

BOOK REVIEW: Aliraza Javaid. *Masculinities, Sexualities and Love*.

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At the crossroads of many fields of study – sociological, cultural, post-structural, gender and sexuality, and autoethnographic studies – Aliraza Javaid’s book is a social critique with personal, self-reflexive insights into our understanding of the concepts of love, intimacy, and vulnerability. *Masculinities, Sexualities and Love* represents a significant contribution to the “odd man out” subfield of gender studies (i.e. masculinity studies, cf. Beasley 2009) and its long-lasting preoccupation with hegemonic masculinity theory; it also paves the way for a more delicate discussion about stigma, including the researcher’s own stigmatization by association, because of the sensitive topics it investigates (Javaid 2019).

The book is divided into seven chapters examining various aspects related to the three core concepts announced in the title – *Masculinities, Sexualities and Love*; they are preceded by an Introduction and followed by Conclusions. To help with the reading process, each chapter ends with a conclusion section that summarizes the main issues and arguments of the respective chapter.

The Introduction outlines the ways in which Aliraza Javaid (a British academic who has extensively researched aspects concerning male rape, masculinities and sexualities) contributes to the definition of love as a sociological concept, which has only recently come under scrutiny by sociologists from the perspective adopted in the study. Since the expression of love and of its related emotions is considered a sign of weakness and is usually a marker of femininity, while emotional inexpression is a marker of power and domination, Javaid’s declared aim is “to understand how men construct and interpret love and to connect their constructions and

interpretations to social structures.” (p. 5) Combining objective research with autoethnography and “covert research” (pp. 8-9), the author critically comments on love and its related emotions as being made and unmade through gender and discourse and argues that love is constantly “negotiated through social and power relations” (p. 6). Javaid further reviews three core concepts – Michel Foucault’s discourse analysis of love, Raewyn Connell’s hegemonic masculinity, and Adrienne Rich’s heteronormativity – which affect the lives of men of other sexual orientations as well as the ways in which such men construct and express love and intimacy.

The first chapter traces the history of love from a social and cultural perspective, starting with the founding fathers of sociology: Karl Marx’s neglect of love as a social concept, Emile Durkheim’s opposition between family love and the passionate love of the couple, Max Weber’s forms of brotherly love and erotic love, ending with Talcott Parson’s discussion of gendered roles in the nuclear family, which have also left a mark on Javaid’s own formation as an individual. Significant works by other scholars (for instance, Stevi Jackson, Kenneth Plummer, Eric Anderson, Catharine Donovan and Marianne Hester, Aaron Ben-Zeév and Ruhama Goussinsky, etc.) are discussed for their contribution to the concept of love in terms of romantic relationships, monogamy, self-discovery, domestic violence and abuse, and even self-nurture but they are also critiqued for their limitations with regard to same-sex and bisexual couples. Arguing for a social-constructionist perspective on love, Javaid concludes that love is meaningless until someone inscribes it with meaning; it can only be understood as a social and cultural product since ideas about love – together with behaviours, emotions and relations with the loved one – constantly change across cultures, places and times.

Chapter 2, entitled “Men, masculinities, and love: a contradiction in terms?”, centres on heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity (cf. Connell, pp. 41-50) and deals with the ways in which love is constructed by various types of masculinities, while also trying to answer whether men can (fall in) love. Javaid’s main argument here is that typologies are not fixed but build a rather fluid hierarchy that is constantly negotiated by men according to the social, cultural and temporal context. One of the most important points the author makes is that the love of gay and bisexual men, as representatives of subordinate masculinities, or of men marginalized because of religious, racial, ethnic or physical features is made inferior and largely perceived as deviant and abnormal. An equally important point is that, although challenging the system and defying authority, protest masculinities are subservient to various forms of hegemonic practices such as sexual promiscuity and “unemotionality” as ways of dealing with insecurity and powerlessness.

Sexual scripts, argues Javaid, are crucial to our understanding of love and intimacy. Different for boys and girls (i.e. focused on sex and the chase versus romance and the ever-after), these scripts contribute, together with culturally bound hegemonic practices, to showing that not all men are capable of love because love and emotions are mostly equated to a fear of losing power and control; hence men are socialized into emotional detachment and “inexpression”. Hegemonic masculinity – concludes Javaid – can have many implications depending on the social and cultural context where it is “done” but it is all the more powerful because it can use various strategies or practices, including “cultural, symbolic or physical ‘violence’” (p. 60) to trick and deceive the weaker partner into serving the “hegemonic man” (p. 59) and thus to further legitimate gender inequality, particularly in romantic relationships.

Chapter 3 (“Sexualities and love: doing sex and making love”) begins by tracing the history of the gay liberation movement, as well as the changes in British laws (starting with 1967) to decriminalize homosexuality and homosexual social practices. Taking his main cues from Plummer, Javaid argues that, despite the freedom this movement brought to gay men, “homophobia and the regulation of homosexualities are both forms of social control” (p. 66), which have worked together with social prejudices to “push homosexuality [back] into the closet” (p. 66) and to further emphasize heterosexuality as the visible, accepted norm. If men enact emotion and/or love, it is primarily to safeguard heterosexual hegemony, which reproduces power, which then translates into a series of sexual conquests. Similarly, in homosocial contexts love is replaced by sexual conquests so that men can attain heterosexual ideals. Javaid further explores two special contexts in which men have trouble finding and/or keeping love: on the one hand, the case of fraternities, where gay men draw on exclusionary tactics to reproduce ideals of heterosexuality, to compensate for their devalued status among men and their inferior homosexuality, and on the other hand, the case of sex workers, often marginalized and stigmatized because of their work and trying to distance themselves emotionally when working in order to stay loyal to their lover.

Relying on Foucault’s approach to discourse analysis – which actually lends itself well to Javaid’s undertaking –, the author then proceeds to analysing the ways in which love, intimacy and emotion are constructed in two blockbuster films adapted from equally successful books: *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *The Girl on the Train*. On the one hand, sexual scripts and discourses about love help Christian Grey shape and then shift his sexual practices, while on the other hand, the ideology of love that keeps Rachel Watson worried and fearful but searching for love even though in dreams or unreliable memories.

Chapter 4 (“Reflexivity and love”) is meant to fill a gap in research by joining together autoethnography, reflexivity and love, with the aim to advance understandings of the self and love. “The sense of self” – explains Javaid – “is shaped by love, romantic ideologies, and through sexual relations; so to provide a reflexive perspective on love can elucidate the ways in which love is constructed by the sense of self and vice versa: how love produces the self in negotiation.” (p. 81) Drawing again on Foucault’s work, this time on subjectivity, which is changing and shaped by social and cultural contexts, Javaid argues that context is essential to understanding how “subjectivity can be produced and how certain forms of subjectivity link with particular forms of love.” (p. 84) In a Foucauldian paradigm, knowledge and power are co-dependent, with power producing the self and subjectivity, which then produces knowledge about love; one can simultaneously produce love and be subjected to various forms of love.

Framing his own identity and personal experiences by three core concepts – i.e. autoethnography, reflexivity and positionality – which he considers related, Javaid explains how his sense of self (he identifies as “a gay Muslim rape victim”, p. 91) was inauthentic by both homophobia and gay men’s preference for casual sex. He goes on to describe how both his area of research (male rape) and his homosexuality have resulted in marginalization and stigmatization by most of the people around him. He argues that although men have become more active “self makers”, making choices for themselves and breaking with tradition, they are still “not entirely free from the shackles of power and from social, cultural and economical [sic] factors that may limit opportunities for more individualized ‘choices’ in intimate and personal relationships.” (p. 96)

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 focus on empirical data collected from interviews with 23 men that mostly identify as gay or bisexual (as explained in the Introduction, pp. 18-19). Titled “What is love?”, chapter 5 explores the ways in which these men define and construct love and intimacy. Starting from various definitions of love and drawing mostly on Foucault’s seminal works, Javaid analyses his personal conversations with such men, identifying some key issues that lie at the foundation of love: communication in person (rather than online), sharing, and the potential lover’s personality. Nevertheless, homophobia may lead gay and bisexual men to conceptualize love in negative terms as undesirable and rejected, all the more so since the negative consequences of these men’s disclosing their dissidence from heteronormativity would outnumber and outlast the positive ones.

Underpinned by Connell’s “ontoformativity of gender” (pp. 116-117), chapter 6 analyses the intersection of love and hegemonic practices in the interviews conducted by the researcher. Javaid argues that few men can actually embody hegemonic masculinity all the time

“but they can and do enact patterns of conduct” (p. 117) such as sexual promiscuity or the overuse of drugs and/or alcohol. Exploring the ways in which gay and bisexual men perform (patterns of) hegemonic masculinity in relation to love, Javaid theorizes that, if love does not have a purpose (e.g. to experience excitement, to demonstrate power over the lover or to control him), it becomes insignificant and unwanted, a mere distraction from achieving success of any kind.

Chapter 7 investigates how the interviewees “do sexuality and what this means for them” (p. 134), focusing mainly on stigmatization in relation to bisexuality (which is even harder to grasp than homosexuality), singlehood, relationship failures (prompting reflexivity and a reinvention of the self), ‘coming out’ (a confession leading to unpredictable reactions both positive and negative), children as ‘means’ of validating loving relationships, and deception, overtly used in dating as a manifestation of power.

Although at times the reader may in part disagree with Javaid’s interpretation of the interviewees’ stories, chapters 5 through 7 provide emotional inside perspectives on the ways in which love and sexuality are constructed by gay and bisexual men, particularly highlighting that masculinities are culturally bound as well as subject to (social) change.

Tracing the most important issues discussed in previous chapters, the Conclusions rubric emphasizes once again that just as masculinities and sexualities are negotiated through gender and power relations and change over time and social context, so is love constantly shaped by discourses and social practices. The most important lesson, however, is that “[y]ou have to be okay on your own before you can have a healthy relationship with someone else.” (p. 163)

Overall, Aliraza Javaid’s *Masculinities, Sexualities and Love* is not only a well-documented and personal, soul-baring contribution to the research on sexualities and love, but also the result of writing as a cathartic and healing process, in which the author has learnt to renegotiate his own sense of self as single and gay but in search of lasting romantic love.

References

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