



Unboxing the Feminine Power and Women Identification: Feminine Consciousness in the novel *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* by Taylor Jenkins Reid, analyzed through the lens of Adrienne Rich's *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*.

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Abstract

A female identity has been forever shaped according to the values, interpellated in our minds through the veins of culture and traditions. The society is consumed with the idea, that the chief role of a woman in the society is to please her husband, both mentally and physically. Through the character of Evelyn Hugo in the novel *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, the author Taylor Jenkins Reid attempts to tear the image of a culturally accepted woman, rather draws a picture of a self-defined, self-sustained and a self-enamored woman, who preferred to make decisions according to herself, instead of men around her. Evelyn married for seven times in her life, however those choices were modelled on her “preference” to preserve her queer identity. According to Adrienne Rich, heterosexuality is presumed the “sexual preference” of most women. Due to this “innate orientation”, through culturally transmitted values, queer women generally tend to ignore their lesbian impulses, which they often consider a disease, or a kind of an abnormality in their personality. Evelyn Hugo broke away from this preference and embraced her sexual impulses. She kept striving to keep her love for Celia preserved. She duped media intermittently by marrying men, and thereby maintained her social image. Her relationship with Celia was not only sexual but also platonic. Adrienne Rich calls this aspect as “Lesbian Continuum”, a term that she prefers over “lesbian sexuality”. The term “Lesbian Sexuality” is only limited to the sexual pleasures experienced between women, whereas “Lesbian Continuum” perpetuates to many levels. It is a women identified experience, which includes sharing of richness of life, bonding against male tyranny

and giving and receiving of practical, emotional and psychological support.”. According to her, homosexuals are forced to make this “preference” not out of love, but out of indirect provocation that the society poses on them through various symbols and messages around, especially media.

Rich explains exhaustively that this companionship is different from the love and relationship shared between a male and a female, as it is extricated of any kind of capitalism and power domination. The bond of love that is shared between a man and a woman, demands a woman’s subjugation, and many other obligations like following certain societal norms and maintaining the image of a perfectly married family. This contention of Rich, has been impactfully painted through the character of Evelyn, through her vivid experiences with men, whereas on the other hand, Celia’s love was uplifting, empowering and even appreciative of her.

The role of the media is significant in the novel, due to media’s insistence, Evelyn was expected to fit herself in a typical stereotype grid. Media objectifies females. Women on screen are filtered through the perspective of male pleasure (male as a viewer and male as a protagonist). Hence the director of a movie places male desire, voyeurism, fantasy and eroticism entral to his work. His role, according to Laura Mulvey is a “powerful and a political one. Evelyn happily agreed to the choice of being an object of male fantasy, in order to climb the platform of success. However, she had to trade her freedom to live together with Celia instead. Her choices of heterosexual marriages were the outcome of her vulnerability in front of media. She was encumbered to showcase herself as a perfect woman in a perfect and dreamy marriage.

However, at the end she finally decided to break through her vulnerabilities, and accepted her identity as a bisexual. She wanted to break that perfect figurine, that she carved for everybody and fearlessly declared her love for Celia through her biography. She entrusted the task of writing her biography, to a reporter Monique Grant, and emphasized to seamlessly present her life events without filtering it. She wanted sheer truth to be unspooled in front of everybody.

Feminine sexuality has always been a problem in defining her ‘self’ since ages. A woman has been in a constant flux of emotions, traumas and all sorts of vulnerabilities whenever she intersects with her true bodily and mental image. It has never been an easy task to handle this fabric of emotional and mental intensity due to the culturally imbedded values that are in front of our subconscious. Since birth women are fed with values and messages through fables, television, media and culturally transmitted stories about definite feminine roles.

These values have incubated the most prime idea in our heads that the cardinal role of a women in the society is to gratify her husband both physically and mentally and also, to cast herself into the role of an ideal mother and a submissive wife. Adrienne Rich, in *Compulsory Sexuality and Lesbian Existence* (1980) mentions:

women have become the consumer victims of various cures, therapies, and normative judgements in different periods (including the prescription to middle-class women to embody and preserve the sacredness of home – the “scientific” romanticization of the home itself). (p. 9)

Heterosexuality is presumed the “sexual preference” of most women. This general tendency becomes a huge burden on the lesbian identity. To them their identity turns out to be a guilt on the consciousness, or an abnormality in their personality. This idea of “preference” or “innate orientation” is questioned by Adrienne Rich in her essay *Compulsory Sexuality and Lesbian Existence* (1980). My attempt is to analyze the novel, *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* by Taylor Jenkins Reid through the lens of Adrienne Rich’s assertions about lesbian consciousness which she enunciates in *Compulsory Sexuality and Lesbian Existence* (1980).

Since a tender age, while Evelyn Hugo lived in Hell’s Kitchen, she was aware of her feminine and delicate body. She knew how to offer herself to the male dominated society, in order to receive attention from the public. She noticed the male glances, falling upon her voluptuous body, and indeed made them her power to mount the social ladder and become successful. Billy the owner of five-and-dime grocery shop once groped and kissed her, she tried resisting, but couldn’t due to his strong arms. She had two choices. “I could do it for free. Or I could do it for free candy”. (p.11)

Later, she married Ernie Diaz, her first husband, just for the sake of entering Hollywood. She said, “and that’s what I traded my virginity for. A ride to Hollywood”. Afterall Evelyn was never interested in any of the male, sexually but only “wanted to get far away from Hell’s Kitchen.” Adrienne Rich mentions that how the females with queer identity, incline their preference to choose a suitable husband and marry. They are injected with the idea of heterosexual romance, which they are bound to prefer over their lesbian impulses, in order to keep their economical, and financial position unscathed. Finally, they submit themselves to their husband, considering it a natural phenomenon. This is a result of psychoanalysis. To elucidate this Adrienne Rich mentions Kathleen Barry’s “sexual domination perspective” according to which the “overall identification of women primarily as sexual beings whose responsibility is the sexual service of men.” (Rich 23) Barry makes it

more definite by calling it “Compulsory Heterosexuality”, as this idea of heterosexual romance has been interpellated in us through movies, fairytales, popular songs, wedding pageantry etc.

Evelyn yearned for the life of media and glamour once, and later, her life got unescapable from media’s attention. Media played a major role in the novel, after all it was the impetus, she became *the greatest Evelyn Hugo of all times*. She effortlessly changed her appearance and her language accent, the moment she entered Hollywood. She even changed her name from Evelyn Herrera to Evelyn Hugo. Not even for a moment that she budged, whenever she was expected to add any change in her personality:

Gwen bleached my hair and cut it into shoulder length bob. She shaped my eyebrows. She plucked my window’s peak. I met with a nutritionist, who made me lose six pounds exactly, mostly by smoking and replacing some meals by cabbage soup. I met with an elocutionist, who got rid of the New York in my English, who banished Spanish entirely. (p. 50)

Brave heartedly, she did all the bold scenes in movies and photoshoots. She knew well the prime intention of the director and his area of focus. Gradually, she learned to make transactions with the male dominated society, what the society expected from her and in return, what she had to offer for money and success. Laura Mulvey in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Discourse* critically describes the idea of *male gaze*. This alludes mostly to the pornographic depiction of women in movies. It is a concept, based on psychoanalysis, where males derive pleasure in watching women, who to them are the objects of pleasure. Our brain unconsciously allows this function to happen, due to the various cinematic strategies like focus, lighting etc. Therefore, women on screen are filtered through the perspective of male pleasure (male as a viewer and male as a protagonist). Harry Cameron, the producer in the novel wanted Evelyn and “Don (to) do a picture. A matinee romance, maybe. Something where all the girls want to be you, and all the boys want to be *with you*.” (67). This concept also alludes to Freud’s *Scopophilia*, i.e., pleasure derived from looking and enjoy objectifying (voyeurism), especially women. It’s like peering into another world through cinema, which happens mainly through factors like darkness, seats positioning, shots angle etc. Thus, the role of a director becomes the most essential. He places male desire, voyeurism, fantasy and eroticism central to his work. His role, according to Mulvey is a “powerful and a political one”, as he decides not only what the spectator sees but also how.

In the novel, these aspects played a pivotal role. Her fame was the outcome of her choice to become the object of male gaze, as she knew, that's where the power and success laid. She opted for difficult and complex choices to please men, and eventually climbed the rough platform of success. Evelyn Hugo decided at every turn, to be the captain of her own life. She never allowed her conscience to get wavered, whenever it came to leaving men, whenever any of them ventured to turn her course of life. She said, "I don't feel regret for the things I've done- at least not the things you might expect".

The only sincere love of Evelyn's life, was a woman named Celia, also one of the greatest actresses of her times. She loved her to an immeasurable length. Her relationship with Celia was not only sexual but also platonic. Adrienne Rich calls this as aspect as "Lesbian Continuum", a term that she prefers over "lesbian sexuality". The term "Lesbian Sexuality" is only limited to the sexual pleasures experienced between women, where as "Lesbian Continuum" perpetuates to many levels. It gives a broader perspective, where women share a complex bond of true comradeship. Rich calls this, a type of "lifestyle shopping" as it is a women identified experience, which includes sharing of richness of life, bonding against male tyranny and giving and receiving of practical, emotional and psychological support.

Since the journey has never been easy for women in love, Evelyn got vigilant, once the media got suspicious of them. She would do anything to save Celia's and her name from getting blemished. Rich probes deeper into this perspective of *Lesbian Continuum*, and says that its "knowledge is joy, sensuality, courage, and community, as well as guilt, self-betrayal, and pain." (28) She not only loved her dearly, but also loved seeing her successful. She earnestly wanted Celia to be awarded with an Oscar, and was delighted when it happened. To prevent media from knowing about her "forbidden love", she finally weaved a plan to marry Mick Riva, in order to trick media, and shift its attention away from their lesbian bond. She enticed Mick, by using her feminine charms, and got married to him only for a night, divorcing the very next morning. She finally succeeded in making a breaking news, and ended up in a tabloid of the newspaper. Regarding the scandalous news she said:

All I had to do was make sure that my romantic scandals felt like a story that would keep making headlines. And as long as I did that, I knew the gossip rags would never look too closely at Celia.
(p. 184)

Later, she married Rex North, not out of love, but for the publicity of her upcoming movie *Anna Kerenina*. After divorcing from Don Adler, her second husband after Ernie Diaz, Evelyn's scope in the industry narrowed since, Don was the major star of Sunset Studios, due to which she was removed from the directing company; also, many of her contracts came to an end. Harry Cameron still remained her constant support, and fetched her a movie somehow. So, it became extremely vital for her for to make the movie a superhit, or else lose her fame. Therefore, her marriage to Rex North remained an honest one, as both entered the publicity stunt together. Both wanted Anna and Vronsky (lead roles of the movie) hitched together in a dreamy wedding, in order to soak attention from the public and media. Finally, the movie received tremendous magnetism, glamour and success. She said "it was the beginning of my millions" (196). Evelyn Hugo and Rex North never consummated, yet both respected each other's choices and lifestyle. They shared a brief relationship of friendship and remained as partners in film industry. Evelyn mentioned:

We woke up every day in our separate beds, got ready on opposite sides of house, and then got into the same car and drove to the set together, holding hands the moment we drove on to the lot. We worked all day and then drove home together. At which point, we'd split up again for our evening plans. (p. 211)

Rex was aware of her intimate relationship with Celia, and was supportive too. He was also involved in a romantic relationship with an actress Joy Nathan. Their marriage ended soon, as Joy got pregnant with Rex' child. Evelyn, delighted than ever for Joy and Rex pressed them to get married and begin their family, yet they worried about the judgmental media. Finally, they concocted a plan, where none of their images would get tarnished. Evelyn duped media with her faux photoshoot with Harry Cameron, and made bold headlines about an extramarital affair. Rex did the same, by hanging out more publicly with Joy. He made news too. Finally, Rex and Evelyn parted on friendly terms.

Evelyn and Harry were queer, yet they married because of media. Both were happy in their own respective relationships: Evelyn with Celia and Harry with John Braverman. Due to media's continuous interference in their lives, Harry and Evelyn finally decided to have a baby, after all it became essential for them to portray themselves as a happily married family. similar to what Adrienne Rich calls: heterosexual "preference", a choice which a person with queer identity usually tend to make due to societal constraints. Rich

gives the example of *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and the Human Malaise*, by Dorothy Dinnerstein. Dinnerstein prefers the term: “gender arrangements” rather than “marriage”. According to her, homosexual people are forced to make this “preference” not out of love, but out of indirect provocation that the society poses on them through various symbols and messages around, especially media. Dinnerstein says:

...sharing of parenting between women and men and for an end to what she perceives as the male/female symbiosis of “gender arrangements”, which she feels are leading the species further and further into violence and self-extinction. (Rich15)

Dinnerstein calls this forced arrangement as “a collaboration to keep history mad”. Evelyn and Harry got blessed with a baby girl, named Connor. Both fulfilled their parental duties sincerely, yet never gave up their queer relationships.

Soon, Evelyn reached nearly at the brink of her career, so decided to film the most steamiest scene of her life with Don Adler, in the movie *Three A.M.* Through the movie, she wanted to dissipate the image of women as objects of sex, with a sole aim of giving pleasure to men. However, the same woman is to be chastised, and labelled as a whore, if she decides to seek pleasure from men, rather than only give. She said for herself, “I was being designed to be two opposite things, a complicated image that was hard to dissect but easy to grab on to. I was supposed to be both naïve and erotic.” (51). So, through the character of “Philomena”, she intended to shatter “the most pernicious message that women are natural sexual prey to men and love it, that sexuality and violence is congruent.” Adrienne Rich calls this tendency of the society as “clitoridectomy”. According to this term, women are stripped of their identity, autonomy, dignity and personality and the fact that they can derive pleasure out of sexual activity too. Evelyn said:

The idea that I’d be shown to enjoy my body, to desire the male form just as strongly as I was desired, to show a woman putting her own physical pleasure at the forefront... it felt daring. (p. 262)

Women are considered devoid of emotional context and individuality, rather treated as a sexual commodity to be consumed by males. Rich says: “for women sex is essentially masochistic, humiliation

pleasurable, physical abuse erotic.” This movie turned out scandalous, and Evelyn made headlines again. It received X rating and censorship too, yet she earned bags of money and further contracts, and finally reclaimed her title as “bombshell Evelyn”

Harry Cameron died of an accident. Devastated Evelyn again chose to marry Robert Jamison, brother of Celia, in order to protect her identity as queer. Being married to him would give media a false impression of a heterosexual marriage and also, she could stay connected to Celia, because Robert would do anything for Celia and her love for Evelyn. He earnestly fulfilled his duties as a father, yet both of them never shared even a fleeting romantic moment ever. Adrienne Rich says:

This heterosexual preference and taboos on homosexuality, in addition to objective economic dependence on men, make the option of primary sexual bonds with another woman unlikely—though more prevalent in recent years. (p. 16)

Evelyn, however stayed loyal to Celia, and made necessary and needed decisions timely to safeguard her relationship, especially from media. She said “I spent half of my life loving her (Celia) and the other half hiding how much I loved her. Never once did I cheat on Celia.” (271). For media and viewers, she remained a beautiful mystery throughout her life. It was only, towards the end of her life, when she finally decided to open up about her queer relationship by asking the reporter Monique, to write a biography on her, insisting her to lay bare her life events and present them truthfully without filtering them or reducing her to labels because of them. This novel is therefore an unspooling of her cryptic and scandalous life that she narrates to the reporter Monique.

Women in love have always faced problems due to the societal norms. The images media imposes on the society, encapsulates our vision and narrows it to accept only heterosexual form of love. The other form, i.e. homosexual love is considered as a disease or an abnormality in a person. In the novel this aspect has been highlighted. Evelyn and Celia remained worried, due to the fear that people might throw them into an asylum, once their truth ever surfaced. She said:

Homosexuals were misfits. And while I didn't think that made them bad people—after all, I loved Harry like a brother—I wasn't ready to be one of them...sometimes reality comes crashing

down on you, other times reality simply waits, patiently, for you to run out of energy it takes to deny it. (p. 134)

They periodically made necessary arrangements to conceal their “forbidden love”. Adrienne Rich also talks about this tendency of society to label homosexual love as a flaw in someone’s personality or as an act of sin. Rich mentions the time, when the society burned and tortured millions of widows and spinsters, during the witch persecutions of fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe. Towards the end of the novel, Evelyn Hugo donates a large portion of her money to the activist group fighting for the rights of homosexual people, because she felt that the coming generation must live in freedom, unlike her who lived in captivity.

Adrienne Rich says that women down the history have experienced lesbian continuum. She lays down various examples of successful women from history who have experienced and benefitted from this bond of love. She mentions Hilda Doolittle, famously known as H.D, who is one of the propounds of the imagist movement. Rich quotes her autobiographical passage, in which the poet described the time when her friend Bryher supported her in persisting with the visionary experience which later shaped her literary work.

I knew that this experience, this writing-on-the wall before me, could not be shared with anyone except the girl who stood so bravely there beside me. This girl said without any hesitation, “Go on.” It was she really who had the detachment and integrity of the Pythoness of Delphi. But it was I, battered and dissociated...who was seeing the pictures, who was reading the writing or granted the inner vision. Or perhaps, in some sense, we reflect the degree to which persecution of lesbians is a global practice here and now.” (Rich 31)

She also gives example of Charlotte Bronte who too believed that women must be companions, allies and support for each other’s struggle for survival. “There is “delight in each other company, and attraction to each other’s’ minds and character, which attend a recognition of each others’ strength.”(11)

Lesbian continuum transcends above the levels of bodily and sexual thirst. It considers many other important aspects like mutual respect, empowering women, sharing of work, sharing of joy and resistance towards acceptance of powerlessness. Rich explains exhaustively that this companionship is different from the love and companionship between a male and a female, because it is free of any kind of capitalism and power

domination. A man and a woman share love but in return, demands subjugation of the woman. She is expected to follow certain societal norms and maintain the image of a perfectly married family. She is forever laden with the responsibility of a wife as well as a mother. Adrienne Rich says:

....it has reflected male needs, male fantasies about women, and male interest in controlling women – particularly in the realms of sexuality and motherhood- fused with the requirements of industrial capitalism.(12)

Rich mentions that great women in the past have shared this bond. However, those relations were sidelined neatly by the hands of traditions and cultures. According to Rich, men will continue to prefer and support heterosexual relations in order to preserve their image and dominance in the society; it's the women who must stand up for themselves, and reconsider their choice of "preference". In the novel, a group of homosexual people openly announced themselves and led the *stonewall riots*, Evelyn being desperate to support them, was immediately stopped by Harry, in order to prevent controversies. Finally, they agreed to fund them. On seeing them protesting, Evelyn bursted into joy:

I started crying when I realized those men were willing to fight for a dream I had never even allowed myself to envision. A world where we could be ourselves without fear and without shame. (234)

Rich mentions about a report from Norway, which relates about a lesbian in Oslo. She was in a heterosexual marriage but it didn't work. Sadly, she was sent to a sanitorium for rehabilitation and treatment. There she was subjected to "couch therapy". Which means that she was forced to submit to heterosexual intercourse with her husband, to which she averted continuously. Later she ended up in realization, that she had been subjected to forcible rape for six months. So, women are forced to uphold this power of "choice" and adhere to the heterosexual "preference", or else they were to suffer economic deprivation or social ostracism. According to Rich, the fault lies mostly with women, due to which homosexual relationships face a rough road, because they lack the courage to go against the structures.

The relationship that Evelyn had with Celia was entirely different from those she had with men. Don and Max asserted their power on her, the only men, for whom her heart skipped a beat. Don was her second

husband after Ernie Diaz, almost her first experience of true love. Unfortunately, after getting married to him, Don turned abusive and left her with no option other than divorce. Similarly Max Gerard, the famous singer, made gigantic promises of love, but unfortunately, he fell in love not with Evelyn but with the idea that, he was married to the greatest actress of all times, Evelyn Hugo. Evelyn was like a possession to him, like a trophy to showcase to the rest of the world. Sadly, no efforts were ever made from his end to actually probe into her heart and understand her soul. Celia on the other hand loved her, motivated her throughout and admired her “for being absolutely unstoppable.” (107)

Celia was different than the rest. With Celia, Evelyn not only experienced the most passionate kind of sexual experience, but also the most intimate bond where she was not only stripped naked of her clothes, but also her thoughts, feelings and emotions. It was only with Celia, with whom she could act and be real. She would unveil and undress her mind, soul and psyche in front of her without a slightest feeling of intimidation. While she was married to Don Adler, he imposed himself upon her, wanting to control her career, intending to end it. Don even tried to wrap her up in a box of motherhood, by pressurizing her to have a baby. Evelyn not wanting, dismissed the same, but was brutally criticized by the media in an article *COLD, COLD EVELYN* (99), for not embracing motherhood. She said “People don’t find it very sympathetic or endearing, a woman who puts herself first. Nor do people respect a man who can’t keep his wife in line.” (102). At the end she had to fake a miscarriage to put criticisms to an end. During that sensitive time, Celia was the first person who showed up at her doorstep to brighten her up, and also celebrate their act of deceiving media. They drank expensive wine, built fire and burned those sour articles. “Do it” she (Celia) said “Burn those jerks”.

Soon, Celia turned out to be the first person, with whom she ever opened up her mind. It was that night when both discussed about Don and his cavalier attitude towards the marriage. Unlike others, Celia never judged her, instead supported constantly.

Celia’s companionship enabled her to sharpen up her acting skills. During the shooting of the movie *Little Women*, based on the novel by Louisa May Alcott, Celia gave honest criticisms and suggestions regarding Evelyn’s acting skills. Both spent hours practicing with each other. Evelyn on the other hand implored Ari Sullivan to arrange a photoshoot for Celia, who was freelancing at that time. That photoshoot definitely helped Celia to gain media’s attention and popularity, as a result she won the award for the role of Beth as The Most

Promising Female Personality. Unfortunately, Evelyn being the protagonist Jo, remained without an Oscar, due to Don Adler's dirty politics game. Harry Cameron felt sad and considered it a failure for Evelyn, but Evelyn on the other hand was undergoing an uncontrollable fit of happiness due to Celia's success. Adrienne Rich says: "women identification is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power, curtailed and contained under the institution of heterosexuality." (34). Therefore, to them the denial of this companionship, implies denial of power.

Celia and Evelyn, though they were perfectly hooked up in their bond of love and true comradeship, yet both were opposites in nature. Celia was an idealist and romantic, whereas Evelyn was practical. Evelyn was the one, who always ended up with a solution at the time of crisis. After her divorce with Don Adler, she was loaned out of the Sunset Studios, her career nearly spoiled up. She even lost the Oscar. Evelyn being practical, warned Celia to limit her hang out with her, or else she would taint her successful reputation. She told her:

I love you, and I can't let you throw away everything you have built—and all your incredible talent—by taking a stand when no one will stand with us. (p. 170)

However, Celia being unconvinced, was even ready to give up her Oscar, but never to give up Evelyn. She preferred to celebrate her success with Evelyn rather than the Sunset group. She even thanked Evelyn in front of the cameras, dedicating her gratitude. Evelyn said "When she said my name, I was swelled with pride and joy and love. I was so goddamn happy for her." (153). However, soon the media got suspicious of them, almost tagging them as lesbians, it was then, Evelyn devised the plan of marrying Mick Riva who had a huge crush on her at that time, only to annul the wedding the next morning.

She said "The problem was, I used my body to get other things I wanted. And I didn't stop doing that, even for her. That's *my* tragedy." (271) Unfortunately, Evelyn got pregnant with Mick's baby, which left Celia disheveled. Celia, being an idealist, wanted Evelyn to be truly hers, even physically. Unable to handle the heartbreak, she left Evelyn for years. On this drastic turn of events, Evelyn said "Heartbreak is a loss. Divorce is a piece of paper." (141). However, the plan went successful, as it deflected everybody's attention away from her lesbian relationship.

Later, Evelyn decided to marry Harry, in order to keep her relationship with Celia furtive. Harry Cameron was queer and loved John Braverman dearly. He completely understood Evelyn's relationship and supported her throughout. At the wedding, seeing Evelyn with Harry, Celia got "absolutely smashed" due to jealousy, yet all four of them remained in a complete euphoria, after Celia and John also got married.

Due to Celia's romantic view of life, Evelyn preferred to consider her viewpoint, when she and Harry planned to have a baby, due to media's pressure. Only after Celia's approval, to which she says "giving herself, she gave me a baby.", Evelyn finally gave birth to a baby girl named Connor.

Celia, having been a constant support throughout, imbued her again to restore her name as *the greatest Evelyn Hugo of all times*. She injected a new spirit in her to begin again, and ditch the roles of mother or teacher, which the movies were then offering her; instead opt for a romantic role. Celia and Harry tried their best to support Evelyn. They even took good care of Connor and gave her complete attention, whenever Evelyn would be late, shooting for the film. However, things turned topsy turvy, when Evelyn in an air of a revolution, did an X rating film *Three A:M* with Don Adler. Evelyn Hugo remained a sensation, earned enormous amount money and contracts, but once again lost Celia. Crestfallen Celia couldn't handle, broke their relationship and left. Celia perceived things either as black or white. For her the labels were clear: lesbian or not. Evelyn on the other side never stuck to any label, she moved freely with her identity dismantling all the strictures of the society. She openly accepted herself, and her identity as a bisexual, rather than a lesbian. This truth she wanted Monique to depict in her biography with honesty and sincerity. She said: "I loved men. I loved Celia. I was ok with that."

Later, towards the end both ameliorated their relationship and connected again. However, Evelyn, to her heartbreak found Celia dying. She was diagnosed with obstructive pulmonary disease due to excessive smoking. Evelyn by that time was done hiding, and dedicated the most of her time to Celia. Max Girard, her husband during that time, got utterly uncomfortable because of her lesbian relationship and even threatened to disclose it, if it was not to be stopped. Unbothered Evelyn, divorced again, gave up her career and Hollywood, and shifted to Spain with Connor, where she could give Connor more attention, and Celia could get medical care. Both married secretly by exchanging their hair ties as a symbol of their never-ending love. After six years, Celia died.

Evelyn wanted Monique to honestly depict her truth, her life, without fitting her into any grid. She wanted sheer truth to be unveiled in front of everybody. She was unbothered about the society and hardly cared, even if people would forget her. She told Monique clearly:

Evelyn Hugo doesn't care if everyone forgets her name. Evelyn Hugo doesn't care even if everyone forgets she was ever alive.

Better yet, remind them that Evelyn Hugo never existed. She was a person I made up for them. So that they would love me. Tell them that I was confused, for a very long time, about what love was. Tell them that I understand it now, and I don't need their love anymore. (p. 358)

She clearly stated "I'm bisexual. Don't ignore half of me so you can fit me into a box, Monique. Don't do that." (123) She wanted the world to know about her true love and soulmate. Finally, she wanted to undress her true self and was seamlessly unashamed of it. She says:

"I've been given so much in this life", Hugo said last year in a speech to the Human Rights Campaign. "But I've had to fight tooth and nail for it. If I can one day leave this world a little bit safer and a little bit easier for those who come after me." (p. 383)

Therefore, her bond with Celia, was unique, as it alleviated her conscience, made her selfless and fueled her to achieve greater success. It transformed her and enabled her to fearlessly accept her identity towards the end. At the end she donated large portions of her money to battered women shelters, LGBTQ+ communities, and cancer research.

Evelyn married for seven times in her life, sometimes out of her own will, or for fame, or for safeguarding her identity. Yet each husband gave her a different experience, taught her a new aspect of life and gave her a new perception of the world each time. Each husband held a particular phase in her life, and those phases constructed the complex character of Evelyn Hugo, which Taylor Jenkins Reid builds up beautifully and gradually throughout the novel. She was therefore a round character, who kept developing till the end.

Evelyn married Ernie Diaz, her first husband when she was 14 years old, after lying that she was 18. Her sole aim of marriage then, was to leave behind the wretched life of Hell's Kitchen, including her abusive father. Ernie wanted her to finish high school, but Evelyn wanted fame and money. She frequented Ferosa

Café, where Hollywood celebrities made appearances often, and finally one day she happened to intersect ways with Harry Cameron, a famous producer. Evelyn said about her marriage to Ernie:

When you're given an opportunity to change your life, be ready to do whatever it takes to make it happen. The world doesn't *give* things, you *take* things. (pp35)

Ernie Diaz became uncomfortable due to her choice of career, as he somewhere expected a wife who would tend to household chores, to which Evelyn dissented. She left Ernie, without a sigh of dismay. Later, it is was told that after Evelyn, Ernie married Betty, who gave birth to eight children and died in early nineties.

Don Adler was her Second husband. He mirrored a male chauvinist perspective in the novel. He was one of the famous actors of that time, and handsome too. Evelyn met him, when Harry introduced her to Sunset Studios. Both signed in together for a movie *Father and Daughter*, which turned out to be a big hit. Don being her first true love, was earnestly loved by Evelyn. However, Don wanted her to construct his fame, respect and an image of a perfectly married home. On the night of their movie premiers, he showed her a diamond ring in private, to be thoroughly confirmed about her answer, and then to Evelyn's surprise, kept it inside. He had the intention of proposing her in public and thereby turning it into an event. They had a flamboyant wedding. Ruby Reily, another famous actress was her maid of honor.

After their marriage, Don turned bossy. Evelyn got scolded even for not knowing his breakfast preference. Soon, he got intimidated by her success. He got exasperated when he read the article with the heading "Don and Evelyn Hugo", which inferred to him that he was her wife. Their relationship became ugly, when both of them lost the Oscar, Evelyn consoled him but to her surprise, he got even more outraged and ended up saying: "we are not equals. And I'm sorry if I've been so kind that you've forgotten that"(77). Finally, Don demanded Evelyn to discontinue acting, rather plan a baby. Evelyn being resistant, was hit on her face. Waking from her stupor, she spent the next week traumatized and concealing the bruise on her face with makeup. Later Don apologized, but it became a cycle of hitting and apologizing the next day with flowers or coming down to his knees. Don was abusive to Ruby Reily, his second wife too. Don's mentality was that of a colonizer, who wanted complete autonomy in the relationship. He would make decisions and impose them on his wife or else she was to be punished. He simply asserted his male right on the woman by the means of his punishing

attitude. In the novel, Being married to him, Evelyn portrayed an image of women who underwent a similar plight, at the hands of such abusive men:

I wasn't the only woman being hit back then. A lot of women were negotiating the very same things I was at that moment. There was a social code for these things. The first rule being to shut up about it. (p. 79)

At the Oscars, Evelyn caught Don in the guest room, cheating upon her with another woman, she left in a rush of rage. The next morning, she returned home, but to her knowledge, Don already abandoned her. He also loaned her out from MGM and Columbia. After divorcing him, she lost her contract with Sunset Studios too, with her career nearly ruined up. However, Evelyn said "I got up off the floor and wiped my eyes. I gathered myself" (78)

Later, when she crossed ways with Don as they both signed in together for *Three A:M*, Don apologized, but Evelyn clearly refused him to be even friends with him.

Mick Riva was her third husband. She married him for the sole reason to deceive media and divert its attention away from her queer relationship. He was gullible and extremely impatient for marrying Evelyn. No sooner did they marry and consummate, than he regretted his decision and called for an annulment. He treated Evelyn as a commodity, that he would purchase and use. Evelyn being aware of his impatience, used it for dodging media's attention. She said "I don't regret many of the lies I told or the people I hurt. I'm OK with the fact that sometimes doing the right thing gets ugly."(p. 25)

Evelyn and Rex North married solely for the sake of publicity. They got married while they were shooting for *Anna Keranina*. However, both were honest as they had the same interest. They were married for two and a half years. In between Rex showed some sexual advancements towards her, to which she never yielded due to her loyalty and sincerity towards Celia.

Harry Cameron was her fifth husband. Though they married to keep their image intact, still they had been good friends since the beginning of Evelyn's Hollywood journey. Evelyn and Harry shared a special bond of that of soulmates. For her, "he was there to celebrate the good and support me (her) during the bad." (249). Harry was queer too, therefore he understood Evelyn and her decisions without any prejudice, unlike the rest,

including Celia sometimes. Due to Harry's assistance, Evelyn entered into Sunset Studios, changed her appearance and modified her Spanish accent of English. She said, "Harry was my greatest friend. He invented me. He was the person who loved me the most unconditionally. The person I loved the most purely." (36)

When Evelyn got physically abused by Don, on seeing her bruised, Harry got enraged and said "I will kill him". Later, he supported her decision of the fake miscarriage rather than encouraging her to submit to one of Don's whims of having a child. He advised her to divorce Don. Evelyn was mortified when Don cheated upon her, Harry bolstered her and took her to his home. Though Harry was unable to love her like a man, yet he loved her soul and preserved it.

Harry turned out as a wonderful parent to Connor, he was the one who was mostly around her and tended her, whenever Evelyn was out for shootings. Later, he supported her marriage to Max Girard, when he came to know about the romantic feelings brewing between the two, also he knew well that, he was incapable to love Evelyn the way she deserved. Celia already broke up with her and disappeared for years, so without any hesitation, he invigorated her to divorce him and marry Max. Later, it was only due Harry's valuable piece of advice, Evelyn reattempted to connect with Celia. It was he, who told her to write to her and make amends.

It was not only Harry, who affirmatively stood by her side, Evelyn too became a fortress to him when he faced a rough road. John Braverman, Harry's love interest died of a heart attack. Harry was in ruins, so resolved to excessive drinking. He became disoriented and lost all the meaning in life. Evelyn in order to distract him from his unimaginable loss, begged Max Girard for the movie *All for Us*, for Harry to produce and finally emerge out of his trauma. She told Harry, that how badly she needed an Oscar, and for her Harry worked extremely hard to an end that Evelyn did win an Oscar, Harry won for the best producer, and the whole movie in itself won the Best Picture award.

Later on, when Harry died of an accident, Evelyn missed him badly especially for Connor. After six years, when Celia died. Evelyn in an inconsolable state, visited Harry's tombstone too. She was extremely dejected and missed Harry's comforting presence.

Harry's presence was not only limited to the time of their marriage, but also throughout her journey in Hollywood and even after.

After Harry, she got married to Max Girard, and later to Robert Jamison. Max Girard was no better than Don, he too imposed rules on her and tried to fit her in a box. He even threatened her to reveal her identity, to which Evelyn gave a fig. Robert Jamison was Celia's brother. He was completely aware of her identity and Celia's too. They married solely for Celia's sake in order to keep her relationship with Evelyn moving. However, he remained a good father to Connor. Connor was diagnosed with breast cancer. He comforted her and stood by her until her death.

Her love for Harry, transcended beyond the physical plane. She expressed many times, that Harry was her true soulmate, however her love for him was never romantically inclined because her true romantic inclination was only for Celia. Men came into her life and professed their love, however, that love was always entangled with some or the other kind of expectation. Evelyn demanded freedom in love, which came sexually and platonically only with Celia.

Conclusion

People with queer identity face a rough sea both socially and emotionally due to their preference. Evelyn Hugo's character was a complex one in the novel, it faced crises, difficulties and eventually evolved towards the end. She covered an odyssey from being a girl who once wore her heart upon her sleeve, craving for male attention to finally becoming self-spirited, self-motivated and self-consumed in her unconditional love for Celia. Without giving a thought, she discarded those norms in her life which encapsulated the identities and personalities of women, in order to sabotage them, according to the plexus of culture and traditions. She combated consistently not only with the male dominated society but also with the superiority complex ideology, interpellated in men since ages. Adrienne Rich's assertions against heteronormativity, in her seminal work *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* align perfectly with the work *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*. Not only did the work give a deeper probing into lesbian consciousness, but also a post-structural notion about feminine consciousness and identity. The term 'female identity' underwent a constant process of Derrida's post structural idea of *signification*, which he developed out of Saussure's concept of *sign*. Hugo's fluid identity kept evolving, without solidifying to any particular *signified*. This fluidity of identity is seamlessly projected through the complex yet, significant character of Evelyn Hugo. The character of Evelyn Hugo is

therefore collateral to the assertions of Adrienne Rich, about female identity as mentioned in her work *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*.

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