



# Studying Gender and Sexual Identity in Aaron's *Prayers for Bobby* and *Lee's Angel*

- Dr. C. Lalrinzuala  
Guest Lecturer  
Department of English and Culture Studies  
Mizoram University

During the last weekend of June of 1969, a revolutionary incident took place which changed the course of history for gay and lesbian people. The Stonewall Riot marked the turning point in the struggle for Gay and Lesbian Liberation.

A group of gay customers at a popular gay bar in Greenwich Village called the Stonewall Inn, were angered by the harassment and homophobic comments of the police. A riot broke out. The news of this demonstration spread like wildfire and was soon joined by other gay men and women who shouted 'gay power' at the policemen while throwing objects at them. Police reinforcements could not beat down the heat of the demonstration. The Stonewall Riots as it is commonly known can be regarded as the catalyst for the LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender) movement for civil rights in the United States.

This riot inspired the LGBT people throughout the country to organise the support of gay rights and not long after the riots, gay rights groups sprang up in nearly every major city in the United States.

This Stonewall incident is important as it fuses two worlds creating a space characterised by chaos which Homi K. Bhabha calls the 'liminal space.' Society is situated in this liminal space as it neither fully understands the cause of the homosexuals nor fully rejects the once silenced voice of the queers. In other words, there is a hybridity of cultures which caused a liminal space marked by disintegration and chaos in the level of sexual identity and gender. The heteronormative traditional acceptance of sexual identity which was once considered

to be fixed became deconstructed. Other contemporary theorist like Judith Butler came to the scene with her seminal works notably *Gender Trouble* (1990).

In her *Gender Trouble*, Butler talks about the ‘performativity’ of gender and says that gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on, as one puts on clothes in the morning, that there is ‘one’ who is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today.

If one is to take the view point of Butler into consideration then it puts into question what identity and sexuality truly stands for. If the point which every human, accepted to be the ‘true’ identity i.e. gender susceptible to variations and is not stable then the question lies: where does one’s identity lie? What makes up who one is? It is clear from this fact that one’s sexuality does not define a person and that the failure to follow the code of socially constructed gender roles does not necessarily bring disintegration on one’s ‘true’ identity.

According to Butler, nothing about one’s identity is fixed. The gender roles that one takes upon in life are just a result of repetition of discourses. It is a common misconception to try to relate one’s identity with his/her sexual desires. In other words, what Butler is trying to point out is that it is wrong to fix the unfixed identity by taking into consideration the sexual urges and desires.

Butler notes that the ways that one think and talk about gender and sex tend to “presuppose and preempt the possibilities of imaginable and realizable gender configurations within culture” (13). One is constrained by existing discourses. Many humanist when viewing a person see gender as an attribute which when once installed by culture becomes fixed and a permanent part of that person’s self. But Butler prefers “those historical and anthropological positions that understand gender as a relation among socially constituted subjects in specifiable contexts” (15). In other words, gender should be seen as a fluid variable which can shift and change at different times and circumstances rather than viewing it as a fixed attribute.

Gender is so pervasive that in the society today it is assumed that it is bred into the genes. From reading the theory laid down by Butler it can be established that gender is constantly created and re-created out of human interaction, out of social life, and is the texture and order of that social life. Yet gender, like culture, is a human

production that depends on everyone constantly "doing gender." And everyone "does gender" without thinking about it.

In order to know the process constituting the social construction of gender one needs to begin with the conception. For the individual, gender construction starts with assignment to a sex category at the time of birth which is done on the basis of what the genitalia look like. Then after this comes the assignment of dresses to the babies who are dressed or adorned in a way that displays the category to prevent the constant question of the gender of the sex of the babies which can be annoying for parents. A sex category becomes a gender status through naming, dress, and the use of other gender markers. Once a child's gender is evident, the child is then treated differently according to the gender the child possesses. Children respond to these different treatments which can be seen by how they feel and behave. Sex does not come into play again until puberty, but by that time, gendered norms and expectations have already shaped the sexual feelings, desires and practices. All of these processes constitute the social construction of gender.

Gender, then, is nothing more than a performance. "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; . . . identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (33). What Butler is trying to say here is that one does not have a gender identity which informs his/her behaviour. Gender, then, is what people do at particular times, rather than a universal 'who' one is.

Butler recognises gender as something of an achievement. If a woman puts on a new dress and make-up, she might declare 'I feel like a woman tonight'; similarly, a man who has put on overalls and picked up a power drill might see himself in the mirror and say 'What a man!' The fact that these expressions are not wholly meaningless shows that mostly people are at least partly aware that gender is some kind of performance.

This makes it clear that no kind of identity is more 'true' or 'real' than any other. Thus, for example, where gay relationships seem similar in style and structure to heterosexual partnerships, this only reveals to Butler the 'utterly constructed status' of both types. Thus, gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy. "The parodic repetition of 'the original' . . . reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the idea of the natural and the original." (41)

Similarly, one may say that there cannot be any 'real' or 'authentic' performance of male or female. There are patterns of identity one is already familiar with due to the frequent repetition but, Butler suggests that there is nothing fixed or predetermined about them. The mass media plays a much centred role in influencing people as to what one is to believe in as it conspicuously circulates certain kinds of performances of male and female which has to be preferred, thereby making the gender categories more 'real'. Regarding this influence of the mass media, David Gauntlett writes in his book, *Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction*:

Within particular moments, then, the media might make gendered behaviours seem more 'natural', but when considered over time, the broad changes reveal the very constructedness of gender performances (151).

In *Prayers for Bobby*, the mother, Mary Griffith, being a product of the traditional heteronormative society, indirectly drove her son, Bobby Griffith to commit suicide. She could not accept the sexuality of Bobby which fails to be in par with the traditional acceptance of sexuality. It is the society which lays down rules and conditions the minds of the people on certain attributes which certain gender should follow. A homosexual by birth, Bobby is not able to abide by this 'rule'. Under the pressure of his mother and the society Bobby began to detest who he was. This detestation can be seen in his private diaries which he kept only to himself as it contained his deepest thoughts and details which the 'normal' people would surely reject if they ever read it. His diary being the only friend he had, there are various entries which showed his intense inner sufferings:

May 11, 1979. Sometimes I feel like I'm at the edge of a cliff, looking down at the crashing surf with nowhere to go but down to the jagged rocks below. I can ask myself why all this B.S. is happening to me, but would it change anything? No, I'll have to change before circumstances do. But fuck, right now I have neither the will or the energy to change my ways of thinking

May 18. Dear God: Are you there? I ask because i really don't know. Sometimes I hurt so bad, and I'm scared and alone. I wonder why you or somebody doesn't help. I'm so mad and frustrated, I seem to be at the end of the road. Why do you remain silent?

May 30. Gentle springtime weather surrounds me, but a fierce unrelenting storm rages within. How much more can I take? Only time and a million tears of bitterness will tell. I guess I am slowly sinking in a

vast lake of quicksand; a bottomless pool of death. I wish I could crawl under a rock and sleep for the rest of time.

June 1. I'm scared of the person I could grow up to be. Oh, how I hope the changes in myself ahead of me are good ones. (172-174)

The anger which he feels inside manifests itself in one incident when he and his brother Ed had a fight.

The author writes:

Bobby had totally lost it, Ed observed. He was out of his head during the fight. Still, at the time Ed didn't view their scuffle as particularly serious. Later he would realize that it had nothing to do with them, that the volcano inside Bobby had been bubbling to the surface. He would understand, too, that when Bobby had said, "I want to be normal like you," he had meant, "I want to be ordinary, not some freak." When Bobby drove his fist into the mirror he was lashing out at the freak he saw reflected there. (314-315)

Some of the entries he made, sometimes show that he at times wanted to change who he was and follow what the society wanted him to be. The convulsions which he sometimes had were also results of the frustration he felt due to his inability to abide by the rules of the traditional acceptance of sexuality in spite of him wanting to change. In other words, Bobby was experiencing liminality on a personal psychological level when his idea of 'true' identity clashed with the traditional norm.

His mother wanted to change Bobby's sexual desires and relate his desires with his identity. She sees his identity in relation to his sexuality. As any kind of 'perverse' sexuality is rejected by the society and the Church at large and since Bobby was born with that kind of 'perverse' tendency, this tendency is immediately seen as his identity.

Tracing the history of discourses about sex, Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* argues that in the seventeenth century it was Christianity which brought sex into the spotlight, decreeing that all desires should be transformed into discourse, in the form of the Christian confession. Desires suddenly became the priority and it acquired great importance. Throughout the Western culture, this idea of sex being the inner 'truth' about the self spread. This further became reinforced in the eighteenth century by carefully-worded studies, when sex

became a 'police' matter, and also rested at the core of the newly-emergent political and economic concern about 'population' (Foucault *History* 20–25).

Foucault regards the modern concept of homosexuality, as arising from a desire to perceive the concept of sexuality as the fundamental aspect of one's identity. The act of sodomy was simply regarded as a criminal act before the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. It was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature. (43)

In short, the word 'Homosexuality' was no longer associated with certain acts but became a part of a person's identity and his soul. Worst than this, it developed to be the main aspect of a person's identity, his/her true self. Sexuality now became the central key to interpret a person's personality and behaviour. Working to eliminate homosexual acts ceased to be priority, rather the discourse that developed around homosexuality viewed the acts of homosexuality as constitutive of a person's identity. Jeffrey Weeks in his book, *Sexuality* wrote:

...new typologies of degeneracy and perversions emerged and there was a decisive growth of new sexual identities. Homosexuality moved from being a category of sin to become a psychological disposition. Sexology, the new would-be science of desire, began to speculate about the laws of sex and 'sexuality' finally emerged as a separate continent of knowledge with its own distinct effects. (33)

Taking Foucault's concept of 'Homosexuality' into account, the forty-two year old minister Paul Tobit falling for a young man of twenty-four Ian in *Angel* is not a strange thing. Prior to this, Paul had never had any trait of homosexuality in him. In fact, he was married to a loving wife, Sara Tobit who eventually died of cancer. When Sara died, so did his liveliness and his enthusiasm. He lacked inspiration after she died and he was ever in search of a reason to live and a reason to be happy again. This mental stagnation of his is also affecting his lively energy in his work as a minister of the Church. Fully aware of his inertia, he visits Sara's grave and utters:



God, I miss you, Sara. I just don't know what I'm doing anymore. You had a way of pointing me in the right direction. My job is to inspire people. How can I do that if I'm not inspired? I don't need God to send an angel down on a cloud to touch me on the shoulder. But I wouldn't mind a little spark of inspiration. I just want to wake up to life again, to feel the presence of God in something. I'm just going through the motions, and the members of the church deserve better. (8)

When he first met Ian, an alcoholic on his way to an AA (Anonymous Alcoholics) meeting and who he initially thought was an angel and later a woman, he immediately fell for him. He felt and behaved like a young teenager who is having a secret crush. This homosexual trait baffled him, obviously, as he was a product of the society, conditioned with what the society teaches about homosexuality. "What am I thinking? He's a man. A man," (12) said he lying on his bed fantasising about his new found love.

As mentioned before, Paul had never had any kind of homosexual tendencies prior to this. It was not the 'sex' or 'identity' he was born with, but now he has suddenly developed sexual urges for a man of the same gender. The socially constructed gender role he was meant to play is being deconstructed when he falls in love with a man. This can be related to Butler's contention that it is wrong to try to relate one's identity with his/her sexual desires as the identity and the sexual desires cannot be related. In other words, Paul is performing a dual identity that originated when he first fell for a man. In the Church he executes the role of a normal heterosexual minister preaching to the people. But with Ian, he performs the role of a homosexual man intensely in love with a young man. As these two identities clash there exists disorientation because one is accepted while the other is objected to society. The minister, regarded to uphold the heteronormative norms, is initially disturbed by the uncontrollable feeling he had for Ian. He linked his feelings with his mission work and his capability to appreciate something which is aesthetically beautiful. But, he clearly knows that this feeling he had for Ian goes beyond the external, it was sexual also. Finding it hard to accept his feelings toward Ian, he undergoes a chaotic searching for an answer:

God had given him a sign that this was someone he should notice so he could help him spiritually. Yet Paul sensed his attraction went beyond a desire to be of service. What was it? It wasn't sexual, he told himself. It couldn't be sexual. He was not gay. He had to be feeling something else. Inspiration, a pure appreciation of beauty. There was nothing wrong with admiring beauty where it existed, even in a male form. God had created it. It was divine energy. (12)

Here, one can see how even though Paul is not gay, he still have feelings for a guy. And later when he and Ian indulge themselves in a sexual relationship, he still maintains the fact that he is not gay. Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* states that the label 'Homosexuality' is not related to who a person is. He talks about how since the 19<sup>th</sup> century homosexuality ceased to be confined to the realm of one's behaviour and action and is linked to a person's identity. A person who indulges in a homosexual activity is now seen as a homosexual person and his/her whole identity is judged and centered on that. As this becomes the case, there exists a fixed and clear fine line between the two polar 'identities' i.e. homosexuals and heterosexual the clash of which is bound to create chaos.

In *Angel*, Paul experiences the same kind of situation- the repercussion of which he received from the people whom he worked with in the Church and the people whom he ministered to, as they could not understand what he was going through. When he had a sexual relation with a man, even right before that, when he started having feelings for a man he was already labelled a homosexual. Homosexuality is no longer limited to a certain 'perverse' behaviour, it encompasses a person's whole identity.

In *Prayers for Bobby*, Bobby's 'perverse' desire to be with a person of the same sex convinced his family and the people around him that he was a homosexual. Even he himself was convinced that his desires made him homosexual as it was the general acceptance. Choked by his secret, but still feeling the need to come out to another human being, he came out to his brother Ed Griffith with whom he shared nothing similar but difference. A perfect recipient for Bobby, the flabbergasted Ed questions Bobby:

"Bobby, how do you know this?" "I've known for a long time," Bobby answered. "But how can you be sure?" "I'm sure, Ed. Believe me, I'm sure." Bobby hung his head as if in pain. They talked some more, and Ed could see that Bobby considered his gayness to be a terrible defect. (74)

He does not need to have sexual relationship with a man for him to be labelled homosexual; as the criteria for being a homosexual already exists in his desire and also in his behaviour according to the normal acceptance. This so called 'normalcy' is what caused Bobby to internalise his agony and hide this 'terrible defect' in him. In the preface of her book, *Gender Trouble* Butler thus said:



... normative sexuality fortifies normative gender. Briefly, one is a woman, according to this framework, to the extent that one functions as one within the dominant heterosexual frame and to call the frame into question is perhaps to lose something of one's sense of place in gender. (xi)

As mentioned earlier, one's behaviour and identity are often linked together that how one behaves is taken into consideration and used as a significant tool to determine a person's identity. Richard Jenkins identifies 'identity' as:

a very basic starting point, identity is the human capacity — rooted in language — to know 'who's who' (and hence 'what's what'). This involves knowing who we are, knowing who they are, and so on: a multi- dimensional classification or mapping of the human world and our places in it, as individuals and as members of collectivities. (5)

Speaking further on the birth of the label, 'homosexual' Foucault sees the increase of scrutinizing of the various forms of sexual behaviour to be a part of what he famously calls "spirals of power and pleasure." According to his view what draws observer and observed into a close and intimate contact is the close scrutiny that accompanies the 'medicalization' of sexuality. On one hand, when the observer exercises power in examining and drawing out his subject's sexual pleasures, this exercise of power harness in him a kind of pleasure. On the other hand, this process of scrutiny of the observer tends to isolate and highlight his subject's pleasures, thus giving some kind of encouragement to the observed. In this way it becomes clear that both the observer and the observed can find both power and pleasure intermingling in this intimate examination. As Foucault thus says:

The power which thus took charge of sexuality set about contacting bodies, caressing them with its eyes, intensifying areas, electrifying surfaces, dramatizing troubled moments. It wrapped the sexual body in its embrace. There was undoubtedly an increase in effectiveness and an extension of the domain controlled; but also a sensualization of power and a gain of pleasure. This produced a twofold effect: an impetus was given to power through its very exercise; an emotion rewarded the overseeing control and carried it further; the intensity of the confession renewed the questioner's curiosity; the pleasure discovered fed back to the power that encircled it. But so many pressing questions singularized the pleasures felt by the one who had to reply. They were fixed by a gaze, isolated and animated by the

attention they received. Power operated as a mechanism of attraction; it drew out those peculiarities over which it kept watch. Pleasure spread to the power that harried it; power anchored the pleasure it uncovered. (*History* 44-45)

For Foucault confession has become an omnipresent aspect of one's daily lives, one no longer think of the power pushing him/her toward confession as a constraint placed upon him/her. On the contrary, we have come to think of confession as a way of finding truth, a form of liberation from the repressive powers that try to silence him/her.

The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, 'is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, "demands" only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation. Confession frees, but power reduces one to silence; truth does not belong to the order of power, but shares an original affinity with freedom: traditional themes in philosophy, which a "political history of truth" would have to overturn by showing that truth is not by nature free-nor error servile-but that its production is thoroughly imbued with relations of power. The confession is an example of this. (60)

From the moment when Bobby chose to confess about his sexuality, his relationship with his family deteriorated and it seems that somehow this confession brought about awareness in him about his true identity and individuality leading him to live a "homosexual lifestyle". The work of the observers like his mother, create in him and encourage him to go against what the society wants him to be. He was searching for who he was and where he fits in the heterosexual world. His immense inner turmoil as seen in his diary is mainly caused by the rejection of his family. This leads him to seek love and acceptance in places where he thought he could find. Sometimes, he even indulges in some promiscuous activities but not without guilt. This guilt further creates an inner turmoil which at times can be very suicidal in tone. The constant reminder of his mother about his sinful nature adds up to his pain. Butler remarks:

I sought to understand some of the terror and anxiety that some people suffer in "becoming gay," the fear of losing one's place in gender or of not knowing who one will be if one sleeps with someone of

the ostensibly “same” gender. This constitutes a certain crisis in ontology experienced at the level of both sexuality and language. (Butler xi)

Foucault observes how the discourses on sexuality have increased over time. One's sexual proclivities like any other were once just a fact about oneself but now they are the key to unlocking one's character. When it comes to sexual habits earlier generations would have a different perspective and would have most probably equated with the way they thought of eating habits: no one would have thought to classify a person according to what they eat. Even today, when people are categorised as ‘vegetarian’ or ‘vegan,’ their entire character is not necessarily tried to be understood based on his or her dietary preferences. And yet, the tone of voice, the taste in music, or the political affiliation of a person is all taken as monolithic criteria to understand that person's ‘homosexuality.’

Foucault further claims that observation is not a neutral act. That is to say the perverse sexuality is not an objective and immovable thing that will not change under scrutiny. If the sources of sexual pleasure are intensely scrutinized, then it gives one a new awareness of those pleasures, an awareness that can be said to be the result of that scrutiny. A person's sources of sexual pleasure become secrets and mysteries that a careful observer must discover and seek answers to. As a result the person thus becomes more aware of these pleasures which make it more valuable for him/her. As a matter of fact, he/she might not have notice these pleasures if he/she was not a subject to the scrutiny which heightened the awareness and sense of value, just like a person who is told that slight stomach cramps are the first sign of terminal cancer might develop an acute sensitivity toward her stomach.

A person's sexual pleasures are closely linked to the power being exercised to draw these pleasures into focus. The more it is being scrutinized, the more there is to find. Foucault describes this relationship between pleasure and power as a spiral: they pursue one another in a circular pattern, power seeking pleasure and pleasure drawn to power. The powers of analysis which have been directed toward perverse sexuality have not acted to repress it but to help it flourish.

Here, the words of Hans Bertens when he talks about the intimate relationship between knowledge and power as seen in Foucault's works is significant:

Knowledge is a way to define and categorize others. Instead of emancipating us from ignorance, it leads to surveillance and discipline. Occasionally, it seems to lead to more positive results. To stay with the field of sexuality, the ‘discovery’ that there are men who have a ‘homosexual personality’ has led to disciplining and stigmatizing, but may also be said to have contributed to the creation of homosexual communities, to solidarity at the personal level, and even to collective action at the political level. Foucault is aware of this, but it is not easy to determine whether he sees such a “reverse” discourse’ (his term) as an instance of successful resistance. (154)

Taking cue from Michel Foucault’s “observation” in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, published in 1975, one can say that Bobby becomes the object of observation. Observation to Foucault is a mechanism that coerces, rather than the process by which the public watches an execution. Foucault's point is that the person observed can be coerced or forced to do something by being observed constantly. Not only do the observed feel self-conscious, but their behaviour changes. This is an example of the operation of power: an effect occurs on their body without physical violence. This is very true in the case of Bobby who becomes the subject of observation which further led to his self-surveillance and then caused a change in him.

The emergence of the category of homosexuality and ‘the homosexual’ clearly illustrates what was actually taking place. Homosexual activities or same-sex activities are definitely widespread throughout every culture and the history of homoeroticism is present both in the West and across all other cultures. But the idea that there is such a thing as ‘the homosexual person’ is relatively a new one. Relating with what Foucault has said, one can say that the evidences are present suggesting that before the eighteenth century, homosexuality, interpreted in its broadest sense as involving erotic activities between people of the same sex, certainly existed, but the term ‘homosexuals’ in its modern sense, did not exist before and came into existence only after the development of medical sciences.

Initially the act of sodomy was severely condemned mostly in Britain and then to the United States, West Indies, from Africa to Hong Kong. But the idea of a distinct type of homosexual personage was unknown. Even though the commonly used term ‘the social construction of sexuality’ has a harsh and mechanistic sound, at its heart it is quite a straightforward concern with the intricate and multiple ways in which emotions, desires and relationships are shaped by the society one live in. Jeffrey Weeks speaks about the same subject when he says:

The 'sodomite' cannot be seen as equivalent to the 'homosexual'. Sodomy was not a specifically homosexual crime; the law applied indifferently to relations between men and women, men and beasts, as well as men and men. And while by the eighteenth century the persistent sodomite was clearly perceived as a special type of person, he was still defined by the nature of his act rather than the character of his personality. (34)

Foucault while attempting to made query on the very category of sexuality wrote:

Sexuality must not thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct. (*History* 105)

This 'new' kind of identity clearly disturbed Bobby in *Prayers for Bobby*. The position in which Bobby was standing was very unstable and quandary as he could neither identify himself as 'straight' nor gay because of the pressure he received from his family especially his mother. He was transitioning, getting to grip with things. Because of his personal, internal processing of himself he did not fit as 'straight', he was not yet fully ready to take on a 'gay identity' because, as mentioned, of the various pressures. And also he was not 'positionable' as such by anyone. In short, he was liminal. He experienced cognitive dissonance- as he was aware of his conflict with the heteronormative order- he cannot resolve. Religion contributes to homophobia and cognitive dissonance particularly for Bobby and also Paul in *Angel* as it is the general belief that there is a fundamental conflict existing between Christianity and homosexuality. Heterosexism and homophobia definitely contribute to and reinforce their liminal state, by preventing their transition to publicly recognised homosexual status in the society. Similarly, Paul, even though he loved Ian and had a sexual relationship with him still hesitated to identify himself as a gay man. He even said to himself, "I'm not gay, but my boyfriend is." (Lee 125) Lee continues saying that:

He certainly couldn't insist he was "straight" anymore, given the circumstances. "Bisexual" was the obvious (and least absurd) choice, but it didn't feel right to him either. Paul had always associated that word with people who wanted to play around and experiment with sex. To his mind, it lacked commitment and serious intent. (125)

This hesitation to associate himself with homosexuality is clearly the result of the homophobic societal stance and him being thoroughly conditioned by this society failed to identify himself as homosexual. In other words, he was also liminal.

Andy was part of Ian's other world, a strange foreign place he inhabited that had never included Paul. Andy was ready to accept Paul into their world without hesitation. Paul was sure he didn't belong. I'm not like him...Boyfriend. Paul immediately hated the word. Heaven help me, he thought. I have a boyfriend. This clearly should not have come as a surprise. He had been living with Ian for months now. Yet for the most part, they had existed in their own little world. Paul hadn't let himself take much time to consider who they were to the larger world, who each was individually in society, and who they were together. Ian is my boyfriend. Paul tried the label on and tried to make himself comfortable with it. It wasn't working. (124)

For Paul, all that matters is his love for Ian. But in the real world that is not how the society accepts identity and sexuality. He professed not to be confused sexually but according to the yardstick of the nominal acceptance he could not be identified with either of the binaries- heterosexual and homosexual.

His sexuality wasn't confusing or complicated at all, really. He had fallen in love with Sara, and he fell in love with Ian. Simple. It only became complicated when he tried to fit that reality into the shorthand of official categories. That these labels failed to describe how he felt about himself should not have troubled him much, but so many people had faith in the categories that he was inclined to believe the problem was with himself, and not the check boxes. That was where he became confused. (125)

For a better understanding of the relationship between identity and sexuality, it is important to see how certain cultures view these concepts and how colonialism have caused the liminality of identity. The Samoan culture with their *fa'afafine* people serves this purpose of cross cultural examination well. Western academic discourses particularly gay and lesbian studies and more recently queer studies have constructed a third gender category. Any group of individuals who transgresses the gender binary and appears to have a definable and sanctioned status are classified as third gendered: the *hijra* of India and the *fa'afafine* of Samoa, along with others, are reduced to easily comparable and highly similar examples of transgenderism. Yet, identity as "central to the realisation and name of the individual's 'true self'" is a construction of Western modernity. (Worth Para.7)



In Samoan, the word *fa'afafine* means “in the fashion of a woman,” when such fashion is undertaken by somebody who is not a female biologically (Besnier 1994: 286). In his most innovative work, Niko Besnier in *Polynesian Gender Liminality through Time and Space*, discusses the historical construction of this particular category. That is to say, he discusses the ways in which Europeans of the Enlightenment conceived Polynesian gender liminality according to their own perception and also through their own conceptions of gender, sexuality and morality. Besnier also remark that when the *fa'afafine* were not being mistaken for women, they were scrutinized morally because of their seemingly unnatural sexual practices (293). Ethnographers and expeditionary Europeans conceptualized the sexual lives of the *fa'afafine* as unnatural due to their homosexuality. However, as Jeanette Mageo and Johanna Schmidt noted, feminine gender practice and eventual sexual preference are not being equated by the Samoans, and also they do not necessarily categorize sexual practices as hetero- or homosexual. Classifying *fa'afafine* as homosexual, transgender, gay or third gendered, according to Besnier’s argument “at best capture only one aspect of the category, at worst are completely miscontextualized” (ibid: 287).

From what has been said about the ideas which theorists like Judith Butler and Michel Foucault propounded about gender and sexual identity being a social construction and simply a performance clearly highlight the fact that as the society fails to move along the line of the mentioned theories, homosexuals, as now being referred to, are now being situated in a liminal space, the in-between world as they fail to identify themselves with either of the binary sex laid down by the heteronormative society.

### WORK CITED

- Aarons, Leroy. *Prayers for Bobby: A Mother's Coming to Terms with the Suicide of Her Gay Son*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995. Print.
- Bertens, Hans. *Literary Theory: The Basics*. London: Routledge Publication, 2001. Print.
- Besnier, Niko. *In Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism Culture and History*. New York: Zone Books, 1994. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, i*. Trans. Robert Hurley. London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1978. Print.

Gauntlett, David. *Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.

Jenkins, Richard. *Social Identity: Third Edition*. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.

Lee, Laura. *Angel*. New York: Itineraries Press, 2011. Print.

Weeks, Jeffrey. *Sexuality*. New York: Routledge, 2010. Print.

Worth, Heather 2001 “Bad-Assed Honeys with a Difference: South Auckland *Fa’afafine* Talk About Identity.”

*Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* issue 6, URL:

<http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue6/worth.html>, accessed August 14, 2015.

