

# Representation of Male Love in East Asia and West: “Fetish vs Activism”

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## Abstract

Alice Oseman, the author of an LGBTQ+ young adult graphic novel that focuses on the lives and romance of two boys, has made a comment that caused some controversy on the internet. This comment by Oseman illustrates a somewhat common view held by Western society toward East Asian Boys Love (BL) genre. That is: BL novels and webcomics being highly sexual, fetish works with little literary value. This research note tries to analyze what could be the reason behind this commonly held view by the West, illustrated by Oseman’s comment through analyzing BL genre, Oseman’s work *Heartstopper*, the differences and tendencies within the works from East Asia, China specifically, and the West.

Keywords: BL, Boys Love, M/M, LGBTQ+, East Asia

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Arrival date: 29 January 2024 • Acceptance date: 19 March 2024

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Research Note

<http://federgi.ankara.edu.tr>

federgi • 2024 • 16(1) • 70-82  
DOI: 10.46655/federgi.1427610

# Erkek Erkeğe Aşkın Doğu Asya'da ve Batı'da Temsili: Fetiş Karşısında Aktivizm

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Öz

Nick ve Charlie adında iki gencin arkadaşlıktan aşka uzanan hikâyesini konu edinen Heartstopper (Kalp Çarpıntısı) adlı çizgi romanın yazarı Alice Oseman'ın "Tapas" adlı online çizgi roman platformunda yaptığı yorumlar Boys Love (BL) hayranları arasında tartışma yaratmıştı. Söz konusu yorumunda Oseman, genelde Doğu Asya ile bağdaştırılan BL türünü karakterleri seksüelize ve fetişize etmekle itham ederek aslında Batı'da, özellikle İngilizce konuşan toplumlarda, Doğu Asya kökenli bu türe karşı yaygın olarak beslenen bakış açısını somut bir şekilde göz önüne sermiş oldu. Bu araştırma notu, Oseman'ın bu yorumundan yola çıkarak Doğu Asyalı ve Batılı yazarların "erkekler arasındaki aşk"ı konu alan eserleri ele alış tarzları ve İngilizce konuşan Batı toplumları arasında Boys Love eserlerine yönelik genel yargının ardındaki sebepleri inceleyip tartışmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** BL, Boys Love, M/M, LGBTQ+, Doğu Asya

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Geliş tarihi: 29 January 2024 • Kabul tarihi: 19 Mart 2024

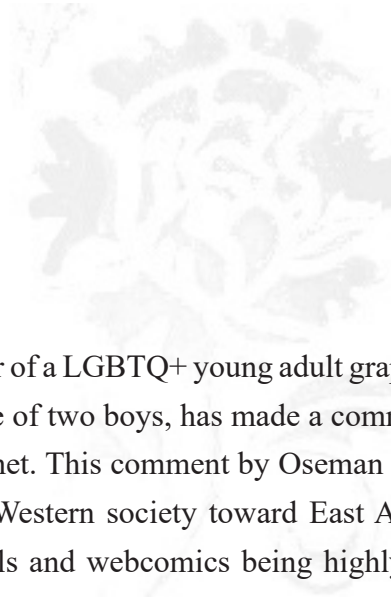
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Araştırma Notu

<http://federgi.ankara.edu.tr>

federgi • 2024 • 16(1) • 70-82

DOI: 10.46655/federgi.1427610



## **Introduction**

Alice Oseman, the author of a LGBTQ+ young adult graphic novel that focuses on the lives and romance of two boys, has made a comment that caused some controversy on the internet. This comment by Oseman illustrates a somewhat common view held by Western society toward East Asian Boys Love (BL) genre. That is: BL novels and webcomics being highly sexual, fetish works with little literary value:

Yup, no explicit sex in this comic - the characters are teenagers so it's just not appropriate, and even if they weren't, I'd have no interest in drawing that. I wouldn't describe this comic as 'yaoi' or even 'BL' - they're genres of comic that tend to fetishise and eroticise queer men in a really bad way. This comic is just a romance between two boys and a coming-of-age story (Oseman, 2017)!

The controversy was caused by the fact that an author like Oseman,

who tells the story of “two boys falling in love,” was categorizing BL which in its core tells similar stories with similar subjects to Oseman’s story.

This paper tries to analyze what could be the reason behind this commonly held view by the West, illustrated by Oseman’s comment through analyzing BL genre, Oseman’s work *Heartstopper*, the differences and tendencies within the works from East Asia, China specifically, and the West. Post-structuralism is utilized in order to explain and analyze the works produced by East Asia and the West, which on a superficial look can easily appear similar.

Having access only to English language materials and comments without the discussions held by Chinese people on social media platforms such as Weibo, WeChat and Signal limits us from assessing the genuine opinions of Chinese people. Hence, forming a more realistic opinion of the perspective from China towards BL genre, its sociocultural effects on Chinese society and LGBTQ+ activism is hard.

## **What Is BL?**

Boys Love (also known as BL) as a genre has originated in Japan in early 1970s. It depicts romantic and sexual relationships between male-male couples. Young fans during the 1970s was creating their own homoerotic works of fiction and art, pairing their favorite artists or favorite characters from manga works that were catered towards men and boys originally. The genre was created and consumed by cisgender heterosexual women from the mid-1970s onward in Japan. According to James Welker (2022, 1), however, nowadays the demographic is increasingly expanding and becoming more diverse. He explains that even though the genre, originally, was not intended to promote homosexuality or encourage new perspectives on gender among

its consumers, people who are not necessarily cisgender or heterosexual find a place to breathe in the fandom (Welker 2022, 2).

From the 1980s onward the genre has spread around the globe—mainly in the East and Southeast Asia (Welker 2022, 1). In the early 1990s, mangas of different genres from Japan started to circulate in China. During this period BL manga too had the opportunity to enter the Chinese market. Boys Love is referred to as *danmei* in China and the prevalent form of *danmei* is prose fiction (Welker 2022, 5).

### **Post-Structuralism**

Post-structuralism argues that subjects are not autonomous creators of themselves or their social worlds (Ki 1994, 221). It argues that people as subjects exist in a complex network of social relations. These relations in turn determine which subjects can appear where and in what capacity (Ki 1994, 221). Post-structuralism defends that a subject is not the foundation and the basis of how one conceives politics and social structures but rather it is constituted and shaped by the very things themselves.

The distinct behaviors of Eastern—specifically Chinese BL (*danmei*) authors and Western authors who produces LGBTQ+ themed works demonstrates this concept. In China, which structurally silences any public discussion or media representation of LGBTQ+ people/issues, any online program is deleted or revised if it contains a “presentation or representation of abnormal sexual relationships or conduct, such as incest, homosexuality, sexual perversion, sexual predation, sexual abuse, or sexual violence” (Lin 2022, 31-32). Since the publication of *danmei* in print form is forbidden (Feng 2009, 6) in mainland China, the majority of *danmei* works are published on

online platforms such as Jinjiang ([www.jjwxc.net](http://www.jjwxc.net)) (Feng 2009, 2). However, even online platforms are not entirely safe havens for *danmei* works. As Wang exemplifies, several anti-pornography campaigns launched by the government resulted in several *danmei* authors being fined or incarcerated (Wang 2015, 141-142). As a result of the pressure, censorship, and penalties utilized by the government Chinese *danmei* authors rarely, if ever, reveal their identities. Aside from their gender, hobbies, favorite foods, etc. most of the time readers do not have any substantial knowledge about the authors.

On the Western side, UK specifically, does not have any laws that are prohibiting authors to publish or self-censor their works concerning “homosexuality.” As a result, readers know who Alice Oseman is, what she looks like, what are her opinions on politics concerning LGBTQ+ community. She has a transparent relationship with her readers and the world. She actively engages in LGBTQ+ activism, got involved in the casting process of her novel’s casting for Netflix adaptation in order to include people who are from the LGBTQ+ community.

The effect of how their social environment shape them, their readers, and respective LGBTQ+ communities from both countries reflects on the structure and content of the works that are produced. To illustrate, many of the Western audiences and readers who have read and watched *Heartstopper* by Alice Oseman state that they were inspired and encouraged to “come-out” to their family, even using a famous scene from the Netflix series in the process by making their family members watching the scene.<sup>2</sup> The scene depicts one of the main characters coming out to his mom after struggling with coming to terms with his bisexuality. Alice Oseman herself states in one of her interviews that growing up she did not have this kind of representation and she wanted to provide the representation she so desperately sought in her teenage years (Zornosa, 2023). Even though unrealistic to some, her work aims to bring

some positivity and uplift the LGBTQ+ youth. She has the aim of doing activism, bringing awareness for other members of the community such as the transgender, asexual, aromantic people and the struggles they face in the society. Her work has sociological elements that represent the members of the community such as the ordeal of coming out, discovering one's sexual identity and gender, bullying of queer youth by their peers, etc.

In the case of Chinese *danmei*, however, there seems to be no active effort, purpose or deliberation to represent, advocate, or bring awareness to struggles that the queer community faces. Most of the time main characters do not identify themselves as gay or queer. In his Introduction to *Queer Transfigurations Boys Love Media in Asia* James Welker describes this as such: "...the male characters in same-sex relationships in BL are most often not intended to be "gay" but rather simply two boys or men who are drawn to one other" (Welker 2022, 8-9).

Coming out, the pressures one faces as a result of being queer, representation of different identities are not the main concerns or aspirations of *danmei* works. There seems to be no *danmei* work or its adaptation that inspires and encourages coming-out to its readers. The absence of such themes in *danmei* works therefore their lack of effect in inspiring such behaviors can be explained by the post-structuralist theory. Since China as a society do not have a sociological concept such as coming out to one's family in order to fully embrace and acknowledge one's identity, as most Western society does. Thus, it is predictable that *danmei* works do not make a topic of these concepts.

Moving on to how these authors represent their characters in their works, they again differentiate from each other. Alice Oseman's controversial comment illustrates her view on Eastern BL works: "...they are genres of comic that tend to fetishize and eroticize queer men in a really bad way. This comic is just a romance between two boys and a coming-of-age story!" (Oseman,

2017). She regards BL works as fetishizing and overly sexualizing queer men whereas she regards her own work as a comic that describes the romance, the feelings rather than the sexual realities of those in her community which she views as fetish.

*Danmei* works do describe sexuality between two men in a rather explicit way in some cases and from a Western point of view explicit works are more visible than the works that describe the “romance between two boys.” The works which contains extreme sex scenes or plots that may sound over the top get more attention by the English-speaking community, hence they get translated more, become more visible, and as a result create the image described by Alice Oseman above. However, among the works that have been translated and are being translated into English only a couple of them, which are really famous, has such explicit plots or sex scenes in reality.

Alice Oseman’s *Heartstopper* describes a somewhat idealized and romanticized society, the struggles of characters rather softened compared to the real-life struggles of queer youth. It claims to represent the community, the identities within the community and its struggles but in the process the reality of experiences by which people feel seen and connect to gets blurred. Nick’s own personality, Charlie’s own experiences, Elle’s<sup>3</sup> own struggles fades next to their queer identities: bisexual, gay, and transgender.

Most of the Chinese *danmei* focuses on the characters’ own struggles, experiences and personalities rather than focusing solely their queer identities leaving everyday-life problems as extras to a character. Readers do not perceive these characters through the lens of a queer identity. A character’s sexual and gender identity are not presented as something separate from their own identities. Gu Hai<sup>4</sup> is Gu Hai who is a student, whose dad got remarried and he likes his step-brother “who happens to be a boy.” In the case of *Heartstopper* by Alice Oseman the case is the opposite. Charlie is a “gay boy” who got



bullied by other students in his school.

The reason for the difference in representation of identities could also be the fact that for Alice Oseman and many Western authors; activism, visibility and representation of queer identities are a big part of their works and their personal lives. They may tend to associate queerness with politics hence their works carrying political agendas. In the case of Chinese *danmei* works this is not the case. Welker regards BL as being political since it has the *potential* to "...motivate them [young females and cisgender heterosexual men] to engage in activism." (Welker, 2022, 11-12) He explains that BL, creates a context in society in which flouting of the gender and sexual norms are possible. Hence, the strict line that has been drawn by societal norms separating LGBT(Q) individuals from heterosexual people gets blurred. This, in turn allow a space in society where these individuals can express themselves more freely while allowing a perspective the heterosexual cisgender fans to the lives and struggles of queer people in a society (Welker, 2022, 12).

Welker's views highlight the fact that these outcomes are not major concerns of Chinese *danmei* authors when they produce a work, hence their political and activist effects being just potentials. They don't aim to bring about these results as with the case of Alice Oseman. They seem to be more like natural by-products of their literary works. This does not mean that the authors do not care or they are mere bystanders in this situation. They do not actively engage in activism with an open identity or state their views on such topics as a Western author may do. However, in Chinese political and cultural context continuing to produce work in the BL genre itself can be considered as activism itself, whether the author has intended or not, as the works have the effects stated above by Welker.

## Literary Representation

One of the main characteristics of BL works is the “coupling system.” BL works categorizes couples by what the West refers as being “top” or “bottom.” In Chinese, this is referred to as *gong* (top, the one who penetrates) and *shou* (bottom, the receiver). In this sense BL works reiterate the heterosexual roles and concepts in queer relationships. The effort for categorizing homosexual people through heterosexual concepts (such as asking which one of them is the “woman” of the relationship or who “tops” and who “bottoms”) by heterosexual people exists in real life both in East Asia and West. Western works unlike BL genre do not reiterate the concept further or built their genre upon this categorization. Two distinct behaviors from two sides are completely consistent when the activism aspect and two different sociopolitical environment are taken into consideration. Western authors who carry political and activist concerns obviously would not want to recreate the same heterosexual narrative in their works. While the Chinese authors who do not seek such concerns openly and seem to focus on the enjoyment and fulfillment to be gained from a literary work would not take such considerations.

From the Western point of view, it may seem like the characters in BL works are being sexualized. However, rather than being sexualized they seem to be embracing their sexuality. They are not being idealized in order represent an identity, an ideal, or utilized for activism. Their realness which comes from their human side: their mistakes, their lives that resembles readers’, their sexual lives, etc. In a sense, even though characters in *danmei* works are always described as extremely beautiful and handsome they are more real and have their imperfections among all the beauty surrounding them. Looking from this point of view, Western authors seem to be romanticizing their characters in order to represent, do activism, and increase the visibility of the LGBTQ+ community.

## **Conclusion**

The reason behind Alice Oseman's and West's view on BL genre being a fetishizing and sexualizing work of art may be couple of things. In Alice Oseman's case, her discontent seems to be carrying some puritanism. She, as an asexual and aromantic person, by choice does not tell sexual stories. However, her community contains such people who are sexual and they express it. Another reason could be the fact that while many Western authors carry political concerns when they produce their works, authors from the East Asia, especially in China do not have such claim. The questions such as: whether a work of art should carry a political agenda, and if it does not carry them would that make it any less valuable, concerns of representation, etc. would be the topic of another discussion. As an important note, just because it seems on the surface that Chinese authors do not hold any political agenda does not mean that these works do not have any sociological and political effect on people. They do make the community more visible. They do express the hardships experienced by these people. They, in a sense, are slowly normalizing talking about the community and their rights without the constant reference to AIDS/HIV (Lin 2022, 34). The difference between the concerns from both sides, however, is one of the reasons that create a misconception of East by West. Another reason for this misconception may stem from the works that gain popularity in West. Sex-heavy, controversial works seem to gather much more attention by West compared to works that simply tell a romance story. Hence, they get translated more and much more people who are not familiar with the genre get more exposed to these works which in turn create the misconception mentioned above. Perhaps the reason for this attention from West towards "controversial" works from East can be studied more.

- 1 There are people who found the series unrealistic and unrepresentative of the real life struggles of the community.
- 2 Characters in Heartstopper series.
- 3 One of the main characters in danmei author Chai Ji Dan's novel 'Are You Addicted?'

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