

# The representation of bisexuality in *Avatar: The Rise of Kyoshi* by F. C. Yee

Abdurrafi Nugraha Putra\*, Mochamad Ilham, Supiastutik

English Department, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Jember  
Jl. Kalimantan No.37, Krajan Timur, Sumbersari, Kec. Sumbersari,  
Kabupaten Jember, Jawa Timur 68121, Indonesia

\*Corresponding author, email: abdurrafinp@gmail.com

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## Abstract

LGBT identities are often perceived as deviant within society; however, their representation has increasingly appeared across various media, including films, novels, and music. This study examines the representation of bisexuality in *Avatar: The Rise of Kyoshi* by F. C. Yee\*. The data are drawn from narrative elements that reflect bisexual themes and are analyzed using Stuart Hall's theory of representation, supported by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of homosocial desire. The findings show that bisexuality is represented through Kyoshi's relationships with two characters: Yun (male) and Rangi (female). These relationships develop through three phases: heterosexual, homosocial, and homosexual. The interaction between Kyoshi and Yun reflects heterosexual intimacy, while her relationship with Rangi evolves from admiration and emotional closeness into romantic same-sex attraction. This progression supports Sedgwick's idea of a continuum between homosocial bonding and homosexual desire. Furthermore, the study finds that the inclusion of bisexual elements is not solely the author's original construction. Kyoshi's bisexuality had previously been established in *The Legend of Korra: Turf Wars*, and the novel further develops this canonical aspect. Overall, the novel demonstrates how bisexuality can be represented as a dynamic and evolving identity within literary narratives.

## 1. Introduction

This study examines the representation of bisexuality in *Avatar: The Rise of Kyoshi* (2019) by F. C. Yee. It also investigates the possible reasons behind the inclusion of LGBT elements in a young adult novel. The analysis employs Stuart Hall's theory of representation as the primary framework and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of homosocial desire as a supporting theory. Homosocial desire refers to same-gender admiration or bonding that is not necessarily sexual, although it may sometimes be associated with homosexuality (Sedgwick, 1985). For instance, admiration between same-sex individuals, such as close friendship or shared interests, may reflect homosocial relations rather than sexual orientation.

Bisexuality is part of the LGBT spectrum, which includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender identities. Discussions surrounding LGBT individuals often intersect with social stigma, including associations with HIV transmission. Studies indicate that a proportion of HIV cases are linked to marginalized groups, including LGBT communities, which has contributed to societal misconceptions and stigma (Logie et al., 2020). Therefore, understanding sexual orientation is essential. According to Bailey et al. (2016), sexual orientation encompasses patterns of emotional and sexual attraction and is generally categorized into heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality. Bisexuality, the focus of this study, refers to attraction to more than one gender and challenges binary conceptions of sexuality by suggesting a broader

spectrum.

Scholars have proposed various factors influencing the development of sexual orientation. N. Rikhusshuba and M. Huda (2020) highlight the role of parenting and early socialization. Additionally, environmental exposure, including media consumption, may shape perceptions of gender and identity through processes such as attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. These processes illustrate how individuals, especially children, may internalize observed behaviors and identities.

Media representation plays a crucial role in shaping public understanding of gender and sexuality. LGBT identities are expressed across various forms of media, including films, music, and literature. In this context, literary works such as *Avatar: The Rise of Kyoshi* provide a platform to explore how bisexuality is constructed and represented.

The term “avatar” carries multiple meanings depending on context. In digital culture, it refers to a virtual identity or representation (Kannen & Langille, 2023). However, within the narrative of the novel, the Avatar is a spiritual figure capable of mastering the four elements—water, earth, fire, and air—to maintain balance in the world. The protagonist, Kyoshi, is portrayed as a strong and decisive character, and her bisexual identity adds complexity to her characterization.

Published in July 2019, *Avatar: The Rise of Kyoshi* serves as a prequel to the animated series *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Although set in a fictional world, the narrative draws inspiration from real-world cultures. For example, the Earth Kingdom reflects aspects of Chinese imperial culture, the Air Nomads resemble Tibetan Buddhist traditions, the Fire Nation parallels Imperial Japan, and the Water Tribe is inspired by Arctic Indigenous cultures (Chavey, 2020).

The novel follows Kyoshi’s journey as she is identified as the Avatar, the reincarnation of a spirit that maintains balance across nations. The Avatar cycle and selection process are rooted in spiritual traditions within the narrative (Poizner, 2017). Initially, another character, Yun, is believed to be the Avatar; however, Kyoshi ultimately demonstrates her true identity through her ability to control the elements.

The popularity of the *Avatar* franchise contributed to the novel’s success as a bestselling young adult book (Yee, 2025). Notably, Kyoshi’s bisexuality was previously established in *The Legend of Korra: Turf Wars*, indicating that her sexual orientation is part of the broader canon rather than solely the author’s addition.

Kyoshi’s relationships with Rangi and Yun are central to the narrative. Her romantic relationship with Rangi reflects emotional intimacy and mutual support, while her connection with Yun highlights complexity in interpersonal dynamics. These relationships illustrate how bisexuality is represented not merely as identity but as lived emotional experience.

Furthermore, Kyoshi’s background as an orphan suggests the absence of traditional parental role models, which may influence identity formation. Sedgwick (1985), referencing Richard Klein, argues that individuals may pass through homosocial phases in identity development. While such theories remain debated, they provide a framework for analyzing interpersonal dynamics in literary texts.

Several previous studies inform this research. Yuan G. et al. (2025) examine LGBT representation in media and its role in shaping public perception, highlighting a shift toward greater acceptance. Katelyn Thomson (2021) explores LGBTQ+ representation in film and

television, emphasizing its impact on audience understanding. Additionally, A. S. Salsabilarahma (2024) analyzes Kyoshi's individuation process using a psychoanalytic approach.

In contrast to these studies, the present research focuses specifically on the representation of bisexuality in *Avatar: The Rise of Kyoshi* using Hall's theory of representation and Sedgwick's concept of homosocial desire. This approach aims to provide a deeper understanding of how bisexual identity is constructed and communicated within contemporary young adult literature.

## 2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design to analyze the representation of bisexuality in *Avatar: The Rise of Kyoshi* (2019) by F. C. Yee. The primary theoretical framework is Stuart Hall's theory of representation, supported by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of homosocial desire.

Hall (1997) defines representation as the process of producing and exchanging meaning through language, signs, and images within a culture. Representation is not merely a reflection of reality but a process through which meaning is constructed and communicated. Hall proposes three approaches to representation: the reflective, intentional, and constructionist approaches. This study adopts the intentional approach, which emphasizes the role of the author in encoding meaning into a text. This approach is considered most relevant because the meanings related to bisexuality in the novel are often implicit and conveyed through narrative, dialogue, and characterization rather than explicit statements.

To support the analysis, this study also applies Sedgwick's (1985) theory of homosocial desire. This concept refers to non-sexual or ambiguous same-sex relationships characterized by admiration, intimacy, or competition. Although distinct from homosexual desire, homosocial relationships may exist on a continuum that connects social bonding with potential emotional or sexual dimensions. This theory is used to examine how relationships between characters reflect emotional intimacy and how such interactions may contribute to the representation of bisexuality in the novel.

The data of this study consist of words, phrases, sentences, and dialogues involving the main character, Kyoshi, and other characters in the novel. Following Martyn Denscombe (2010), data are defined as materials collected to answer research questions and support analysis. The primary source of data is the novel *Avatar: The Rise of Kyoshi*, while secondary sources include books, journal articles, and relevant online materials that provide theoretical and contextual support.

Data collection was conducted through a close reading technique. The researcher read the novel thoroughly to identify and select relevant passages that reflect bisexuality, including emotional, social, and potentially romantic interactions between characters. These data were then categorized based on thematic relevance, such as romantic attraction, emotional intimacy, and interpersonal relationships.

The data analysis was carried out in two stages. First, a close textual analysis was conducted to examine how Kyoshi's sexual orientation is represented in the narrative. In this stage, Hall's intentional approach was applied to interpret how the author constructs meaning through language and characterization. Second, the identified data were analyzed using Sedgwick's concept of homosocial desire to explore the dynamics of same-sex relationships and their connection to bisexual representation.

In the final stage, the researcher classified the findings into categories of homosocial relationships and bisexual representation. This classification aims to clarify how the text portrays emotional and relational dynamics, as well as how these contribute to the broader representation of bisexuality in the novel.

### 3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the analysis of the data to answer the research questions. It is divided into two subchapters. The first subchapter examines the heterosexual phase in Kyoshi's relationship with Yun, while the second analyzes the same-sex relationship between Kyoshi and Rangi. The findings are then discussed in relation to broader societal perspectives on homosexuality.

#### 3.1. Representation of Heterosexual Phase in *Avatar: The Rise of Kyoshi*

In *Avatar: The Rise of Kyoshi*, the early romantic interaction between Kyoshi and Yun is depicted in the chapter "Desperate Measures" (Yee, 2019, pp. 91–92). In this scene, Yun observes Kyoshi while she is working. Kyoshi then rests her head on Yun's lap while absentmindedly playing with leaves. The narration notes that such a position would be considered inappropriate if seen by others.

This moment illustrates the initial stage of romantic intimacy between Kyoshi and Yun. The physical closeness—Kyoshi resting her head on Yun's lap—suggests emotional comfort and trust. At the same time, Yun's concern about being seen indicates the presence of social norms regulating male–female interactions, reflecting how intimacy is culturally constructed and monitored.

The relationship develops further when Kyoshi becomes captivated by Yun's appearance. The narrative describes how she almost kisses him, and Yun, recognizing the moment, moves closer and initiates the kiss (Yee, 2019, pp. 91–92). This interaction signifies a transition from subtle emotional intimacy to explicit romantic expression. The mutual attraction between Kyoshi and Yun is conveyed implicitly through gestures and narrative description rather than direct statements, which aligns with Stuart Hall's intentional approach to representation. The author encodes meaning through suggestive actions and emotional cues, allowing readers to interpret the romantic dimension of their relationship.

Further evidence of their emotional bond appears when Yun expresses his support for Kyoshi, stating that he would be happy if she were revealed as the true Avatar (Yee, 2019, p. 92). This statement reflects not only personal affection but also emotional sacrifice, as Yun was initially believed to be the Avatar. His willingness to accept Kyoshi's potential identity demonstrates a deep level of care and trust.

From the perspective of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of homosocial desire, although primarily applied to same-sex relationships, this interaction can still be understood as part of a broader continuum of relational intimacy. The relationship between Kyoshi and Yun represents a heterosexual phase in Kyoshi's emotional development, characterized by affection, admiration, and emerging romantic desire.

Overall, the depiction of Kyoshi and Yun's relationship reflects how heterosexual intimacy is constructed through narrative subtlety. The author does not explicitly label their relationship but instead conveys meaning through actions, dialogue, and emotional context. This supports the idea that representation in literature operates through implicit encoding, requiring

interpretation by the reader.

### 3.2. Representation of Homosexual Phase in *Avatar: The Rise of Kyoshi*

In analyzing Kyoshi's same-sex relationships, this study applies Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory of homosocial desire as a supporting framework to distinguish between homosocial and homosexual dynamics. This theory examines how same-sex relationships—particularly in close emotional bonds—can manifest as friendship, admiration, or competition without necessarily being categorized as homosexual (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 3).

Homosociality exists on a continuum in which the boundaries between friendship, admiration, and attraction may overlap. However, within patriarchal cultures, these relationships are often constrained by strict social norms that discourage any expression associated with homosexuality (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 3). As a result, individuals may maintain emotional distance even when experiencing deep admiration.

The early interaction between Kyoshi and Rangi appears on page 66, in the chapter "The Iceberg":

Rangi shifted, pressing closer to Kyoshi's body, rubbing the soft bouquet of her hair against Kyoshi's lips. The startling contact felt like a transgression, the mistake of a girl exhausted and drowsy. The more noble Fire Nation families, like the one Rangi descended from, would never let just anyone touch their hair like this (*Yee, 2019:66*)

This moment occurs unintentionally due to exhaustion. Kyoshi's reaction reflects surprise, not only because of the physical contact but also due to the social hierarchy between them—Rangi as a noble and Kyoshi as a servant. At this stage, the interaction can be categorized as homosocial, as Kyoshi's response is rooted in admiration and awareness of status rather than explicit romantic or sexual desire.

A deeper emotional shift is evident in the following passage:

The sight made Kyoshi's breath come to a standstill at the very time she needed it flowing. Rangi was so beautiful, illuminated by moon and fire, that it hurt. She was strength and skill and determination wrapped around an unshakable heart. Kyoshi had always admired Rangi. But right now, it felt as if she were gazing at her friend through a pane of glass freshly cleaned. Some mighty and loving spirit had reached down from the heavens and outlined the Firebender in new strokes of color and vibrance (*Yee, 2019:148*)

This excerpt, from the chapter "Escape," demonstrates a transition from admiration to intensified emotional perception. Kyoshi's description of Rangi suggests not only respect for her abilities but also a heightened awareness of her physical and emotional presence. This can be interpreted as **homosocial desire**, where admiration begins to overlap with affective attraction.

The relationship progresses further in the following scene:

Kyoshi gently nudged Rangi's chin upward. She could no more prevent herself from doing this than she could keep from breathing, living, fearing. "I do feel loved," she declared. Rangi's beautiful face shone in reflection. Kyoshi leaned in and kissed her (*Yee, 2019:203*)

At this point, Kyoshi explicitly expresses emotional intimacy. The act of kissing signifies a shift from homosocial desire toward a more explicitly romantic interaction. However, the narrative does not provide detailed clarification regarding the nature of the kiss, leaving its

interpretation open. According to Sedgwick (1985), such ambiguity reflects the “gray area” between homosocial and homosexual relationships, where emotional closeness and desire intersect.

The climax of this relationship is illustrated in the following passage:

But the sound of laughter pulled her back. Rangi was coughing, drowning herself with her own tears and mirth. She caught her breath and retook Kyoshi by the hips, turning to the side, offering up the smooth, unblemished skin of her throat. "That side of my face is busted up, stupid," she whispered in the darkness. "Kiss me where I'm not hurt." (Yee, 2019:203)

This scene marks a clear transformation in their relationship. Rangi's physical gesture and verbal requests indicate a conscious and reciprocal desire. At this stage, the relationship can be categorized as homosexual, as both characters demonstrate romantic and physical attraction. The interaction moves beyond ambiguity and reflects mutual emotional and bodily engagement.

These findings support Sedgwick's (1985) argument that homosocial and homosexual relationships exist on a continuum rather than as strictly separate categories. The progression from admiration to desire in Kyoshi and Rangi's relationship illustrates how same-sex intimacy can develop organically within narrative contexts.

From a broader perspective, the representation of bisexuality in the novel can be related to real-world social dynamics. Kyoshi's background in the Earth Kingdom—culturally inspired by Chinese imperial society (Chavey, 2020)—invites comparison with historical attitudes toward homosexuality. During certain periods, such as the Ming dynasty, same-sex relationships were relatively tolerated if individuals fulfilled social obligations such as marriage and reproduction (Shen, 2024). In contrast, contemporary attitudes in China tend to be more conservative, influenced by traditional values and social norms (Ying & Minggang, 2017).

Similarly, Rangi's Fire Nation background reflects influences from Imperial Japan, where same-sex relationships, known as *nanshoku*, were historically practiced and socially recognized in specific contexts, such as among samurai and Buddhist communities (McLelland, 2000). However, modernization and Western influence led to shifts in perception, increasingly framing homosexuality as deviant (Frühstück, 2003).

Through these cultural parallels, F. C. Yee constructs a narrative that both reflects and challenges historical and contemporary attitudes toward sexuality. The relationship between Kyoshi and Rangi demonstrates how literary works can serve as a medium for representing bisexual identity and questioning rigid social norms.

However, it is important to note that there is no definitive scientific evidence suggesting that homosocial relationships directly lead to homosexuality. Sedgwick (1985) emphasizes that these relationships exist on a spectrum, while studies such as Christopher C. H. Cook (2021) argue that sexual orientation cannot be explained by a single factor. Instead, it emerges from a complex interaction of biological, psychological, and social influences.

Finally, the author's perspective also plays a significant role. Kyoshi's bisexuality was previously established in *The Legend of Korra: Turf Wars*, indicating that it is part of the canonical narrative. In an interview, Yee stated that he chose to retain and further develop these elements rather than omit them, ensuring that Kyoshi's identity is balanced with other narrative aspects such as conflict and characterization (Stewart, 2020).

Overall, the representation of Kyoshi and Rangi's relationship illustrates how bisexuality is constructed through narrative progression, emotional depth, and cultural context, reflecting both fictional storytelling and broader social realities. To clarify these patterns, the key stages of Kyoshi's relational development and their theoretical implications are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Summary of Kyoshi's Relationship Representation**

Relationship Stage	Characters	Type of Relationship	Textual Indicators	Theoretical Interpretation
Early Phase	Kyoshi – Yun	Heterosexual (female–male)	Physical closeness, near-kiss, emotional support	Heterosexual representation (Hall's intentional approach)
Homosocial Phase	Kyoshi – Rangi	Friendship & admiration	Admiration of Rangi's strength and beauty	Homosocial bonding (Sedgwick)
Homosocial Desire	Kyoshi – Rangi	Emotional intimacy	Deep emotional awareness, fascination	Transitional desire (Sedgwick's continuum)
Homosexual Phase	Kyoshi – Rangi	Romantic (female–female)	Kiss, verbal expression of love, mutual physical interaction	Homosexual relationship (mutual desire)
Overall Identity	Kyoshi	Bisexual	Attraction to both Yun and Rangi	Bisexual representation

### 3.3. Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The analysis focuses solely on *Avatar: The Rise of Kyoshi* without including its sequel, *Avatar: The Shadow of Kyoshi*, which may result in an incomplete understanding of Kyoshi's overall character development and sexual identity across the broader narrative.

In addition, this research relies on specific theoretical frameworks, namely Stuart Hall's theory of representation and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of homosocial desire. While these frameworks are relevant to the study, they may limit the scope of interpretation, as other approaches—such as queer theory or feminist criticism—could offer different perspectives and deeper insights.

The analysis is also based on close textual reading, which is inherently interpretive and subjective. As a result, different researchers may arrive at different conclusions when examining the same passages. Furthermore, this study does not incorporate audience reception or empirical data, meaning that it does not account for how readers interpret Kyoshi's bisexuality in real-world contexts.

Future research is therefore encouraged to examine the sequel and to apply broader theoretical perspectives or reader-response approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of bisexual representation in literary works.

## 4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that bisexuality in *Avatar: The Rise of Kyoshi* is represented through the gradual development of Kyoshi's relationships with Yun and Rangi. At the beginning of the narrative, Kyoshi is involved in a heterosexual relationship with Yun, marked by emotional intimacy and romantic interaction. As the story progresses, particularly after Yun's

death, her relationship with Rangi evolves from friendship into deeper emotional closeness and ultimately into a romantic same-sex relationship.

Rather than presenting these relationships as separate or contradictory, the novel portrays them as part of a continuous process of relational and emotional development. This progression moves from heterosexual interaction to homosocial bonding and eventually to homosexual desire, suggesting that Kyoshi's identity reflects bisexual tendencies through her capacity to form meaningful attachments to both male and female characters.

From a theoretical standpoint, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of homosocial desire helps explain how admiration and emotional closeness may gradually develop into romantic attraction. At the same time, Stuart Hall's theory of representation underscores how these meanings are not stated explicitly, but are constructed through narrative elements such as dialogue, actions, and characterization.

It is important, however, to situate this interpretation within a broader understanding of sexual orientation. This study does not suggest that sexual orientation changes solely because of social interaction. Rather, the novel illustrates how identity can be expressed and negotiated through interpersonal relationships within a fictional context. As noted by Christopher C. H. Cook (2021), sexual orientation is shaped by a complex interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors.

In addition, Kyoshi's bisexuality is not solely an invention of F. C. Yee but is rooted in the established canon of *The Legend of Korra: Turf Wars*. Yee's role lies in expanding and deepening this aspect of the character while maintaining balance with other narrative elements such as conflict and character development.

Taking together, these findings highlight how literary works can represent bisexuality as a dynamic and evolving identity. The novel not only constructs a nuanced portrayal of sexual orientation through character relationships but also reflects broader cultural conversations surrounding gender and sexuality.

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