an oppressive manner until he is diagnosed with cancer. He decides to be his true "self" to enjoy the last days of his life. However, he is also fortunate because he has a boyfriend who loves him deeply and accompanies him to spend the last days of his life. Song Zhengyuan is the so-called creator of "tongqi," representing

homosexuals who have to bow to public opinion and traditional thinking. It is unknown if he truly loved his wife; the film does not judge him but portrays him as a kind person in a peaceful manner.

Jay, Song Zhengyuan's lover, for whom "love is everything" [2]. He experiences two departures from his boyfriend: the first time he is told that his boyfriend wants to be a normal man and will soon marry a woman, and the second time is final due to Song's death. He keeps Song's pajamas and the book he was reading, which is in some sense similar to the scene in *Brokeback Mountain* where Jack's closet holds Ennis's blood-stained shirt, and later Ennis brings it back to his trailer and covers Jack's shirt with his own from the outside.

Similarly, in *Brokeback*, it seems that Ennis is the originator who makes everyone miserable. But it is not him who is to blame; the culprit is his father and people like him, who are disgusted at the thought of homosexuality. It all starts with Ennis's experience at nine years old when he witnessed a tragedy in which a cowboy was brutally murdered due to homosexuality. It should be noted that homosexual activity was illegal at that time. From his father, he received the message: Homosexuality is a curse. He even later mentions that his father may have been involved in the murder; thus, his homosexual tendency is repressed by fear and at the same time, the hatred instilled by his father. His only option is to suppress and hide himself and nullify any desire to be close to the same sex. Later, Ennis marries Alma. He is obeying the social expectations of a man and following the norms of society. The values he inherits from his father are traditional and authoritarian; one could even say he marries Alma because the two people have similar ideas. He is desperate to maintain the expectations of a heterosexual man in the conservative social environment in which he lives.

Ennis and Jack are in love, but their love is different. Jack, from the perspective of the film, is someone born with a "gay" tendency. In other words, Jack is psychologically and physiologically born to love men. And Ennis, in the film, is not naturally homosexual. It just so happens that he loves a man. He could fall in love with a woman, but he meets Jack and they live together in *Brokeback Mountain*, an isolated and lonely place, causing him to fall in love with a man. Ennis cannot face his inner feelings, and although he still meets Jack every year for twenty years, he has not been able to accept the fact that he is in love with a man. Ennis lives more painfully than Jack. If they are

under the same pressure from society, Jack naturally confronts the fact that he is gay and loves Ennis with all his heart; the rest is how to disguise oneself in life and in his marriage to Lureen.

Interestingly, both in the two films and in “Mal presagio casar lejos,” there are allusions to outer space. In *Dear Ex*, Song Zhengyuan writes a song called “Bali Island” for a play that Jay continues to rehearse after his death, as if it were a place where they can finally be together. In *Brokeback*, Jack goes to Mexico for his sexual desires and suggests to Ennis that they should go live there; moreover, although not strange, the isolated mountain is the only place where they can be together away from society, away from the voices of others.

In “Mal presagio,” homosexuality does not occur in Spain but overseas during the Flanders War, and the act is between the prince of Flanders and his page. At that time, homosexuality, or sodomy, was known as nefarious and *contra naturam* (against nature), which was considered an offense to God and was punished by death by civil courts. Of course, the connotation of Flanders, which was at war with Spain, differs from a beautiful island like Bali or an isolated mountain, yet it still denotes the foreignness of homosexuality in the text.

During the Spanish Golden Age, the religious and political context deeply influenced societal attitudes and treatment towards sodomy. The predominant religion, Catholicism, played a central role in shaping these attitudes, as did the political structures of the time.

Catholic doctrine at the time strictly condemned homosexuality as a sin. The Church’s teachings, heavily influenced by interpretations of biblical passages, categorized same-sex relationships as unnatural and immoral. The Inquisition, established in the late 15th century to combat heresy and enforce religious orthodoxy, also targeted individuals accused of engaging in sodomy. Those found guilty could face severe punishments, including imprisonment, torture, and even execution. As a result, societal attitudes towards homosexuality were often steeped in religious dogma and fear of divine retribution. The Spanish monarchy wielded significant power during the Golden Age, and its policies often reflected the influence of the Catholic Church. Laws and regulations concerning morality and sexual conduct were enforced by the state, with punishments meted out to those perceived to be deviating from societal norms. The monarchy, seeking to maintain social

order and uphold religious orthodoxy, played a key role in enforcing laws against sodomy and other perceived moral transgressions.

Despite the prevailing condemnation of homosexuality, the topic was occasionally explored in literature and art of the period. However, such representations were often fraught with moralistic overtones, depicting same-sex relationships as sinful or scandalous. For example, in works like *La Celestina* by Fernando de Rojas, same-sex desire is portrayed as morally corrupt or deviant. In theater, characters engaged in homosexual behavior were often vilified or portrayed as objects of ridicule.

3. THE DECEIVED WOMEN

Liu Sanlian, the so-called “tongqi,” is a very typical Eastern wife and mother, kidnapped by public opinion and traditional thoughts. She can sacrifice everything for her family. She knows that her husband does not love her, but she still begs her husband to support their family. She loves her son in her own way and strives to create a future for her son. Her love is very aggressive. Because her son doesn’t want to come home, she tirelessly works to cook for him every day and cleans the house of the disgusting “enemy” just so her son can rest well. But she can no longer accept reality, is it all for nothing? On the verge of a nervous breakdown, she bursts into tears and asks the psychiatrist - Is everything really fake? Liu Sanlian is worthy of sympathy but also evokes a sense of helplessness. According to research, almost 13.6 million women in China are married to homosexual or bisexual men [3]. After all, the situation of “tongqi” is the result of homosexual love surrendering to society, which has become the greatest challenge that this film has presented to us.

In *Brokeback Mountain*, Alma is portrayed as a typical domestic woman as well. Cooking, washing clothes, knitting sweaters, taking care of her daughter, it can be seen that she is almost always doing housework. She is quite in line with society’s requirements for women, with a traditional moral perspective. Nevertheless, she is not just a common housewife; she knows how to deal with her husband, that is, with her pillow talk and passionate embrace, which is something that Liu Sanlian is incapable of, due to the traditional value fixed on women and the fact that Song Zhengyuan has no interest in women, unlike Ennis. There is a scene in *Dear Ex* where she tries to seduce her husband to save her marriage, but he keeps pushing her away and finally shouts at her that “I like men”. In

contrast, Alma is the one who ultimately rejects intimacy with her husband and tells Ennis that she would do it if he can support the family, marking her decision to end the marriage. And that is the biggest difference between her and Sanlian and the cultures they respectively represent.

Just like Alma and Sanlian, who enter marriage as a “conduit of relationship rather than a partner to it” [7], in “Mal presagio casar lejos,” Doña Blanca “for conveniences to the royal crown and her brother’s liking, her marriage was arranged with a prince of Flanders...” [6]. Williamsen asserts that “in essence, Doña Blanca serves as political currency, an object of exchange to foster closer relationships among men in power” [5]. Doña Blanca is an intelligent woman, believes in her own judgment, and has doubts about marriage, therefore, she makes the prince of Flanders court her for a year, during which he makes all kinds of grand gestures to demonstrate his love for her. Unfortunately for Blanca, she marries the prince and leaves Spain, her home, for a foreign country only to discover that “the husband and his family are a set of perverts, misogynists, and sodomites” [4]. When she witnesses her husband and his lover’s “crime” in bed, she cannot speak a word and does not tell anyone, just like Alma, who witnesses Ennis and Jack kissing through the window. At that moment, for Alma, her marriage is already dead because she is a woman who accepts the social values of the time and is merely playing her role in the house and in society; after she remarries and has a normal family, she finally dares to confront Ennis. In “Mal presagio,” Doña Blanca says “Mi muerte hallé (I found my death)” [6] and burns the bed “donde se comete su ofensa [de Dios] y la m á (where his offense [against God] and mine are committed)” [6], which is a scene where religious connotation can be observed. Williamsen argues that “the burning of the bed represents her protest against the system of oppression that will demand her ‘sacrifice’” [5]. The death of Doña Blanca is written with terms of martyrdom by Mar ía de Zayas: “quisieron ejecutar la sentencia contra la inocente corderilla (they wanted to execute the sentence against the innocent lamb)”, “aquella inocente víctima, sacrificada en el rigor de tan crueles enemigos (that innocent victim, sacrificed in the rigor of such cruel enemies)” [6].

4. CONCLUSION

To summarize, the homosexual men portrayed in the films are victims of the social environment. They have to suppress their desires and sexual passions in order to meet the reproductive needs of their parents or even themselves. Moreover, to protect themselves from peculiar looks and to lead a normal life, they have to accept a false love or marriage and act within the dominant logic of society. The saddest part is that “forced” gay men turn heterosexual women into victims of patriarchy, who are more innocent in the tragedy of mixed-orientation marriages. The film *Dear Ex* finally adopts a form of “compromise,” drawing a hopeful and unfinished ellipsis for the same kind of problems in our current society. In the end, everyone has embarked on peace. When Jay’s mother hugs him, it is the moment the mother accepts that her son is gay and also symbolizes the moment when society will accept homosexuality. Liu Sanlian eventually eats the fried chicken chops she tried to prevent her son from eating and sings her husband’s song with her son on the streets of Taipei. As the tagline of *Brokeback Mountain* goes: “love is a force of nature,” hopefully, everyone can find a place in their heart for understanding, tolerance, and love.

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