

# Boys' Love Romance in the Realm of Popular Literature: Genre, Motif, and the Future of Romance

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**Abstract.** Boys' love romance is popular literary sub-genre that has developed in the past two decades. This popular work became globally accepted and enjoyed due to its successful publication and reproduction into various forms of projection such as films and TV series. BL romance is a new trend in popular literature. Its existence cannot be separated from various acceptance and appreciation from the various levels of readers and researchers. The paper discusses the position of boys' love romance in the popular literary sphere. As a new sub-genre in popular literature, this work has its own structure in terms of conveying messages and issues. The working paper framed the readings of this genre based on its mode of narration which is hereinafter referred to as the motif. The motif in the present paper was adopted from Bal's (1997) suggestion of focalization which encompasses on the focus of the narration. With respect to Bal's suggestion, the position of the character as well as the narrator of the story also takes control to the running of the plot, which of course gives impact to the interplay between the theme, the subject matter and the character(s) of the story. The relationship between the pattern of narrative mode and the theme of the story enables this sub-genre to bring an interesting phenomenon in the development of popular literature. As a literary work, this genre certainly carries its own mission for its readers and the future development of literary and cultural studies

**Keywords:** BLR; sub-genre; motif; popular literature

## 1 Introduction

Boys lover romance (BLR) was first appeared in manga history in Japan under the name of 'yaoi'. 'Yaoi' refers to a friendship, and is closer to romance, between two teenage boys in a particular culture. *Manga* is enjoyed and read by both young Japanese boys and girls. Therefore, *manga* can be considered as young adult literature (Zsila & Demetrovics, 2017). Historically, BLR is a popular work written by many female writers. Thus, BLR targets female readers. This is based on the assumption that this literary work was written to fulfil the "wishful thinking" of straight women how to channel their hidden desires for men.

The term BLR is a development of pre-existing terminology such as gay novels, gay fiction, gay popular novels, and gay love stories. The term boys' love then also appeared along with the many studies on this genre. This paper uses the term BLR with several considerations. One of them is that this literary work is a romance. Because this romance is carried out by male characters, the term BLR is considered more appropriate to describe this genre.

As young people's literature that presents the romantic friendship of two boys with stereotypes that become idols for young people, especially girls, this romantic relationship becomes an attraction. The romantic relationship is carried out by two young boys who are dashing, handsome, macho, metrosexual, adventurous, and are very concerned about physical appearances (Zsila & Demetrovics, 2017). Therefore, the representation of the characters is favoured by readers, especially women. However, the representation of the close relationship of the characters leads to the relationship of sensuality and sexuality among men.

Since it first appeared in the world of literature, the BLR has become an interesting phenomenon. Literary works in this genre show the romantic problems of love between men. Bayard Taylor's *Joseph and His Friend* (1870), Henry James' *Roderick Hudson* (1876), even E.M. Foster's *Maurice* (1913) can be categorized as BLR. Phenomenal contemporary works that have been translated into films such as "Brokeback Mountain" (1997) short story and *Call Me by Your Name* (2007) can also be put into BLR. Subsequently, following the success of "Brokeback Mountain" (1997) and *Call Me by Your Name* (2007), similar works have colored the popular literature of this genre and have gained much success.

As a relatively new sub-genre, the history of the emergence of BLR is associated with the existence of manga, anime, or fan works that feature same-sex romance by targeting the female reader (Zsila & Demetrovics, 2017). That is actually the beginning of the emergence and existence of "yaoi" in the forms of anime and manga in Japan. At the beginning, this same-sex romance was only limited to the closeness of two men, such as the brotherhood of men. However, in recent development shows that this romance involves sexual activities by displaying the dichotomous side of "top" and "bottom". The "top" will dominate the "bottom" in terms of sexual intercourse.

Recently, "yaoi" is intertwined with BLR in the use of the term (Zsila & Demetrovics, 2017), and it has not been disputed yet by some researchers such as emotional attachment (Mizoguchi 2008); both characters do not realize that they are actually homosexual (Galbraith 2011); McLelland and Welker (2017); Welker (2015), and Mizoguchi (2008). Pagliassotti (2008a) disapproved that BLR is a reflection of the reality of Japanese society; and Saitō (2007) also previously believed that BLR is not a representation of the society, but is a form of collective fantasies of Japanese women in the online world.

McLelland and Yoo (2007) found that homosexuality in Japan is deeply rooted in Japanese culture. This tradition is a part of the fantasy of Japanese women's sexuality. Pflugfelder (1997) found that Japanese male homosexuality is influenced by strong traditional roots because it is related to the physical education of Japanese youth, namely "shudo", where in the physical exercise there is an emotional and personal bond between "shudo" which eventually leads to homosexual behavior (Leupp 1999). In fact, this homosexual behavior was prohibited when the emergence of European colonizers in Japan (McLelland and Welker 2015). From the above fact, it can be concluded that Japanese society is more tolerant of homosexual behavior than those of Westerners (McLelland and Yoo, 2007; (Zsila & Demetrovics, 2017)). However, they are still considered as minority groups (McLelland and Welker 2015; (Zsila & Demetrovics, 2017)). Therefore they often get humiliated and stigmatized (Herek 2009; Zsila & Demetrovics, 2017).

As has been stated earlier, BLR first appeared in the 1990s by displaying male-to-male romance intended for female readers (female gaze). But in its progress, BLR has become a separate sub-genre which is intended for general readers with the aim of introducing queer life of human love. And this is also a means of propaganda of the gay community to introduce themselves (Sugiura, 2006). The development of Japan's industry and economy is the main reason for the emergence of this sub-genre (Zsila & Demetrovics, 2017).

Generally speaking, the urge to advance the economy and the lifestyle demands of Japanese society became a necessity to enjoy the charm of romance. At that time, Japanese women did not want to get married because they wanted to work and be the breadwinner of the family. They do not want to be burdened with domestic chores such as taking care of family and having children. "Yaoi" entered a new chapter in the Japanese literary industry and became BLR for the commercial and entertainment for all "yaoi dōjinshi" (Welker, 2006; Zsila & Demetrovics, 2017).

BLR is the same as those of other sub-genres of romance such as contemporary romance, fantasy romance, futuristic romance, historical romance, paranormal romance, suspense romance, time travel, spiritual, science fiction, apocalyptic, artificial intelligence, colonization, cyberpunk, dying earth, dystopia, virtual reality, and many others. However, the BLR sub-genre is a form of utopia to be recognized and accepted as a part of the society. Of course, this issue stems from the patriarchal world which develops the notion of heteronormativity to impose a dichotomous binary opposition toward gender. BLR thus tries to deconstruct the heteronormativity.

Several countries in the world have freed and legalized this kind of romance into their materialized and regulated law. Therefore, same-sex marriage couple also gets the same rights as those of heterosexual couples. Some other countries still preserve a conservative attitude not to accept this type of romance and therefore the voices in favour of this love relationship will continue to roll in the next few decades.

## **2 Methodology**

This working paper describes several proposed issues related to the existence of BLR in popular literature. The discussion in the paper did not analyse BLR genre but as a documentation study of the theoretical peculiarities that developed from the many studies of it. The topics discussed the BLR in the scope of popular literature and as a new sub-genre. The narrative form of the BLR story is also discussed by using a special motif developed from Bal's opinion (1997) on focalization.

The term focalization refers to the structure or structure that can be framed from a narrative perspective. The term focalization was first introduced by Gerard Genette (1980). The term focalization is like the optics in a camera. It catches the object of the reflection of light that is emitted by a point. This term can be intertwined with "*point of view*". However, focalization is more meaningful when an object is captured by the camera's focus to be developed into an object of wider meaning. Genette's focalization is more concerned with who is watching than who is speaking. Thus, it can be concluded that Genette's focalization can explain a formula in the story because the object being discussed is clearer since it is relied on the voice of the main character.

Focalization aims to identify the potential modes of the interplay of the characters; who sees and who is being seen (Miller, 2005). To put that in another way, which eye is used to focus on the story narrated to the reader at one time is the most crucial point at focalization. Genette classifies visual perspectives in terms of spatial distance, and along the filtering of knowledge from subjective consciousness (Miller, 2005). Genette offers three basic types of focalization typology, namely internal focalization (knowing as much as the character), external focalization (following a character from the outside and knowing less than it), and zero focalization (knowing more than the character) (Miller, 2005).

Bal (1997), meanwhile, redefined Genette's view of focalization. Bal's concept of focalization is more culturally nuanced than that of Genette's and therefore more interdisciplinary and can be applied to a wide variety of texts in cultural studies including literature and film (Miller, 2005). Bal's focalization is fluid and it goes beyond the structuralists' typology and, more precisely, does not only dwell on the issue of dichotomy (Miller, 2005). Therefore, Bal's focalization (1997) becomes more appropriate because in describing BLR problems, Bal's focalization touches more on the characteristics of problems and social phenomena that occur in the flow of BLR narratives.

Focalization can also be interpreted as a '*center of consciousness*' (Miller, 2005). Therefore, in a narrative, that awareness is built by words that are affiliated with a stream of consciousness. It leads to a central point of discourse. If the narrative spins like a wind with no clear purpose, then actually the discourse that is built by the rotation of consciousness will stop at a single point, namely the discursive point. Unlike the natural sciences, the narrative structure is more like a branching with many possible explanations. Because it is related to language, therefore narratology is a logical science of thinking that allows social-contextual reading (Miller, 2005). Thus heuristic reading is more appropriate in dealing with the pattern of narrative structure, although in reality the logic of narratology resembles an exact science. The readings carried out by narratologists finally emphasize the focus aspect of storytelling and the purpose of the narrative.

### **3 Findings and Discussion**

#### **3.1. BLR's Motif**

In line with the above arguments, BLR combines various storytelling modes, ranging from traditional romance (eg forbidden love due to family factors and social status), and genre-specific (eg "rape as an expression of love") narratives that reflect the uniqueness of the narrative. , although the impression is quite complicated, resembling heterosexual romance, with a special recognition that the characters are men (Mizoguchi 2003, 56). In many stories, BLR is still struggling with the problem of love at first sight. However, the things that follow the course of the plot find many difficulties due to gender equality issues, for example, the social background of the people who have not accepted the story of same-sex love, openness to family and close friends, or past trauma, which dominates the narrative. Meanwhile, Madill's (2011) study found various modes of storytelling such as anxiety in having same-sex relationships, prolonged illness and then deciding not to continue heterosexual relationships, rape, incest, and other dramatic themes that are often found in the BLR sub-genre. .

The psychological trauma experienced by male characters makes the characters have decided to have a romantic relationship of the same kind. Even, Madill (2011) found that in their visual representations, *manga*, fan art and others clearly display changes in the appearance of the male physical characters, both aesthetically and idealistically. The character's perspective on the ideal physique is also a topic of discussion in BLR (Bollmann, 2010). This relates to the opinion that same-sex relationships between men are more concerned with physical appearance, age, and maturity. McLelland and Welker (2015) meanwhile argue that in many stories, BLR portrays "*bishōnen*" characters, namely beautiful male characters who have different physical characteristics than usual. It can be concluded that the opinion regarding BLR is related to "*yaoi*" can be justified.

Same-sex couple in BLR features two men consisting of a masculine character commonly called "*seme*", and a feminine submissive partner which is usually called "*uke*" (Bauwens-Sugimoto 2011). Meanwhile, Mizoguchi (2008) divides several common motifs of BLR, (1) rape as a representation of excessive love, (2) maintaining heterosexual identity when the protagonist engages in homosexual activities, (3) the role of "*seme-uke*" based on physical appearance. characters, (4) a fixed role (orientation) that cannot be changed anymore, and (5) sexual relations that always involve anal sex.

Meanwhile, Kamm (2013) proposed a different view from that of Mizoguchi's (2008). He argues that a number of BLR narratives do not involve the latter two motives, namely the permanent role as a "*seme-uke*" and also anal sex. Kamm argues that this role in terms of sexual relations can go interchangeably, aka *seme* can be *uke* and or *uke* can become *seme* in some cases if he were met with new male characters. And the depth of a relationship can be described through different forms of sexual interaction. Fujimoto (2007) notes that the closeness, the emotions of the characters, the unconditional love between the characters justify the characteristics of the relationship. The "*uke*" is usually the victim of rape by "*seme*" or by a third person. This person can be a "*seme*'s" friend. And still according to Mizoguchi (2008), rape incident is actually a serious problem in the realm of heterosexual relationships. However, in love relationship between men, rape has got a positive response and it is considered as a beginning to enter the world of homosexual love (initiation).

Hagio (2005) meanwhile provides an argument that rape is an aesthetic illustration of the journey of a homosexual love affair. This can be a kind of affirmation of how a character accepts himself as a homosexual. Still in Hagio's (2005) understanding, "*uke*" initially experienced "a momentary trauma" after he was raped by "*seme*". But then "*uke*" actually develops cooperative feelings by accepting "*seme*" as someone who has given him an unforgettable experience in homosexual relation. However, Hagio (2005) did not specify whether this acceptance was a form of recognition or what "*uke*" actually wanted in his involvement in this kind of relationship. Mizoguchi (2008) and Orbaugh (2010) also approve this. The experience of rape was the beginning of "*uke*" entering the world of homosexuality and finally he found his identity. At the same time "*seme*" provides support for "*uke*" and is committed to having same-sex relationships.

Gibbs (2012) explained that the top's journey to be gay has some connections with his past experiences. Traumatic childhood events and psychological burdens in the past have led him to become a same-sex lover, or rather "*seme*" will undergo a dual role as a bisexual. "*Seme*" will pretend to be still in a relationship with a woman to trick the environment and his

family (Gibbs 2012, 186). The moral, financial and comfort support cause these same-sex couples live their lives like a close siblings (Fujimoto 2007; Mizoguchi, 2000; Mizoguchi, 2010). Often they refuse to be labeled as "gay" because they are still trying to develop their "self denial" of their own identity.

From the reading process of BLR, thus, the main motifs of BLR can be described as follows: (1) the first encounter of the two characters due to a coincidental situation, (2) the similarity of fate brought them together and shared the same experience, (3) feelings of attraction to each other, but does not want to admit it, (4) there is a physical contact that leads to sexual intercourse, (5) still maintains a heterosexual relationship with the opposite sex but does not feel comfortable with the relationship, (6) rejection from the closest ones to the behavior that is considered deviant (homosexuality), (7) both characters try to convince to come out to their closest friends and family, and (8) both characters continue their relationship with various obstacles. The main focus of a woven relationship leads to the problem of common destinies and the need to understand and to be understood. The end of the narrative flow journey ends with the characters' desire to be recognized and accepted by those closest to them.

### **3.2. The Future of BLR and the Future of Romance**

Several studies on literature in the scope of homosexual romance relate it to views on traditional gender roles. Welker (2011); Fujimoto (2007b); Nagaike and Suganuma (2013) openly said that works in this genre intersect with the problem of gender discontentedness in society. It all culminates in the cruelty of the patriarchal world (Welker, 2011). Kamm (2013) meanwhile notes that the development of literature in this genre is a social response to gender inequality and unfair treatment toward gay people as minorities. Women will sympathize with homosexual behavior and therefore many BLR writers are usually female. Fujimoto (2004) has previously mentioned this in his research that homosexual couples described in BLR are represented as physically inappropriate characters in the heterosexual world. Welker (2011) reiterates that it is the result of unfair social treatment and also a patriarchal social hierarchical structure.

Fujimoto (2004) also argues that the homosexual male character in the story is a representation of a woman trapped in a male body. Therefore, female readers will identify themselves more reluctantly with the characters in the BLR than with the characters in different genres. Therefore, female readers, according to a study by Welker (2010), will be more empathetic to the problems of homosexual couples in the story and know what they really need in a homosexual romantic relationship. Chou's (2010) study relates it to the power system prevailing in society. Bollman's (2010) study links the problem of gender conflict which results in psychological anxiety in same-sex relationships, with the sexual identity dilemmas of the characters. Therefore, the male characters in the story tend to deny their sexual identity and continue to live their lives by pretending to be heterosexual. Welker (2011) concludes that the psychological conflicts and dilemmas experienced by homosexual characters in BLR are representations of the psychological condition of women in real life generally.

Several studies related to BLR have linked openness and understanding of same-sex love relationships in post-industrialized societies, both in western and eastern countries

(Pagliassotti 2008b). Pagliassotti (2008b) also admits that through of BLR people are more aware and open as well as accept the the queer romance. In line with Pagloassotti, Mizoguchi (2010) also underlines that the BLR literature will raise public awareness to accept homosexuality and that they are recognized as parts of the general public. However, not a few also reject the existence of this type of literature because of the vulgar themes in terms of deviant sexual behavior, as well as themes that represent underage homosexuality romances which will have an unfavorable psychological impact on society.

BLR is a response to the dominance of patriarchy in gender related relationships in society. Women can be said to be the most tolerant party in terms of gender relation and inequality because women are the submissive party in a heteronormative culture. This is the reason why women adore BLR because they are more sympathetic to same-sex relationship. This argument is based on several psychological factors and empathy. BLR is a form of female gaze for women where they can enjoy the object of gaze of men. The characters of men have the expected physical appearance but they have the softness which is desired by women. Further studies related to this opinion could be analyzing this idea by using psychology and the reader response method of analysis to have more precisely underlined conclusion.

#### **4 Conclusion**

From the explanation above, it can be concluded that BLR is a sub-genre of romance which has the same position as those of other sub-genres in romance such as science fiction, spiritual fiction, supernatural fiction, time travel romance and others. Adopting Bal's (1997) view of "focalisation" which is the development of Genette's (1983) focalization, BLR represents the narrative of same-sex love (men and men) in their position in society as part of the journey of human love stories. What is focused in the narrative is the worldview of the characters, which in this case is the embodiment of the author's worldview regarding the romantic relationship between men and men. With respect to Bal's suggestion (1997), the author of BLR also gave his voice and views on the rolling problems in storytelling.

How the joys and sorrows of living a same sex love life in a patriarchal world become the main object of the narrative. The central character experiences oppression, harassment, rejection, and also physical violence, in which they are forms of expression of anger that is restrained because of the absence of a channel to voice aspirations. This is one form of manifestation of the existence of this sub-genre. In the midst of the threat of discomfort in a patriarchal-heteronormative social life, the BLR sub-genre has become a vehicle for the struggle of LGBTQ people in voicing their aspirations to realize a new world order that is attached to political nuances and economic interests.

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