

THE CONFORMIST CONUNDRUM: INTERROGATING THE NORMS OF CONFORMITY IN *ANGELS IN AMERICA: A GAY FANTASIA ON NATIONAL THEMES*

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Abstract

*This paper aims to look at the constructivist implications of identity constitution in the play *Angels in America* by focusing on the characters falling along the conformist spectrum of identities. The paper uses the theoretical scaffolding of Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and Michel Foucault's concept of Knowledge/Power. The characters in the play are aware that "[p]erforming one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all." (Butler 528) Thus, it emerges that performative fluidity challenges the stability of heterosexual normative. By looking at the narrative of these characters through the lens of the aforementioned theories, the paper tries to move closer to praxis.*

Keywords: Identity, Performativity, Heteronormative, Power.

Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes is a seminal play in the repertory of not only Tony Kushner but also literature, especially drama. The two parts of the play- *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*- are strong forces to be reckoned with. The play won the 1993 and 1994 Tony Award for Best Play. The first part of the play, *Millennium Approaches*, received the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

Angels in America is a politically charged play. As a nation and people, it had been a considerable period of time since America had ushered into the period of postmodernism. The nation's founding principles were rooted in egalitarianism, acceptance and love. The US Declaration of Independence (1776) reads:

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the

opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Unfortunately, history tells us that these lofty principles soon came under the siege of divisiveness and hatred; the advance of the postmodern spirit was arrested. In this epic narrative, Kushner challenges the contemporary American society by effectively showcasing and subsequently demolishing the stubborn essentialist beliefs.

One of the remarkable positions that emerged from postmodernism was the change in the nature of identity. This change was embedded in a wide range of developments that spanned across social, political and economic considerations. The absurdity and ennui that pervaded the world in the aftermath of World War II, the communist scare, Vietnam War and economic turbulence created upheavals in the cultural outlook of people in general. There was a growing disenchantment with the prevailing norms of identity perception. Social movements that were new in spirit provided the impetus for the formation of a new cultural terrain. Cultural authority was challenged and the hierarchical structures associated with it were questioned. The notions of normative culture suffered an abrasion owing to the tectonic changes in the ideology of society. Identity began to be seen as a construct which implied a need for reconfiguration.

The play is a microcosm of the America of 1980s-90s. Notwithstanding, it transcends the spatial and temporal boundaries to become a text that speaks to the unreserved strength of human spirit. It aptly positions itself as an epic drama. In a cauldron stewing with strong concomitants of sex, power, race, class and ethnicity, it indubitably stirs up an intense concoction. The play was a labour of love for Kushner. Through it he produced a powerful indictment of the state of contemporary American affairs.

Kushner's advent on the American theatrical scene created a schism in its timeline. The new postmodern sensibility inaugurated vistas of discussion for the much bandied about topics prevalent in the discourse, with a newfound enthusiasm. *Angels* gave the American theatrical scene a new lease of life:

This is the astonishing theatrical landscape, intimate and epic, of Tony Kushner's "*Angels in America*," which made its much-awaited Broadway debut at the Walter Kerr Theater... Mr. Kushner has written the most thrilling American play in years. (Rich)

He infused a new lease of life into the postmodern impulse driving the age. The rigidities of identities were shaken by him in this landmark play. Kushner calls into question the essentialised notions on the epistemological and ontological nature of sexual, gender and racial identities. In the play, he highlights the outbreak of AIDS epidemic in Reagan-era

which was treated callously by the authorities. The play was later adapted into a miniseries for HBO; Kushner wrote the screenplay for it.

Identity is a construct; it automatically means that it defies any form of fixity and is always in flux. The constructed nature of identity ensures that the subject is susceptible to the changes in social vectors. True to its amorphous nature, the identity is always undergoing transformation, even as we breathe or talk. Markings that are etched into the fabric of self under the effects of a changing chronotope make their way to weave a new tapestry. Any attempt to undo in order to retain the earlier self would only result in destroying the beauty that the tapestry has come to attain.

Angels in America marks the precipice of change that had arrived for the postmodern American theatre as well as people in multiple ways. It created characters who jostled in a bid to understand and define their identity. The play takes us into a new postmodern world where identity, especially, sexual identity was perceived with a newfound constructivist lens of understanding. The politics of identity constitution that underlies our socio-political narratives is exposed in the play. Joe, a lawyer; Harper, his wife and Roy Cohn, Joe's boss, are the characters who would allow us to look at the destructive consequences of essentialising identities.

Harper is presented as a flaky woman who hallucinates and hence is prone to live in a delusional world but when she utters that "old fixed orders [are] spiraling apart", (Kushner 22) she prophetically announces the new dawn. Mr. Lies is a fictitious creation of Harper's mind. The creation of this alternate existence is an attempt at delimiting the boundaries of her identity, considering the forced lie that Joe lives and subsequently makes her live. She finds her identity as Joe's wife problematised because Joe denies being gay. The hostile socio-political climate of New York prevents him from acknowledging the truth. In an atmosphere where heteronormative strictures limit the possibility of self expression via identity, where the rigidities of institutions stultify psychological growth, Harper and Joe become prisoners of an ugly truth. They are expected to be true to the identities chiselled out for them by the social order of legitimacy, irrespective of the personal costs that accrue. Judith Butler says, "...if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief." (Butler 520)

The external factors start dictating internal constitution which is detrimental to Harper as well as Joe. Mr. Lies, the figment of Harper's imagination, in one of the many conversations that Harper has with him, says that as human beings "[w]e are adepts of motion, acolytes of the flux." (23) Thus, even in a casual and fleeting conversation, he impresses upon us a cardinal postmodern thought. The inability to reconcile the opposing realities makes Harper live a ruptured life. She realizes that her identity as Joe's wife is the primary identity beyond which there is no reprieve for her. The fixity of Joe's identity ascribed to him by the society creates

an identity crisis for them. The need to suppress his homosexual identity is Joe's way to assimilate himself in the mainstream America which treated homosexuality as a deviant tendency, rendering such people as pariahs. Consequently the emotional torment that ensues, from the incumbency upon Harper of unseeing the reality of Joe's identity, inflicts profound agony on her.

Institutionalized standards of normativity tend to naturalize, regulate and reify and subsequently create and control human ideology, preventing people from experimenting and creating an independent existence. The effort is towards passing off as unmarked entities, precluding exclusion from the society. Imitating and exhibiting the normalised markers is a constant struggle of negotiation for earning validation. Through the operation of a hegemonistic mechanism, the heteronormative construct regulates sexual identity and circumscribes the subjects rigidly. The juridico-discursive institutions pressurize Joe to compulsorily conform to the heteronormative norms. In this incident the collateral damage is Harper. The conduit of hallucination is the only outlet at her disposal for exorcising her demons. As a result, subjection to heteronormativity damages the interpersonal relationships of Joe and Harper.

Roy Cohn is the embodiment of heteronormative ideology, an active facilitator of its repressive construct. His enacted identity circulates to produce a cascading effect, of which Joe is a victim. In an underhand sleight dealt out to him by Roy Cohn, Joe sees that even the most powerful man in the upper echelons of society eschews admission of his homosexuality. In the face of it he does not have a choice but to be a cohort of a repressive line of thought espoused by Roy. Joe rants out to Harper in a frustrated moment:

For God's sake, there's nothing left, I'm a shell. There's nothing left to kill.

As long as my behavior is what I know it has to be. Decent. Correct. That alone in the eyes of God." (46)

Social construction of identity is a core concept of identity politics. Joe believes that he is performing an identity that is desirable and legitimate. Joe and Roy are participants in a discourse which they have inherited. Its goal is to maintain coherence of identity. Fear of social backlash and marginalization prevents Joe from admitting to his truth; he is paranoid to the point that he even stops Harper from uttering doubts about his sexual preferences and instead, advances his own theory in order to make it seem plausible to him: "Does it make any difference? That I might be one thing deep within, no matter how wrong or ugly that thing is, so long as I have fought, with everything I have, to kill it."(46)

In a significant speech, Roy Cohn posits important thoughts for the audience to ruminate over. He divests sexual identity of 'sex' that is inscribed in it. As repulsive a character as he may be, Roy Cohn locates it within the matrix of power relations, concretised in the form of " labels [which] tell you one thing and one thing only: where does an individual so identified fit in the food chain, in the pecking order? Not ideology, or sexual taste, but something much simpler: clout." (51)

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault articulates upon the idea as presented by Roy Cohn: "...it is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power-knowledge, the processes and struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge."(26)

The heterosexual discourse functions systematically through the agency of power to prevent any infiltration and consequent change in the status quo of balance of power. Relegation to the margins of discourse is the way in which the 'sanctity' of status is maintained and reiterated. Through a set of regulatory practices, the heterosexual cultural matrix ensures that the 'other' identities cannot exist. These identities that fall outside the purview of the regulatory discourse are dismissed and hence proven as unintelligible practices. Consequently the allegedly stabilizing vectors entail that the identity produced adheres to the norms of coherence, stability and intelligibility. As one of the components of the cultural matrix, religion necessitates compliance with the norms issued by it, thus, regulating the production of identity. Joe is stung by compunction when he feels that he cannot "measure up" and "live up to God's strictures, which are very...strict"(59) The overbearing governing entity created by religion, in the form of God, is the weapon through which the hegemonic order is enforced, maintained and advanced. Rejection of this regulatory authority is punished by hedging the subject in a trap of remorse and guilt which ultimately deters him from taking any deviation, as happens with Joe. In this respect, views of Ganzevoort, der Laan and Olsman are reiterative: "To discover oneself to be a member of a contested, stigmatized, or even rejected group is at least potentially harmful, even when many people in this situation find ways to cope with it." (Ganzevoort 209) The society carries out its "gay agenda" (Herman 67) as an organized effort to protect the traditional Christian values. Religious institutions use this as the pretext to centralize power and exercise control upon its subjects. Sanctification accorded by religion reaffirms the sense of identity in the subject in question. When the comfort of continuation is denied, thus, affecting a schism in the thoughts, the 'subjected' entity feels decentred. The universe of this subjected being spirals out of control and it is unable to reconcile the opposing identities, thus, eventually creating a fractured identity. Joe suffers from a sense of this fractured identity which convinces him that religious sanction has no salvation for him just as the social order doesn't. In a society where there is a systemic force at work to 'out' them, the validation of religion, which enjoys a reverential high ground, is valuable. A subject primarily identifies itself by organizing its identity around a core identity from amidst the multiple identities available to it. For the homosexuals their sexual identity becomes the organizing identity. Often homosexuals organize their self-identity around their sexual identity. This organizational principle lends unity or consistence to the other identities of the person. Joe is subsumed by the overarching social and religious institutions which would deny him the status of an insider if he strayed from the ordained path. In order to ensure the infallibility of identity and prevent fissures from creeping up, it is

important for Joe to remain within the arc of religious and social sanction. He dithers against the force of his inner calling vis- a- vis his sexuality for fear of illegitimization; for the “fear of what comes after the doing” and “that makes the doing hard to do”. (Kushner 75) In an incident when Roy admonishes Joe so as to shed his naiveté about the way the world functions, he may have meant about the politics at hand but the deeper meaning could not be missed out: “...this is politics, Joe, the game of being alive. And you think you’re....What? Above that? Above alive is what? Dead! In the clouds! You’re on earth, goddammit! Plant a foot, stay a while.”(74) Roy Cohn has the machinery of power at his disposal which could be manipulated by him to serve his devious machinations but he falls helpless before a stronger ideological apparatus that would not cut him a favour if he exposed his painful nerve to the world.

In a moment of apparent strength, an inebriated Joe dials up his mother and reveals his homosexuality to her. It is worth noting though, that a state of drunkenness induces in him the courage to undertake the action. However, the significance of it could not be ignored. It is a moment of epiphany for not only Joe and his mother Hannah but also for the audience who had been waiting for the revelation. Joe’s admission is cathartic for him; he has taken the first step towards regaining control of his life and writing his narrative, even if momentarily.

The homosexual outing is always accompanied by some stock reactions as far as the family of the individual is concerned: denial or lie. Hannah pretends that the moment could be erased and life would proceed smoothly by “just forget[ting] this phone call” (82) Despite realizing that this is not a lie she wants to believe against the tide of reality coming her way that Joe can be redeemed if he returns to his wife. Here it is significant to note that this is the stock pattern that families use as a last resort to presumably ‘correct’ the apparent ‘waywardness’ of their children. Homosexuality to them is not a sexual preference or orientation but a malaise that could be cured by taming and curbing, through sexual relationship with a woman. Family, as an institution, tries to impose its ideology with the goal of enforcing and perpetuating its regulatory practices. They do not realize, especially Joe, that Harper deserves to not be treated as just the ‘best buddy’. Joe’s desperate and agonized attempts early on in his life to address his homosexual orientation reveal the lack in our system. He describes his frantic and perplexed method when “[he] thought maybe that with enough effort and will [he] could change [himself]... but [he] [couldn’t]...” (83) This is the initial kneejerk reaction that every confused homosexual grapples with. Pangs of compunction take a hold on his heart, when in an honest admission to Harper he says “I don’t have any sexual feelings for you, Harper. And I don’t think I ever did.”(84) Though unfair to Harper, it at least saves them from the pretense of keeping up a façade to themselves, thus, moving outside the limiting discourse of institutional ideology of family. By reclaiming the truth about their lives, Joe and Harper have challenged the dominant ideology and subverted it as the guiding beacon of the ultimate truth.

The gay characters in the play highlight the fluid nature of gendered identity through visible performative markers like, speech, action and behaviour, thus demonstrating that gender draws legitimacy from “a set of intelligible acts”. Roy Cohn performs the masculine role to hide his gay identity, positioning himself in the matrix of intelligibility. As a result he models his speech, style and behaviour in public after the heterosexual man. This is an affirmation of what Butler says about gender that it is “...a free-floating artifice...” (*Gender Trouble* 6) The gendered actions and gestures of the heterosexual matrix internalized by them dictates their self perception. *Millennium Approaches* maintains the struggle, the tension of a gay behaviour which is rooted in the heteronormative tradition. Roy and Joe’s “false impression of assimilation into the heterosexual hegemony... suggest[s] that their power is illusory.” (Gorney 9) They see their homosexuality as an aberration, which despite their wilful perseverance could not be treated. Masculine gay characterizations, as represented by Roy and Joe, are contingent on the rigidity of the normative binary structure to maintain the illusion of power. These compulsory acts of representation of masculinity reinforce the presence of their mask. By looking towards drawing validation from the binary oppositions as a source of defining their identity, they reject the possibility of creating an individual position within the continuum. Kushner has created in these characters a mouthpiece for gay identities which are compelled by the social constructions of acceptable sexual behaviour. Thus, society necessitates repeated performance of fixed gender roles without any room for integrating deviations from those yardsticks. In the maintenance and continuity of this iterative pattern, the hierarchical structures of power are allowed to proliferate unfettered.

Roy and Joe are not only the victims but also agents in this rigid system. In their reluctance to express solidarity they are perpetuating the cycle of repression and legitimizing the prevailing dominant heteronormative discourse. Though, a pragmatic view of the situation would convey that they were driven by the need to protect themselves, yet it also stands true that they were being an inadvertent agency in advancing the cause of normative sexuality. They feed into the governing forces of social and political spectrum that derive their credibility by universalizing the infallibility of heterosexual normativity. But the disservice is not just limited to the homosexuals as a group, striving for mainstream inclusion. Harper lies at the receiving end of the charade that Joe lives and suffers from anguish, depression and grief. The collateral damage caused by people representative of Joe’s line of thought fails the ethical scale as well. Kushner seeks to bring out these undercurrents in a hard hitting and unpolished way so as to drive home the impact that is demanded.

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