

Racism and Colonialism in the Concept of “Polyamory”: Focusing on the Exclusion of Polygamy in the Monogamous System

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“Polyamory,” meaning “plural love,” is a term coined in the 1990s in the US and is known to refer to the practice of having consensual sexual or romantic relationships with two or more people at the same time. This paper aims to critically evaluate the concept of “polyamory” from racism and colonialism, considering the contrasting situation where polygamy, including polygyny and polyandry, is marginalized, even though polyamory is gaining increasing support in the US. Specifically, it focuses on the “ethical” aspects of polyamory, arguing from the historical context that the so-called universal moral values of respect for individual agency and freedom are mobilized to ensure the superiority of monogamy, which has racialized and marginalized polygamy, and that polyamory, or “ethical” non-monogamy, has been constructed in a way that does not threaten the structural privileges of monogamy.

Firstly, Chapter 1 suggests polyamory has its origins in sexual liberation in the 60s that opposed the monogamy system, was later reconstructed as “ethical” non-monogamy in the wake of the conservative backlash in the 80s, and then, gained popularity in the US. Here, polyamory is presented as a “free” love and sexual practice that respects all parties involved and is not bound by the monogamous institution of marriage. However, the concept of polyamory has conservative and exclusive aspects: the “ethicality” of polyamory is ensured by incorporating conservative views of the family, such as commitment to the relationship and the stability of the relationship, and polyamory is defined in a way that distinguishes it from other non-monogamous practices such as cheating, swinging and polygamy.

Chapter 2 focuses on the tendency of polyamory communities to be reluctant to legal inclusion, even though they are already legally marginalized, due to their emphasis on individual freedom in the private sphere. It is argued that this aversion to legal recognition stems from an unwillingness to be incorporated into traditional monogamous marriages, and that they do not intend to dismantle privileged monogamy itself.

In the following Chapter 3, the concept of polyamory is critically analyzed that it panders colonialism, racism, and Western centrism of monogamy, by reviewing the situation where polyamory is becoming popular in the US, while polygamy is still criminalized across the country. Furthermore, the “freedom” of individual choice in the private sphere, which ensures the ethicality of polyamory, is operationalized in homonational and mononormative discourses, and thus it implies polyamory contributes to the reproduction of a heteronormative and mononormative society. The “freedom” of individual choice emphasized here is problematic because it is inseparable from individual positionality and privilege, yet is presented in a way that ignores these differences. In light of above discussion, Chapter 4 examined the debate over the “ethicality” of romantic/sexual representation in the drama *Conversations With Friends*.

In overall, this study clarifies that the ethical non-monogamy practice of “polyamory” dehistoricizes and presupposes the monogamy system that was privileged and constructed in the modern West, based on racism, colonialism and heterosexist norms; then polyamory claims its legitimacy on the basis of the “ethics” maintained under that monogamy system. Although, it should be noted that this study is mainly concerned with situations in the US, and polyamory activism in Japan is considered to be of a different aspect.