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The Politics of the Closet: Queer Identity and Silence in Taylor Jenkins Reid's The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo

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Abstract:
This paper examines portrayal of queer desire, secrecy, love, and survival through the survival off the protagonist, Evelyn Hugo in Taylor Jenkins Reid's novel ***The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*** (2017). Though, the novel highlights fame and scandal in Hollywood, at its core, it tells the queer love affair between Evelyn and Celia. It uses Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory from ***Epistemology of the Closet*** (1990) to understand how the "closet" shapes Evelyn's life and her decisions. Her seven marriages are presented as acts to save her career and public image in front of the media, with her true love because of Hollywood environment. By linking the novel to the wider context of American queer literature, the paper claims that Reid's work introduces queer existence into modern culture while still depicting the suffering of before queer lives. Ultimately, the novel tells the reader about the struggles faced by queers in American society especially in context of Hollywood industry.

Keywords: Queer desire, The Closet, Hollywood and Sexuality, Self and Secrecy, Love and Expectation, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Taylor Jenkins Reid.

Introduction:

Queer Literature is often used to designate the combined area of gay and lesbian studies, together with the theoretical and critical writings about all modes of variance such as bisexuality, and transsexuality. The term "queer" was originally derogatory, used to stigmatize male and female same-sex love as deviant and unnatural; since the early 1990s, however, it has been adopted by gays and lesbians themselves as a non-invidious term to identify a way of life and an area for scholarly inquiry. Both lesbian studies and gay studies began as "liberation movements"-in parallel with the movements for African American and feminist liberation-during the anti-Vietnam War, antiestablishment, and countercultural ferment of the late 1960s and 1970s. Since that time these studies have maintained a close relation to the activists who strive to achieve, for gays and lesbians, political, legal, and economic rights equal to those of the heterosexual majority. (Abrams and Harpham 327)

American Queer Literature is a rich and evolving area that reflects the diverse experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals through various character, works and themes. From Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass in the 19th century to contemporary literature, it has been continually exploring themes of sexuality, identity, belonging, love, prejudice, and the struggle for rights. While earlier works often relied on coded language due to social restrictions, the late 20th century marked a rise in openly talking about queerness and

LGBTQ+ issues. Writers such as Walt Whitman, Patricia Highsmith, James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Tony Kushner, Edmund White, and Sarah Schulman have been central in shaping both queer identity and broader cultural conversations.

Taylor Jenkins Reid is a popular American author known for her emotional and influential works about love, fame, compromise, and identity written in historical fiction. She started her writing career in 2013 with her first novel ***Forever, Interrupted*** so far, she has published 9 more works. Her most celebrated work is ***The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*** (2017) it made her known across the world. In the novel, Reid has told readers the story of one legendary Hollywood actress Evelyn Hugo who married 7 times to men and lastly came out as bisexual as she claimed in the novel that the love of her life was Celia St. James, her fellow actress with whom she worked in movies and fell in love with her. The novel can be considered as both a romance and a critique of the society of silence that controlled mid-century America, showing how women—particularly queer women—were forced to choose one from two; between love and survival. Through this work Reid has become a voice for queers in contemporary literature, especially for bringing queer desires into focus.

Epistemology of the Closet (1990) by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick is book which is also considered as a queer theory. In her work, Sedgwick talks about how society, literature, and one's prejudices for someone are shaped by the difference between being heterosexual (straight) and homosexual (gay or lesbian). According to her the concept of "closet" is not just about a person hiding their choice of liking men or women but a whole system which forces them to hide their "emotions" or "truth". She says that coming out as straight, gay or bisexual is strong and painful at the same time because only "queer" individuals must declare who they're and not the others and after that too they're criticized. Overall, by the concept of "closet"; the major symbol of struggle in contemporary era, Sedgwick suggests us to see literature and culture in "queer" way, by paying more attention on what is hidden, unsaid, and disguised between them by doing so we can understand not only how the "queer" thinks and sees but how the "society" sees them. By seeing ***The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*** through Sedgwick's closet we can see how queer people must hide what they are or who they need especially for them who are in limelight. The Hollywood setting in the text fuels the discussion of its importance, as the film industry was built on precisely well-crafted public images of the actors-actresses where any news like this might have become a very scandalous act. Using Sedgwick's Epistemology of the Closet as a guiding theory this study will explore how the novels talks about the tension of one; being in the closet and being out of the closet, and how this closet shapes Evelyn's identity, her relationships with men and Celia, her career as an actress and her legacy in Hollywood.

Objectives:

- To analyze representation of the queer desire through the character of Evelyn Hugo.
- To examine the role of the closet as a dominant metaphor in the novel ***The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo.***
- To apply Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's ***Epistemology of the Closet*** to the text to understand secrecy, silence, and disclosure.
- To situate ***The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*** as an important work of American queer literature.
- To highlight the importance of queer storytelling in contemporary literature and popular culture.

Reading Evelyn Through, The Epistemology of the Closet:

Queer literature has always focused on voices that were silenced, hidden desires of queers, and identities forced to the margins. In the past, queer writers had to hide their meanings using coded language and metaphors because American society did not allow them to openly discuss about same-sex love and LGBTQ+ issues. To bring up, in the early 20th century, queer stories were often masked as friendships, exceptional relationships, or tragic endings, reflecting the cruel environment that queer people faced. Over time, especially in American literature, more direct portrayals of queer life began to publish, but even then, the theme of secrecy was still there in their works.

The "closet" is one of the strongest metaphors in queer studies. It describes the need of hiding one's sexuality or identity from society due to fear, shame, or social expectations. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her important work ***Epistemology of the Closet*** (1990), explained that the closet is more than just an individual choice; it represents a whole system of secrecy and ignorance. Some people know who they are, some guess who they might be, and some remain in the dark not knowing about them, but the silence about sexuality affects everyone's life. Sedgwick argued that the closet is central to the contemporary queer experience, and literature often reflects the tension between visibility and invisibility.

When we study queer literature, we also examine how writers portray secrecy, longing for love, fear of being outcaste, and the hard process of coming out as gay, lesbian or bisexual. This paper will help the reader to understand the main character Evelyn Hugo who spends much of her life in the closet, playing a public role of straight femininity while privately loving a woman Celia St. James. In the novel, when Monique Grant was taking interview of Evelyn she asks her;

"Who was the love of your life?"

Evelyn looks me in the eye, and I know she needs one more tiny push.

"It's OK, Evelyn. Really."

It's a big deal. But it is OK. Things are different now from how they were then. Although still not entirely safe, either, I have to admit.

But still.

She can say it.

She can say it to me.

She can admit it, freely. Now. Here.

"Evelyn, who was your great love? You can tell me."

Evelyn looks out the window, breathes in deeply, and then says, "Celia St. James."

The room is quiet as Evelyn lets herself hear her own words. And then she smiles, a bright, wide, deeply sincere smile. She starts laughing to herself and then refocuses on me. "I feel like I spent my entire life loving her." (Reid 123)

In ***The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo***, Reid tells us the story of Evelyn, a classic, famous, and legendary Hollywood actress Evelyn Hugo who finally reveals to a young journalist, Elizabeth Monique Grant the shocking reality of her life and why she married seven men.

At first, the novel seemed like a dramatic tale of fame, beauty, love, secrets, and power in the Hollywood film industry. However, at its core, it is a queer love story, though Evelyn is bisexual she herself tells that to Monique, "I'm bisexual. Don't ignore half of me so you can fit me into a box, Monique. Don't do that." (Reid 123)

Reid uses the narrative of Evelyn's marriages to seven men to lead readers gradually to the truth: Evelyn's most yearning relationship was with her fellow actress named Celia St. James. By focusing on an aged

actress revealing her secrets to a reporter, Reid focuses on how silence, survival, and queer identity connect throughout Evelyn's whole life. Her work is important in American Queer Literature because it introduces queer themes to modern literature in a way that is relatable to a vast audience while also dealing with serious issues of sexual identity, secrecy, and revealing about self. Unlike earlier American queer novels that may have attracted only to targeted audiences, Reid's novel made to worldwide bestseller lists and introduced millions of readers to queer history of American society within the glossy context of Hollywood.

Evelyn Hugo's life can be seen as a very long performance of one of her movies. From the moment she got her place in Hollywood, she learns that if she wants to survive in this industry, she won't just have to show her talent but at the same time she'll have to focus on how she presents herself. Back in the 1950s and 1960s Hollywood industry wanted its actresses to be beautiful, glamorous, desirable to men, and most importantly, heterosexual. If an actress did not fit into these criteria, her career might end before it even began. Evelyn understands this at an early stage of her career, so she carefully creates a public image that matches what media, society, and industry expects.

This is why she marries seven men throughout her life to hide her actual love life. These marriages are not specifically about romance or love. Instead, they are just strategies; acts to hide her relationship with Celia. In the novel, in her fifth marriage with Harry Cameron; one of her close friends in the industry they only get married to hide their gay and lesbian relations. Harry and Evelyn married each other, so did Celia and John, but Evelyn had physical relations with Celia while Harry and John loved each other. Some marriages give her more publicity and some are simply to cover up the truth of her private love life. Evelyn knows that the industry will not accept her for who she really is, so she uses marriage as a kind of disguise, an act to stay hidden in the closet. But behind these fake marriages, Evelyn has a real and great love for Celia St. James. Celia is not just another relationship—she is Evelyn's true lover, her partner, and the person she loves most deeply and truly. Yet Evelyn cannot openly accept this love in front of the world. At that time, being gay or lesbian in Hollywood was considered as a career-ending scandal. If people found out about them, both Evelyn and Celia could have lost everything they have achieved till now: their fame, their money, their identity in industry, and perhaps even their whole career. So, Evelyn keeps their love hidden, locked away in secrecy.

Celia got absolutely smashed during the wedding. She was having a hard time not being jealous, even though she knew the whole thing was fake. Her own husband was standing next to Harry, for crying out loud. And we all knew what we were.

Two men sleeping together. Married to two women sleeping together. We were four beards.

And what I thought as I said "I do" was It's all beginning now. Real life, our life. We're finally going to be a family.

Harry and John were in love. Celia and I were sky-high. (Reid 233)

This secrecy comes at a big cost in Evelyn's life because living a double life is exhausting. Evelyn constantly must lie, manipulate the industry; herself and her close ones too, and use men as shields to protect her real relationship. Her whole public identity becomes a mask. At this point, Evelyn's story mirrors Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory of the closet. Sedgwick says that the closet is not just about silence—it is about performance and appearance. Evelyn appears as heterosexual for the cameras, media and the industry while her real self is hidden in the closet; her private relationship with Celia.

Through Evelyn, we see how the closet can feel like a prison to one queer person. It helps her to survive in the Hollywood industry, but it also forces her to sacrifice love, honesty, and morality. For her, love

becomes something that must be carefully-calmly managed, hidden and most importantly—never freely lived. Evelyn's life shows us that secrecy, performance and appearance are not just personal choices—they are survival strategies, acts in a world that punishes difference.

Their relation shows us the tension between private love and public truth, tension between two queer lovers. It is one of the best examples of Sedgwick's idea that the closet is unstable and exhausting. Some people around them know what they are, some suspect who they might be, and some are completely in the dark about their relation. Their love is real and strong, but it is also constantly shaped by silence, secrecy, and the fear of disclosure.

One of the most engaging parts of ***The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*** is how it portrays the difference between the public image and the private image. For Evelyn, these two identities are day and night apart. In public, she is the glamorous, famous star: smiling on red carpets, marrying powerful and successful men, and surely fitting into Hollywood's picture of the "ideal actress." To the world, she is a heterosexual beauty queen, straight woman who loves men. But Evelyn is someone else entirely, she loves men, but she also loves Celia. She is a Cuban American woman who has had to hide her culture, change her accent, and even change her appearance to be accepted by Hollywood. Most importantly, she is a woman who loves another woman, living with a truth that the world cannot accept. This dual identity is the central struggle of her life.

Hollywood plays a major role in this novel. The film industry of Evelyn's era; mid 20th century was a society designed to control images. Stars were not allowed to be their real selves—they had to be finely shaped, managed, and sold to the public, the media. Queerness, especially for women, was totally unacceptable. So, Evelyn plays the role required to hide her love, using her seven marriages as props in her ongoing performance of being heterosexual woman. But this double life comes with a big cost. Evelyn gains success, wealth, and power, but she loses peace of mind and especially the love of her life. She lives in constant fear that her secret of being lesbian will be exposed. She knows that if media finds out about her relationship with Celia, they will not focus on her being bisexual they will only say that she is a lesbian. This fear poisons her relationship with Celia and makes her manipulative at times. Her popularity, which seems like a dream from the outside, is a cage from the inside just like the closet.

Through Evelyn's story, the novel portrays how sexuality and stardom are deeply connected in Hollywood. Evelyn's fame is fully based on her ability to hide her queer identity. Her tragedy is that even at the peak of her success, she cannot live truly; she must hide her actual identity or else she will lose everything she has worked for till now. Her life becomes a reminder that the cost of fame and stardom is often silent and hidden in the closet.

Application of Sedgwick's Epistemology of the Closet:

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her important work ***Epistemology of the Closet*** (1990), argues that the closet is not just an individual's choice to hide or show their sexuality or identity. It is a system of society forcing them to announce who they are, a complex act that controls who knows, who suspects, and who remains unaware of the truth of one's identity. Sedgwick states that the closet is the defining structure for gay/lesbian/bisexual oppression in this century.

Evelyn Hugo's life fits into this theory. From the start of her Hollywood career, she realizes that her success is depended on her ability to perform heterosexual feminine while hiding her true desires of loving a woman. Her queerness or love for Celia is not just her own secret; it becomes a secret that involves everyone around her Celia, Harry and Robert. Her husbands, friends, managers, journalists, and the public

all play a role in maintaining her identity as a heterosexual woman. When Evelyn marries Don Adler, she knows marriage is about appearances and popularity. The public sees it as a charming union, but behind closed doors, Adler is abusive and cruel.

Frustrated, Don grabbed the pillow from under his head and smashed it over his face, screaming into it.

"What has gotten into you?" I said.

"If you're not going to be the kind of wife who is going to make me breakfast, you can at least know how I like it." He escaped to the bathroom.

I was bothered but not entirely surprised. I had quickly learned that Don was only kind when he was happy, and he was only happy when he was winning. I had met him on a winning streak, married him as he was ascending. I was quickly learning that sweet Don was not the only Don. (Reid 75)

The reality of their marriage remains hidden because Hollywood industry, and the society it reflects, lives on illusions. This shows Sedgwick's idea that the closet is not only about who one loves, but also about how the entire social structure of society depends on controlling what can and cannot be said about heterosexuality or homosexuality.

Sedgwick points out that the closet creates tension between knowing and ignoring. Some realities are spoken; others are guessed, and some remain unsaid but still understood by others. Evelyn's relationship with Celia St. James is the perfect example of this tension. At different times, Evelyn must carefully check out who knows about her love for Celia. For example, Harry Cameron, her closest friend and a fellow closeted gay man, understands her secret without her needing it to be explained. Evelyn remembers Harry that, "Harry just knew. He didn't ask, and I didn't tell him. But he knew it. Harry was the only man who knew me, all of me. He knew I loved Celia, and he never judged me for it. He covered for me when no one else could" This act shows what Sedgwick describes as the "glass closet." In this situation, the truth is known to other people but unspoken, which exists in a fragile space between visibility and invisibility.

Other characters too have varying connections to Evelyn's truth, some of her husbands; like Don Adler and Mick Riva, never suspect her true desire. Others, such as Rex North, enter into a "mutually beneficial" marriage with Evelyn where they both were married just for the sake of media and to show them that they are a happy couple. The public, however, remains completely unaware about what is going on behind their fake marriage. Hollywood magazines endlessly cover Evelyn's fairytale straight romances with men, completely ignoring her relationship with Celia. Sedgwick's theory explains that the closet is a network of people who control information that affects the whole world of social media, rather than just one queer person's secret, is reflected in this act. Evelyn's truth is like a flickering light; it illuminates the area around her whether it is invisible from the media or visible.

Sedgwick's primary argument is that "coming out of the closet" is an ongoing, repetitive process, not just a single event. Queer individuals face the continuous challenge of deciding when, where, and to whom they can reveal their real identities. Evelyn experiences this process throughout her life in the industry.

Evelyn does not have one defining event of "coming out the closet moment." Instead, she shares her truth in selected and calculated ways where she feels right. She very first reveals herself to Celia when they first admit their love. Their closeness begins with Evelyn telling her that she loves her, leading Evelyn to understand that; everything else—the men, the movies, the media, the industry, the fame—none of it would ever compare.

She was in her robe still, drying her hair in front of her vanity.

I walked up to her and looked into her gorgeous blue eyes, and I said,

"I think that I love you."

And then I took the tie of her robe and pulled it open.
I did it slowly. I did it so slowly that she could have stopped me a million times before it broke free. But she didn't.
Instead, she sat up straighter, looked at me more boldly, and put her hand on my waist as I did it. (Reid 137)

However, this revelation remains private and limited to both of them only, not letting it out beyond the protection of their relationship. Later, Evelyn selectively comes out as queer to Harry Cameron, who becomes a supportive partner for her in navigating Hollywood's expectations of heterosexual woman. Evelyn has a unique opportunity to be honest because of Harry's shared queerness, but again, this is a partial coming out rather than a full disclosure.

Finally, when Evelyn feels like she is not going to live long, she selects to share her ultimate truth with Monique. She tells her the full narrative of her sexuality, her life, her fame and her great love for Celia, presenting it as a final acceptance of her identity before her death. This situation shows Sedgwick's idea that the closet is never entirely "overcome" instead, disclosure is always delayed, partial, and always dependent on other situations. Evelyn's reality is fully revealed only when she knows that she has nothing left to lose.

Sedgwick argues that the closet has a mixed role, acting as both a shield to hide and a source of harm if anyone finds out about the truth. Evelyn's love life with Celia shows this duality. On one hand, the closet protects them. By hiding her love for Celia in the closet, Evelyn safeguards both their careers. The Hollywood industry of the 1950s and 1960s was extremely homophobic which would not allow one woman to have homosexual relationship. Any public acknowledgment of their queerness could have quickly ended their careers. As Evelyn states, "If they knew the truth, I'd never work again. And Celia's career would be ruined too." This secrecy allows her to get fame in Hollywood, gain wealth, gain success, and gain power in the industry. On the other hand, the closet also traps her in it. The need of hiding their relationship harms her relationship with Celia, who gets more unhappy with living in the closet. Celia tells Evelyn, "I don't want to live my life in the shadows. I want the world to know that I love you." Evelyn's refusal to come out of the closet costs them more pain than the happiness they felt over the years and almost tears them apart. So, Evelyn's story fits perfectly into Sedgwick's point: the closet is both a way for queer lovers to stay alive and a major source of pain and alienation. It helps Evelyn stay alive and famous in Hollywood, but it also keeps her in a closet of lies, slyness, and the eventual regret of losing the love of her life.

Sedgwick describes the closet as an ongoing burden that shapes an individual's entire existence in the world. For Evelyn, this weight is mostly unbearable. Throughout her career, she continuously has to calculate her moves, ensuring that no gesture, act or word exposes her secret of being queer. The fear of being exposed in front of the media and industry never leaves her. She tells Monique, "I lived my whole life with one half in the light and the other half in the dark. And let me tell you, it's not worth it." This statement refers to Sedgwick's claim that the closet is not simply a space of safety but also a structure that gets one stress, self-surveillance, and psychic damage because of constantly hiding themselves. By the end of her life, Evelyn gets to the heavy cost she had to pay for her silence. She has achieved everything the world desires in dreams of fame, beauty, wealth, success but she still feels emptiness as she is left alone now. The years of secrecy still haunt her, and her final confession is not about shocking the world but about unburdening herself.

By applying Sedgwick's ***Epistemology of the Closet*** to ***The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo***, we can view that Evelyn's life is not just a dramatic Hollywood story but much more than that. It serves as a major case study in queer theory, showing how sexuality is forced by social structures of knowing and not knowing, secrecy and disclosure, safety and danger. Evelyn's story tells us that the closet is not a personal or a simple choice. It is a forced system created by society which one must follow. The Hollywood industry creates closets and forces its stars to live in them, to hide their actual identity in them. The media too follows those closets by only presenting heterosexual love stories in their news and highlights. People love these lies and prefer the glamour and fame of lies to the discomfort of the truth of queerness. Evelyn does not live in the closet by her choice; she is trapped in it without willingness. Ultimately, Sedgwick helps us understand Evelyn's life more clearly with her theory of the closet. Her queerness is not just an identity hidden in the closet; it is the central force around which her entire career, her success, relationships, and tragedies revolve. The closet does both at the same time; gives Evelyn Hugo power and takes it away from her.

Conclusion:

Taylor Jenkins Reid's ***The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*** is not just a novel about fame, success and glamour in the Hollywood industry. It tells a great powerful story about queer desire, secrecy, and survival in Hollywood. Evelyn Hugo's hidden love for Celia St. James reveals the sad reality of queer lives of mid 20th century lived inside the closet. Her marriages, public image, and private truths reflect the cultural structures of American society that forced queer people into silence in the 20th century. When we read the novel through Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's ***Epistemology of the Closet***, we can see how Evelyn's story highlights the complexity and problems of secrecy/disclosure. The closet is not just about hiding oneself; it is about power and survival. Evelyn's life emphasizes the role of closet in shaping personal identity and public performance, especially in a place like Hollywood industry. Additionally, the novel adds a very important point to the tradition of American Queer Literature. It links the suffering of past marginalized queer voices — from Whitman to Baldwin to Lorde — with the current desire for representation of queer voices in modern culture. By placing a queer love story of Evelyn and Celia at the heart of her popular novel, Reid brings queer desire into the current hot discussion, making it visible to audiences worldwide. In the end, ***The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*** reminds us that these closets still exist in society, even when its acceptance has grown worldwide. It shows the strength and importance of queer love, which forces secrecy and silence. Evelyn Hugo's story, though fictional, represents real histories of queer people who lived in the shadows of the closet but whose desires could not be erased by the society. Through her story, readers are reminded that the closet is not just a place of hiding your identity and reality; it is also a source of love and comfort from your loved ones.

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