

## *Discriminatory Structures in The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*

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### **Abstract**

*The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* is a 1994 Australian road movie in which three drag queens travel through the Australian desert in a bus named "Priscilla" while confronting various forms of discrimination and prejudice. About 30 years ago, when this film was released, the term "LGBT" was not widely used and there was little understanding of gay and transgender people. The film's focus was not so much on discrimination against drag queens as it was on their flamboyant costumes, powerful performances, and sheer cheerfulness, which captivated audiences. However, the film includes some discrimination toward the drag queens. The structure in which some miners, a female customer in a bar, and an Asian woman regard the drag queens with hostility is considered to highlight male chauvinism and the women who pander to it. On the contrary, the Aborigines they encounter in the desert readily accept the existence of drag queens after they show their performances. This can be thought of as the sympathy of the Aborigines, who are a minority, for the drag queens, who are also a minority, in other words, the sympathy of those who are discriminated against. In this presentation, I will prove that *Priscilla* is not just an entertaining portrayal of drag queens, but an epoch-making work that brought the existence of LGBT and related issues to the public's attention by portraying discrimination against minorities, male chauvinism, and the existence of women who pander to it with a critical eye.

Keywords: *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, Drag Queens, Male Chauvinism, Aborigines

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## Introduction

*The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* is a 1994 Australian road movie about three drag queens, Bernadette, Mitzi, and Felicia, who travel through the Australian desert on a bus named "Priscilla" while confronting various forms of discrimination and prejudice. About 30 years ago, when this film was released, the term "LGBT" was not widely used and there was little understanding of gay and transgender people. The film's focus was not so much on discrimination against drag queens as it was on their flamboyant costumes, powerful performances, and sheer cheerfulness, which attracted audiences.

However, the film does contain discrimination against drag queens. The structure of hostility and discrimination against drag queens by the men who work in the mines, the woman customer in the bar, the Asian woman is thought to highlight male chauvinism and the women who pander to it. On the contrary, the Aborigines the three gays encounter in the desert readily accept the existence of drag queens after watching their performances. This can be thought of as depicting the sympathy of Aborigines, who are a minority, for drag queens, who are also a minority, that is, sympathy among those who are discriminated against.

In this paper, I will prove that *The Adventures of Priscilla* is not just an entertaining portrayal of drag queens, but a groundbreaking work that brought LGBT existence and related issues to the public's attention by portraying male chauvinism, the women who pander to it, and discrimination against minorities with a critical eye.

## Discrimination against Gays due to Homophobia

*The Adventures of Priscilla* is the story of three drag queens, Bernadette, Mitzi, and Felicia, who travel by bus through the deserts of central Australia. Bernadette is heartbroken because her young lover has just died in a bathroom accident; Mitzi was married for several years and has a son. Felicia, the youngest, is an optimistic gay, but she has also suffered a lot of discrimination. They make living performances in Sydney, but when they are asked to perform at a hotel owned by Mitzi's ex-wife, they decide to travel to Alice Springs, a rural town in central Australia. The trip begins with Felicia's bus, which she names "Priscilla."

During the trip, the gays encounter several dangers. They are subjected to prejudice and violence by homophobes, haters of homosexuals. For example, at the first hotel they stay at in Broken Hill, when they go to a bar dressed as a flamboyant transvestite, a middle-aged woman tells them, "We've got nothing here for people like you. Nothing!" This middle-aged woman at the bar is supposed to have a hatred for homosexuals.

Judith Butler, in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), refers to homophobia:

Precisely because homophobia often operates through the attribution of a damaged, failed, or otherwise abject gender to homosexuals, that is, calling gay men "feminine" or calling lesbians "masculine," and because the homophobic terror over performing homosexual acts, where it exists, is often also a terror over losing proper gender . . . , it seems crucial to retain a theoretical apparatus that will account for how sexuality is regulated through the policing and the shaming of gender. (p. 238)

It seems likely that the woman in the bar treats Bernadette, Mitzi, and Felicia as the damaged, failed, despicable gender that Butler describes. In other words, this woman cannot dispel the

notion that sexuality and gender must be the same. Butler's idea that we need a theoretical apparatus to persuade conservative people who try to exclude anything that does not fit the established concept may be persuasive in this scene.

Furthermore, the large graffiti "AIDS FUCKERS GO HOME" painted on the "Priscilla" that the three gays find when they are about to leave Broken Hill is an indication of how much people consider homosexuals to be a threat. This sentence in paint shows how sexuality and gender are not separated in society, and how prejudice against those who deviate from the social norm is common.

In this movie's pamphlet made in Japan, Stephan Elliott, who made the film, states the reason for making the film: He began to wonder how gays were coping with their difficult surroundings (basically, everyone around them is against them) while watching their joyful performances. Underneath the flamboyance, there is a sadness, a fragility. He was intrigued by this humanistic theme. And he knew that it should never be a sympathetic, well-behaved film. He wanted to tell a story in which humanity is revealed in the midst of a flood of great entertainment. In the first half of the film, the audience laughs at the transvestite gay men, but in the second half, he wanted the audience and the gay men to laugh together (*Priscilla's* pamphlet, p. 5).

As Elliott states, *The Adventures of Priscilla* is not a film that defends gays or invites sympathy for them. He depicts the humanity and way of life of Bernadette, Mitzi, and Felicia, who are gays but transcend being gays. In other words, he is portraying their identity as gays.

Judith Butler, in considering the issue of gender and identity in *Gender Trouble* (1999), writes, "To what extent do regulatory practices of gender formation and division constitute identity, the internal coherence of the subject, indeed, the self-identical status of the person?" (p. 23).

She further explains that "identity" can only be recognized within the limits of what can be understood in society:

...the "coherence" and "continuity" of "the person" are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility. Inasmuch as "identity" is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of "the person" is called into question by the cultural emergence of those "incoherent" or "discontinuous" gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined. (p. 23)

The three gays in *The Adventures of Priscilla* are considered "incoherent" and "discontinuous" gender in the general society, so even though they look like "people," they are sometimes treated as if they are not "people" because they do not conform to the gender norms of the general society.

As was the case with the female customer at the bar I mentioned earlier, when they arrive at the mining town of Coober Pedy, the men treat them as if they were not "people" at all. Bernadette and Mitzi are quietly eating at a restaurant, while Felicia, the youngest, goes to an outdoor bar where men gather, dressed as a woman, and tries to seduce them. However, when the men at the bar realize that Felicia is a "male," they run after her and try to rough her up.

Bernadette, noticing the commotion, rushes to the scene and defeats the men, saving the day. For the men who attempt to assault Felicia, Felicia's existence does not conform to the culturally understandable gender norm by which a person is defined. This event makes us aware of how people live by the norms of what is considered common knowledge.

The female customer at the bar engages in a drinking match with Bernadette as if she were a man. In order to compete with Bernadette, who is a man becoming a woman, the customer seems to be trying to show her superiority over the gay man by displaying her masculine strength. The men in the mining town also have an unidentifiable fear of drag queens, whose gender cannot be determined as male or female, and they seem to be trying to demonstrate their male superiority by using violence.

### **Women and Gays in Male Chauvinism**

The attitude toward the drag queens of a Filipina woman named Cynthia, wife of Bob, the repairman who saves the "Priscilla" when it breaks down and is stranded in the desert, can also be considered typical homophobia.

Though Cynthia is Bob's wife, she interrupts Bernadette, Mitzi, and Felicia, who are putting on a show of drag queens at a bar, and she tries to put on her own sexy show. Estella Tincknell and Deborah Chambers (2002) describe Cynthia's eccentricity at this time: "Cynthia is offered as a "real" grotesque, a monstrous woman who demonstrates her monstrosity by revealing her female genitals to the barroom crowd, as she catapults Ping-Pong balls from her orifice" (p. 153). Cynthia herself tries to appeal to the significance of her existence by being recognized by men by flirting with the men in the bar.

Tincknell and Chambers (2002) interpret Cynthia's behavior as follows:

This [Cynthia's] performance is so outrageous it might be read as a reaffirmation of a powerful femaleness unavailable to the drag queens, yet such a reading would be offset by the presentation of the figure of Cynthia as both sadly lacking in ironic self-reflexivity (she takes herself seriously as a "sexy" performer) and as deeply threatening to the central romantic relationship. (p. 153)

Tincknell and Chambers do not view Cynthia's act as an emphasis on femininity, but rather as abnormal and threatening. Certainly, Cynthia's actions are out of the ordinary and abnormal, but her actions could be considered a way to show men, the head of the male-dominated society, that she is more superior to gay men. In other words, she panders without question to the idea of male supremacy and is desperate to be accepted by men. The impatience and anger of Cynthia, whose sexual- and gender-identified status as a "female" or a "woman" is threatened by drag queens, is thought to be expressed by her sexy dancing in front of men, competing with drag queens. Cynthia seems to be appealing to her femininity as much as she can in order to defend her "female" identity against the threat of the presence of drag queens, who are gays with strong performances.

Luce Irigaray (1985) calls on women who have been oppressed by men:

Women, stop trying. You have been taught that you were property, private or public, belonging to one man or all. To family, tribe, State, even a Republic. That therein lay your pleasure. And that, unless you gave in to man's, or men's, desires, you would

not know sexual pleasure. That pleasure was, for you, always tied to pain, but that such was your nature. If you disobeyed, you were the cause of your own unhappiness. But, curiously enough, your nature has always been defined by men, and men alone...

So ask yourselves just what “nature” is speaking along their theoretical or practical lines. And if you find yourselves attracted by something other than what their laws, rules, and rituals prescribe, realize that—perhaps—you have come across your “nature.”

Don't even go looking for that alibi. Do what comes to mind, do what you like: without “reasons,” without “valid motives,” without “justification.” (p. 203)

Cynthia, who panders to a male-dominated society and is hostile to Bernadette, Mitzi, and Felicia, is supposed to be one of the very victimized women Irigaray calls upon who have been oppressed by men. Normally, women and gays should be able to identify with each other in that they are oppressed in a male-dominated society. Nevertheless, Cynthia, a woman, seems to regard gay men, who cannot become women, as her rivals, that is, women's rivals in terms of competing for men, and she seems to be desperately trying to show her superiority as a woman. Cynthia's attempts to demonstrate her superiority to men are evidence of her unquestioning acceptance of a male-dominated society that despises women. Cynthia seems to be pandering to men's disdain for women and misogyny.

The discrimination against Bernadette, Mitzi, and Felicia in *The Adventures of Priscilla* is not only caused by homophobia, but also by the social structure of a male-dominated society. This film highlights the discriminatory structure of a male-dominated society that ranks men, women, and gays by depicting the discrimination against both women and gays by men who are in the most advantageous position in a male-dominated society, and discrimination against gays who cannot fully become women in terms of sexuality by women who are looked down upon by men.

### **Empathy between Gays and Aborigines**

On their way from Sydney to Alice Springs, their bus named “Priscilla,” breaks down in the middle of the desert. Bernadette, Mitzi and Felicia practice dancing, explore the desert, and paint the “Priscilla” lavender as they wait for help. They almost get help from a white couple, but they run away as soon as they realize that the three of them are gay. Later, when the three are rehearsing for a show in the desert, they are very surprised to notice an Aboriginal man secretly watching them, but the Aboriginal man, unlike the couple who has run away, greets them friendly, “Hello. Nice night for it.” The Aboriginal man takes the three to the place where his friends are having a party, singing songs and drinking.

At this time, the three are not dressed as drag queens and are all wearing pants, so it is assumed that Aboriginal people are not aware that they are gay. When the Aborigines first see Bernadette, Mitzi, and Felicia, they are surprised to see white people and stop moving, but this is only for the first moment, and then they start singing and drinking again, and do not seem to be particularly concerned about the three of them. A few Aborigines are playing guitar and singing, and when they finish their performance, Bernadette, Mitzi, and Felicia change into their drag queen outfits and begin their usual dance, as if it were their turn to be next.

The Aborigines are at first puzzled, but gradually accept the drag queens as they move their bodies to the music, clap their hands, and accompany the gays with their own instruments. Furthermore, the first man, who meets the three, changes into a fancy costume and creates a dance show with Bernadette, Mitzi and Felicia. In this way, the drag queens and the Aborigines enjoy dancing and singing throughout the night. Afterwards, the Aboriginal man escorts them back to the bus.

This scene of the overnight exchange between the three drag queens and the Aborigines is depicted in the film for only about five minutes. However, this scene is considered to be a very important scene in the film because it is the scene where the Aborigines, who are a racial minority in Australia, and the three drag queens, who are sexual minorities in the society, establish an emotional bond. Here, I will explore the reasons for the heart-to-heart relationship between the Aborigines and the gays, as well as the intentions behind the depiction of the scene.

As a historical fact, Aborigines, the indigenous people of Australia, have lived in Australia for more than 60,000 years. In comparison, white people settled in Australia only 250 years ago. Rie Shiraishi (1993), a Japanese long-time resident of Australia, describes the relationship between white Australian society and the Aborigines. As it is said that "White Australia has a black history," there is a big black hole in the history of Australia known as a white nation for the past 200 years. Australia's history cannot be told without the existence of Aborigines, and the ignorance of ordinary Australians about this aspect of their country's history can only be described as the blacking out of the history of contact between whites and Aborigines because it is the ugly part of the nation, and the deprivation of the right of ordinary Australians to know about it. Aborigines were not only the indigenous people, but also the major ethnic group following the English and Irish in Australian society after the arrival of whites. However, in the history of Australia spelled out by whites, the history of Aborigines stopped 200 years ago, and from then until the late 1960s, it is a blank, as if they had never existed. The general Australian public has been indifferent to the existence of brown-skinned Australians, believing that white history is the only history of Australia, as they have learned it in school and through the media (p. 171).

Thus, in around 1994 when *The Adventure of Priscilla* was made, there was still a trend of disregard for Aborigines within Australia. To put it more clearly, Aborigines were discriminated against within Australian society in those days.

On the other hand, according to the website of the Japan Association for Women's Education, the term LGBT has been widely used since Declaration of Montreal on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Human Rights was adopted in 2006. Although the understanding of gay and transgender people has grown considerably since the advent of the LGBT term, the term did not exist in the mid-1990s when this movie was made. As the graffiti "AIDS FUCKERS GO HOME" on the "Priscilla" suggests, gay men like Bernadette, Mitzi, and Felicia were hated and discriminated against by the general public. In other words, the three gays and the Aborigines they met in the desert had one thing in common: they were unfairly discriminated against by society.

When the three gays try to enter the Aboriginal circle, the music stops for a moment and the people freeze. This could be because the Aborigines perceive Bernadette, Mitzi, and Felicia as white men. Aboriginal people are upset that white men who discriminate against them appear in their space. However, the upset Aborigines soon behave naturally as if nothing

happened when they see that their own fellow, who brings the three gay men with him, is not at all alarmed by them.

When the Aboriginal men finish their song, Bernadette, Mitzi, and Felicia change into their drag queen outfits, put on some music, and dance. At first, the Aborigines are bewildered, but gradually begin to move their bodies, clap their hands, and join in the accompaniment. Thus, the Aborigines readily accept the three drag queens without any discomfort, probably because they are not normal white men. It is not clear whether the Aborigines are aware of the existence of drag queens, but at least we can assume that they do not see Bernadette, Mitzi, and Felicia as white supremacist, or so-called typical white men. When the Aborigines see that the three drag queens they think are men begin to dance in flamboyant women's clothing, they probably feel in their gut that the drag queens are just like them and that the drag queens are minorities in the society too.

Robert Lawlor, in *Voices of the First Day* (1991), describes Aboriginal empathy:

The first emotion the Aborigines cultivate is compassion. For them, the feeling of compassion extends beyond a moral sense; it is the summation of their sympathetic and empathetic sensitivity to the surrounding world. Sympathy is feeling accord with the emotions of another, whereas empathy is the power to project one's being into the emotional state of another or to allow another state to enter and be felt. Compassion is sympathy or empathy accompanied by a desire to help alleviate the plight of another. (p. 246)

The Aboriginal man who brings Bernadette, Mitzi, and Felicia to his friends eventually changes into a glittering costume and dances with the three gays. In this way, the Aboriginal man and their friends empathize with the suffering of Bernadette, Mitzi, and Felicia, who are probably just as discriminated against by society as they are. They seem to be trying to share the pain of discrimination by creating a sense of unity through dancing, accompanying, and clapping together.

Thus, by depicting the drag queens meeting the Aborigines in the middle of the desert and empathizing with them through drinking, singing, and dancing together, the film reveals the existence of minorities who are marginalized and left behind by society. Furthermore, the film seems to laugh off discrimination against minorities as trivial by depicting the drag queens and the Aborigines spending time together in a very joyful and lively manner.

## **Conclusion**

As I have discussed, *The Adventures of Priscilla* is not simply an amusing portrayal of drag queens. It is a groundbreaking film that brought LGBT existence and related issues to the public's attention by portraying homophobia, male chauvinism, the existence of women who pander to them, and discrimination against minorities with a critical eye.

Bill Hunter, who played Bob, says of the film that people have different values. Rather than rejecting them, this film speaks to the importance of standing in each other's shoes and caring for the other (*Priscilla's* pamphlet p. 31).

I believe that what this film is advocating is exactly what Bill Hunter is talking about: acknowledging the other. Discrimination on the basis of gender or race is very silly. The three drag queens in this film demonstrate this point.

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