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Heterofatalism – a false cure for heteronormativity

Bachelor's thesis in philosophy

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Introduction

Some of the big questions of this particular historical moment are about what the terms “male” and “female” mean, what does “gender” mean and is it any different from “sex”? At the time of writing this thesis, Donald J. Trump has been the president of the United States of America for his second term for around 4 months. Shortly after taking office, he issued executive orders, signing an order that recognizes only two sexes – male and female – that cannot be changed. He is also ending the DEI (culture, gender and diversity, equality and inclusion) programmes (Arkin, Alcindor, Lavietes 2025). The US is not the only one taking part in fighting against what a lot of conservatives have started to call “gender ideology” – this has become a talking point of many politicians in Europe, North America and beyond. On the 16th of April 2025, the United Kingdom’s supreme court ruled that the legal definition of a woman is based on biological sex – meaning the law states that there are only two genders and that they are biological (Carrel 2025).

This particular time is special in the ways people are influenced by the internet more than ever before. With this comes the growing appeal of far-right conservative parties and influencers, popularity of the “manosphere” — the Tate brothers, Joe Rogan, Jordan Peterson, trad wives and many more. This new internet culture is a backlash to LGBTQAI+ community, but the people following this culture see themselves most of all as protectors of traditional values and fighters against the “gender ideology”.

Positions on gender, sex and sexuality are extremely pressing, playing a role even in the pending conclave on the new pope. But the political and religious implications also spill over to the private sphere – how our culture is created and revolutionised; how heterosexual culture specifically is changing. This political, religious and social background is why the topic of this thesis is special at this time.

This BA thesis focuses on the problems created by heteronormativity, how heterofatalism tries to be its solution and how it ultimately fails to solve these problems. As we see in this thesis, many of the problems that come with heteronormativity are created because there is a lot of disagreement on the question of whether gender is binary or not and consequently how different genders should act.

This thesis consists of three chapters: the first one exploring the larger problems created by heteronormativity; the second one defining and exploring heterofatalism and its potential as a

solution to heteronormativity; and in the third chapter I will be criticising heterofatalism and showing why it does not work as a solution.

One key concept to note before we can dive into any topic related to feminist philosophy is patriarchy. It literally means a “hypothetical social system in which the father or a male elder has absolute authority over the family group” (Britannica, patriarchy 2025), in modern times however, it is an understanding of how our social world and its systems operate, mainly how power relations benefit men and how gender inequality has been rooted in our system.

Another key concept that is enforced by patriarchy and heteronormativity is gender norms. I will be defining “heteronormativity” itself in more detail in chapter one, but it generally means how heterosexuality has been naturalised and favored in our society.

Gender norms or gender roles are “culturally and socially determined set of expected behaviors, attitudes, and characteristics based on concepts of masculinity and femininity” (Britannica, patriarchy 2025). They are expectations, like women are supposed to take care of children and men are supposed to provide for their families, but also assumptions, such as men are more logical and women more affectionate. These ideas have also been philosophically legitimized throughout history dating back to ancient philosophy, when Aristotle for example found women to be inferior to men (Huber 2015), but these ideas continued on with later philosophers, Kant in the enlightenment era being a strong example of this (Mikkola 2011). Gender norms can be extremely harmful, just like assuming traits based on race or class are. They have led to women being paid less in the workforce, to mandatory military service for men, but not for women, and they can also lead to more serious harms like violence. This is why gender norms that are constituted by the patriarchal system and heteronormativity, are a big part of feminist discourse.

To explain the problems of heteronormativism I will be taking a closer look at a few authors’ work on the subject, but mainly Adrienne Rich and Judith Butler. I will be looking at these two authors in particular, because while they give good examples of the problems created by heteronormativism and how it hurts mainly women, the approaches and reasoning of the authors’ as to how we could change the system and make the world better are very different from each other. From these authors’ works, I will be concluding that the main problems created by heteronormativism are that it 1) naturalizes heterosexuality; 2) enforces gender roles; 3) creates heterosexism, and; 4) makes heterosexuality compulsory.

In the second chapter I will be looking at the concept of heterofatalism as it was coined by Asa Seresin and how the more radical form of the concept may be used to try to fight against heteronormativity and the harmful gender norms that come with it. The term “heterofatalism” generally means a feeling of embarrassment towards someone’s own heterosexuality, but I will be explaining the concept in greater detail in chapter two.

In the last chapter, I will be taking into consideration two arguments against heterofatalism as a solution. I argue that heterofatalism is not a good solution for heteronormativity and should not be used as one. One of the arguments will be a counter argument based on Butler, arguing that confining a person to a particular identity does not help with defying the heteronormative world, so if we blame men and create the idea of a “universal man”, we are actually supporting the same framework that is oppressing women in the first place. The second argument will be based on the question of “does heterofatalism even help women?” and I will be arguing that it does not, because in its core, heterofatalism is just a negative emotion towards someone’s own sexuality and the precautionary effect that could be its only redeeming quality does not work in practice.

Chapter 1: A framework for the discussion of heteronormativity

Heteronormativity as a concept has been used by many feminist thinkers, especially lesbian and queer feminists, to show the ways in which our society's preference for heterosexuality has played a part in the patriarchy and has thus impacted some subjects (but mainly women, because they are the most affected by the patriarchy) negatively.

In this chapter I will be taking a look at how different feminist authors have thought about heteronormativism, but it is important to firstly look into what the historical context in which they were writing was.

Feminist authors have used many different concepts to refer to heteronormativity, like the heterosexual matrix, heterosexism, heterosexual contract and compulsory heterosexuality; all of which I will be defining in this chapter. As heteronormativity has many definitions, in this thesis I will be referring to it as heteronormativity, because it is used as an umbrella term to mean the larger societal issues and captures other terms in it as well.

When feminist and/or queer thinkers say that our society is "heteronormative", they mean that heterosexuality in our society has been naturalised and favored. In a heteronormative world, heterosexuality is seen as natural and by extension, other identities that do not conform to heterosexuality, become seen as not normal or unnatural. A heteronormative society expects its subjects to comply with heterosexist norms – for example, women are expected to marry men, carry their children and by extension accept traditional gender roles. This is why heteronormativity and heterosexism are so important to feminist thinkers.

The prejudice that comes from heteronormativism, the belief that non-heterosexual identities are somehow unnatural, has been called heterosexism – a set of biases and discrimination in favor of heterosexuality.

As many authors argue against the "naturalisation" of heterosexuality, I will define what it means and why it is something we should reject, at least according to social constructivists. The assumption here is that gender is purely socially and ideologically constructed. The process of naturalization of heterosexuality is the process in which heterosexuality has become to be seen as natural, inevitable, normal and universal. Heterosexuality in this way becomes not just an attribute of someone's personality or just a way in which we show sexuality – it is a trait that everybody should have, it's biologically essential. I will show how

Rich argues for this in chapter 1.1, but an important thing to note here is that this is precisely what the UK ruling and US executive order try to enforce by ruling that there are only two genders. The problem of naturalisation is that heterosexuality (like any other sexuality or gender) is constructed socially and the way in which we should show sexuality entirely depends on the norms and rules of our society. In this chapter, but especially with Adrienne Rich and Judith Butler, we come to see how even though heterosexuality is the norm, it is socially enforced, not a biological reality.

Before diving into specific authors, I will provide some background about the historical “waves” of feminism, each bringing a different emphasis or goal. While the first wave of feminism, which took place in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, was mainly focused on the practical aspects, like voting rights for women and expanding opportunities for women overall, the later waves started to deal more with deconstruction and re-thinking, like questions about what a woman even is or what is their purpose (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2018). One of the first to ask the question of “what is a woman?”, was Simone de Beauvoir, who wrote her works, which influenced the later waves, mainly in the 1940’s and 50’s. Even though the term “heteronormativity” wasn’t in the feminist vocabulary yet, we can see that de Beauvoir already wrote about the ways in which heterosexual expectations influence the creation of the “myth of women”. The second wave, which came about in the 1960’s and 70’s, was influenced by the civil rights movement, being influenced by principles like equality and justice, and by historic events like the Vietnam war. This is where we start to see more opposition towards what is expected of women by heterosexual culture – mainly motherhood (Britannica, feminism 2025). In the 80’s, by the end of the second wave and before the beginning of the third one, feminist thinkers like Adrienne Rich and Monique Wittig started to think about what is a woman, just like de Beauvoir before them. While Wittig was more interested in how people become women by influence of male-dominated society and Rich critiques the way in which women are forced into heterosexuality, just like de Beauvoir, they both already dealt with heteronormativity, even though the term was not yet created. By the time third-wave feminism rolled around in the 90’s, feminists started thinking more deeply about intersectionality and the identities and problems that the first and second wave failed to include (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2018). This is the context in which Judith Butler starts their goal of deconstruction and asking the question of “what is a woman?” once again, this time providing a more ambiguous definition and a more inclusive one. Many claim that we are currently experiencing a fourth wave of feminism,

which started around 2012 with the emphasis on sexual harassment, some even claiming that we are already at the fifth wave (Britannica, feminism 2025), but as I do not see clear definitions for this wave yet and modern culture seems to still be influenced by the questions of the first three waves of feminism, I will take a look at the authors that mainly worked in these times.

The concept of heteronormativity has its roots in queer theory, where Michel Foucault and Judith Butler are considered as forerunners. Both of their works illuminate the norms that construct and regulate identities, which in turn make the basis for what contemporary heteronormativity is.

The early papers dealing with heteronormativity did not always call it that – they dealt with the challenges that queer people faced, but didn't explicitly apply queer theory to their research (Regan; Meyer 2021). As mentioned before, a wider criticism of heteronormativism can be seen from early on in feminist discourse, when authors criticized heterosexuality without having the concept of heteronormativism to use. A great example would be the revolutionary work *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir (1949). In her work, she explores how men are seen as the universal subject and how our world is created around that belief – while men are the subjects, women are defined by them and become “the other” (de Beauvoir 1949: 26). Her work is important for a few reasons: firstly because even the title shows a historical stance, how women have been considered as the second sex — made from Adam's rib, etc. And secondly, a very famous quote in feminist literature comes from this book: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman (de Beauvoir 1949: 330). It is a statement about gender and its performativity, how it's not innate, but you can become a woman.

Our heterosexual culture, where women are always seen in relation to men, where woman is “the other”, creates what de Beauvoir calls “the myth of woman” – a set of (often idealised) attributes that society pushes on women: the mother, the virgin, the slut, etc (de Beauvoir 1949: 315-316). Women are expected to follow it, even though it is just a myth.

“There are different kinds of myths. This one, sublimating an immutable aspect of the human condition—that is, the “division” of humanity into two categories of individuals—is a static myth; it projects into a Platonic heaven a reality grasped through experience or conceptualized from experience; for fact, value, significance, notion, and empirical law, it substitutes a transcendent Idea, timeless, immutable, and necessary. This idea escapes all contention because it is situated beyond the given; it is

endowed with an absolute truth. Thus, to the dispersed, contingent, and multiple existence of women, mythic thinking opposes the Eternal Feminine, unique and fixed; if the definition given is contradicted by the behavior of real flesh-and-blood women, it is women who are wrong: it is said not that Femininity is an entity but that women are not feminine.” (de Beauvoir 1949: 315)

Like many (lesbian) feminists after her, de Beauvoir points out that homosexuality is one way for women to reconcile their autonomy and if nature is invoked, it could be said that all women are naturally homosexual (de Beauvoir 1949: 481). Even though de Beauvoir does not use the term “heteronormativity”, it is clear that her work references the problems created by it – mainly how women are defined by men and therefore oppressed.

While Foucault and Butler are concerned with the ways in which power regulates identities and how heterosexuality as an institution can force people into certain identity groups, there are feminist authors who are specifically concerned with the ways in which heteronormativity regulates women. One of such is Monique Wittig with her famous essay “One is not born a woman”, which takes a lesbian feminist approach in arguing against what Adrienne Rich would call “compulsory heterosexuality” and Wittig herself calls the “heterosexual contract” – accepting the idea that men should naturally be in charge of women in society (Wittig 1980: 32). Compulsory heterosexuality, the term that Rich uses, is a result of heteronormativity, but more specifically it means the way in which heterosexuality becomes obligatory in a heteronormative world – our society forces people into heterosexuality.

Wittig argues that the refusal to become (or remain) heterosexual means to refuse to be a man or a woman and this is where her famous claim that a lesbian is not a woman comes from. It goes beyond just refusing the role of “woman”, but it also means the refusal of the political, economical and ideological power of men (Wittig 2013: 248). Wittig goes against strictly defined genders, just like Butler and Foucault do, arguing that finding biological reasons for men and women’s differences is an inherently heterosexual approach and could never constitute a lesbian feminist’s approach (Wittig 2013: 246).

Wittig argues for abolishing gender, saying that you need to destroy the class of men to destroy the class of women, because there are no slaves without masters, and that there is no “woman” the myth, only “women” as a class.

“Our first task, it seems, is to always thoroughly dissociate “women” (the class within which we fight) and “woman”, the myth. For “woman” does not exist for us: it is only an imaginary formation while “women” is the product of a social relationship. /-/ “Woman” is not each one of us, but the political and ideological formation which negates “women” (the product of a relation of exploitation).” (Wittig 2013: 249).

For her, sexuality is a social institution of violence, because for what makes a woman, is a specific social relationship to a man (Wittig 2013: 250).

This overview touched on just some of the authors who have dealt with the problems created by heteronormativity, but in this thesis and chapter 1 I will be looking at two feminist authors that discuss heteronormativity more closely – Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* and Adrienne Rich in “Compulsory heterosexuality”. After briefly outlining both authors’ views, I will be putting the two into dialogue and seeing which of the authors solves the problem of heteronormativity better.

In this thesis I will be focusing on heterosexual women as they relate to heterofatalism, and although I do not have the room to go into more detail in this thesis, I am aware that a narrow definition may create some problems regarding intersectionality, etc (because people other than straight women also experience heterofatalism). Heteronormativism however is a broader term that specifically also targets non-heterosexual identities.

1.1 Adrienne Rich on compulsory heterosexuality

Adrienne Rich is a lesbian feminist who wants to bridge the gap between “lesbian” and “feminist”, and by that show us that lesbian erasure, that our heteronormative world is trying to do, is not only heterosexist, but also anti-feminist.

“It was written in part to challenge the erasure of lesbian existence from so much of scholarly feminist literature, an erasure which I felt (and feel) to be not just anti-lesbian, but anti-feminist in its consequences, and to distort the experience of heterosexual women as well. It was not written to widen divisions but to encourage heterosexual feminists to examine heterosexuality as a political institution which disempowers women—and to change it.” (Rich 1980: 11-12).

She does not engage with Wittig or de Beauvoir directly, but does criticize the way in which past feminist theorists have talked about or not even mentioned lesbians. By giving some

examples from literature she shows that the assumption that women are innately sexually oriented towards men is extremely common and that heterosexuality is more than just a preference – it is an institution.

“I have learned more from some of these books than from others, but on this I am clear: each one might have been more accurate, more powerful, more truly a force for change had the author dealt with lesbian existence as a reality and as a source of knowledge and power available to women, or with the institution of heterosexuality itself as a beachhead of male dominance. In none of them is the question ever raised as to whether, in a different context or other things being equal, women would *choose* heterosexual coupling and marriage; heterosexuality is presumed the “sexual preference” of “most women,” either implicitly or explicitly.” (Rich 1980: 13)

Because so many women have historically been in heterosexual relationships, a lot of authors have assumed that it’s just a part of human (or female) nature. In her essay, Rich however gives many factors to why women seem to “choose heterosexuality”. First of all, lesbianism has been illegal historically, women were given the death penalty or were “treated” medically for same-sex attraction, while later on, books, media and public life tried to stop lesbian identities from being shown. This is a reason why lesbianism was almost rendered invisible as an option for women (Rich 1980: 14, 17). Heterosexuality was also the smartest choice for survival because it promises security – women were historically dependent on their husbands, so marriage was the best option for economic stability, while unmarried women were attacked and ridiculed (Rich 1980: 15). These were the more “natural” forces that have convinced women that heterosexuality and marriage to men is inevitable, but there are also some very violent factors that have been used to deny women their sexuality, like clitorectomies (surgical removal, reduction, or partial removal of the clitoris) that were used so women can not feel sexual pleasure even with each other, which was convenient for men with multiple wives (Rich 1980: 20).

From all of these examples she concludes that heterosexuality, contrary to what we have been made to believe, is not natural or a “preference” for women, it is a result of patriarchal socialisation (Rich 1980: 16-17). Not only is heteronormativity a part of the patriarchy, but it creates and maintains male dominance. By denying women their sexualities (by making women dependent on men, erasing lesbianism as an option, etc), men enforce their power

over women (Rich 1980: 18). This is why, for Rich, heterosexuality is a political institution and it's inherently tied to male power.

1.2 Judith Butler on heteronormativity

While earlier feminist scholars like de Beauvoir did not have a name for this phenomenon, Rich uses the word “compulsory heterosexuality” to define what I call “heteronormativism” in this thesis. Butler uses another word – “heterosexual matrix”. As I mentioned before, I prefer to use heteronormativism, because it is an umbrella term that captures different authors’ perspectives on the topic – it captures the overall societal normalisation of heterosexuality, which brings about compulsory heterosexuality (Rich), the need for fixed norms (Butler), etc.

“I use the term heterosexual matrix throughout the text to designate that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized. I am drawing from Monique Wittig’s notion of the “heterosexual contract” and, to a lesser extent, on Adrienne Rich’s notion of “compulsory heterosexuality” to characterize a hegemonic discursive/ epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality” (Butler 2016: 194).

For Butler, heteronormativity (or heterosexual matrix as they call it) is inherently tied to our ideas of sex and gender – the way in which we construct what sex and gender is, we also tie heterosexuality to them as a part of the “natural” way.

In their work, Butler criticizes a certain type of identity politics. They state that for a long time, feminist theories have assumed that there is some existing identity to be a woman (Butler 2016: 3). There is a political assumption that feminism has a universal basis and it is found in the identity that is presumed to be the category “women” (Butler 2016: 6).¹

This presumed identity of women has been used to gain some political advantages and the feminists who support identity politics find characteristics which the identity can be

¹ This is precisely the debate between biological sex and gender that is pressing in our political climate right now. This thesis does not focus on this topic specifically, but it is something to take into consideration while reading Butler.

constructed on (for example, women are those who share the experience of oppression or have traits like femininity or maternity) (Butler 2016: 19). The identity politics that Butler disagrees with constructs the identity of “woman” and assumes certain traits to it, seemingly to further feminist goals like stopping oppression or patriarchy. Butler, however, argues that this type of essentialist identity politics is actually harmful and can have a negative effect on feminist goals.

This is where they also start to challenge heteronormativity. They reference Foucault’s ironic statement that people are searching for a “truth” of sex and in that way trying to regulate identities (Butler 2016: 23). This is where the heterosexualization of desire happens, which “requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between “feminine” and “masculine”, where these are understood as expressive attributes of “male” and “female.”” (Butler 2016: 23). The heteronormative world, in addition to identity politics, requires some identities to not exist, those whose desires do not follow from sex or gender (Butler 2016: 24). The identity politics that Butler argues against assumes that sex, gender and sexuality are tied together – to be a woman is to also be biologically female and attracted to men.

They argue that gender is not a “truth”, but a performance – people need to perform gender within a compulsory system.

“Discrete genders are part of what “humanizes” individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right. Because there is neither an “essence” that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all.” (Butler 2016: 178).

1.3 A dialogue between Rich and Butler

Rich’s and Butler’s works definitely have a different scope – while Butler in their book deals extensively with categories, deconstructing them and how this deconstruction is a never-ending process, Rich’s essay is focused on only one topic and in that sense her work is narrower. While the entirety of their work deals with different topics, I apply their arguments to specifically the question of heteronormativity and the problems created by it as seen in their work.

In conclusion from both authors, we see that the main problems created by heteronormativism are:

1. It naturalizes heterosexuality; meaning society treats heterosexuality as natural, it's expected and so other identities seem abnormal
2. It enforces gender roles; meaning it ties certain traits and expectation to subjects, like women's role to marriage, motherhood and dependence on men
3. It creates heterosexism; meaning the biases created by heteronormativism give heterosexual subjects privileges, while those who are not heterosexual are discriminated against and even oppressed
4. It makes heterosexuality compulsory; meaning people are socially and institutionally forced into heterosexuality

The criticism of heteronormativity is the place where Butler and Rich overlap the most. Rich argues against the idea that women have two innate orientations (sexual towards men and reproductive towards their children), presumes that social relations between sexes are problematic for women and heterosexuality as an institution is a "beachhead of male dominance" (Rich 2016: 13).

The ways in which Butler and Rich try to solve the problem of heteronormativity are very different. While Butler is trying to fight against the notion that there is a shared identity of "woman", Rich supports the idea. She even says that "woman identification is /-/ a potential springhead of female power" (Rich 2016: 34). Putting these two authors into dialogue, it seems that Rich in her theory is working in the same frameworks of identity politics that Butler is trying to go against, she is an essentialist while Butler is against essentialism. This is where we see that difference between lesbian feminist and queer theory: for a lesbian feminist like Rich, woman-identification has political power, but a queer theorist like Butler challenges fixed categories of sex and gender. For Butler, politics should not be grounded on fixed identities.

They both challenge heteronormativity and resist fixed identities (Rich at least somewhat), but Butler wants to get rid of the norms governing the idea of "woman", while Rich is much more comfortable with tying women to norms. Of course Rich challenges the traditional heteronormative norms in her work, but instead of going against norms entirely, like Butler

seems to do, Rich is more interested in redefining or changing them. Rich's theory relies on the shared experiences of women, while Butler tries to argue against this idea, saying that tying a person into a particular identity (even lesbian), does not help with defying the heteronormative norms that feminists are fighting against. "Indeed, the premature insistence on a stable subject of feminism, understood as a seamless category of women, inevitably generates multiple refusals to accept the category." (Butler 2016: 7)

The way in which Butler and Rich go against traditional views of sex and sexuality also seem similar. What Butler is arguing against, is the idea that sex, gender and sexuality are tied together and this is what Rich points out as well – traditionally it has been assumed that women are attracted to men, because the sex of female equals attraction to males. But the solution to the problem is once again totally different between the two authors. Rich just flips it on its head and says that women are not naturally attracted to men, but women are naturally attracted to other women. This does not, however, solve the problems Butler points out. If we agree with Butler and say that the problem might be that we tie sex, gender and sexuality together and by that erase possibilities for different kinds of identities, then Rich's theory works in the same problematic framework.

It seems that Rich falls into the trap of trying to find the "truth" of sex, which actually regulates identities, rather than freeing people from them. Because Rich is one of more influential lesbian feminists, the flaws of her assumptions and conclusions may also be the flaws of a radical lesbian feminist approach overall.

Butler's theory shows the places in which lesbian feminism falls short – we can agree that women are presumed to be heterosexual and how lesbian identity could be important as a fight against patriarchy for an individual. However, as Butler seems to argue for "the bigger picture", we see that Rich's theory just continues to argue for the sex-gender-sexuality tie that is actually a construction of our oppressive system trying to control identities. That is why Butler's theory makes more sense to take into account while fighting against patriarchy.

In conclusion, while Rich utilizes a shared female experience to resist patriarchy, Butler critiques this essentialism, arguing that fixed identities perpetuate the norms that feminists seek to dismantle. Butler's view on gender as a performance offers a more radical framework for deconstructing heteronormativity and disrupting patriarchal power structures.

Therefore, I argue that Butler's approach is more effective for challenging the patriarchal system.

Chapter 2: On heterofatalism

In this chapter I will explore the concept of heterofatalism, how it relates to heteronormativity and how a radical type of heterofatalism could try to solve the problems created by heteronormativity.

Heterofatalism was first coined by Asa Seresin in his essay “On Heteropessimism”. Although his essay was originally called “On Heteropessimism”, he has since changed the term to heterofatalism. Seresin shared on his blog that he started using heterofatalism instead of heteropessimism to make it totally clear that there is no parallel between heteropessimism and afropessimism (the view that Black Americans are still viewed as they were viewed in the slavery days as different, inferior, and as outsiders) (Asa Seresin's blog). He also made it clear that there are different terms to talk about heterofatalism, “hetero-negative” as in sex-negative or Jane Ward's “heteromiserablism” are just a few examples of many. In this thesis however, I will be using the term “heterofatalism”, because as Seresin argues, it best describes the main notion of “letting go” and can not be likened to afropessimism (Seresin 2019).

Heterofatalism describes a feeling or attitude of fatalism (powerlessness to change something resulting in pessimism) towards heterosexuality by subjects, (mainly women), who are heterosexual themselves. In its core, heterofatalism is an attitude of embarrassment towards someone's own heterosexuality, but it also captures the feeling of hopelessness that comes with believing something is inevitable.

Seresin points out that one of the key elements of heterofatalism is that it “consists of performative disaffiliations with heterosexuality, usually expressed in the form of regret, embarrassment, or hopelessness about straight experience.” (Seresin 2019). It is performative, because rarely do people experiencing heterofatalism actually abandon their heterosexuality. While Rich, as well as Butler, are not only scholars, but activists, – they are trying to change things, not only to resign themselves to fatalism –, heterofatalists feel like the victims of their sexual culture. Fatalism in the term “heterofatalism” captures the idea that these women feel that they are almost completely unable to change their fate.

It's important to note that, as Seresin mentions, men are seen as the root of the problem by most heterofatalists². Sure, men can be heterofatalists too, but the ones taking part of this culture are mostly women.

Men and women experience heterofatalism differently. In this thesis, I focus on women-identified heterofatalists, but it is important to note some differences between how women and men experience it. An example of male heterofatalism would be the way in which some married men seem to joke (or seriously talk) about how marriage is like a chain on their ankle. However, Seresin makes an interesting distinction between male and female heterosexual experience. He says that while men's heterosexual nightmare is probably the trope of the “overly attached girlfriend” (a famous internet meme that was used by men to poke fun at women), women reacted to this portrayal of them by “declaring themselves absolutely and flamboyantly unattached—to men and to heterosexuality in general.” (Seresin 2019). So, while men’s expressions of heterofatalism are more comedic and it stems from the fear of emotional intimacy, women’s heterofatalism is a reaction to the way the dominant group (men) have portrayed and treated them. In this way, female heterofatalism almost seems more legitimate, because it is a response to the way they are treated, rather than just a fear or a “joke”. Male heterofatalism got a response from female heterofatalism and the idea of the overly attached girlfriend started to be replaced by the woman who avoids all or most male attention (Seresin 2019).

Heterofatalism became almost like an anesthetic for women, because it dissociates them from the traits that heterosexual culture is trying to make them ashamed of, like overattachment and the “overintensity of feeling” (Seresin 2019). The metaphor of anesthesia is something that is particular to heterofatalism. It is a strong statement for Seresin to call this feeling an anesthetic, because it’s not just disappointment or unhappiness. Think about how anesthesia works in healthcare – being under it takes the pain away, it does not just numb you, it makes you feel nothing. However, you still wake up from it at some point and then the pain comes back. So this anesthetic part of heterofatalism that may seal the person’s unhappiness and hopelessness does not last for long, meaning heterofatalism is probably not a sustainable attitude.

² This point is relevant to questions about the manosphere and incel (involuntary celibate) internet content – if that is men’s way of responding?

Embarrassment about someone's sexuality does not just turn into hopelessness, it needs a push and I think that what Seresin is hinting with the metaphor of anesthesia is the unsustainability of it all – how embarrassment may be ignored for a while, but how people can not be numb forever and when they come out of the numbness, the embarrassment turns into hopelessness and fatalism – because it seems that nothing can be changed.³

There is a larger trend of women becoming more and more disappointed in men and heterosexuality itself. An example of this would be straight women who claim to want to be lesbians, saying things like “it would be so much easier if I was into girls.” Heterosexual dating culture has become something embarrassing and because social media shows us all the examples of men doing awful things, heterosexuality starts to feel like a burden, rather than just an expression of women's (sexual) desires.

In short, some central points in heterofatalism are:

- 1) heterosexuality is inevitably disappointing, and people, especially women see almost no way to escape it;
- 2) heterosexuality is embarrassing, and heterofatalists tend to distance themselves from it;
- 3) heterofatalism is a critique of modern heterosexual culture, but it rarely actually rejects the culture or tries to change it for the better;
- 4) heterofatalism is not only a personal disappointment, but a cultural one, which shows us the need for reform in heterosexual culture even more clearly.

Heterofatalism also poses a question of how big of a role does sexual orientation play in determining all forms of social or interpersonal interaction and does heterofatalism lead us to avoid all interaction with the opposite sex, or only sexual interaction? Considering the way in which heterofatalists often blame its problems on men, it would not be too much to assume that when women become disappointed in men because of their romantic and sexual arrangements, it spills over to the platonic side. Heterosexual male friendships with heterosexual women are always followed by the shadow of pessimism in the context of heterofatalism, because even if there is no romantic or sexual connection between the two people, they still see or imagine them interacting with other people in that way. So,

³ This metaphor also takes up questions of autonomy – is this anesthesia injected by the person experiencing it or is it something else, especially if there is a political agenda behind it?

friendships between heterosexual men and women are not completely ruled out, but as heterofatalism often entails becoming disappointed in “men”, not just a man or some variation of them, it seems plausible that many women begin to abandon or question their platonic relationships with men as well.

While Asa Seresin’s essay was more tied to cultural observations from his own life than philosophical discourse, heterofatalism has become an interesting question from an academical philosophical perspective as well. First of all, this discussion ties into many feminist questions in philosophy, such as the paradox between sexual subjectivity and women’s autonomy (are we actually free in determining our sexuality?); questions about desire and how it relates to our social and political world; and of course, it is also a potential solution to the age-old problem of heteronormativity.

Heterofatalism has also slowly made its way to modern feminist thinker’s language, especially when talking about newer problems like the dangerous incel (involuntary celibate) movement. Samantha Pinson Wrisley, in her essay “Heteropessimism and the pleasure of saying “no”” uses heterofatalism to analyze the affective function of heterofatalism, (heterofatalism as an anesthetic), arguing that “it affectively soothes but politically stultifies the feminist movement.” (Wrisley 2023: 23).

There is also a bigger project called “The heteropessimism project”, where scholars from different backgrounds of for example philosophy, gender and literary studies, based in the University of New England explore the concept of heterofatalism and alternative solutions for heteronormativity (The heteropessimists: About 2025). These scholars point out, that a lot of the problems that rise from heterofatalism or heteronormativity are not new, but the concept of heterofatalism has a uniquely modern touch, because “the disappointment or negativity has not been resolved by the struggles for feminist and sexual liberation to date, indeed it persists in spite of social change.” (The heteropessimists: About 2025). So, it is important to explore the “viral” concept of heterofatalism, because many women relate to it, even though the problems referenced by it have remained unchanged in spite of all the waves of feminism.

2.1 Heterofatalism and heteronormativity

While heteronormativity, as both Rich and Butler point out, seems to push subjects, especially women, into certain roles, heterofatalism seems, at least on the first look, to be an

act of resistance. It is our heteronormative society after all that alters the perceptions that women have of heterosexuality.

Heteronormativity fuels heterofatalism – when heteronormativity creates and maintains harmful gender stereotypes and expectations, people start to go against it and see the problem in heterosexuality. This is where heterofatalist thought is created.

Although heterofatalism deals with heterosexual subjects, (while Butler and especially Rich are more so concerned with the oppression of non-heterosexual subjects), it shows us how heteronormativity is harmful to those who should supposedly gain the most from it. A heteronormative society's expectation of women to take on caregiving roles, to submit to their husband, to marry young and start producing babies, etc., is what makes even heterosexual women pessimistic towards their sexuality. This is because in patriarchal society, everyone, but mostly those who are likely to benefit most from it, (in this case, the husbands, the men), is affected by these societal norms and expectations, expecting others to act accordingly and internalising the expectations for themselves. But heterofatalist women often start to realise that these patriarchal norms tied to heterosexuality do not support them – as an institution, heterosexuality only naturalises sex, like Butler says, gives women an idea of the “universal female” (what de Beauvoir calls “the myth of woman”) to follow and denies women their sexuality (even if it is a heterosexual one).

As Seresin points out, heterofatalism also challenges the status quo in gender theory made by queer theorists that have contributed the most to research about sex, gender and sexuality. For a lot of queer theorists, heterosexual culture has been neglected in their research on sexuality, because as it has been the societal norm, it has been assumed that being heterosexual is easy for heterosexual subjects (Seresin 2019). Heterosexuality has been seen as boring and predictable – Seresin even says that “queer theorists look smugly at heterosexuality over their shoulders as the thing that they have—thank God—left behind.” (Seresin 2019). According to Seresin, this negative attitude towards heterosexuality is not similar to heterofatalism that sees the problems in heterosexuality. This attitude is a reflection of the historical idealised version of heterosexuality that its subjects enjoyed (Seresin 2019). Heterofatalism together with heteronormativity however seems to show us the opposite – modern heterosexual culture is not easy or comfortable for heterosexual subjects, especially if they are women. Yes, it may be true that heterosexual subjects do not experience sexuality-based oppression, but that does

not mean that they have no problems of their own, just that the problems manifest in different ways.

2.2 Radical heterofatalism – a solution to heteronormativity?

Let us consider how heterofatalism would try to solve the problems of heteronormativity. One of the main problems is that it creates unrealistic and harmful standards and gender norms for people, especially women. Some see heterofatalism as a way to combat that, though not all heterofatalists go against the “norm” in the same ways.

Like with any other ideologies and ways of thought, there are moderate and radical ways to be heterofatalist. In a less radical form of heterofatalism, the person may become pessimistic towards their heterosexuality, because they feel they have no escape from it – fatalism captures the feeling of “my sexuality has been determined for me and I can do nothing to change it.” These moderate heterofatalists may be very pessimistic, but they still do little or nothing to combat heteronormativity. Like Seresin points out, in most cases the heterofatalism is performative, because heterofatalists don’t actually do anything to change their sexuality or to reform heterosexual culture. Because of this, moderate heterofatalism can not even be considered as a resistance to heteronormativity. What about the more radical kind though?

Theoretically, a radical heterofatalists position would lean towards political lesbianism – choosing relationships with women and refusing relationships with men for political (or societal) reasons. Radical heterofatalists would become so disappointed in heterosexual culture and relationships that they try to cut heterosexuality out of their lives completely by becoming a lesbian or just refusing all romantic and sexual, (sometimes even platonic), relationships with men.

Political lesbianism may seem as a great way to combat heteronormativity, because if we presume, as feminists advocating for political lesbianism do, that sexuality is something we can control, at the very least we are able to restrain our sexuality and refuse heterosexual relations, then by extension all women could break the shackles of heterosexuality and heteronormativity would not be a problem anymore.

The question here is, would all women deciding to become lesbian even work and if it did, would it actually change society? In the next chapter, I will be arguing that political lesbianism is not the solution, but rather intensifies the problem even more

Chapter 3: A critique of heterofatalism

There are some problems that rise from heterofatalism. It is not a problem in itself, but rather a manifestation of one. The more popular heterofatalism gets, the more we see how urgently heterosexual culture needs to be revolutionized. But, as Seresin also says, heterofatalism may not be the answer, because as it is an anesthetic, it stalls movement and if heterosexuality becomes shorthand for misogyny (dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against women), we are not solving the root of the problem (Seresin 2019).

In this chapter, I will be looking at two arguments against heterofatalism and arguing that it should not be used as a tool against heteronormativity.

3. 1 The universal man

As said in chapter two, heterofatalists often think the root of the problem is men. But if people become disappointed in heterosexuality itself, or even a whole gender, we fail to change the culture for the better.

It seems that radical heterofatalism that leans towards lesbian feminism is something that Adrienne Rich would support – it creates a new shared identity of womanhood not defined by men and the pessimism towards heterosexuality can also be used as an argument of why heterosexuality is not natural or to be preferred. However, as radical heterofatalism falls short on the same places where Rich's theory does, the same counter-arguments from Butler's text can be used.

As Butler says, confining a person to a particular identity does not help with defying the heteronormative world and the norms it creates that feminists are fighting against. Butler uses this argument mainly to argue against the universal idea of women, but in this subchapter I will be taking the same logic to talk about the "universal man".

Heterofatalists accept certain "truths" about our world – like the false belief that finding the "truth of sex" (a right and only way to be sexual) is possible, which is the reason why heterofatalists believe that heterosexuality is doomed. This fatalist belief that nothing can be changed also corresponds with the idea that there is some type of universal (heterosexual) man and that this is what causes problems in women's, heterosexual or other, lives. What these men have in common is at the very least some misogynistic tendencies, at the most violence and actual hate towards women in general. That is why heterosexuality is doomed –

a heterosexual relationship can not work, because men in our system are flawed and don't work together with women.

The idea of the universal man is theoretically nothing different from the universal female – that is why Butler's critique can be used to oppose this part of heterofatalism. This idea enhances the sex-gender-sexuality tie that is a construction of our oppressive system trying to control identities. While women are expected to take on caregiving roles and are assumed to be weak, men are expected to be strong, not show weakness, provide for their families, protect their country, etc. Radical heterofatalism goes as far to assume traits like violence to men. But all these assumptions of traits are just ways to keep us confined in a heteronormative world, it is the system's way of forcing us to conform to the sex, sexuality and gender we are expected to.

If we want to liberate women from the harmful gender norms that our heteronormative society has ascribed to them, we can not do it without liberating other identities – such as men. Even if all women stopped thinking in heteronormative ways (believing that they have certain roles as women, etc.), a lot of men would still think that way and everyone who had a dad, brother, a male partner or friend would still be affected by it. So even if we agree that a lot of men are “the problem” by enforcing gender stereotypes more, we still can not leave men as a group out of the resistance towards heteronormativism. Because they, too, are affected by it.

3.2 Does heterofatalism even help women?

Heterofatalism seems to have many flaws, even though some would argue that it can be used to solve the problems created by heteronormativism even in some parts. In this subchapter however, I will be arguing that heterofatalism is flawed in its core and it does not help the women practicing this mentality.

If a woman becomes heterofatalist, she is less likely to give men the “benefit of the doubt”, to accept them and communicate through difficulties, because of her assumption that heterosexuality is “doomed”. That is not to say that the defense system that women develop due to the danger they face because of men is not valid, as precautions are understandable. But the question of “is heterofatalist mindset doing more good to women than bad”, can still be asked considering this.

Heterofatalism often stems from precaution, from having men act misogynistically in the past or even from the fear of violence. But we still have to distinguish between caution and resignation. When caution starts to bring about an overall pessimistic attitude, which makes the life of the woman experiencing it more difficult, because she feels a gap between her desires and reality; and when women start to act on this pessimism more radically, but it does not help with actually dealing with the problem, as I explained in the last subchapter; is where we see the failure of heterofatalism.

Because what is heterofatalism trying to achieve? After all, it is a negative emotion towards someone's own sexuality – something that should be a great part of their identity, something to explore and enjoy. The only redeeming quality of heterofatalism may be its precautionary effect, but as explained before, even this precaution eventually hurts the woman.

Conclusion

This BA thesis explored the problems created by heteronormativity and how heterofatalists could try to solve them, ultimately arguing that heterofatalism does not help to solve these problems.

In chapter 1, I argued that heteronormativity, as a concept, has been central to feminist and queer theory, particularly in discussions about how societal norms favoring heterosexuality reinforce patriarchal structures. I examined the work of Adrienne Rich and Judith Butler, two feminist theorists who critique heteronormativity from different perspectives, ultimately coming to the conclusion that Butler's theory is better in fighting against gender norms and therefore the patriarchy that Rich's is.

In chapter 2 I explored the concept of heterofatalism, a term coined by Asa Seresin that describes a fatalistic attitude towards one's own heterosexuality. I considered if radical heterofatalism could serve as a solution to heteronormativity. While it may offer individual resistance, I questioned whether it effectively dismantles systemic structures or simply reinforces the same essentialist thinking that Butler was arguing against. This leads into the next chapter, where I argued that political lesbianism does not resolve the problem but may, in fact, intensify it.

In Chapter 3, I argued that heterofatalism is not a solution to heteronormativity, but it reinforces its structures. While heterofatalism exposes the need for change in heterosexual culture, its fatalistic nature does not help progress. Hence I conclude that heterofatalism is not a good tool for fighting against the patriarchy and it is not something to be used as such.

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Resüme

Selle lõputöö (“Heterofatalism – vale ravi heteronormatiivsuse vastu”) raames käsitlen heteronormatiivsusest tulenevaid probleeme ning seda, kuidas heterofatalism neid probleeme lahendada püüab. Väidan, et heterofatalism on heteronormatiivsuse tekitatud probleemidele vale lahendus (*false cure*), peamiselt seetõttu, et heterofatalismi radikaalsem vorm tugevdab esiteks soorolle, mida see peaks püüdma lõhkuda, ja teiseks ei saavuta see tegelikult oma eesmärke, kuna probleemi lahendamise asemel tuimestab see heterofatalisti.

Töös uurin heteronormatiivsuse teoreetilist tausta ning ajalugu feministlikus ja kväär-teoorias, selgitan heterofatalismi mõistet ning kuidas seda võiks näha vastusena heteronormatiivsuse probleemidele, ning lõpuks väidan, et heterofatalism ei ole tegelikult lahendus.

Heteronormatiivsuse taustakäsitluses toon lühidalt välja mõned feministlikud autorid, nagu Simone de Beauvoir ja Monique Wittig, kuid töö keskendub peamiselt Adrienne Richi teosele "Compulsory Heterosexuality" ning Judith Butleri teosele "Gender Trouble". Kuigi nende teoste haare on kindlasti erinev, rakendan nende ideid konkreetselt heteronormatiivsuse ja selle tekitatud probleemide kontekstis, nagu see nende töödes kajastub..

Summary

In this thesis, I address the problems created by heteronormativity and how heterofatalism tries to be a solution to them. I argue that heterofatalism is a false cure for heteronormativity, mainly because the more radical form of heterofatalism firstly reinforces the gender norms it should seek to destroy and secondly does little to actually achieve its goals, because rather than being a solution, it is an anesthetic.

In this thesis, I explore the theoretical background and history of heteronormativity as seen in feminist and queer theory, explain heterofatalism as a concept and how it could be seen as a solution to heteronormativity's problems and finally argue that heterofatalism is not a solution.

In the background on heteronormativity I explore a few feminist authors briefly, like Simone de Beauvoir and Monique Wittig, but this thesis mainly focuses on the ideas of Adrienne Rich in her work "Compulsory heterosexuality" and Judith Butler in their work *Gender Trouble*. While their works definitely have a different scope, I apply their arguments specifically to the question of heteronormativity and the problems created by it as seen in their work.

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