



“The Purest, Most Innocent Kind of Love”: *Summer Bird Blue*
and Asexuality

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I. Introduction

“LGBTQIA+”. This is a string of letters most individuals have encountered per the 21st century. Ten years ago, however, there were only four letters used to represent minority gender and sexual orientations: L, G, B and T (Gold). Now, it is evident that there exist additional abbreviations for identifying other minority gender and sexual orientations. For instance, “Q” stands for queer, “I” for intersex, “A” for asexual and “+” to represent those who are part of the community, but do not possess terminology to accurately represent and capture their identity (“LGBTQIA Faculty/Staff Resources”). This thesis will take particular interest in asexuality as a sexual orientation as in literature and literary analysis as asexuality rarely appears in literary criticism. Asexuality has been employed in literature to describe the idealization of a female character after being stripped of her sexuality and sexual and psychological disorders, such as frigidity and female hysteria (Linde 81). Hence, this thesis will analyze the themes of asexuality present in the novel, *Summer Bird Blue* by Akemi Dawn Bowman via the research question, “how does *Summer Bird Blue* depict asexuality?” Furthermore, the following sub-questions will be addressed in the second and third chapter respectively:

- How is asexuality posited within a sexual normative culture?
- How does the author of *Summer Bird Blue* deal with questions about sexuality?

Summer Bird Blue is a contemporary, young-adult, LGBTQIA+ novel published in 2018. It features Rumi Seto, an insecure seventeen-year-old whose only certainty in life is her desire to spend the rest of her life writing music with her sister, Lea. However, Lea gets into a tragic car accident in which she dies, resulting in Rumi being sent to Hawaii by her mother while she deals with her grief. Rumi must deal with the loss of her sister, abandonment by her mother and the inability to play music without her sister by her side. With the aid of fellow neighbours Kai and an old man by the name of George Watanabe, Rumi attempts to find her

way back to music by writing the song that she and Lea never got to finish, “Summer Bird Blue”. Therefore, *Summer Bird Blue* is an exploration of “grief, guilt, and the healing power of art and friendship” (“SUMMER BIRD BLUE”). The author, regarding the novel, states that “Rumi’s story is so much about learning—learning to grieve, learning to forgive yourself and learning that it’s okay not to have the answers to everything” (Smith). The themes of asexuality within the novel are not at the forefront, but rather a facet of Rumi’s exploration of her own identity through her grief. This presents the case study as interesting due to it exploring asexuality on a personal scale, rather than on a political or societal scale. This also presents the issues surrounding exploring one’s sexuality to be intimate and individual, rather than a cause for political, social or medical discourse. Furthermore, exploring themes of asexuality through the lens of Rumi herself allows this thesis to analyze Rumi’s personal struggles regarding her sexuality through identifying and explicating on theoretical and societal perspectives that contribute to the marginalization of asexuality.

Asexuality

Before proceeding further, the concepts behind asexuality must be explicated upon.

Asexuality typically pertains to the experience of not being sexually attracted to others (Decker 3). Less commonly, its definition consists of not pursuing sex or sexual attraction due to its perceived lack of value (Decker 3). According to AVEN, The Asexual Visibility & Education Network, an asexual person is one who “does not experience sexual attraction – they are not drawn to people sexually and do not desire to act upon attraction to others in a sexual way” (“Overview”). As a result, asexuality is a sexual orientation, characterized by “sexual attraction to no one” (Decker 4). Such a definition, however, constitutes an “unnecessarily black-and-white understanding of attraction” (Decker 5), as there are “further subdivisions that describe the asexual experience in different ways” (Decker 17). As per all

sexual orientations, within asexuality there exist gray areas, coined by the term “graysexuality”. It is an umbrella term referring to “many situations wherein a person is experiencing something that isn’t as consistent, as strong, as predictable, or as prevalent as most other people experience it” (Decker 37). Also, an individual who experiences sexual attraction after forming a bond with someone else is described as “demisexual” (Decker 41).

Aromanticism

In addition, romanticism is an important distinguishing factor between types of asexuals as it determines whether they experience romantic attraction or desire romantic relationships (Decker 17). Romanticism is important to this thesis as Rumi of *Summer Bird Blue* identifies as aromantic. Therefore, an understanding of romanticism and aromanticism must be present to further understand the case study. It is worth noting that romanticism is separate from sexual orientation whereby romantic attraction refers to one’s romantic orientation.

Romanticism purports the notion that “relationships do not have to include sex or sexual attraction to be categorized as romantic” (Decker 17). In the context of asexuals, despite their lack of sexual attraction to their partner, they may still seek romantic relationships which satisfy them and fulfill their needs (18). Romanticism, for asexuals, is experienced via the understanding that expressions of romantic emotions via sex or sex being intrinsically attached to love do not naturally occur to them (Decker 18). As a result, romantic attraction experienced by asexuals proves to be an independent experience from sexual attraction.

People who do not find themselves romantically attracted are called aromantic and may describe themselves as having no romantic drive, not finding anyone attractive in a romantic sense, preferring singlehood, being satisfied by close friendships, not enjoying or relating to partnered life or feeling a general romantic interest but not finding anyone with whom they want a romance (Decker 22-23). Some aromantics find themselves acquiring their desired

social and emotional satisfaction from friendly relationships (Decker 23). In addition to romantic attraction, aesthetic attraction is also included within the asexual experience where despite the lack of sexual attraction possess an attraction to those they find physically attractive (Decker 19).

Literature Review

Asexuality as a sexual orientation can be classified as a relatively novel field of study as only with the publication of sexologist Anthony F. Bogaert's paper 'Asexuality: Prevalence and Associated Factors in a National Probability Sample' in 2004 only did asexuality garner more attention. His article, based on a pre-existing questionnaire provided by a national probability sample of British residents, suggests that approximately one percent of the population is asexual as they answered affirmatively to the question, "I have never felt sexually attracted to anyone at all" (Bogaert 281). Furthermore, the discourse of asexuality has primarily taken place in the social sciences, despite the evident connections to gender and sexuality (Cerankowski and Milks 650). However, asexuality gathered attention from the perspectives of medical and psychological discourse in which it was discussed in pathologizing terms (Cerankowski and Milks 653) and remains to be "typically operationalised as a taxonomic category" (Swami et al. 2). This thesis will not take such an approach in pathologizing Rumi's asexuality but rather acknowledge it as a sexual orientation and identity rather than discussing it in conjunction with medical and psychological discourse.

Moreover, a key researcher concerning asexuality is Karli June Cerankowski, a lecturer in Stanford's Program in Writing and Rhetoric. Her dissertation *Illegible: Asexualities in Media, Literature, And Performance*, according to Leah Stark, "blazes pathway for academic study of asexuality" whereby she "emphasizes social discourse and de-pathologization of sexual orientation" (Stark). Her thesis extensively discusses the scope of

research into asexuality as a sexual orientation and analyzes multiple media representations of asexuality and stereotypes concerning asexuals online, on television and in film. She argues that the continued growth of the asexual movement reflects the evolving socio-cultural landscape where sexualities have come to be understood as normative or non-normative, pathological or healthy as “asexuality remains illegible in a culture that valorizes sexual relationships and remains committed to a sex-normative ideology that upholds sexual desire as an innate drive” (Cerankowski iv). In such a culture, asexuals are then regarded as “immature, suggest hormonal or medical problems may be to blame, assume a history of sexual trauma, or accuse asexuals of repression or extreme asceticism” (Cerankowski iv). Furthermore, Cerankowski argues that asexuality in media is visualized as a spectacular phenomenon for television or entertainment purposes, and it is further characterized as an “abnormal” condition in need of causal explanation or medical intervention and exists as a result of “how ideologies of ‘normal’ sexuality circumscribe asexuality as pathological” (Cerankowski 40). Ultimately, the erasure and medicalization of asexuality as a sexual orientation in a culture that regards sex and sexual attraction as part of the human condition is the position that Cerankowski maintains. And in the world of television and entertainment, asexuality or identifying as asexual is due to a medical disorder that requires treatment resulting from the aforementioned culture which erased and medicalized asexuality.

Structure of The Thesis and Methodology

This thesis will take inspiration from and employ a similar approach to Cerankowski in emphasizing social discourse and de-pathologization of sexual orientation. The methodology used to analyze *Summer Bird Blue*'s depiction of asexuality consist of the theories present amongst sexuality studies as asexuality possesses clear connections to gender and sexuality. It will do so by first expanding upon sexuality studies, which purports the norms concerning

sexuality. The theories from sexuality studies can allow us to understand why asexuality is regarded as an outlier or contrary to normative behaviour. In line with Cerankowski, who explored the invisibility of asexuality within a sex-normative ideology, this thesis will expand on notions of sexual normativity. Sigmund Freud can be argued to be an important proponent of sexual normative thinking, a reading of his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) will be conducted to determine how his works contribute to sexual normative ideologies and their prevalence today by identifying contemporary media which confirms or contradicts his contribution. Lastly, the contextual knowledge gained via sexuality studies and sexual normativity will be part of the methodology this thesis employs when analyzing the depictions of asexuality within the case study *Summer Bird Blue*. As sexuality studies and the concept of sexual normativity extensively discusses sexual orientations and behaviours, the theories purported by them prove to be appropriate in their application due to this thesis acknowledging asexuality as a sexual orientation and identification. As analysis of asexuality within literary works is an underexplored field of academic discussion, this research proves to be relevant today whereby acknowledgement and recognition of asexuality as a sexual orientation amongst the queer community and online platforms. With more academic research regarding asexuality, such as this thesis, knowledge about an underexplored topic will be brought to attention, paving the way for larger attention and recognition of asexuality as a sexual orientation.

II. Sexuality Studies and Sexual Normativity

Sexuality Studies

Sexuality studies, according to Steven Seidman, realize the aspects of sex such as issues of desire, pleasure, identity norms, norms of sexual behaviour and intimate arrangements as social phenomena (Seidman et al. *Introducing* xv). Sexuality studies maintain that social forces are what determines which organs and orifices are deemed sexual, how they may be used or expressed and their social and moral meaning (Seidman et al. *Introducing* xvi). The aforementioned social forces refer to the individuals and groups who “give meaning to bodily sensations and feelings, make erotic acts into sexual identities, and create norms distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable sexualities” (Seidman et al. *Handbook* 4). Social forces also determine which desires and acts are deemed the basis of identities and what social forces regulate behaviours and intimacies (Seidman et al. *Introducing* xvi). Hence, in the discussion of sexuality, it is worth understanding the social forces surrounding sexuality and its corresponding discourse. In *Summer Bird Blue*, Rumi’s struggles regarding her sexuality relate to the behaviours exhibited by her peers and sister, understanding of the notion of social forces dictating normative behaviours, desires and acts is required.

The Culture of Romantic Love

Similarly, romantic love is regarded akin to sexuality whereby it is influenced by social forces. Eva Illouz, Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Jerusalem, elaborates on the social forces that create a culture of romantic love by establishing the definition of a culture of romantic love. The culture of romantic love suggests that “the definition of the good life includes finding a person able to generate long-lasting and yet exciting feelings, and being able to extend the experience of love throughout one’s life” and

where “the experience of love plays a central role in the definition of self and in which actors engage in a wide variety of symbolic practices to create, experience and maintain the emotion of love” (Illouz 43). As Rumi of *Summer Bird Blue* identifies as aromantic, the culture of romantic love is exceedingly important to understand how Rumi may experience the culture of romantic love.

Illouz further states that modernity is the cause for love to be our “categoric imperative, the experience without which we do not feel fully accomplished human beings” (Illouz 43). Also, as love “flourishes in individualistic cultures”, the individualist search for love is most influenced by the culture of consumption in the twentieth century as individualism promoted by consumption has contributed most to the institutionalization of a culture of romance (Illouz 43). This is due to consumer culture catering to and eliciting deeply rooted emotions, such as love or the need for security, through portrayals of “scenarios of the good life and models of self-realization” and has extensively used the imagery of a couple in love for the promotion of goods (Illouz 43).

Once again, as Rumi identifies as aromantic, Illouz’s notions regarding the notions of social forces constructing romantic love, the definition of the culture of love, modernity and consumption culture and romantic love will be employed to understand how Rumi experiences the normative culture of romantic love as an aromantic.

Sigmund Freud and Sexual Normativity

Sexuality studies’ scopes of analysis possess relations to Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the key person in the foundation of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is described as “a theory of the human mind, a therapy for mental distress, an instrument of research and a profession” (Ward and Zarate 3) and can be said to transform “the way we see ourselves in modern

‘Western’ societies” (Ward and Zarate 6). Therefore, with Freud being “the single most influential thinker in shaping Western sexual culture” (Seidman et al. *Handbook* 5), this thesis will identify and deconstruct sexual normativity in Freud’s theories to answer the sub research question, “how is asexuality posited within a sexual normative culture?” Freud believed that sex is at the core of oneself, and that sexuality is the main cause for psychological and social conflict as “the psychological character of the individual rests on how the sex drive is managed” (Seidman et al. *Handbook* 6). From the brief explanations of Freud’s beliefs, his theories perpetuate sexual normativity which are ideologies that pertain to a culture suggesting that sex and sexual attraction are part of the human condition. It has since contributed to the invisibility of asexuality within a sex-normative ideology. Also, a definition of sexual normativity is warranted as it will be discussed greatly in conjunction with Freud. Sexual normativity pertains to “model sexual behaviour that is taken as exemplary for defining the propriety or impropriety of any particular instance of sexual activity” (Schutte 41). Furthermore, in contemporary societies heterosexuality is considered the universal norm for sexual conduct whilst queer relationships are considered as deviant or outcasts from “the rights and privileges accorded to the traditional heterosexual couple” (Schutte 42).

A reading of Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), being an “important *psychoanalytic* text central to the understanding of psychoanalytic ideas on sexuality” (Haute and Westerink 8), is most relevant to this thesis. It is worth acknowledging the different periods in which Freud’s theories and *Summer Bird Blue* were published whereby notions of sexuality have evolved vastly. To substantiate the relevance of Freud’s theories to today’s society, examples from contemporary media including our case study *Summer Bird Blue*, which either confirms or contradicts his theories, will be used to

understand the sexual normative culture present that is in line with Freud setting the precedent.

In the first essay, “The Sexual Aberrations”, Freud calls attention to a “distinct feeling of loathing” towards “the employment of the mouth as a sexual organ ... if the lips (tongue) of the one are brought into contact with the genitals of the other” (20). The aforementioned loathing leads to Freud’s observation that, “in the loathing we may observe one of the forces which have brought about restrictions of the sexual aim. As a rule these forces halt at the genitals; there is, however, no doubt that even the genitals of the other sex themselves may be an object of loathing” (20). Hence, such behaviours are deemed “characteristic of all hysterics” (Freud 20). The loathing Freud discusses is consistent with the sentiments of repulsed or reluctant asexuals, where they find the “idea or experience of *personally* being in a sexual situation that seems unappealing” where some asexuals experience feeling “sickened by images of sex like pornography, love scenes or explicit public displays of affection” (Decker 31). As a result, Freud normalizes enjoying the sexual act as opposed to the repulsion or aversion that several asexuals face. Hence, Freud posits sex-repulsed and sex averse asexuality as hysterical as opposed to the sexual normative act of enjoying sex.

To exemplify sex-repulsed and sex averse asexuality, the novel *The Bone People* (1986) by Keri Hulme features a sex averse asexual protagonist, who does not conform to Freud’s notion of loathing the sexual act as characteristic of all hysterics. Kerewin Holmes, a part Maori and Pakeha woman, is a recluse who lives alone in a tower located on the seashore of New Zealand. She encounters a young child named Simon when she catches him trespassing her property. In turn, Kerewin meets Simon’s abusive adoptive father, Joe Gillayley. With Kerewin’s rejection of his sexual advances, Joe is then unable to view her as asexual, but rather holds the belief that she was hurt (Cerankowski 192). To establish a sexual connection

with Kerewin, Joe believes he must help her overcome her pain (Cerankowski 192).

Throughout the novel, Kerewin “repeatedly reaffirms her aversion to and lack of interest in sex” (Cerankowski 198). When Joe presses her on his assumption of trauma leading to her rejection of his sexual advances, he asks, “I thought maybe someone had been bad to you in the past and that was why you don’t like people touching or holding you” (Hulme 265).

Kerewin then expresses violent exasperation by stating, “I said no. I haven’t been raped or jilted in any fashion. There’s nothing in my background to explain the way I am” (Hulme 265). Thus, Joe attributing Kerewin’s sex aversion to be a result of trauma mirrors Freud’s classification of sex-repulsed and sex averse asexuality as “hysterical” due to her displaying non-normative behaviour. Therefore, the treatment of Kerewin’s asexuality highlights the sexual normative culture she is situated in whereby her aversion and lack of desire for sexual intercourse is treated as causal of trauma, rather than a sexual orientation and identity.

Freud’s reasoning whereby sex-repulsion and aversion individuals as hysterical is inapplicable to Kerewin. Despite experiencing trauma and violence in her life such as the “displacement and betrayal in her family and cemented histories of colonial violence that manifest in her struggles with alcohol abuse, art-making, and balancing language between Maori and Pakeha cultures” (Cerankowski 199), she “routinely refuses any connection between her life’s traumas and her asexuality” (178). She functions normatively, as opposed to demonstrating behaviour that can be classified as hysterical by Freud’s standards.

In addition, what Freud determines to be the “sexuality of psychoneurotics”, he states that most psychoneurotics possess a “disease” that develops after puberty or later in life, due to the libido being “unable to attain normal sexual gratification” (32). Libido, according to Freud, refers to the “energy of the sexual instinct” and is reflected in “consciousness as a physical and psychic urge for sexual gratification” (Reich et al. 15). However, many asexuals purport a low or non-existent sex drive and do not relate to the ideas or need of release

through orgasm or stimulation (Decker 29). Thus, with asexuals possessing a low or non-existent libido due to their lack of physical and psychic urges and desire to attain sexual gratification, Freud would determine asexuals to possess a disease and to be psychoneurotic as they do not conform to his ideas of sexual normative libido and sexual gratification.

An example in contemporary media representing Freud's aforementioned determination is in the television show *House, M.D* whereby the husband of an asexual married couple was a patient in the sub-plot of the episode "Better-Half" (2012). In the episode, the husband's asexuality was debunked as he was found to suffer from a pituitary tumour which inhibited his sex drive and depleted his libido. Furthermore, his wife revealed that she lied about her sexual orientation to prevent her husband from feeling guilty about denying her sexual needs. Doctor House, when theorizing the patient's lack of sex drive and libido states, "lots of people don't have sex. The only people who don't want it are sick, dead or lying" ("House, MD' Asexuality Subplot") and the episode concluded with "asexuality 'solved' as a sickness or a ruse" (Decker 84). As a result, the show determines asexuality to be a deception, a pathology, a lie or a symptom of a medical disease (Attwood et al.). With the episode suggesting that those who choose not to engage in sexual acts are sick, it reinforces Freud's sexual normative notions of those unable to attain normal sexual gratification and lacking the physical and psychic urge for sexual gratification to be characteristic of psychoneurotics and possessing a disease.

Freud in his third essay "The Transformation of Puberty" presents the notion of "asexual love" in females due to "deeper disturbances of the psychosexual development" which in turn leads to "incestuous object-selection" (68). Freud's assertion is as follows:

Girls with an excessive need for affection and an equal horror for the real demands of the sexual life experience an uncontrollable temptation on the one hand to realize in life the ideal of the asexual love and on the other hand to conceal their libido under an

affection which they manifest without self-reproach; this they do by clinging for life to the infantile attraction for their parents or brothers or sisters which has been repressed in puberty. (68)

Freud, with the importance he places upon puberty where he believes the beginning of puberty to transform the “infantile sexual life into its definite normal form” (56), his research is uninformed of the possibility of asexuality as a “mature state” (Decker 7). Asexuality describes a mature state as it applies to maturing or mature people and is not a sign of emotional or physical stunting (Decker 7). For instance, Rumi of *Summer Bird Blue* is seventeen and does not appear to lack emotional or physical stunting in the novel, but rather represents asexuality as a mature state. Rumi states:

Lea was always the romantic one, not me. Mom says I might be a late bloomer, but I'm not so sure. Late implies there's something that's still going to happen- something I don't fully understand yet. But I do understand it ... What's the point of wasting all that time? That's the part I don't understand. Time isn't replaceable and you never know how much of it you have left. Why waste so much of it dating? It doesn't make me a late bloomer-it makes me practical. (Bowman 210-211)

With Rumi being certain of her asexuality and not attributing it to a developmental issue, she is contrary to Freud's assumption of puberty transforming the infantile sexual life to its sexual normative state. As a result, Freud in his attribution of asexual love within females to incestuous object-selection to repression within puberty is uninformed of asexuality as a mature state, independent of emotional or physical stunting.

Notwithstanding disregarding asexuality as a mature state, Freud's research is also uninformed in the possibility of aromanticism. This is so as aromantics are perfectly capable of gaining social and emotional satisfaction from familial relationships (Decker 23) This

notion is incredibly relevant to this thesis as Rumi of *Summer Bird Blue*'s relationship with her mother and sister objectively conforms to Freud's discussion of incestuous object-selection. Rumi, when finding Lea smiling at her, expresses:

Something rushes through my body, as if my blood has been replaced with starlight. I feel like magic, and wonder, and pure happiness. And when I look at Lea, my fifteen-year-old sister who glows and shimmers and is everything good that I'm not, I know she feels the same way ... I don't think I'll find another person in the entire world who understands me the way Lea does. (Bowman 5)

When reflecting on the love she had for her dead sister, Rumi states "fuck romance- Lea was the love of my life. I was beautiful and horrible and messy and angry, but it was also the purest, most innocent kind of love I'll ever feel" (Bowman 348). Furthermore, Rumi when conversing with her mother, poses the question, "what if Lea's the only person I can ever love? Lea and you?" (320). Rumi's asexual love extending to only her mother and sister conforms to Freud's discussion of incestuous object-selection. However, Rumi does not display an excessive need for affection or horror towards sexual life; both of which Freud attributes to incestuous object-selection. She instead finds herself satisfied by the asexual love towards her mother and sister and disregards the need for romance and sex. Rumi's asexual love, therefore, contradicts Freud's sexual normative regard to incestuous object-selection theory.

Therefore, asexuality is posited within a sexual normative culture, as purported by Sigmund Freud and in contemporary media, as hysterical in sex-repulsed and sex averse asexuals as they are opposed to the sexual normative enjoying of sex. Also, asexuality is regarded to be a disease and psychoneurotic since it does not conform to sexual normative libido and sexual gratification. Lastly, Freud in his attribution of asexual love within females to incestuous object-selection due to repression within puberty is uninformed of asexuality as

a mature state independent of emotional or physical stunting as opposed to normative libido and sexual attraction. Freud is also uninformed of the social and emotional satisfaction which asexuals gain from familial relationships. Based on Freud's notions being both confirmed by "Better-Half" and contradicted by *The Bone People* and *Summer Bird Blue* in contemporary media, it is evident that his theories purporting sexual normativity are extremely prevalent today. With the knowledge of the sexual normative culture in which Sigmund Freud had a hand in creating, it is useful as a methodology to analyze Rumi's exploration of her asexuality and aromanticism and how the sexual normative culture she is situated in contributes to the aforementioned exploration.

III. *Summer Bird Blue* and Asexuality

Firstly, this thesis must establish Rumi's identification as asexual and aromantic in her sentiments expressed in the novel before attempting to answer the research question and sub-research question. Rumi's position and sentiments as asexual will then be used in analyzing how *Summer Bird Blue* depicts asexuality. Once again, it is worth emphasizing that the themes of asexuality within the novel are not at the forefront, but rather a facet of Rumi's exploration of her own identity through her grief. As a result, the methodology employed in analyzing *Summer Bird Blue* consists of exploring themes of asexuality through the lens of Rumi herself in conjunction with the relevant theories from sexuality studies and the sexual normative culture she is situated in.

Rumi explicitly states, "if I was basing it off what the Internet says, I'd identify as asexual. And maybe somewhere on the aromantic spectrum, too" (Bowman 332). Her behaviour throughout the novel is also consistent with sentiments faced by other asexuals and aromantics. For instance, regarding crushes, Rumi expressed:

Most other people my age have crushes- they're attracted to each other and have the urge to flirt. I don't feel anything like that- when I think about romance, I feel indifferent. When I see someone I think is physically attractive, I don't picture them naked or wonder what it's like to kiss them- I just see people who are aesthetically pleasing and could potentially make a good friend.

And it never used to feel like I was missing out on anything. I always felt like I was the way I'm supposed to be. (Bowman 104)

Her asexuality and aromanticism are most prevalent in how she regards other individuals of her age, especially her sister Lea and her neighbour Kai. For instance, when she finds herself stricken upon hearing the song that played during the car crash from the iPod of Kai's

father's car, she states, "normally I wouldn't care. Boys and trucks and coolers are about as foreign to me as people who think the best music is the stuff on the radio" (Bowman 31). Furthermore, when she encounters Kai without a shirt, she remarks, "I've never really been nervous in front of a guy before, but I am in front of Kai. And not because of his missing shirt, but because it's becoming more and more likely that he's going to find out I know nothing about surfing" (Bowman 144). When attempting to understand her feelings regarding Kai, Rumi ponders:

I don't know what I feel when I look at Kai. I think he's attractive, and smug, and really confident, and maybe even a little cool. But I don't know if that's an equation for anything at all. Because when I look at Hannah I think she's attractive, and *not* smug, and really confident, and *very* cool. I don't understand what the difference is supposed to be. (Bowman 214)

Furthermore, she also expresses aesthetic attraction, as opposed to sensual or sexual attraction towards Kai. She also establishes her aromanticism when she states "I know he's beautiful, but just because something is beautiful doesn't mean I want to kiss it. Someone can be beautiful and I don't want to have a romantic relationship with them. There are other kinds of relationships I find more important. Family. Friendships. Music" (Bowman 304).

Therefore, as a result of Rumi's position and sentiments as asexual, *Summer Bird Blue* depicts asexuality to consist of indifference to sex, appreciation for an individual's aesthetic appearance and satisfaction in other non-sexual or non-romantic relationships. This is confirmed in how Rumi feels indifferent when it comes to crushes, how despite having an aesthetic appreciation for Kai she does not desire to kiss him or be in a romantic relationship with him and how she finds importance in her relationship with family, friends and music. Furthermore, asexuality is depicted to be a state in which the individual's asexuality is innate and natural. This is confirmed in how Rumi does not find a deficiency in her indifference to

crushes, or lack of desire to kiss someone she finds physically attractive or view them naked. Instead, she believes that she is fine the way she is.

Summer Bird Blue and Questioning Sexuality

In Relation to Lea

Regarding Rumi and her sexuality, her exploration and questioning of it prove to be a vital aspect in the depiction of asexuality in *Summer Bird Blue*. As a result, this thesis will benefit from exploring the sub-question, “how does the author of *Summer Bird Blue* deal with questions about sexuality?” Rumi’s questioning of her sexuality is heavily linked to her sister Lea. There are flashbacks interspaced in the novel where Rumi finds herself thinking back to instances when her sister was alive. Throughout those instances, Rumi seems to question her sexuality and desire by constantly comparing herself to Lea and their shared peers. For instance, when Rumi expresses her knowledge of labels and terms such as asexuality, demisexual, gray asexual and romantic orientations, she tells Lea:

And honestly, I don’t know really *know* what I like or don’t like. I didn’t like kissing Caleb, but does that mean I’ll never like kissing anyone? I don’t know the answer to that. I don’t know whether I’ll ever meet someone and want to kiss them, or date them. Or have sex with them. I just know that I’m not attracted to people the way you are. (Bowman 264)

After the death of Lea, Rumi questions her sexuality by comparing herself to what her sister would do or think or say. For example, when Kai invited Rumi to karaoke, she deduced how Lea would react to “a shirtless boy half inviting me to go to karaoke in Hawaii” and decided that “smiling about boys has never been my thing. It was hers” (Bowman 69). Furthermore, in attempting to understand her feelings regarding Kai, she turned to how Lea may have

perceived the situation by stating, “Lea always talked about a spark- the thrill of magic or lightning or fireworks” (Bowman 214). Therefore, Rumi finds herself questioning her sexuality based on the behaviours of her late sister. Moreover, Lea’s death influenced Rumi in questioning her sexuality alongside questions of mortality. For example, Rumi asks “what if I die before I ever have sex? Or before I figure out if I ever *want* to have sex?” (Bowman 177). These questions regarding sexuality are spurred on by reflecting on death, where she asks herself, “maybe all I have left now is the knowledge that we live before we die- everything in between is simply extra effort to keep ourselves from hitting our expiration dates too early” (Bowman 177). As a result, Rumi’s grief and her questions about sexuality are intertwined closely throughout the novel. The impact of the intertwining of grief and questions about sexuality in the overall narrative of the novel is an exemplification of how the author herself states that Rumi’s story about learning; wherein learning how to overcome grief, she also learns to understand herself as a person- such as in the case of her sexuality.

Judgement From and Comparison to Peers

In addition, aside from comparing herself to her sister and her peers, Rumi seems to feel judgement from her peers. This is evident when she states, “I don’t care what people think about me as a person, but I do care about the fact that they might have an opinion on my sexuality before I do. It feels ... invasive. It feels like I’m being rushed” (Bowman 263). Moreover, others’ sexuality and self-awareness are an avenue in which Rumi finds herself questioning her sexuality. For instance, when conversing with Kai’s friend Gareth about sexuality, she asks, “how are people supposed to know what they like for sure?” (Bowman 333). Gareth, as a native Hawaiian with a heavy Hawaiian accent, offers her wisdom where he states, “I don’t t’ink you have fo’ know right this second... I don’t want all the answer’s right dis second” (Bowman 333). Rumi almost shouts at him, “that’s what I want. But I feel

like I'm supposed to know everything right now. Everyone always seems so put together" (Bowman 333). In this interaction, Rumi's doubts and questions about her sexuality are summarized where she finds herself inferior to individuals, such as Lea and her peers, who possess a level of certainty in their lives. However, this interaction between the two takes a different turn when Gareth responds to Rumi's statement with, "Dat's because people are liars...Dey as clueless as us; dey only better at pretending...An' you know what I t'ink? I 's okay fo' be confused, an' i's okay fo' not to be confused. One isn't mo' bettah dan da uddah, yeah? Dey both okay" (Bowman 333). To that, Rumi comes to a realization:

It's okay to be confused. It's normal.

I'm normal.

And part of me knew it all along. Because feeling the way I feel always felt normal to me, until I realized it wasn't what other people were doing- when I realized how sure everybody else seemed to be about their likes and dislikes. (Bowman 333-334)

Thus, the author deals with questions of sexuality as a normal part of finding one's identity and is also something others experience as well. The normalcy of questioning one's identity is also consistent with the novel's classification as a young-adult novel whereby it is a common trope amongst novels with the same classification.

Therefore, the author of *Summer Bird Blue* deals with questions about sexuality on a social level due to the involvement of the social circle in questioning sexuality. A social circle is defined as members being "sociometrically linked with one another, but does not require that all pairs of members be *directly* linked" (Scott 5). The protagonist, Rumi, has her social circle comprising of her sister and her peers from high school. Rumi often finds herself comparing herself to her sister when questioning her sexuality. Furthermore, Rumi's peers also play a role in her questioning her sexuality, as she seems to feel judgement from them

and insecurity regarding their sexuality and self-awareness. Moreover, the author also depicts questions about sexuality to be a normal aspect of understanding identity.

Sexuality Studies and *Summer Bird Blue*

The methodology employed in further analyzing *Summer Bird Blue* via the use of the relevant theories from sexuality studies, such as social forces dictating behaviour and the culture of romantic love, and the sexual normative culture Rumi is situated in will be subsequently expanded upon. Firstly, instances in the text whereby the sociology surrounding sexuality should be recognized in how the novel proceeds to depict asexuality. For example, social forces dictating which desires and acts are deemed the basis of identities are detected in the novel when Rumi finds herself feeling differentiated from her peers. She comments on how everyone had become “so confident and knowledgeable about dating and sex and sexuality” (Bowman 104) whilst she had “never felt more different in my entire life” (105). She proceeds to consider heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual attraction, despite knowing that there was nothing inherently wrong with her when she states:

I’ve tried to like boys. I’ve even wondered if I like girls- or *both*. But I don’t like anybody. I can see when people are attractive, but I don’t want to date them. I don’t want to hold hands, or flirt, or ... kiss. And I don’t feel like I have fewer pieces than anyone else, or that I’m somehow less whole because I don’t want to date. But I feel like I’m supposed to be that way. (Bowman 105)

Rumi’s experience thus results from social forces dictating sexual identities based on her peers’ certainty of their sexualities and sexual attraction. Amidst her peers, Rumi finds herself experiencing some level of confusion regarding her sexuality and sexual attraction. Therefore, *Summer Bird Blue* depicts asexuality as a sexuality that does not conform to the

basis of identities purported by social forces but is simultaneously not rendered unnatural and foreign.

This is exemplified through Rumi's perceived differentiation in her identity as asexual and aromantic among her peers whilst simultaneously certain that there was nothing inherently wrong with her or that she possessed any deficiency. In addition, social forces resulting in the regulation of behaviours and intimacies are also present in the novel on two occasions. The two occasions in question hold importance in the novel as they demonstrate consistency in Rumi's regards and reactions to kissing someone. After a date with Kai, he kisses her. In reciprocating his action, she states, "and I kiss him back because that's what I'm supposed to do. Right?" (Bowman 262). This event triggers a flashback where Rumi found herself crying in Lea's presence, after an interaction between herself and a boy named Caleb. In the flashback, we find Rumi informing Lea that after Caleb had expressed that he couldn't stop thinking about kissing her and that Rumi "let him, because I thought I wanted him to. I thought I was *supposed* to want him to" (Bowman 262). These instances demonstrate social forces regulating the action of not only reciprocating kissing a romantic interest but also wanting to kiss them. Rumi, as an asexual and aromantic, clearly lacks such a desire for kissing which is highly contrary to the social norm of wanting to be kissed and engaged in kissing. Therefore, *Summer Bird Blue* depicts asexuality to be contrary to behaviours purported by social norms, such as kissing.

The culture of romantic love, as defined by Eva Illouz, is also evident in the novel. For example, Rumi reflects on love where she states she does understand love and romance, "but I do understand it. I can see why some people like falling in love, over and over again, because it's addictive and it feels good. It is like opening presents on Christmas- that immense wave of excitement, followed by blissful happiness. I assume love must be *something* like that; otherwise, why would people keep doing it?" (Bowman 211). Rumi's

understanding of love is consistent with Illouz's assertion of what the culture of love denotes: finding a person that causes long-lasting and exciting feelings and being able to extend the experience of love throughout one's life. Rumi, however, finds herself having a different perspective regarding love in stating:

I don't know what I'm looking for in love. I don't even think I'm looking for love at all. I don't see people and feel that rush of excitement Lea always described when she had a crush- the kind of excitement that leads to touching and kissing and whatever else. I just see people that might make good friends, and I've always been okay with that. (Bowman 211)

Furthermore, modernity and the culture of consumption in the institutionalization of the culture of romance are present in the novel. To reiterate, Illouz states that consumer culture caters to deeply rooted emotions for the promotion of goods. For instance, in *Summer Bird Blue*, Rumi is portrayed to have thoughts regarding consumer culture and love. For instance, Rumi believes that Valentine's day is "a giant marketing scam" and that she is "not the kind of person who falls for cheesy cards and bargain chocolate boxes" (Bowman 22). It is clear that Rumi's asexual and aromantic identity results in her possessing a different perception of social norms and cultural practices regarding love and romance. Therefore, *Summer Bird Blue* depicts asexuality to allow the individual in question to possess a different perception of social norms and cultural practices regarding love and romance.

Sexual Normativity and *Summer Bird Blue*

Instances of sexual normativity that are present in the novel and the insights gathered from the culture of sexual normativity will be employed in further analysis of *Summer Bird Blue*. After Rumi's and Kai's disastrous date due to their kiss, Rumi confides in her neighbour Mr.

Watanabe, a native Hawaiian with a heavy Hawaiian accent, and seeks his advice. However, his advice proves to be unhelpful as it was sexual normative:

When I keep staring at him with iron eyes, he sighs. “I t’ink if you like dis boy da same way he like you, you would like kissing him, too”

I feel my heart sink. “But I don’t think I like kissing anyone. I mean, it’s possible to like someone and *not* kiss, right?” (Bowman 270)

The purpose of this interaction cements the differences between the two regarding sexuality. In the novel, Mr. Watanabe is implied to be heterosexual as he is a widow with both a late wife and son. Therefore, Mr. Watanabe likely experienced romantic attraction and intimate contact to go hand in hand. He does not seem to be aware of asexual tendencies and behaviour whereby intimate contact such as kissing is not preferred or wanted. He thus concludes that Rumi does not like Kai the way he likes her. It seems evident that Rumi’s lack of intimate desire is at odds with Mr. Watanabe’s sexual normative notion that having affection for an individual constitutes enjoying the act of kissing. Rumi immediately finds herself disagreeing with his conclusion and pushes back on it, exploring her sexuality and feelings on the matter.

In addition, when Kai and Rumi find themselves saying goodbye, Rumi decides to sing to Kai the finished song, “Summer Bird Blue”. Kai then remarks, “I pictured the serenading. I thought there’d be moonlight. You’d be sitting in front of your window. I’d be leaning out of mine. And maybe there’d have been kissing at some point” (Bowman 365). Kai, like Mr. Watanabe, is implied in the novel to be heterosexual as he stated he “had the same girlfriend fo’ a long time in highschool” (Bowman 250). Like Mr. Watanabe, Kai posits his heterosexual conceptions of behaviour towards Rumi in the event she serenaded him. Rumi, as she did with Mr. Watanabe, pushes back and asks, “you have a couple of minutes to spare?

Kissing and moonlight not included” (Bowman 365). Once again, Rumi fails to conform to sexual normative actions and codes of behaviour.

Therefore, *Summer Bird Blue* depicts asexuality and asexual desires as unrecognizable amongst sexual normative notions and actions. The implications of *Summer Bird Blue*’s aforementioned depiction confirm how asexuality overall is posited in a sexual normative culture. For instance, as determined by this thesis earlier, asexuality is regarded to be a disease and psychoneurotic and is simultaneously disregarded in terms of the social and emotional satisfaction gained solely from familial and platonic relationships. Such regards primarily stem from deviance to purported norms as a result of sexual normativity. Due to Rumi’s asexuality being deviant to the sexual norms and conceptions held by individuals such as Mr. Watanabe and Kai, her asexuality goes unrecognized by standards such as theirs.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, to answer the research question “how does *Summer Bird Blue* depict asexuality?” understanding how asexuality is posited in a sexual normative culture is imperative. Upon reviewing Sigmund Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, asexuality is posited within a sexual normative culture as hysterical, a result of disease and psychoneurotic and resulting from repression within puberty. The relevance of Freud perpetuating sexual normativity to today’s society is evident in examples from contemporary media whereby his theories are confirmed by “Better-Half” and contradicted by *The Bone People* and *Summer Bird Blue*.

The themes of asexuality within the novel are not at the forefront, but rather a facet of Rumi’s exploration of her own identity through her grief. Hence, the author of *Summer Bird Blue* deals with questions about sexuality by having the protagonist, Rumi, exploring her sexuality through her growth and journey in navigating her sister’s death. Rumi’s grief and her questions about sexuality are intertwined closely throughout the novel and demonstrate how when learning how to overcome grief, she also learns to understand herself as a person and her sexuality. Rumi also finds herself questioning her sexuality based on the social behaviours of her peers but learns that questions and confusion is a normal aspect of understanding identity. Although questions about identity and subsequent resolution are common tropes in LGBTQIA+ novels, *Summer Bird Blue* is unique in exploring asexuality in particular as asexuality in literature is limited and underrepresented. Furthermore, unlike other LGBTQIA+ media which encompasses sexuality as its main theme, *Summer Bird Blue*’s depiction of asexuality and the protagonist’s exploration of it as a device in aiding their mourning process offers a different perspective into how exploring one’s sexuality can facilitate growth and development when navigating circumstances such as grief as sexuality is not typically a theme in the process of mourning.

Lastly, it is possible to further understand how asexuality is depicted in *Summer Bird Blue* by observing the notions purported by sexuality studies and sexual normativity's presence in the novel. As a result of Rumi's position and sentiments as asexual, *Summer Bird Blue* depicts asexuality to consist of indifference to sex, appreciation for an individual's aesthetic appearance and satisfaction in other non-sexual or non-romantic relationships. It is represented in how Rumi feels indifferent when it comes to crushes and how she finds importance in her relationship with family, friends and music. Furthermore, asexuality is depicted to be a state in which the individual's asexuality is innate and natural via Rumi feeling a level of security in her lack of sexual and romantic attraction. In addition, the social forces dictating which desires and acts are deemed the basis of identities present in *Summer Bird Blue* depicts asexuality deviate from the basis of identities purported by social forces. Also, *Summer Bird Blue* depicts asexuality to be contrary to behaviours such as kissing purported by social norms. For instance, Rumi, as an asexual, clearly lacks such a desire for kissing which is highly contrary to the social norm of wanting to engage in kissing. However, the asexual lack of interest in such activities is not rendered unnatural and foreign as Rumi recognizes that she does not possess any deficiencies in how she feels. With the presence of the culture of romantic love in the novel, *Summer Bird Blue* depicts aromanticism, alongside asexuality, to allow the individual in question to possess a different perception of social norms and cultural practices regarding love and romance. Lastly, instances of sexual normativity in the novel resulted in *Summer Bird Blue* depicting asexuality and asexual desires as unrecognizable amongst sexual normative notions and actions due to Rumi's asexuality being deviant to the sexual norms held by individuals such as Mr. Watanabe and Kai.

Ultimately, this thesis contributes to the limited pool of research surrounding asexuality whilst treating it as a sexual orientation, rather than a cause for medical alarm or

abnormality. Instead, the complexities of experiencing sexual and romantic attraction, or lack thereof with asexuals, in understanding one's identity are made apparent in this thesis. This thesis also disproves sexual and romantic attraction as normative but rather opens the possibilities of other identifications and desires- such as the lack of sexual and romantic attraction whilst still gaining satisfaction from fulfilling emotion and familial relationships. It thus changes the dynamics of what behaviours and desires are declared normal or abnormal by demonstrating media representations of satisfied individuals, such as Kerewin Holmes of *The Bone People* and Rumi Seto of *Summer Bird Blue*, who do not conform to sexual normative standards or lack any deficiency in how they identify or express their desires. Henceforth, this thesis hopes to introduce more research upon the representation of asexuality via emphasizing social discourse and de-pathologization of asexuality but rather regarding sexual orientation and identification within academic research and discourse.

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