



RESEARCH PAPER**Queer Silence, Queer Noise: Exploring the Power Dynamics of Unspoken Desire in *The Mercies* by Kiran Millwood**

¹Iqra Hameed, ²Muhammad Javaid Anwar* and ³Basri Sattar

1. Ph. D Scholar, College of Foreign Studies, Department of Foreign Language & Literature, Yangzijin Campus, Yangzhou University, Jiangsu Province, China
2. Ph. D Scholar, College of Foreign Studies, Department of Foreign Language & Literature, Yangzijin Campus, Yangzhou University, Jiangsu Province, China
3. Lecturer, Department of English, Humanities and Social Sciences, Punjab Group of Colleges Vehari, Punjab, Pakistan

***Corresponding Author**

raojavid96@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study probes into the challenges of same-sex relationships within patriarchal and heterosexist societies, utilizing Kiran Millwood Hargrave's novel, *The Mercies* as a case study. Rooted in Teresa de Lauretis' queer theory, this research examines nonnormative desire, opposition to heteronormativity and the subversion of traditional gender roles. Through a critical analysis of *The Mercies*, this study identifies strategies to challenge stereotypical perceptions of women, men and queer individuals. The novel emerges as an anti-patriarchal and queer text, offering a unique perspective on same-sex relationships. The complex relationship between Maren and Ursa is particularly noteworthy, highlighting Maren's sexual desire distinct from romantic love. This research contributes to existing literature by demonstrating how queer narratives reshape paradigms, endorsing for increased representation, adoption of queer theory and future studies on queer representation in historical narratives, eventually promoting deeper understanding and challenging heteronormative norms.

KEYWORDS

Homosexuality, LGBTQ+ Representation, Queer Theory, Resistance, *The Mercies*

Introduction

According to Nahole (2023), the portrayal of same-sex relationships in literary work is, as always, a queasy issue since queer experiences have regularly been negated or erased even in historical novelistic practice. However, in the last decade, there has been a trend towards more openness and representation, which correlates with the shift in people's attitudes and the recognition of the need for diverse stories (Onty, 2021). In such background, Kiran Millwood Hargrave's *The Mercies* seeks to subvert the traditional notions of both love and desire in so far as it gives a modern and complex exploration of same-sex desire and relationship from the 17th century Norway. Earlier studies on Kiran Millwood Hargrave's novel *The Mercies* have also focused on socialist feminist lens to analyze the agony and independence of women where male domination and patriarchy forms the pillars of women oppression. Witchcraft as a Political Discourse: A Historical and Feminist Analysis of the Political Uses of Witchcraft in the Novel has also been critically analyzed and it falls under history and feminism, early modern demonology and second-wave feminism (Koffey, 2021). Especially, scholars have discussed how, together with such novels as *The Mercies* (Hargrave, 2020) and *Les Sorcières de la République* (Delaume, 2016, as cited in Gauthier, 2023), the novel explores the complicated history of

witchcraft as a metaphor for the power of women and their solidarity against oppression and domination of men (Sempruch, 2008; Purkiss, 1996). Nonetheless, there are still significant gaps in documentation of how Queer Desire, Intimacy and Resistance function in *The Mercies*. Previous scholarship has concentrated itself on the representation of the female characters and the thematic elements of the novel as a woman's text, and little has been said about the non-hegemonic sexually desiring and loving body that circulates, challenges and undermines heteropatriarchal norms, and structures sexually nonconventional relationships. This study aims to fill this void by analyzing *The Mercies* using queer theory in order to better understand how gender, power, and culture influences non-normative sexual desire and relationships in the narrative.

This debut, published in 2020, has been acclaimed for both its writing and characters, which give a fresh look at a historical period in the history of Norway. Hence by reflecting upon the gay relationships within the novel, it demonstrates issues regarding the formation of identity, desire and the manifestations of socialized sexuality. These themes will be studied under the lens of Teresa de Lauretis's Queer Theory with an aim to finding out how this novel portrays Same sex desire and queer relations defying hetero normativity and presenting the strength of Queers. The main research questions of this study are: what role does *The Mercies* play in disrupting conventional pair-bonding structures of romantic love and sexual desire and how does the novel contribute to queer historical fiction. Finally, this paper aims to appreciate that *The Mercies* depicts the reality of two women in love, in a time that was orchestrated heteronormatively to dictate the outcome of the story contrary to queer desires.

Kiran Millwood Hargrave is a British writer, poet, and playwright born in 1990 in London, England (Hargrave, n.d.). She was born into an art-inclined family and inherited her creative genes from her parents, who were artists by profession (The British Book Awards, 2017). Millwood Hargrave developed her love of words and stories while at the University of Cambridge, receiving her degree in English Literature, and later attended Oxford Creative Writing (University of Oxford, n.d.). Her first book, *The Girl of Ink & Stars*, was published in 2016 and received positive reviews, winning the Waterstones Children's Book Prize (Waterstones, 2016) and earning a nomination for the Carnegie Medal (CILIP, 2017). Her fourth book, *The Mercies*, is a historical fiction novel set in 17th-century Norway, exploring desire and survival during and after the Vardø storm (Hargrave, 2020). Critics have praised Millwood Hargrave's sophisticated mythopoeic aspects, combining elements of mythology, folklore, and historical fiction (Kirkus Reviews, 2020, as cited in Sullivan, 2021). Her works have been translated into multiple languages, garnering international acclaim and establishing her as a rising figure in contemporary literature (Publishers Weekly, 2020).

The Mercies by Kiran Millwood Hargrave is a historical fiction novel set in Seventeenth-century Norway (Hargrave, 2020). Located in the tiny Arctic village of Vardø, the story revolves around Maren, a young woman from a group of remaining women after the male population was destroyed by a storm (Hargrave, 2020, p. 12). While the community fights for existence, Maren develops affection for Kirsten, a smart and quick-witted head of the village (Hargrave, 2020, p. 50), and then falls in love with Ursa, the mysterious and beautiful woman who appears in Vardø at some time (Hargrave, 2020, p. 123). The strained atmosphere and the growing mistrust of witchcraft turn the story of Maren and her sisters with Kirsten and Ursa into the story of the village, a sentiment echoed by Kirkus Reviews (2020) and cited in Sullivan's collection of essays (2021) Themes of love, desire, physical strength, and the endurance of women are central to the book, mixed with stylings of fairy tales, myths, and real history to present a tale of a post-apocalyptic village (Publishers Weekly, 2020). From the very beginning, Maren's story,

Millwood Hargrave splendidly captures the rigor and even rawness of the Norwegian Arctic and its women (The Guardian, 2020).

Literature Review

Historical fiction has recently attracted much attention for presenting same-sex relationships, which expands reader understanding and can be attributed to the development of society's values (Suzuki, 2006). In this respect, Kiran Millwood Hargrave's *The Mercies* presents a timely and complex analysis of same-sex sexual attraction and partnerships in seventeenth-century Norway. Prior research in literature has explored the phenomenon and representation of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender individuals in historical fiction and stressed that other research on queer historiographies and their characteristic features is necessary. Most notably scholars like Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have provided a starting point in queer theoretical investigations focused on the role of non-normal desire and coupling.

The Mercies is influenced by queer theory in both thematic content and form, as defined by Teresa de Lauretis. In her production, De Lauretis ignores strict dichotomy between identity and desire associating both with instability and difference. Especially this perspective is important to *The Mercies*, where the role of women in the male-dominated society is depicted. Prior research on queer representation in the historical novel has indicated the heuristic effectiveness of the queer theoretical approach in revealing the discreet and subtle yet striking patterns of constructing non-heterosexual desire, as was shown by Justice and Tinker (2002) and Caroline Gonda (2016). *The Mercies* has attracted quite a lot of attention from scholars within a very short span of time, and several works have been written concerning the issues of feminism, history, and queer encounters as depicted in the novel (Hargrave, 2020). By using Socialist and Radical Feminism arguments, Rabeea (2024) in her paper explores 17-century women in Norway using Kiran Millwood Hargrave's *The Mercies* (2020). Female strength and sisterhood are demonstrated although patriarchal practices and women's emancipation are described by the researcher with the help of qualitative topic analysis.

Perhaps the first overlooked area in the existing literature on *The Mercies* solely is the absence of remarkable argumentation of *Queer Theory* on the novel, especially in view of de Lauretis's conception. This work aims to help fill this void by adopting de Lauretis's approach to analyze the multiple dynamics of female characters in *The Mercies*, explaining how the novel troubles and blurs the heteronormative paradigm. Using the framework laid by earlier research endeavors, and infusing this research with queer theory, it is the author's intention to add further to the body of knowledge on LGBTQ+ characters in historical fiction. Scholarly work on *The Mercies* is scarce, and only a handful of articles analyze the representation of same-sex relationships in queer theoretical framework within the context of the novel. However, analyzing *The Mercies*, Rabeea (2024) explores 17th-century Norwegian women's experiences through Socialist and Radical Feminism lenses. Building on foundational research in queer representation (Justice & Tinker, 2002; Gonda, 2016), this analysis aims to address the existing gap in scholarship by applying queer theory to investigate the novel's queer themes and form, particularly the intersections of cultural background, historical period, and non-straight desire.

Queer Theory, initiated by Teresa de Lauretis (1991), can be used to understand non-normative desire in literature. Developing in the 1990s, *Queer Theory* criticized the binary concept of sexual orientation and sexual and gender binarism, instead proposing the understanding of its subjects as fluid, multiple, and subversive of normative homosexuality. In literary analysis, *Queer Theory* has been useful in discerning

subterranean depictions of non-normative desire normally excluded or erased by mainstream critical methodologies (Butler, 1993; Sedgwick, 1985). Queer Theory, when applied to literary criticism, has drawn heavily from Judith Butler's (1993) acumen on performativity. Through taking Butler's proposition that an individual's identity is performative and always in the process of being brought into being through negotiations of the social, I suggest that the construction of blackness is an active and ongoing process in which its participants are in the midst of constructing their race. This perspective has been employed to explore how literary characters perform feminine/masculine and hetero/queer subjects (Butler, 1990), to name a few key aspects, exposing conflicts and contradictions of normative/non-normative desire. The queer tool also owes a debt to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) regarding the concept of "homosocial desire" with queer traits to explain relationships between characters.

Queer Theory has been used in different types of literary works; they have been used to examine the works of Shakespeare, novels of the nineteenth century and modern fiction (Freccero, 2006). Other critics such as Justice and Tinker and Caroline Gonda have used queer theoretical approaches to study same sex partnership in historical fictions in a bid to show the usefulness of queer approaches in revealing hitherto buried and erasure stories. As a queer historian, Matt Houlbrook (2005) has also drawn attention to the need to theorize the historical category of desire queerly. However *Queer Theory* did seek out to examine those issues and has been critiqued and experienced some limitations. Some critics have posited that because the framework does not take interactions of power with race, class, and ethnicity the framework diminishes complexity. They argue that *Queer Theory* by concentrating on non-normative desire simply reproduces binarisms. Also, the use of *Queer Theory* in studies has been criticized for its capacity to make the notion of sex in the literary and cultural production of today influence interpretation.

To these criticisms, scholars reacted endeavoring to improve and develop Queer Theory. Contemporary theory, reflected in the recent work of José Esteban Muñoz (2009) and Roderick A. Ferguson (2019), pays special attention to the question of intersectionality and contextual approach in queer reading. In light of these ongoing discussions, this study also uses *Queer Theory* to analyze *The Mercies* in order to envision same-sex desire and relationships as they are in the novel and the real world, and to discuss the multifaceted aspects of human life. Thus, in conversing with *Queer Theory's* uses and failures, this work aims to expose how literature's non-normative desire works to provide illumination on *The Mercies'* queering and queer ideas and its engagements in ongoing conversations concerning Minority Literature in Historical Fiction. While historical fiction has begun to attract attention in relation to the topic of queer representation more research still needs to be explored. As, it is evident from the above literature review, historians have researched queer themes in different cultures and historical periods (Doan, 2013; Halperin, 2002), but this is the first study to specifically analyze queer desire in relation to historical fiction and Norwegian cultural inheritance in *The Mercies*.

Additionally, most prior research on *The Mercies* has adopted a feminism or historical analysis while not exploring the multifaceted uses of *Queer Theory*. Indeed, Emily Roemer's analysis of witchcraft and queer identification in the novel broaches these issues but never really gets beneath the surface in light of queer theory. This oversight obscures the ways in which *The Mercies* resists and manipulates heteropatriarchal norms and expectations. Despite the critical importance of *Queer Theory* in modern critical analysis in general and Teresa de Lauretis's conceptualization in particular, the analyzed works entirely neglect an in-depth exploration of *The Mercies* from this perspective. Analyzing non-normative desire and relationships are incomprehensible without De Lauretis's framework; however, it has not been applied to *The Mercies*. This paper aims at filling this

gap by analyzing *The Mercies* towards the background of de Lauretis's Queer Theory to establish how and to what extent the novel represents same-sex desire and relations episodically in the cultural-historical setting of 17th century Norway.

In so doing, this research makes a theoretical contribution to the analysis of non-normative desire in historical fiction to contribute to further studies on queer representation and culture. Finally, the present research shows the benefit of connecting between literary and socio-historical, and theoretical and literary, by employing queer theory and cultural studies alongside close reading and contextualization of *The Mercies*. The following are the research's three main contributions. First of all, it gives a critical overview of the representation of the homosexual orientation/love interests in *The Mercies* and brings fresh light and perspectives into the analysis of contemporary heteronormative society's reflection in the novel. Secondly, it develops the application of *Queer Theory* in Literary Analysis and applies the indicated framework to historical fiction. This study further contributes to historical erasure and representation of non-normative desire which will be useful in subsequent studies of queer history and cultural value.

Material and Methods

This research adopts *Queer Theory* as its theoretical framework with reference to how Teresa de Lauretis (1991) conceptualizes 'queer' as an approach to anti-normalization. De Lauretis focuses on lesbian feminism and 'queer' as a sign of resistance to normalization, claiming a rejection of dominant norms of sexuality (de Lauretis, 1991, p. iv). This framework is useful in understanding multi-layered symbols of same-sex desire and relation in *The Mercies* (Hargrave, 2020), specifically how these relations overthrow conventional structurization of Norwegian seventeenth-century heterosexuality. De Lauretis pinpoints queer resistance since lesbian relationships and non-normative desires disrupt such norms (de Lauretis, 1991). This paper explores 'non-normative desire,' or desires and practices deemed legally, socially, or culturally unacceptable. The love narrative between Maren and Ursa in *The Mercies* exemplifies this, defying societal expectations of conventional marriage and family institutions (de Lauretis, 1991). De Lauretis argues, *the resistance of these marginalized desires... is at the heart of the politics of sexual dissent from dominant ideologies* (de Lauretis, 1991, p. xii).

Heteronormativity, a concept defined by de Lauretis (1991), normalizes heterosexuality while eliminating homosexuality. In *The Mercies*, women like Maren are expected to assume traditional roles. Resistance, a notion salient to de Lauretis, encompasses how individuals and cultures resist and subvert norms and powers shaping societies. Maren's refusal to marry and fight for individual citizenship exemplifies non-normative desire as a means to challenge patriarchy. Judith Butler (1990) concurs, stating performativity can undo normative frameworks by refusing adherence. Applying de Lauretis's lens to *The Mercies*, this research highlights same-sex desire disrupting female conformity, desire, and authority. Analyzing key scenes and characters, the author examines patriarchal and heteronormative discursive formations' contestation. This study participates in current discourses on LGBTQ+ representation, demonstrating literature's role in constructing and subverting dominant gender and sexual identities (Butler, 1990; de Lauretis, 1991).

Results and Discussion

In her book *The Mercies* by Kiran Millwood Hargrave, the romantic entanglement between Maren and Ursa is a first-class example of non-conventional sexual attraction, which goes against all the norms of mid-seventeenth century Norway. It may well be seen

how the pair's private relationship, which is depicted as an intense love between the two characters, registers a subversive note to conventional gender norms regarding women and their relationships. In this manner, the novel poses a cultural discourse that marginalizes any same-sex relationships and dismisses homosexual experiences as monstrous and unworthy of being narrated. The link between Maren and Ursa is a powerful refusal of future stereotyped love story and more importantly the portrayal of women's full range of erotic jealousy. About their love, the novel shows that non-normative desire is capable of being nourished despite the extremely unfriendly environment that denies the oppressed any opportunity to live a full life. Specifically, the narrative of the improvement of the emotional intimate relationship, women's resilience and support to each other strengthens the position that female relationships are a point of defiance of the patriarchal regimen. Thus, In *The Mercies*, Maren and Ursa's story excludes heteronormative discourses and presents non-heteronormative desire as a liberating experience.

"She doesn't tell herself she loves Ursa, but knows it is something closer to love than she has ever known" (Hargrave, 2020, p. 179).

This quote from *The Mercies* makes the treatment of non-normative desire, which is so true to Teresa de Lauretis's queer theory. This quote carries an erotic undertone but it more than love and desire, it's a statement of affection of Maren to Ursa. It seems Hargrave has done a good work at representing the subject in a subtle way which effectively shows Maren's rebellious state of mind that de Lauretis views as subversive and transformative of norms. Maren simply says she is aware of how the cow feels, which attests to the opposition between discursive constructions and affective realities, and the inability of heteronormative epistemology to contain non-straight desire. The idea of 'closer to love' also leaves behind ideas of love and how they are traditionally socially constructed, by the hegemonic, misogynistic and Hetero-Patriarchal paradigm. This phrase implies that there is more than mere romance between Maren and Ursa and their relationship is at a level that does not fit into a simple either / or paradigm. In this way and with this great creative strength, Hargrave shows how the queer can survive hostile socio-cultural structures and how non-recognition desire can nevertheless bloom in deserts infertility. Moreover, Maren herself explores their gender roles and how domination and subordination pervade culture and relationships.

"She takes both Maren's hands in her own, holds them tightly. You are very dear to me, you know that, do you not? I could never let harm come to you" (Hargrave, 2020, p. 216).

This moment is profoundly pitying in *The Mercies* and reveals a true passionate bond between Ursa and Maren, which still coheres with the non-normative desire focusing on Teresa de Lauretis's rationalization of queer theory. While Ursa's physical action of grabbing Maren's hands, adds to this, it together with her proclamation takes the film beyond just the range of friendship or romance. This act of 'fingering' is incredibly personal and erases the socially expected norms of woman- woman relationships in 17th century Norway. In doing so, Ursa subverts the male gaze that/her objectifies while simultaneously denouncing the idea of the dearest's /Maren's propriety. It strengthens the bond of Ursa towards Maren, similar to the message of overall queer perseverance to oppressive society norms which have been presented. This promise positing thus designates a degree of protection and affection that goes beyond simple friendship and constitutes, so to speak, an area of passion love and desire and fidelity. Ursa's loyalty to Maren is much more radical than any rebellious actions: it stands against the discursive construction of homosexuality as something non-existent or at least - non-significant. In

this sense, there is a sense in which Ursa gets to say how she feels about Maren, quietly but surely, in a world that configures those relations. In so doing, the non-normative female desire is constructed by Ursa through physical touch and verbally declaring her love thus offering an escape for queer desire within the oppressive Patriarchal and heterosexist world.

“This is the time, thinks Maren with Ursa’s fierce, lovely face before her, their gazes locked, that she should kiss her. The thought is terrifying: but Maren is certain that if she were a man, she would close the distance and press her mouth to Ursa’s, stop up her words with kisses. But she only nods. “I do.” (Hargrave, 2020, p. 216).

This first dramatic climax of *The Mercies* is to present a neat and poignant mirror of queer theory from Teresa de Lauretis about the conflict between desire and normative expectation. One can detect some erotic desire in Maren toward Ursa, desire that goes beyond the Amerikanin-Kameradin friendship which two females could have naturally. But such anticipation is combined with the feeling of fear and reluctance which prove the strict gender roles imposed on women sexuality and relationships. The acknowledgment violently underscores the phallic regime of the structuring of female desire in which the impossibility of same sex relationships is inscribed in the dominant discourse. Of all this, the simplest, albeit powerful, scene of Maren’s nod instead of a kiss to Ursa symbolizes how the heteropatriarchal system rejects queer directions. The standards that govern their relationships are gradually challenged by the tense, intimate atmosphere created by Maren’s unsaid desire and Ursa’s steady gaze. The disparity between Maren’s inner ideas and her outward behavior highlights the intricate relationships between gender, power, and cultural conventions that mold non-normative wants. This event serves as an example of how LGBT people frequently rely on subliminal cues and unspoken understandings to navigate their needs in constrictive social circumstances. Hargrave deftly illustrates the resiliency and agency of LGBT people by capturing this conflict, showing how they persist in forming meaningful connections in spite of repressive norms that want to invalidate their experiences.

“But Maren seems to cling to Ursa more than ever, and Ursa finds herself clinging back. It dizzies her, how strongly she feels for Maren” (Hargrave, 2020, p. 257).

Teresa de Lauretis’s idea of desire as a disruptive and transformational force is echoed in this intimate moment from *The Mercies*, which highlights the intensity of non-normative desire. The intensity of Ursa’s affections for Maren causes her to feel lightheaded, which is a symptom of the overwhelming power of her emotions, which are beyond reason. This bodily experience emphasizes how queer intimacy may upend and reshape conventional ideas of love and commitment, underscoring the embodied character of desire. Maren and Ursa’s mutual attachment serve as another example of de Lauretis’s *desire-as-multiplicity* theory, which holds that desire is numerous and fluid rather than fixed or unique. They have an emotional bond that defies easy categorization and encompasses a wide range of needs, wants, and emotions. Hargrave disrupts the mainstream discourse’s inclination to standardize and control desire by illustrating this complex intimacy, allowing non-normative impulses to grow. Ursa’s intense feelings for Maren are proof of the transformational power of queer desire, which has the ability to redefine relationships and reshape the individual.

“Nobody,” says Ursa, at last understanding. “When they asked her for more names, that is how she answered. She wouldn’t take another down with her. She is a good woman, and she loves you.” (Hargrave, 2020, p. 260).

The Mercies' grief moment highlights the queer possibilities of selfless love and unity, echoing idea of *queer futurity*. The way LGBT people forge alternate family and communities is shown by Ursa's revelation that Maren's hesitation to name others is an act of love and protection. The anonymous lady represents a lesbian ethics of caring in which love and loyalty are mobilized to combat oppressive forces by putting Maren's safety ahead of her own life. The idea of *queer performativity*, which holds that speaking acts and silences may have a significant impact on queer identities and relationships, is also echoed in this scene by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. *Nobody*, Maren's abrupt answer, turns into a potent theatrical statement that both protects others and declares her love for Ursa. This instance emphasizes how important small, regular actions of love and resistance are to the continuation of LGBT lives and partnerships. The significance of gay awareness and witness is further highlighted by Ursa's acknowledgement of Maren's love and the anonymous woman's altruism. By recognizing and recognizing LGBT love and solidarity, one can effectively defy heteronormative erasure.

"You are not shy of me?" Ursa gives her a gentle smile. "I have a sister." "I am not your sister," says Maren, sharply. "I love you as one," says Ursa, coming close to her and settling her palms upon her shoulders. There is something in Maren's face, a deepening pain, and as Ursa rubs her thumbs along her upper arms she flinches. (Hargrave, 2020, p. 267).

The complicated dynamics of queer desire and intimacy are exemplified by this intimate exchange in *The Mercies*, which resonates with Judith Butler's concept of the *performativity of identity*. By erasing the distinction between romantic love and sibling devotion, Ursa subverts conventional ideas about familial ties with her soft smile and tender touch. With her incisive reply, *I am not your sister*, Maren shows that she wants to set their relationship apart from familial ties and suggests a more nuanced emotional commitment. The idea of *queer phenomenology*, in which physical orientations and gestures disclose the complex negotiations of intimacy and desire, is also invoked by the power dynamics at work. Maren's reaction in response to Ursa's soft touch highlights the conflict between ease and discomfort, as well as vulnerability and desire. This instance emphasizes how unstable gay intimacy can be and how being physically close to someone can both calm and unnerve. By stating, *I love you as one*, Ursa also challenges the heteronormative assumptions that form the basis of traditional notions of love and family. This challenge to sibling love creates new opportunities for non-normative closeness. The scene also illustrates the concept of *outside belonging*, when LGBT individuals form bonds with others that go beyond the traditional meanings of love, family, and friendship. Ursa and Maren's relationship, which defies easy categorization and instead reflects a volatile and delicate queer experience of belonging, lives in this fragile zone.

"Ursa kisses her then, desperately, and Maren doesn't return it. "Maren, please." "Go, Ursa. We will lose the night. Burn your nightdress, wash your face." (Hargrave, 2020, p. 279).

This devastating moment from *The Mercies* reflects the complex dynamics of gay desire and rejection and speaks to the idea of queer affect. Ursa's eager kiss and Maren's lack of response create a warm, emotive milieu where want, longing, and disappointment collide. Maren's rejection, harsh as it may sound, can be seen as a survival strategy that prioritizes one's own survival over emotional vulnerability. This occurrence also represents a phenomenon known as *feeling backward*, in which members of the LGBT community experience a perplexing array of emotions, often caught between desire and disappointment. Ursa's screams, *Maren, please*, which express the agony and need that accompany unfulfilled love, perfectly capture this emotion. Go, Ursa, Maren's dismissive

response may perhaps be a protective move to shield Ursa from the dangers of their forbidden love. This example also illustrates the concept of sexual negativity, which holds that social norms and constraints adversely value desires that deviate from the norm. Maren's rejection of Ursa's kiss serves as an example of how heteronormative rules suppress queer desire and might be interpreted as an internalization of these harmful ideas. Burn your nightgown and wash your face is a terrible reminder of the need for secrecy and concealment, as well as the risks associated with LGBT intimacy in an unwelcoming environment. Through this talk, Hargrave demonstrates the intricate and oftentimes painful mechanisms of LGBT desire and rejection.

"I love you," says Ursa, the truth of it sudden as a falling star, bright and painful. "Will you not say it? I love you." (Hargrave, 2020, p. 279).

This devastating message from *The Mercies* embodies queer confession. The surprising and genuine *I love you* statement from Ursa illustrates how risky and brittle it is to acknowledge non-normative affection. The comparison to a falling star draws attention to the unexpected, insightful, and possibly disastrous implications of this confession. The way Ursa repeatedly says *I love you* is also in line with *performative utterance* idea, which maintains that words have the power to transform reality and create new opportunities. By expressing her desire, Ursa attempts to establish a queer connection that defies conventional norms. Even so, Maren's quiet and the prospect of rejection highlight how risky it is to come out as LGBT and how vulnerability may lead to hurt, rejection, or even violence. Ursa's love for Maren represents an idealized future full of possibilities for queer people, one that may never materialize. The wisdom and suffering of Ursa's confession serve to underscore the emotional depth of queer desire, which frequently transcends the boundaries of traditional romantic love. Through Ursa's words, Hargrave captures the complex interplay between gay desire, vulnerability, and the risks of revelation, illuminating the fragile yet persistent character of non-normative love.

Instead of being governed by traditional notions of friendship, family, or romance, Maren and Ursa's connection resides in a difficult-to-define transitional space. Strong emotional connection, understanding, and tenacity characterize their queer relationality, which enables them to survive the strict social mores of 17th-century Norway. Because their love lies in the spaces between traditional identification classifications, Maren and Ursa's bond transcends labeling or categorization. Rather, they convey their feelings and desires through discreet gestures, glances, and silences that together create a magnificent tapestry of queer intimacy. Their close proximity allows them to forge a relationship that is both highly personal and subversive of society. Moreover, rather than taking the typical route of romantic relationships, their love blossoms on the spur of the moment through stealing glances, whispered vows, and fleeting touches. Their intimacy synchronized temporality, which goes against traditional ideas of love and desire, emphasizes its queer potential. Rather than being idealized or exalted, Maren and Ursa's love is shown to be complex, turbulent, and very human. Their connection is so queerly beautiful because of their shared daily experiences, calm understanding, and resilience in the face of adversity. By using the relationship between Maren and Ursa to highlight the beauty and complexity of lesbian love, Hargrave subverts standard notions of beauty, desire, and intimacy.

Conclusion

This study examines how non-normative desire is portrayed in Kiran Millwood Hargrave's *The Mercies*, with a particular focus on the complex and very personal relationship between Maren and Ursa. Through the prism of queer theory, this analysis reveals the novel's in-depth examination of same-sex love and intimacy, highlighting

themes such as non-normative desire, queer relationality, and chaotic time dimension. The findings demonstrate how skillfully Hargrave subverts dominant discourses and heteronormative expectations by challenging accepted notions of relationships, love, and desire. Maren and Ursa's intimacy, which is distinguished by feelings of closeness, compassion, and strength, is a depiction of the LGBTQ potential of relationships that defy categorization. Ultimately, this paper reveals that *The Mercies* presents a compelling picture of homosexual love and desire, highlighting the complexity, beauty, and transformative potential of relationships that revolt against stereotypes. By focusing on the relationship between Maren and Ursa in the narrative, Hargrave contributes to the growing body of work that challenges the marginalization of queer experiences and shows the resilience of human connection, despite social norms. This study contributes to the ongoing conversations on LGBTQ+ representation in historical fiction and emphasizes the significance of queer tales in changing our perceptions of love, desire, and relationships.

References

- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. Routledge.
- CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals). (2017). Carnegie Medal 2017 Nominees.
- de Lauretis, T. (1991). *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities*. Indiana University Press.
- Doan, L. (2013). *Disturbing practices: History, sexuality, and women's experience of modern war*. University of Chicago Press.
- Ferguson, R. A. (2019). *One-Dimensional Queer*. Polity Press.
- Freccero, C. (2006). *Queer/early/modern*. Duke University Press.
- Gauthier, M. J. M. (2023). *Witchy politics: Witches and witchcraft as political tropes from Malleus Malleficarum (1487) to Les Sorcières de la République (2016) and The Mercies (2020)* [Master's thesis, University of New Mexico]. Digital Repository University of New Mexico.
- Gonda, C. (2016). *Lesbian Dames: Sapphism in the Long Eighteenth Century*. Routledge.
- Halperin, D. M. (2002). *How to do the history of homosexuality*. University of Chicago Press.
- Hargrave, K. M. (2020). *The Mercies*. Little, Brown and Company.
- Houlbrook, M. (2005). *Queer London: perils and pleasures in the sexual metropolis, 1918-1957*. University of Chicago Press.
- Justice, G., & Tinker, N. (Eds.). (2002). *Women's writing and the circulation of ideas: manuscript publication in England, 1550-1800*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kirkus Reviews. (2020). *Review of The Mercies*.
- Koffey, M. (2021). *The Witch's Craft: A Critical Feminist Analysis of the Witch in Historical and Contemporary Visual Discourse* (Doctoral dissertation, The Ohio State University).
- Muñoz, J. E. (2009). *Cruising utopia: The then and there of queer futurity*. NYU Press.
- Nahole, M. (2023). *Sexuality in fiction: Exploring the literary portrayal of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) characters in selected African texts: Speak no evil, the interpreters, fairy tales for lost children, i am a homosexual mum, the hairdresser of harare and the oracle of cidino* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Namibia).
- Onty, J. F. (2021). *Tracing the differences in the representation of 'Queer' identity found in few 20th and 21st Century novels* (Doctoral dissertation, Brac University).
- Publishers Weekly. (2020). *Review of The Mercies, by Kiran Millwood Hargrave*. *Publishers Weekly*, 267(11), 54.
- Purkiss, D. (1996). *The witch in history: Early modern and twentieth-century representations*. Routledge.

- Rabeea, L. (2024). *Women's Suffering and Independence as Shown in The Mercies Novel Through the Lens of Socialist Feminism*.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1985). *Between men: English literature and male homosocial desire*. Columbia University Press.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California Press.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1993). *Tendencies*. Duke University Press.
- Sempruch, J. (2008). *Fantasies of gender and the witch in feminist theory and literature*. Purdue University Press.
- Sullivan, A. (2021). *Out on a Limb: Selected Writing, 1989–2021*. Simon and Schuster.
- Suzuki, M. (2006). *Writing same-sex love: Sexology and literary representation in Yoshiya Nobuko's early fiction*. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 65(3), 575-599.
- The British Book Awards. (2017). *Kiran Millwood Hargrave*. The British Book Awards.
- The Mercies by Kiran Millwood Hargrave review – a haunting tale of witchcraft (2020, February 20). *The Guardian*.
- University of Oxford. (n.d.). *Oxford University's MSt in Creative Writing. Continuing Education*, University of Oxford
- Waterstones. (2016). *Waterstones Children's Book Prize 2016 Winner*. Waterstones.