

Happy Endings for Whom?

A Narrative Analysis of Bisexual Erasure within Lesbian Romantic Comedies

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Abstract

This study looks at the erasure and exclusion of positive bisexual narratives within the genre of lesbian romantic comedies. Analyses showed that even films that are celebrated within the LGBTQ+ community for the happy endings they give their lesbian characters can feature problematic and even harmful stereotypes about bisexuals and bisexuality. The bisexual themes in these films, *Gray Matters*, *Imagine Me & You*, *I Can't Think Straight*, and *Kyss Mig*, are further developed through other commonalities including the use of weddings and engagements as prominent plot points and sibling characters who play active roles in establishing the women's relationships and happy endings. This study aims to both further expose power structures in the media that work against bisexual people and encourage more thoughtful viewership and content creation.

Key Words: Bisexual Erasure, Bisexual Representation, LGBTQ+ Media, Romantic Comedies.

Happy Endings for Whom? A Narrative Analysis of Bisexual Erasure in Lesbian Romantic Comedies

Members of the LGBT+ community have long been wanting accurate representation on the big screen. Following the outlawing of “sexual perversion” by the Hollywood Production Code of 1930, homosexuality of any form was allowed only if the character was shown as a villain so as not to encourage their behavior. Traces of these restrictions still remain today. Bisexuals, in particular, are even more problematic with their onscreen images often being either negative or absent completely. There are specific stereotypes about bisexuals and bisexuality that continually pop up in the media, such as bisexual people being bad relationship partners and prone to infidelity. This is true even of films created by and for members of the LGBT+ community. This is problematic because media images frequently help audience members learn about and understand communities that they do not belong to. Poor representation can negatively affect both public perception of bisexuality and the mental health of bisexual people.

To illustrate the pervasiveness of these issues, this research will take a critical look at four films, *Gray Matters*, *Imagine Me & You*, *I Can't Think Straight*, and *Kyss Mig* (Kiss Me), that have bisexual themes and have been celebrated for providing LGBT+ characters with rare happy endings. This will be done using an in-depth narrative analysis of each film and the commonalities in their themes and messaging. This project is titled “Happy Endings for Whom?” because it will argue that these films perpetuate narratives tying bisexuality with deception and infidelity that are harmful to bisexuals and other members of the LGBT+ community.

Literature Review

Media Representation

The role of the media in both forming and distributing personal and societal values has long been the topic of academic conversation. Many agree that at the very least film, TV, radio, and other forms of media convey values that already exist (Johnson, 2016; Kellner, 2015; “Why Identity Matters”). Moreover, some argue that the media also helps individuals shape their own values and morals with others going as far as to say they “provide materials out of which we forge our very identities” (Kellner, 2015, p.9; “Why Identity Matters”, 2019). Because the media is constructed by people (within the film industry these would be screenwriters, directors, etc.) who each have their thoughts, opinions, and perspectives, it is impossible for media representations to be objective (“Why Identity Matters”, 2019). This means that those “materials” mentioned by Kellner may have been influenced by any prejudices or possibly discriminatory beliefs held by those who hand-crafted them (Kellner, 2015). When people see these potentially harmful messages over and over again in the media they consume, they can become ingrained into the individual's mind and seem “familiar and natural” (“Why Identity Matters”, 2019). This is thought to be especially true when stereotypes concern “people who are not part of the dominant culture” (Hilton-Marrow & Battles 2015, p.85).

Representations of the LGBTQ+ Community

For those in the LGBTQ+ community, media and media representation play a particularly important role. Unlike many other minority groups, LGBTQ+ folks do not grow up in “families or communities that share their minority identities,” (Hilton-Marrow Battles 2015, p.78). Additionally, the LGBTQ+ community is described as a self-identifying population, meaning that it is up to the individual to recognize their own identity and are assumed to be heterosexual until they do (Gross, 1991). In order to accomplish such a task, young queer people must have access to information on the community and the various identities that it contains. For decades

the primary place they could find this information was on TV (Gross, 1991). This phenomenon has been described as the “point of first contact” (Cover, 2000, p.72), meaning that for many young LGBTQ+ people, “media images” provide their first glimpse into life outside the heterosexual norm (Hilton-Marrow & Battles 2015, 79). Because of this, the media and its representation of LGBTQ+ community has been called a “vital source for self-recognition and identity formation” (Hilton-Marrow & Battles 2015, p.77). This may be especially true for bisexuals who are “often out less” and therefore may have more trouble accessing bisexual communities and information in real life (Dyer & Feinstein 2019, pg.97).

For many years it was almost impossible to find such representation, as any form of homosexuality on screen was banned in Hollywood starting in 1930 with the adoption of the “Hollywood Production Code,” also known as the “Hays Code” (Williams 2015). Falling under the umbrella category “sexual perversion” (Clerghorn 2017), it was declared that all same-sex attraction and gender exploration must either be completely avoided or the character who was attracted to others of the same sex was to be shown as a villain or “morally corrupted”, so as to not encourage the behaviors (Hays, 1930). The Hays Code reigned over Hollywood with varied amounts of success for over 30 years until its dissolution in the 1960’s (Williams, 2015).

Though the explicit ban on homosexuality in film is no longer in place, there are traces of its presence that remain, the most common and explicit being the trend of LGBTQ+ characters dying at a proportionally alarming rate known colloquially as the “Bury your Gays” trope (Williams, 2015; Yohannes, 2016). Among all LGBTQ+ identities, lesbian characters are the most likely to be killed during their storyline. In 2016, an annual GLAAD study found that, whereas 4.8% of regular characters on primetime television were a part of the LGBT community, 17% of those characters were lesbians, and 25 lesbian women had been “killed off” of their

shows that year by time of publishing (GLAAD, 2016, p.3). In 2019, the same research group found that the percentages had increased to 8.8% and 25% respectively. However, the “decades-long ‘bury your gays’ trend” still continued to kill of many of the lesbian characters (GLAAD, 2019, p.8).The GLAAD organization contends that the continuation of this occurrence implies that stories of LGBTQ+ women do not hold the same worth as other characters to those in charge of “their series’ worlds” (GLAAD, 2016, p.3).

This has trend has been noticed by audience members and other LGBTQ+ media sources. In her article entitled “18 Awesome Lesbian Movies Where No One Dies at the End”, Cassie Sheets says, “when it feels like every movie about lesbians you watch involves a lesbian dying... it gets a little old” (Sheets, 2018). Further, Sheets purposefully gathered films that defy the “bury your gays” (GLAAD, 2019, p.8) trend in this article to celebrate them for the happy endings that they give to their characters. Given the prevalence of lesbian characters dying in media, those stories that include lesbian happy endings stand out to both critics and audiences, and especially so in romantic comedies as the genre is typically saturated with heterosexual storylines (Nelson, 2009; Rich, 1992/2013).

Bisexual Erasure

Within the category of LGBTQ+ stories in the media, there is a subset about bisexuals and bisexuality that has not received the same level of academic analysis in comparison to their gay and lesbian counterparts (Williams, 2015). This paper utilizes Frann Michel’s definition of bisexuality:

[T]he capacity to feel sexual attraction to people of more than one gender, or the experience of being sexual with people of more than one gender (whether

concurrently or serially), or the identification of oneself as bisexual on the basis of such attraction or experience (Michel 2002, 186).

Within the academic work, there has been a focus on *bisexual erasure*, a term used to encompass either the omission of bisexuality in LGBTQ+ stories, misidentification of a story as bisexual when it is not or vice versa, or what has been called “appropriation without representation” (James, 1996 p.228). The latter is mostly used in response to academic work itself that labels “behaviorally bisexual” people or characters as gay, lesbian, or other terms (James,1996, p.228).

Bisexuality in the Media

When bisexuality is present in the media, there are a few common themes or storylines that occur. One that is related to James’ idea of appropriation without representation is when a story includes bisexuality that “is implied but not demonstrated ” (Bryant, 2011, p.582). This could include a character who holds a demonstrated attraction to men, women, and/or people other genders but never uses the term “bisexual” or offhanded comments that imply the bisexuality of a character that is never demonstrated or brought further into the story. This storyline could also include a character who begins the story in a seemingly happy and fulfilling heterosexual relationship and ends it in a same-gender relationship and a new gay/lesbian identity without considering the possibility of bisexuality. In her book *Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life*, Marjorie Garber acknowledges this form of bisexual erasure by saying bisexuality “is everywhere and nowhere” (Garber 2000, 457).

A second common bisexual storyline portrays a bisexual person in a visibly heterosexual relationship who has an affair with a same-sex partner (Williams 2015). This storyline, in which

a character is caught choosing between being with a woman or a man, has been dubbed “the bisexual plot” (Garber 2000, 456). The bisexual is shown as someone who cannot be satisfied in any monogamous relationship and thus will ultimately betray their partner. Though this paper focuses on women, men are not immune from these tropes either and the Academy Award winning film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) serves as an example. The film features two men who begin a relationship despite the fact that one of them has a fiancée at home. Author Wayne Bryant argues that though there is debate over the men’s identities (his personal opinion is that one is gay and one is bisexual), “what is not debatable is that they reinforce the stereotype that bisexual men inevitably sneak around on their partners,” (Bryant 2011, p.584).

Finally, bisexuality, or bisexual behavior, is often used or expressed as a temporary identity for characters. In film, this idea often shows up when a character who is currently in a visibly heterosexual relationship is revealed to have been in same-gender relationships or participated in same-gender sexual behaviors in the past. This revelation makes their current opposite-gender partner uncomfortable and question their relationship, sometimes going as far as to end things because they believe their bisexual partner will eventually leave them for, or cheat on them with, a person of their same gender. As an example, in HBO’s hit *Sex in the City*, main character and sex columnist Carrie Bradshaw ends a relationship with her younger boyfriend Sean after he comes out as bisexual because, as she describes it, bisexuality is “a layover on the way to gay town” (Bicks 2000). This example is especially interesting as the show’s creator and executive producer, Darren Star, is an openly gay man (Kaczorowski 2013, p.1). This instance exemplifies the idea that stigmatization of bisexuals and bisexuality is not limited to those outside of the LGBTQ+ community (Dyer & Feinstein 2019, p.97)

Bisexuality in Real Life

As discussed in the pages above, these tropes, among others, originate from real life stereotypes about bisexuals and bisexuality. As an example of the widespread stigmatization of bisexuality, professional speaker and bisexual activist Robyn Ochs stated at the 2010 International Bisexual Research Conference in London that she begins all of her programs by asking audience members to “say one thing they have heard about bisexuals” (Ochs 2010, 171). She claims that answers to this prompt have yielded a list is “mostly negative” including that “all bisexuals” are either “really lesbians or gay men who haven’t finished coming out” or “heterosexuals who are just dabbling” and that “there’s no such thing as bisexuality” (Ochs 2010, 171-172). Additional stereotypes mentioned include that bisexuals are “promiscuous”, “incapable of monogamy”, “bad relationship material”, and will inevitably “leave you for someone else” (Ochs 2010, 171). Academics have made similar conclusions in their work, including that bisexual people are often considered to be “undesirable relationship partners” and “less likely to be in a committed and monogamous relationship” (Dyar & Feinstein 2019, p. 97) and that they “frequently are stereotyped as sexually promiscuous and as a danger to stable relationships” (Hilton-Marrow & Battles 2015, p.81).

The Impact of Poor Representation on Bisexuals

The importance of having accurate and positive bisexual representation becomes especially apparent when looking the mental health crisis occurring in the bisexual community. According to the San Francisco Human Rights Commission LGBT Advisory Committee (2011), bisexual women are 5.9 times more likely than heterosexual women and 3.5 times more likely than lesbian women to experience suicidal tendencies. Hannah Johnson draws a parallel between this crisis and media representation by rooting the biphobia bisexuals experience from both heterosexual people and others in the LGBTQ+ community to unfavorable portrayals of

bisexuality (Johnson 2015, 393-394). Johnson's explanation is that if many people get the information they know about bisexuals from the media, and if the media only includes "the most negative aspects of human nature" then it logically follows that their opinions of bisexuals and bisexuality would not be favorable either (Johnson, 2015, p.383).

Methods

All of the films analyzed in this paper were selected from Cassie Sheets's article on Pride.com entitled "18 Awesome Lesbian Movies Where Nobody dies at the end" (Sheets 2018). This list was chosen because Pride.com is a widespread media source created by and for members of the LGBT+ community. Though not entirely comprehensive, this site serves as a window into the opinions of the greater LGBT+ community and how folks think of and interact with pieces of media and popular culture. Further, as previously, this list was specifically curated to only include films that gave their lesbian characters happy endings.

When going down this list, it can be seen that at least 4 of the 18 films, approximately 22%, include bisexual themes. A film was determined to have "bisexual themes" when the description in Sheet's article included a character with implied attraction to people of multiple genders.

Each of these films was watched in its entirety at least two times. The first viewing, accompanied by note-taking, served to get acquainted with the different storylines and characters and look for commonalities or trends among the group. They were then re-watched with a focus on further exploring and documenting these commonalities. Finally, supplemental reviews of specific scenes or sequences were done as necessary to ensure an accurate analysis.

The Films

Imagine Me & You

Imagine Me & You (Balhetchet, Steinborn & Thompson, 2005) is a British film written and directed by Ol Parker. This film tells the story of Rachel and Luce, two women who meet at Rachel's wedding to her long-time boyfriend Heck where Luce was hired as the florist. Their instant friendship soon transitions into a romantic relationship and affair. Rachel is then forced to choose between her partners and in the end chooses to continue to explore the new love she has found with Luce.

I Can't Think Straight

I Can't Think Straight (Kattan, 2008) is another British film that was written and directed by Shamim Sarif and based on a novel also by Sarif. This film features Leyla, a Muslim British Indian woman, and Tala, a Christian Palestinian Jordanian woman, who meet in London through mutual friends. The two women soon enter a romantic relationship despite that they are both in other relationships with men. In fact, Tala is engaged and soon to be married back in Jordan. In the end, she calls off her wedding and returns to London to be with Leyla despite her family's wishes.

Gray Matters

Gray Matters (Footlick, Hermansen & Yari, 2006) was written and directed by Sue Kramer and is the only American movie of the group. Gray and Sam are very tight-knit brother and sister duo who decide it is time to branch out and meet new people. Things become complicated when

they both fall in love with the same woman, Charlie. Though Gray does not end the film with Charlie, her happy ending comes as a result of self-acceptance and optimism about the future.

Kyss Mig (Kiss Me)

Kyss Mig is a Swedish film written and directed by Alexandra-Therese Keining. It tells the story of Frida and Mia, stepsisters to be who meet at their parents' engagement party. The two quickly fall in love even though Mia has recently become engaged to her longtime boyfriend, Tim. After a period of indecision and familial complications, Mia leaves her fiancé shortly before the wedding and rejoins Frida.

Discussion

There were three major themes or commonalities among the films. First, all four feature weddings and engagements as prominent plot points. Next, in each of the films a sibling or sibling relationship plays an important role in the development of the central romance. Finally, as their selection indicates, each of these films include or imply bisexual themes. Examining these commonalities in further detail will help to reveal the severity and pervasiveness of bisexual erasure in the sample as a snapshot of the larger genre of LGBTQ+ media.

Weddings and Engagements

In a content analysis done on over 40 romantic comedies, researchers Johnson & Hayes found that “in films where the central characters married one another, the wedding was shown to be the culminating point of the film with life after the wedding left to the viewers' imagination” (Johnson & Holmes 2009, 364). They are the resolutions, the point the whole film was building towards, and can even possibly be interpreted as the “peak of a relationship” (Johnson & Holmes

2009, 364). The films in this study do not follow suit. Whether this difference is because those films almost exclusively featured heterosexual couples (with one exception) while these are exclusively about women who fall in love with other women cannot be said with certainty. However, these films upset this popular plot structure and instead use weddings and engagements in a variety of different ways, including as the opening scene as is true in *Imagine Me and You*.

In this film, the two women meet at Rachel's wedding where Luce had been hired as a florist Rachel's mother had made all of the prior arrangements, so she doesn't actually interact with Luce until the day of the ceremony. The two women lay eyes on each other for the first time while Rachel is walking down the aisle with her father (Balhetchet et al., 2005, 0:06:23). She breaks eye contact with her soon-to-be-husband, Heck, and looks to the left and her eyes meet those of Luce, who was trying to sneak out to set up the reception. There is a break in the Wedding March music and the video switches to slow motion while the women look at each other, which clearly indicates the significance of this moment. With this interaction, Rachel breaks the intimacy between herself and Heck and commits her first betrayal against their relationship. Through changes in facial expressions and body language, it is clear that both women also feel the significance of their exchange.

The two women soon meet again at the reception where Rachel is trying to fish her wedding ring out of a vat of either punch, sangria, or something similar. That Rachel has immediately misplaced the physical symbol of her union with Heck represents the fragility of their relationship. That Luce is the one to rescue the ring is ironic as it contradicts her future involvement in the dissolution of their marriage.

Like Rachel in *Imagine Me & You*, a wedding serves as the backdrop for Gray's sexual awakening. However, in *Gray Matters*, rather than it being her own wedding, it is that of Gray's brother, Sam, and his fiancée, Charlie. The night before her weddings, Charlie is extremely intoxicated and kisses Gray deeply right after expressing her excitement that the two will soon be sisters-in-law. The next morning Charlie awakens with no memory of their kiss and the wedding proceeds as planned. Though Gray's admiration for Charlie had been hinted at, this moment was where her attraction was confirmed. In fact, Gray had not demonstrated attraction to women at all up until this point, as will be discussed in more detail below.

I Can't Think Straight opens on the day of Tala's engagement party in Jordan. Her family and their staff can be seen scrambling to get everything ready for the big event and it is soon revealed that it is not the first party of its kind. In fact, this is Tala's fourth engagement.

Where this film veers away from *Imagine Me & You* and *Gray Matters* is that Tala's engagement to Hani is not the event that first brings Tala and Leyla together. Nor is it where they first realize their attraction to other women. That Tala has been engaged four times to four different men and not yet married is because she knows she is a lesbian, as will be discussed in more detail below. Instead they meet through Tala's friend and Leyla's boyfriend Ali. However, it could be weakly argued that Tala's third engagement was the inciting event as it was through this fiancée that she became friends with Ali and therefore meets Leyla.

The engagement and impending wedding are still instrumental in Tala and Leyla's relationship. It serves as a deadline. Once the two women meet and begin their affair, there are only six weeks before Tala is to be married. When Leyla decides that she will no longer be with Tala while she is cheating on Hani, Tala is forced to make a decision between the two. A decision that is not only influenced by a number of outside pressures including her parents, her

cultural values as a Christian Palestinian, her commitment to Hani, etc., but is now also on a time crunch. It is this ultimatum from her impending marriage that forces Tala to make a choice. For her, it is essentially now or never.

Similarly, Mia's engagement to Tim in *Kyss Mig* also serves as an ultimatum for her relationship with Frida. However, Mia and Tala differ as Mia is genuinely in love with her fiancé. She and Tim had been together for seven years before they became engaged. Though the film does not show Tim's proposal, one of the opening scenes shows Mia trying on the newly fitted ring which suggests it was a recent development. Like Tala's engagement to Hani, Mia's with Tim acts as a deadline and forces her to make a choice. The stress of juggling two lovers and the guilt of betraying her fiancé and impending commitment proves to be too much for Mia when she runs out of a wedding rehearsal after the priest asks her to practice her "I do". That this scene occurs in a church exacerbates the tension as Mia is now in a position to not only lie to Tim, but also the Priest who, within the film, serves as an stand-in for God and represents the significance of the commitment she will be making if she walks down the aisle.

Additionally, unlike the other films, there are two engagements being celebrated in *Kyss Mig*. Frida's mother, Elizabeth, and Mia's father, Lasse, are getting married and it is at their engagement party where the two first meet. Like Rachel and Luce, the pair are quite literally brought together by a marriage. However, unlike Rachel and Luce, this marriage will turn the women into stepsisters, a dynamic that is further explored below.

That each of these four films include a wedding or engagement does not seem accidental. The "Bisexual Plot" requires only a love triangle, not necessarily a marriage, and this additional development only serves to worsen the infidelity. Not only have these women, apart from Gray from *Gray Matters*, cheated on their male partners to pursue a romantic relationship with a

woman, but they have done so after formally committing themselves to monogamy. The inclusion of these agreements (Rachel and Charlie's weddings and Tala and Mia's engagements) in the films themselves exacerbates the betrayals in the minds of audience members as they see the proceedings and hold memories of them in their mind as the movie progresses.

In two of the films, *Kyss Mig* and *I Can't Think Straight* the engaged woman's ring is prominently visible during the first scene in which they have sex with their female lovers. Though for some these may be exciting scenes as the films' main love interests are finally uniting, the rings serve as a visual reminder that this development is problematic. The audience cannot and are made not to forget that these women have promised themselves to other people. A promise that they are now actively breaking. The audience cannot root for the women's relationship without being reminded of the partner at home who is sure going to be devastated in the coming scenes.

The Role of Siblings

In the same content analysis, Johnson and Hayes also identified "family and friend approval" as a commonality among the romantic comedies they analyzed ((Johnson & Holmes 2009, 364). Further, they determined that in only 6 of the 40 films "did family and friends not approve of partners", and in 3 of those 6 "the families were eventually won over" (Johnson & Holmes 2009, 365). The films analyzed in this study keep with the trend. However, as these films feature same-gender couples, homophobia within the family unit makes this dynamic more complicated in some of the films. One commonality is that in several of the films it is a sibling rather than a parent or other family member from whom the familial support originates. Further, in many of these films this sibling plays a role in bringing the two women together.

Rachel's younger sister, H (a nickname that is short for either Henrietta or "Jesus H. Christ", depending on who is asked) in *Imagine Me & You* is the youngest of the siblings throughout these films at around 10 years old. However, she still plays an important role in the women's relationship through her friendship with Luce. The two first meet at the wedding when H, a very curious child, asks a group of adult family members about "what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object". Luce chimes in with her answer that it is a quick trick question as it is impossible for both something that cannot be stopped and something else that can't be moved to exist simultaneously. This exchange is important for two reasons. The first is that it is a subtle foreshadowing of what is to come. After Rachel admits her affair with Luce to Heck towards the end of the film, he calls back to H's question. He breaks up with Rachel and states that her love for Luce is "the unstoppable force", which means he must get out of the way.

Additionally, this moment also sparks the friendship between Luce and H. H is excited to meet an adult who fosters her curiosity and Luce even helps her with a planetarium project for school. It is at this presentation where the two women touch hands and Rachel fantasizes about touching Luce's face, a moment that prompts her first attempt to open up about her feelings with Luce.

H continues her role of bringing the two women together towards the end of the movie when she receives a phone call from Luce where she cancels plans to go to the museum together. This call is significant as H reveals that Luce is leaving the country for an extended period (following a dramatic scene where Rachel declares that she can't leave Heck and the women break off their affair). When Rachel hears this, she realizes that if she really wants to be with Luce, she only has so much time before it's too late. It's this time crunch (paired with Heck's

revelation as described above) that prompts Rachel's decision to chase Luce to the airport and leads the women to their happy ending together.

In *Gray Matters* Sam's role as a sibling is very clear. It is at his wedding to Charlie that the two kiss and Gray is sent on her journey of gay self-discovery. His relationship with the two women brought them together. However, his role in Gray's story is much more complex than having an attractive fiancée.

It isn't obvious from the beginning that Gray and Sam are siblings. The film opens on the pair swing dancing rather intimately to a cover of Fred Astaire's "Cheek to Cheek " and it's quickly revealed that they are quite close. In fact, they are so close that others sometimes assume that they are dating. It is one such misunderstanding that prompts the two to "venture out" and meet new people and leads them to Charlie. Thus, Sam and Gray's relationship was the catalyst for Gray's journey in multiple ways.

Later on, Sam becomes a sort of adviser to Gray after she comes out. As a heterosexual man, he is remarkably knowledgeable about the LGBT+ experience. To begin, he wasn't surprised when Gray told him she was gay and even claimed to have "known since second grade" when Gray supposedly had a crush on their teacher. This is especially note-worthy as Gray is shown as being completely blindsided by her attraction to women (which also contributes to the un-believability of Gray as a lesbian character as will be described in more detail below). Further, he encourages Gray to keep trying to find love even though she couldn't find it with Charlie. He tells her "you can't expect the first girl you fall in love with to love you back. That's not how it works... You haven't even gone through gay puberty yet". It's through Sam's forgiveness and support that Gray finds the reassurance she needs to embrace her identity and leads her to her happy ending.

I Can't Think Straight keeps with the sibling trend. In this film, both women have sisters. Leyla has one, Yasmin, and Tala two, Lamia and Zina, both younger than her. Though the three are drastically different from each other, they fall into two basic camps: Yasmin and Zina support Tala and Leyla's relationship while Lamia does not, at least not during the film. Additionally, both Tala and Leyla's parents (with one vague and implied exception) do not approve of their attraction to other women. Of the siblings, Yasmin has the largest role, both in the film and the relationship, and will be the focus of this analysis.

Like Gray's brother Sam, Yasmin knows that Leyla isn't straight before she tells her. There is actually a scene in the film where she can be seen making that realization. While talking to Leyla in her room, Yasmin spots a pile of clues on her dresser including books by Virginia Woolf, lesbian Czech-American tennis player Maria Navratilova, and the film's writer and director Shamim Sarif, as well as CD from Canadian Pop/Country star and gay rights activist KD Lang. After seeing these items, a knowing smile comes across Yasmin's face and she asks Leyla, "is anything you want to talk to me about?" in an attempt to coax her into admitting the truth about her sexuality.

Yasmin is also the sibling, among those from all four films, who has the most active and intentional role in bringing the two love interests together. Leyla refuses to meet with Tala after she breaks off her engagement with Hani and returns to London because she still has not come out to her parents. When Yasmin fails to convince Leyla to talk to her, she hatches a scheme with Leyla's ex-boyfriend Ali to get the two together in a restaurant. Although they did not get back together that night, their conversation restarted the chain of events that led to their happy ending together and wouldn't have happened without Yasmin's interference.

Although Mia's younger brother Oskar did introduce her to Frida in *Kyss Mig*, he was otherwise fairly uninvolved in their relationship and did not have a large role in the film. A brief exception was when Mia, before she learned Frida was a lesbian, questioned her about being in a relationship with Oskar after seeing how close the two had become. Mia expressed concerns about the ethics of the possible relationship as they were "about to become a family". Though Frida is not dating Oskar, she decides to push back to mess with Mia and says "We don't have the same parents. You're making it sound like incest", followed by jokes about sleeping with Oskar.

This exchange is significant both because it foreshadows their upcoming relationship and because it exposes the most important sibling relationship in the film, that between Mia and Frida. Because their parents are getting married, the two are step-sisters-to-be. This conversation is the first, and only, acknowledgement of their semi-familial relationship and the additional stigma it would bring if they were to become romantically involved.

In two of the films, *Gray Matters* and *I Can't Think Straight*, the sibling also provides redemption. In addition to cheating on their partners, both Leyla and Tala jeopardized their relationships with their parents in order to live free and be together. That their sisters, especially Yasmin, fully accept their relationship offers relief. The same goes for Sam who forgave Gray for falling in love with his wife, Charlie, and helped her embrace her true self. Even if everything else is changing or falling apart for these women, at least they still have somebody on their team.

With *Kyss Mig*, this support came from Mia and Frida's joint parents/stepparents, as has been shown to be more typical in romantic comedies. Elizabeth and Lasse, though it initially gave him great difficulty, fully embrace Mia's newly open bisexual identity. They also, like H in *Imagine Me & You*, helped Mia track down Frida after she left the country to escape the

complicated love-triangle situation as a sign of their support for the relationship. Further, in *Imagine Me & You*, that H keeps incidentally bringing Luce back into Rachel's life may even suggest that the two are meant to be or linked by fate.

While the use of familial support in these films relates them to the broader genre of romantic comedies, it also distinguished them as large portion of this active support comes from siblings rather than parents. Though this connection was not explicitly made in any of the films, perhaps it was a lack of parental support, be it because of homophobia like in *I Can't Think Straight* or only because of absence like in *Gray Matters*, that inspired the siblings in these films to take a more actively supportive role in their stories.

Additionally, these examples of familial support also serve as a source of balance. Long portions of these films center on the anger, pain, and confusion that women and their partners experience through their journeys of betrayal and self-acceptance. That Rachel, Mia, Tala, Leyla, and Gray have people who are on their team provides relief, both for the characters and audience members and allows folks to have hope in the longevity of the couples' relationships and the films' happy endings.

Bisexuality and Bisexual Erasure

Although these films were chosen for analysis because their descriptions implied bisexual themes, the four films featured varying degrees of bisexuality and bisexual characters. However, all four still contain many of the problematic bisexual stereotypes and storylines discussed in detail above, especially Garber's "Bisexual Plot" that relies on infidelity and indecisiveness.

Although on paper *I Can't Think Straight* adheres to the "Bisexual Plot" with both Leyla and Tala having been in relationships with men and then each entering into their respective love

triangles, neither Tala nor Leyla should be referred to as a bisexual. Unlike Mia, Rachel, and even Gray, these two women can comfortably be classified as lesbians.

In the film, Tala reveals that she first fell in love with another woman when she was 18. Though they had wonderful relationship, Tala broke it off after a few months because she felt she could not live as gay woman within her Middle Eastern family and community. This is why she agrees to marry a man during all four of her engagements. They were attempts to live within her society's heteronormative expectations. However, she consistently calls off the marriages because she cannot love them as they do her and, as she tells her father in this final case, "it won't be fair to [Hani] to go through with the wedding".

Although Leyla does not have the same dating history as Tala, she too expresses a consistent and exclusive attraction to women. When talking about her current relationship with Ali, she says that it doesn't "click" in "the way [she] imagine[s] it should", which demonstrates dissatisfaction with her male partner. Additionally, when coming out to her mother, Leyla mentions that she will never be able to be happy with a man and that "[she's] always known why" and that "what's [she's] been feeling for all these years is actually the right thing".

What these moments show is that both Tala and Leyla have known that they are exclusively attracted to women but have been dating men to intentionally ignore or repress that part of themselves. The choice to include these details in the narrative contribute to the believability of Tala and Leyla as lesbian characters rather than bisexual like some of the other women.

Like Tala and Leyla, Rachel's situation in *Imagine Me & You* also fits Garber's "Bisexual Plot". She begins the movie in a committed and monogamous relationship with her

fiancé/husband, Heck, soon enters into a love-triangle with Luce, and is eventually forced to choose between her two partners of different genders. However, unlike Tala and Leyla, Rachel is bisexual.

Though it is possible to marry somebody without being fully attracted to them, Rachel's speech at the reception confirms her valid and genuine feelings for Heck. She explains their relationship by saying they "were mates and then lovers, and it's been smooth all the way". Though one wouldn't likely discuss any potential relationship problems or doubts in their wedding speech, this sentiment, that Rachel and Heck had a loving and fulfilling relationship before her affair with Luce is never disproven. Additionally, Rachel never reveals any prior history of attraction to women nor questioning of her orientation like Tala and Leyla did. That she demonstrated valid attraction to a man and a woman makes Rachel better classified as a bisexual character and *Imagine Me & You* as a story about bisexual love.

Gray's sexual orientation in *Gray Matters* is difficult to classify in comparison to the rest of the women. She refers to herself as "gay" a couple of times in the film rather than using "lesbian" or any other more specific term. She also says, during a session with her therapist, that she "realized that it's not Mr. Right [she's] waiting for. It's Mrs. Right.". However, this is framed as a spontaneous discovery that occurred after being kissed by Charlie rather than part of a larger process or history of determining her sexuality such as those described by Tala and Leyla (and also Mia as will be discussed later on). Gray herself acknowledges the suddenness of the realization during the same therapy session when she says "you don't know what it's like. One day you think you're one thing, and the next day you realize that you're something else". That Gray lived her entire life up until this point not having any suspicion at all that she was a lesbian is not very believable, especially when her brother was apparently able to spot it in

elementary school as described above. Gray also reveals that she has had “plenty of boyfriends” without mentioning any dissatisfaction with those relationships or thoughts that something was missing or wasn’t clicking like Leyla did in *I Can’t Think Straight*. Though these factors alone cannot definitively classify Gray as a bisexual, they provide enough doubt that she may not be a lesbian either. By keeping Gray’s character ambiguous, *Gray Matters* misses an opportunity for explicit bisexual representation.

Charlie’s character presents another opportunity for *Gray Matters* to explore bisexuality. However, she is fairly one dimensional with her sole purpose being perfect enough that both Gray and Sam can believably fall in love with her. Her sexual orientation is articulated even less fully than Gray’s. She agrees to marry Sam one night after meeting him and is later described by Gray as being “completely, madly, passionately, like cow-jump-over-the-moon in love with [Sam]”. However, she was the one who initiated the kiss with Gray the night before her wedding. Whether Charlie is bisexual and experienced genuine attraction to Gray, or if she is purely a straight woman who just got so drunk that she kissed her new sister-in-law is never answered. However, the storyline relies on this ambiguity. Though it possible that a love triangle never actually existed and may have been entirely Gray’s fantasy, her belief that she may still have a chance with Charlie is what helps propel her to self-acceptance as a gay woman. Thus, it is this bisexual “appropriation” (James, 1996, p.228) as earlier described that drives the film’s plot forward. So, although *Gray Matters* may or may not feature bisexual characters, through its use of ambiguity and appropriation it does commit bisexual erasure.

Of all four films, Mia from *Kyss Mig* is the only canonically bisexual character. Like Rachel, and Tala and Leyla to a lesser extent, she begins the story in a relationship with a man, Tim. The film opens with a passionate sex scene between the two in which Mia appears to be an

enthusiastic participant. This scene also makes Mia the only character to be seen having consensual and enthusiastic sex with both her male and female partners within the film. This alone may have been enough to classify Mia as a bisexual character. However, *Kyss Mig* is explicitly clear about Mia's sexuality and even has a scene in which Frida says "I think Mia is bisexual, but I don't think she wants to acknowledge that", making it the only film to use the term "bisexual". Additionally, Frida is not the first woman Mia has been with. Towards the end of the film Mia admits that she was in love with another woman once before, though she "never thought [she] would feel this way again". This previous relationship establishes Mia's history with experimentation and questioning her sexuality and makes her a much more believable queer character in comparison to others like Gray and Rachel.

Like *Imagine Me & You*, this film relies heavily on Garber's stereotypical "Bisexual Plot" (Garber 2000, 456). Mia's affair and subsequent back and forth decision between Frida and Tim fits the unfaithful and indecisive bisexual blueprint introduced earlier. However, about midway through the film it is revealed that like Mia, Frida is in another serious relationship with a live-in girlfriend, Elin. In this case, the infidelity is not exclusive to Mia and the two must split the stigma of their adulterous relationship instead of it resting solely with the bisexual.

Though *Kyss Mig* distinguishes itself with its explicit bisexual representation, it has still been heavily regarded a lesbian movie. This can be seen not only by its inclusion in "18 Awesome Lesbian Movies Where Nobody Dies at the End" (Sheets, 2018) but also from the review blurbs that are featured on the back cover of the DVD case. One such quote reads "TREMENDOUS, SENSUAL, STUNNING, AND SIMPLY SEXY! *KISS ME* IS AS HONEST AS IT IS BEAUTIFUL. REAL TOUR DE **LESBIAN** FORCE" (bold emphasis added) from AfterEllen.com, a site that "works the lesbian/bi pop culture beat" and highlights itself as "the

pop culture site that plays for your team” (<https://www.afterellen.com/about>). Another says, “GET READY TO HAVE A NEW FAVORITE **LESBIAN MOVIE**” (bold emphasis added) from Curve Magazine, whose tagline is “One World. One Lesbian Community” (<https://www.curvemag.com/>). That two LGBT+ specific media sources have misidentified *Kyss Mig* as a purely lesbian story provides a stark example of external bisexual erasure that can occur even when a film explicitly identifies a character as bisexual.

Though some of these films, namely *I Can't Think Straight* and to a lesser extent *Gray Matters*, may not actually feature bisexual characters, they all still heavily rely on bisexuality and stereotypes about bisexual people. As previously mentioned, every film features Gaber's “Bisexual Plot” as their main story arc which utilizes bisexual people as indecisive and unfaithful characters. Additionally, Rachel and Mia fit many of the common beliefs about bisexuality crowdsourced by Ochs as they are shown to be “promiscuous”, “incapable of monogamy”, “bad relationship material”, and did “leave [their ex-partners] for someone else” (Ochs 2010, 171). Further, though many of these woman did not refer to themselves as bisexual during this period, that they had serious relationships with men before reaching their “lesbian happy endings” plays into the bisexuality as “a layover on the way to gay town” stereotype explained earlier. That all four movies heavily rely on these types of bisexual characters speaks to the continued pervasiveness of negative stereotypes about bisexuality in the media, even that created for and celebrated by members of the LGBT+ community.

Conclusion

From an explicitly bisexual woman to established lesbians who dated men in attempts to resist and hide their identities, these films contained varying levels of bisexual representation. However, all four films still relied on popular bisexual storylines including Garber's “Bisexual

Plot” of infidelity and indecisiveness. Further commonalities included the use of weddings and rings to exacerbate the betrayal of their partners and sibling characters to provide redemption and familial support. That 22% of this sample of films that have been hand selected and celebrated by members of the LGBTQ+ community feature problematic stereotypes and messages about bisexuals and bisexuality speaks to the pervasiveness of these issues in LGBTQ+ media.

That being said, this study looked at only four films. Further scholarship with a larger number of films is necessary to understand the phenomenon of bisexual erasure in LGBTQ+ media more thoroughly. Additionally, further work looking at audience reception could help to quantify how many of these negative messages actually resonate with audience members and if/how they influence their opinions on bisexuals and bisexuality. Finally, though this study did not focus on the international origins of these films, doing so could provide a more complete idea of how explicit bisexual representation and the understanding of bisexuals and bisexuality varies across the global context.

As stated, the larger goal of this project was to draw attention to power structures and imbalances that exist and work against bisexuals within the media, even that created by and for members of the LGBTQ+ community. Additionally, a smaller, but perhaps more important goal, was to encourage thoughtful viewership by audience members and messaging by content creators in hopes to move towards a media landscape that not only contains better bisexual stories, but also helps to cultivate more positive attitudes towards bisexual people.

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