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The Homosexual Revolution

The Cuban Revolution has caused, and it is still causing thousands of families sorrow, hunger, oppression, and censorship that has been shown by literature throughout the work of many scholars, writers, and filmmakers, but most of them from an outside perspective leaving aside the real struggle and feelings of Cuban citizens since 1959 when communism and socialism were established by the revolutionist Fidel Castro.

By focusing my analysis on the 1993 memoir *Before The Night Falls* by the Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas, who became an earlier supporter and revolutionist for the Cuban Revolution before Fidel Castro took power. But was disillusioned some years after because of the revolution's homophobic policies and rhetorics that were imposed on Cuban citizens. Some of his worldwide recognized works are *Singing from the Well*, *Farewell to the Sea*, *The Color of Summer*, and *El Mundo Alusinate*: works that were smuggled out of Cuba in order to be published and some others written in exile. This paper will serve to present the personal struggle of a homosexual man against the socialist-communist government from its earlier phase until his last day of life. I have chosen a novel by a Cuban writer that advocated his life to publish the unpleasant and rough reality of Cuba all around the world, with the hope of seizing the unlawful power from the government. In this biographical novel, Arenas narrates his life from childhood to some years before his death. The central idea of this novel is his inner conflict as part of the

LGBTQ+ community in a machista and homophobic government and society, but also the deterioration of the island and its people after the lead of Castro. Throughout the memories and examples given by Arenas, I will argue what it means to be part of a minority group (LGBTQ+ community) trying to fit under a repressive government and society and their efforts to be accepted.

To begin with, during the first days of the transition between the Batista dictatorship and communism, Castro eliminated many of the high-rank officials who disagreed with his policies, and sometime later he began to assassinate people from his political party who interfered with his government plans and the rules he wanted to enforce in Cuba. All these murders were followed by a series of heterosexual norms and oppression for Cubans, who would not have the courage to challenge the communist system and much less risk their lives to protest against the new Cuban leader. Unfortunately, the Castro regime unbarks on homosexual persecution during the sixties and seventies to eradicate or give “medical treatment”¹ to all homosexuals in Cuba. Based on the 2020 article, “*Historizing Sexuality in the Cuban Revolution: The Spectral ‘Before’*”, “homosexuality was a product of capitalism, doomed to wither away under socialist governance.” (Lambe 224). Therefore, it provides the explanation why homosexuality was not allowed in Cuba, considering it goes against socialist and communist ideologies that were established by the Marxism of the Soviet Union in the Cuban region. Where this type of behavior would not be allowed since it would contradict the norms dictated by the government, but also would be seen as an acceptance of American beliefs.

After Fidel Castro took power in Cuba, the society turned even worse for the homosexual community, where many of them prefer to hide or be in total denial about their orientation, for instance, most of them preferred to comply with the hetero normative established by the

¹ Conversion treatment for the LGTBQ+

communist-socialist government. For example, Arenas, at an early age “(I) realized that being a faggot in Cuba was one of the worst disasters that could happen to anyone.” (Arenas 48) While attending the communist boarding school, Arenas learned that homosexuality was an abomination because a true communist is a real “macho”, who would never have any thought or sexual contact with another man. The school curriculum in Cuba is obligated to teach all the Marxist-Leninism norms in which they clarify that any capitalist ideology or product could not be consumed by any citizen living under the regime since the person would be considered a traitor, to later function as an exemplar for severe punishment, which would serve as a public demonstration for those who want to do the same thing, for this reason, many gays would maintain a hidden romantic relationship and would be careful to not show any type of love demonstration in public.

To continue, most of the population repudiated those who identified themselves as gays, but those same people that followed the machista-socialist role model would be the same who accepted to have hidden sexual encounters with gays, and not much time later denounced them to be arrested for misconduct. For example, Arenas reveals that “many of the young men who were at the school on scholarships were homosexuals who played the male role. In their view, fucking other youth did not make them queer, queers were the ones who got fucked.” (Arenas 51) During this time period, it was normal to think that only those who would be penetrated would be gays, to keep this idea of the representation of man and woman during intercourse. In consequence, many times homosexuals would be used as sexual objects at academy schools and sometime later be found by high-rank officials and be taken to concentration camps² where they would do farming and hard work to overcome their “illness”. Due to the fact that education was revised

²For example, UMAP (Military Units for Aid Production)

and censored by the government, most youths did not want to accept their sexual orientation because they learned that the only sexual attraction they could have was toward the opposite sex. For example, Arenas own experience was that “he did not want to declare himself as homosexual, and he still thought that perhaps he could “regenerate,” this was the word he used to convince himself was that he had a defect that he had to overcome.”(Arenas 68) There was a fear for homosexuals to openly talk and express their orientation because under the regime there could not be more sexual preferences than those for women to men and vice versa, in case they recognize themselves as a different gender this person would be considered anti-communist and ended up having a severe punishment for anyone that would dare to show their sexual preference in public or if they were uncovered by a neighbor or whoever that saw them in this situations.

As the years passed by and Fidel Castro continue in power, the situation for the queer community was getting even more unfavorable where they would have to totally avoid any type of sexual demonstration. “It was 1963, and the persecution of homosexuals was getting worse in one of the UMAP (MilitaryUnits for Aid to Production) concentration camps, but I was not yet confirmed, homosexual. I had no sexual involvement with anybody and was very repressed.” (Arenas 69) Repression was something constantly experienced by people from the homosexual community since they would have to dissimulate or not show their feelings for other men at all to avoid being entered into these camps where they supposedly would be given conversion treatment to be a “normal man again”, but these camps were created to force homosexuals to do hard work, also to rehabilitated them to be useful into Cuban society, and to fulfill the heterosexual rules imposed.

On the other hand, Arenas exhibits a variety of categories, where each gay would fit in, but the most common classification was “the *closet gay*. Nobody knew he was gay. He married,

had children, and then went to the baths surreptitiously, still wearing the wedding ring his wife had given him. Closet gays were hard to spot; many times they were the ones who censured other gays.” (Arenas 78). The great majority of gays in Cuba have to pretend to be heterosexual even though, they do not have those preferences but it was the only way they could deceive authorities and evade being persecuted by government officials. As a result, many gays preferred to camouflage their sexual preferences by starting a family with which they would have the possibility to cover up and keep in secret their true sexual identity and in some way have a sense of freedom under the oppression.

Not only did the socialist party want to have control of the personal lives of their citizens, but also they started controlling gay workers at their jobs and avoiding them to have an income and a way to survive, and even more oppression was held over them. The memoir points out that “ The cruelest attacks of congress were unleashed against homosexuals. Paragraphs were read labeling homosexuals as pathological cases, and more important, it was decided that all homosexuals who held positions in cultural organizations should be immediately severed from their job.” (Arenas 138). This decision was made to control the exposure and diffusion of ideologies from people pertaining to the LGBTQ+ would be made to other citizens to avoid that more people would be informed and build relationships with queers that would end up in the acceptance of the community and realized these people were “normal” as any other person and the unnecessary of any type of medical treatment on gays to change.

Consequently, in the seventies, the Marielitos crisis started in which Castro decided to let go of all those who did not want to remain on the island. However, sometime later “Castro would announce that all those who left could not return, since they were counterrevolutionaries with capitalist ideologies and were not worthy representatives of the Cuban Revolution, and they were

not needed in Cuba” (Capo 14) Gays and lesbians during the seventies were seen as people who had no value for society since they were people who did not make any contribution to the government because their "mentality" and "sexual deviation" came from America, which did not respect the policies of the Cuban regime, what is why Castro decided to remove as many homosexuals as possible from his island so that in this way they would not continue infesting these types of ideologies onto other Cuban citizens to finally eradicate the problem from the root.

Even though the Mariel boatlift episode was to demonstrate that people actually wanted to stay and live under the norms of the regime, many citizens went to the embassy declaring to be homosexuals revealing they wanted to express themselves as what they identified themselves without judgment from the society and punishment from the government; something not possible living in Cuba. Ian Lumsden argued that “the boatlift was a strategic and "explicitly homophobic campaign by the government" to purge Cuba of homosexuals.” (Capo 17,18) The crisis of the Marielitos was the easiest way that the government of Castro found to eliminate all the people who did not want to follow the norms imposed by the socialist regime, but the majority of the people who were exiled from Cuba were people who identified themselves as part of the LGBTQ+ community, which is why this migration crisis was set to segregate and “completely wipe out” from Cuba people belonging to this minority group.

To conclude, Arenas in his memoir wanted to expose and have proof of what the reality and lives of people from the LGBTQ+ in Cuba were like after Castro took power in Cuba and to demonstrate the injustices and punishments the government implemented over them for not being “normal people” and not following the heterosexual's norms established by the communist party after 1959.

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