

**NEITHER STRAIGHT, NOR WHITE: GENDER, SEXUAL AND
RACIAL INTERSECTIONALITY IN SELECT AFRICAN-
AMERICAN AND ASIAN-AMERICAN TEXTS**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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Submitted

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled, “Neither Straight, Nor White: Gender, Sexual and Racial Intersectionality in Select African-American and Asian-American Texts” is the bonafide research conducted by Mr. Sourav Upadhyaya under my supervision. Mr. Sourav Upadhyaya worked methodically for this thesis being submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English and Culture Studies, Mizoram University.

This is to further certify that the research conducted by Mr. Sourav Upadhyaya has not been submitted in any other University/Institute.

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DECLARATION
MIZORAM UNIVERSITY
NOVEMBER 2025

I, Sourav Upadhyaya, hereby declare that the subject matter of this thesis is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this thesis did not form basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University/Institute.

This is being submitted to the Mizoram University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English and Culture Studies.

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Sourav Upadhyaya

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CONTENTS

1. CERTIFICATE	i
2. DECLARATION	ii
3. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	iii
4. TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
5. BODY OF THE THESIS	
i) Chapter I	1-44
Introduction	
ii) Chapter II	45-100
Interrogating Black Gay Identity in <i>No Ashes in the Fire</i> and <i>Speak No Evil</i>	
iii) Chapter III	101-151
The Politics of Visibility in <i>Loving Her</i> and <i>Brown White</i> <i>Black</i>	
iv) Chapter IV	152-212
‘Fragmented Entries, Multiple Selves’: Performing Asian- American in <i>Restoried Selves</i> and <i>Slant</i>	
v) Chapter V	213-241
Conclusion	
6. BIBLIOGRAPHY	242-255
7. BRIEF BIO-DATA OF THE CANDIDATE	v
8. PARTICULARS OF THE CANDIDATE	vi

CHAPTER I

Introduction

This study titled “Neither Straight, Nor White: Gender, Sexual and racial Intersectionality in Select African-America and Asian-American Texts” is located in parentheses between Kevin Mumford’s articulation of ‘Not Straight, Not White’ and Kimberle Crenshaw’s conceptualization of ‘Intersectionality’. The study examines identity crisis inherent in lived realities of African-American and Asian-American experiences to understand the complex interplay of social categories and individual subjectivities. It seeks to problematize and negotiate the presumably inherent but vexed notion of two-genders (male/female) and one-sexuality (heterosexuality) deeply entrenched in our vocabulary. It in particular seeks to examine how gender and sexuality, as categories of identities, must continually be understood in relation to other paradigms like race, nationality, ethnicity, class and other identities. It seeks to enquire how these different trajectories work as interlocked mechanism in the politicization of the body. It will seek to understand sexual identity formation as a social construct as well as a political act in which power is exercised. It will further examine the dynamics of transgression and resistance. Drawing upon theoretical discourses like Queer Studies, Black Feminism, Gay Studies, Critical Race Theory, Performance theories, Post-Colonialism, Critical Discourse Analysis and more importantly Intersectional Studies, it turns towards text, discourse, language, representation, affect and embodiment to make sense of the queer experience of African-Americans and Indian-Americans in the US cultural milieu.

There are compelling questions that arise in our interrogation of sexual identity in the United States. In the context of our study, it becomes imperative to ask such questions as: In what ways do the political and personal identities of non-white queer individuals intersect and evolve through the complex interplay of historical context, racial dynamics, and sexuality? In what manner do theories of alternative sexualities illuminate the unique lived experiences of Asian Americans? What unique challenges do African-American and the Asian-American queer individuals face in navigating their racial, gender, and sexual identities simultaneously in the United States? How do stereotypes and representations in media and popular culture

impact the intersectional experiences of these people? Is same-sex discourse in United States primarily a white and male phenomenon? Does 'gay' community formation deliberately exclude people of colour and women? If so, why? Who benefits from it? Who is most affected by it? In what many ways is this manifested? Do identity formation in non-white gays and lesbians take on different trajectories? What unique positions they find themselves located in? Do they face hostilities differently? How do these social categories navigate the tough waters of intersection? What role do American institutions play in these? These are some of the questions that this research work seeks to interrogate.

This research work seeks to study the six primary texts – *Speak No Evil* (2018) by Uzodinma Iweala's and *No Ashes in the Fire: Coming of Age Black and Free in America* (2018) by Darnell L. Moore, *Brown White Black: An American Family at the Intersection of Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Religion* (2019) by Nishta J. Mehra and *Loving Her* (1974) by Ann Alley Shockley, *Slant: A Novel* (2011) by Timothy Wang and *Restoried Selves: Autobiographies of Queer Asian / Pacific American Activists* (2003) edited by Kevin K. Kumashiro for the purpose. Each of these texts look at the different ways in which queer is perceived. While two of the texts i.e. Uzodinma Iweala's *Speak No Evil* and Darnell L. Moore's *No Ashes in the Fire: Coming of Age Black and Free in America* deal with the question of black gay African-Americans, *Brown White Black: An American Family at the Intersection of Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Religion* by Nishta J. Mehra and Ann Alley Shockley's *Loving Her: A Novel* deal with the question of lesbian identities in inter racial relationships. Another section of this research work looks at the representation of Asian-Americans in the sexual-racial canvas. The above cited texts look at the intersection of both movements- one queer and the other non-white- that has often been ignored. In doing so it makes a distinction between genders as well as the myriad nature of the 'non-white' that encompass a wide range of people from different races. All these texts not only explore non-white, non-heterosexual relationships, but also question in their distinct ways the simple binaries of homo/hetero and espouse a more humane and nuanced understanding of what constitutes sexuality. The above mentioned authors are newly emergent voices in

America. The narration is set in different metropolis of America and therefore a representative of contesting American voices. While these texts interrogate America as an overarching exploitative and inhumane site, these are also an interrogation of the mindset and ideologies of all patriarchal, heterosexual, racial culture that exists at other places.

The proposed study will undertake to make an in-depth study of the six primary texts mentioned above and construct the necessary arguments within the relevant theoretical premises set by Michel Foucault, Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Frantz Fanon, Kimberly Crenshaw, Patricia Hills Collins, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Homi K. Bhabha and Edward Said amongst others. This thesis will also draw on the works of scholars like Kevin K. Kushamiro, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, Russell Leong, Elaine H Kim, Alegre, Brenda Rodriguez, Martin Manalansan, Mark McLelland, Katsuhiko Suganuma and Ly Thuy Nguyen amongst others. Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1976) and Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) challenged many fundamental assumptions of western philosophical tradition, especially sexuality and as such these texts will be a significant influence in this research work. The select texts raise many critical problems which the present study intends to examine. Intersectionality works like *The Combahee River Collective* (1974), *Sister Outsider* (1984), *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (1981), *Asian American Sexualities* (1996) and *Q&A: Queer in Asian America* (1998) etc are central to our discussion. In engaging with these texts, this thesis will transcend the limitations of unidirectional framework of single categorical axis that often ignores the multi-faceted nature of social struggle and embrace a more nuanced understanding of identity politics.

The following paragraphs constitute a brief introduction to the authors and their respective texts that have been taken up for discussion:

Uzodinma Iweala, Nigerian-American author, first gained recognition with his debut novel *Beasts of No Nation* (2005). The novel draws on themes of violence, trauma and distress and narrates the experience of child soldiers in West Africa. While the thematic allure of the text piqued curiosity about the new author among

the readers, and as they sat anticipating, Iweala would wait another thirteen books to write his second novel. *Speak No Evil*, Iweala's second novel, published in 2018, takes a significant leap forward in subject matter and is a bold exploration of LGBTQ within the US and Nigerian socio-cultural context; we call it a bold exploration given the strong anti-gay Nigerian background in which Iweala comes from and writes. The publication of *Speak No Evil* in 2018 firmly solidified his reputation as a formidable literary voice. *Speak No Evil* narrates the story of eighteen year old gay Nigerian-American teen Niru living in a middle-class suburb of Washington: The story of Niru is a story of shattered dreams, of personal tragedies, of unfulfilled wishes, of broken hearts and of unfulfilled love. It is a story that explores what it means to be different in a fundamentally conformist society. As Niru negotiates his many identities: being a Black man in America, being the child of Nigerian immigrants, coming from a middle-class background, as well as being gay, the text foregrounds issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, religion and the diaspora and the complications of lived experiences for black queers in within America's highly acclaimed liberal ethos. The text opens with Niru confiding his homosexuality to his friend Meredith. The text then builds upon this thematic interest of the novel and shows Niru's love interest for boys of his own age. As the narrative move forwards, the text bring in the tension between his homosexual interest and the current of compulsive heterosexuality. In this, the text explores Niru's relation with his parents, particularly his 'protective' father. Niru's father's repeated assertion that homosexuality constitutes a psychological and spiritual problem becomes a source of much tension in course of the narrative. The presence of Reverend Olumide and Bishop Okereke, two religious figures, complicates the entire discursivities. In this narrative of compulsory heterosexuality and authentic expression of desires, Iweala interrogates linguistic construction in which homosexuality is constructed and examines how institutions like home, schools, religion figure in the homosexual/heterosexual debate. Besides, Iweala also interweaves themes of religion, cultural dislocation, mental health, police brutality, and more, each contributing to the intricate tapestry of the text.

Darnell L. Moore is an American author, activist, thought leader and a black intellectual who has written extensively on racism, sexuality and social justice. Moore's memoir *No Ashes in the Fire: Coming of Age Black and Free in America* (henceforth referred to as *No Ashes*), published in 2018, with its comprehensive rethinking on race, gender and sexuality has ever since been a subject of great scholarly inquiry and reference. The text explores Moore's experience of growing up in New Jersey in the 1980s and the 1990s and his struggles with his personal identity as both black and queer. Excluded for being embodying both blackness and queer by black as well as white America, Moore comprehends how his individual experiences are in conversation with broader discourse surrounding race, gender, and sexuality. As the text draws our attention to the idea of "blackness, crafted by generations of white supremacy" and "the calculated policing of sexual difference" (Moore, 5), the readers are invited to see through the fragmentations and contradictions in which black queer individuals like Moore are received. *No Ashes* has been called part memoir and partly social commentary. While the memoir part of the text details Moore's personal experience, his joys and triumphs, his fears and struggles, the social commentator in Moore takes on different nuances: critique, theorist and poet. As the text details Moore's personal experience, the text draws on cultural and political materials to reflect on the intersection of race, gender and sexuality. Moore writes in the tradition of intellectuals. Moore problematizes and foregrounds issues of representation and stereotypes in queer theories, in political space, in media and literature as well as in the popular US imagination. He questions queer theories for the lapses and omissions. He interrogates controlling images in which the blacks and more especially the black queers are received. Amongst other things, Moore's work is an intertextual explication of Foucault's ideas about institutional support system. As Moore struggles to reconcile racism, sexuality, spirituality, and masculinity, the readers get to look into "societal and institutional abuse and exploitation" and "the real tragedy of living with routine acts of violence". (49) Moore also delves into the intricate dynamics of black civil society, examining how it perpetuates entrenched ideologies of sexism, elitism, and homophobia. Furthermore, he critically analyzes the moral shortcomings within the black community, engaging in a rigorous interrogation of black theology and Christian

thought. The text further brings police, media, housing discrimination, political establishment, deindustrialization of black areas within the ambit of his criticism. The greatest contribution of the book is Moore's attempt at humanizing the black gays, expressing through himself the myriad emotions, struggles, fears and the hostility that they face. But Moore's text also constitutes an act in resistance: *No Ashes* offers a compelling glimpse into Moore's journey of transitioning from the confines of performative conformity to embracing the role of a confrontationalist. Every incident in the memoir, each succeeding chapter is an attempt to subvert deeply entrenched racial, gendered and sexual conformity. The culmination of the text, marked by the powerful declaration, "No more ashes. No more fires. Only love." (131), encapsulates a transformative ethos, symbolizing the transcendence from oppression to empowerment through the ethos of love and liberation.

Nishta J. Mehra is the daughter of first-generation Indian immigrants to US. She is the author of two books: *The Pomegranate King* self-published in 2013 and *Brown White Black: An American Family at the Intersection of Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Religion* (hereafter referred to as *Brown White Black*) published in 2019. *Brown White Black* examines issues of immigrant lives, entrenched racism, representation, stereotypes, parent-child relation, cultural ambivalence, issues of hybridity, the gender questions, tradition/modernity dichotomy, homophobia, intersectionality and a host of other issues. The text redirects our focus from the superficial narratives of "opportunity, privilege, responsibility, success" (130) often presented in US, cultural discursivities to delve into the complexities of marginalization and the politics of in/visibility. *Brown White Black* is truly a unique book in racial, gendered and sexual discursivities, distinguished as it is by its foray into previously unexplored realms of intersectionality through a very exceptional way: the brown, white and black in the title of the book refers to Mehra (who is brown), her partner Jill (white) and their adopted child Shiv (black), i.e. the Mehra family. Mehra's statement "Our family doesn't neatly fit well into boxes" (25) highlights the complexities inherent in mixed-race, queer family dynamic. Mehra begins her text by exploring her brown background against the black-and-white city to which she is born and grows up, examining how immigrants become entangled in

the racial politics of the United States. As the plot progresses, this thematic interest receives greater treatment with better critical insights with interrogations of different institutions like home, schools, marriage, legal and criminal justice system in enforcing conformist behaviour. But it is the text's treatment of the interplay between race, gender and sexuality that is of particular interest to us, especially considering the thematic interest of this thesis. In her treatment of racism and sexism, the author offers her readers a window into her personal journey where she navigates the intricate web of systemic oppression and discrimination as an immigrant. Nishta words that "I was constantly being held up to different sets of standards but found lacking on both sides" (68) show the complexity of the intersectionality in which she was placed. Mehra's own experience with dealing with racism and sexism is only a precursor to what is to come to her child Shiv. Mehra writes candidly about her efforts to protect and shelter Shiv from racial slurs on the playground and from intrusive questions by strangers on Shiv's sexual identity while educating her child on the realities and dangers of being black and queer in America. Mehra argues passionately for a more nuanced and compassionate understanding of identity and family in course of the narrative. Mehra's clear-eyed and incisive writing on her family's daily struggle to make space for themselves amid racial intolerance and sexual stereotypes personalizes some of America's most fraught issues.

Ann Alley Shockley is an American novelist, short-story writer and critic who is best known for her fictional works exploring Black Lesbianism and interracial relationships. In the 1980s, when Allen Shockley undertook to publish her book *Afro-American Women Writers, 1746-1933* as a curator of Black literary production as part of her librarian-activist to retrieve black literary foremothers from their relatively unknown or deliberately ignored existence in American literary canvass to reflect black cultural imperatives, she hardly knew she would be relegated to the same literary obscurity and that that her own works would remain unnoticed for a long period of time for a supposed lack of sufficient 'artistic merit' until some scholars would dig these out to dwell on her merits. Her rise to prominence in the 1990s was forged on the back of such scholars as Barbara Smith and Henry Louis Gates whose scholarship on Shockley significantly helped foreground her literary

merits. Today, Shockley is celebrated for her immense contribution to the world of literature, especially black literature. Many of her works deal with racial and sexual overtones of her times that made a strict distinction of where one belonged to in that mosaic. *Loving Her* is one of the earliest book that dealt with lesbian experience among the African-Americans. Shockley's book is also important because Shockley was one of the earliest American authors to look at the intersection of race, gender and sex and the complexities and dynamics that these produce in the life of an average African-American lesbian women. Shockley's novel *Loving Her* challenges rigid discourses on sexuality that do not provide apt paradigms that either capture or illuminate the complex terrain of black women's sexuality. Alice Walker, in her 1975 review of the novel, asserts that *Loving Her: A Novel*, "has immense value. It enables us to see and understand, perhaps for the first time, the choices certain women have made about how they will live their lives"; and, it "allows us glimpses at physical intimacies between women that have been, in the past, deliberately ridiculed or obscured." (qtd. in Melancon 120) *Brown White Black* and *Loving Her* are important works of celebration in multiple and alternate identities and more especially sexual identities. The books raise very important and pertinent questions of gender and sexual identity in the context of the racial background of America. The books question power structures that seek to regulate the sexual lives of private individuals. In do so, they challenge many of our assumptions and expectations of America being a democratized and harmonious site for a free play of alternate sexualities. The two aforementioned books create a discursive environment for willingness to sit and talk in unambiguous terms about intersectional experiences and the politics of visibility.

Restoried Selves: Autobiographies of Queer Asian / Pacific American Activists (hereafter referred to as *Restoried Selves*), edited by Kevin Kumashiro, is a groundbreaking collection of autobiographical narratives from 20 author-activists within the Queer Asian/Pacific American community. These authors belong to different ethnic groups like Nepalese-American, Vietnamese-American, Chinese-American, Japanese-American, Bangladeshi-American and Filipino-American amongst others. Most of these authors are either children of first generation immigrants or have immigrated at a young child with their parents; these immigrants

are settled in different parts of America. While previous works by Asian-American authors predominantly focused on issues of racism, contemporary literature has expanded into new frontiers exploring gender identity, sexuality, AIDS, and questions of representation. *Restoried Selves* exemplifies this shift as it reflects the evolving concerns of 21st-century Asian-American life. The life stories within the book are compelling narratives of the unique struggle and complexities of navigating interlocking systems of oppression and systematic biases. The autobiographies interrogate such areas as hegemonic masculinity, heterosexism and racial othering and how these perpetuate social and political dominance for whites, particularly white men. *Restoried Selves* also examines issues of misrepresentation and stereotypes of Asian-Americans in literature and culture, in magazines and media and how these misrepresentation and stereotypes, fraught with omissions and commissions, set in a narrative of prejudice and biases, especially for the queer immigrants. The text critically interrogates the dissonance between America's outward portrayal of freedom and liberty and the underlying reality of entrenched racist and homophobic discourse that pervades the US socio-cultural discourse. Another important thematic interest of these autobiographies lies in the interrogation of home/family dynamics as a discursive site. These autobiographies challenge familial and cultural expectations and values that have traditionally forced queer Asian / Pacific Americans into shame because of their sexual orientation. Within the narrative, the home transcends its physical confines to serve as a metaphorical battleground where the contrasting forces of tradition and modernity engage in a complex interplay. Home emerges as a complex site of control and security, of violence and love in these texts. Immigrants at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality often have unique experiences that cannot be reduced to certain binaries or generalizations and as such any attempts to fix it in terms of stereotypes and assumptions of a homogeneous site only makes it complex for the queer individuals to navigate the already tough waters of racial divide. Another notable dimension explored within these autobiographies is the nuanced examination of racism within the queer community. Alain Anh-Tuan Dang writes that "Queer communities can be as racist as Asian/Pacific American communities can be heterosexist." (33) Many of the authors in the book constantly point to this phenomenon of white cultural

standards within the larger queer community. The immigrant authors are constantly under pressure to live up to racial and sexual standards that have been set up for them. Amidst these challenges, activism emerges as a vital component of their narratives; authors not only share their experiences growing up but also how those experiences led them to become social activists, speaking out against oppression. In doing so, they not only assert their own agency but also contribute to broader movements for social justice and equality within LGBTQ+ spaces.

Timothy Wang is the last of the authors in the thesis work. Wang is an ethnic Chinese but who lives in US and China and writes in English. Wang's *Slant: A Novel* was published in 2011 and remains his only novel to date. *Slant* narrates the story of a young Chinese-American teen named James and through him addresses the very real and wide-spread issues the gay Chinese-American experience. Set against the backdrop of James's new found love for Stan and his friendship with Michael, the text explores different issues like homosexual/heterosexual debate, issues of Chinese-American stereotypes, cultural and ethnic shame, AIDS, issues of fetishization, and home as a complex site of control and security. In all these Wang informs his readers how racial prejudice continues to be foundational and persisting underpinning of U.S. society and how it connects and strongly informs other identities. Wang also explores the structural challenges and systematic inequities embedded within the gay world of America: its competitive undercurrents, its codes of engagement, its politics of inclusion/exclusion makes for a compelling study in power dynamics. With overprotective Chinese immigrant parent, overtly racist white society, a homophobic background and compounded by a cultural landscape that regularly emasculates and desexualizes a significant section of the people and where standards of beauty are codified in white terms, it becomes a difficult task performing Asian-American and being James.

In light of the preceding discussion, it becomes evident that with the exception of Shockley, the authors featured in this thesis work represent a newer cohort, predominantly producing works after the 2000s. The selection of these emerging writers is deliberate, as this thesis aims to confront the pressing issues

encountered by the contemporary African-American and Asian-American generation of gay, lesbian and trans communities. Shockley's inclusion in this discussion serves dual purposes. Firstly, she provides a crucial historical background not just for black queer culture (in its lesbian orientation) but also the concept of intersectionality. Additionally, integrating Shockley's work into this discourse facilitates understanding discursive shifts over time. Among the six books discussed above, three books (*Speak No Evil* by Uzodinma Iweala, *No Ashes in the Fire* by Darnell L. Moore and *Loving Her* by Ann Alley Shockley) explore the African-American experience, offering unique insights into the challenges, triumphs, and complexities of African-American life, while three others (*Brown White Black* by Nishta J. Mehra, *Restoried Selves* edited by Kevin Kumashiro and *Slant* by Timothy Wang) delve into the Asian-American experience, shedding light on the diverse narratives and perspectives within the Asian-American community. In terms of sexual orientation, three books (*Speak No Evil* by Uzodinma Iweala, *No Ashes in the Fire* by Darnell L. Moore and *Slant* by Timothy Wang) address gay theme i.e., while two books (*Loving Her* by Ann Alley Shockley and *Brown White Black* Nishta J. Mehra) deal with lesbian theme, while one remaining (*Restoried Selves* edited by Kevin Kumashiro) is of mixed interest i.e. both gay, lesbian and trans.

Over the past three decades, the concept of 'intersectionality' has emerged as a significant and influential framework in identity studies. *The Combahee River Collective* (1977) was one of the earliest texts to refer to the idea that "major systems of oppression are interlocking" and that some sections of people confront "manifold and simultaneous oppression" (Taylor, 15). *The Combahee River Collective* (henceforth referred to as *The Collective*) was written by a group of black feminists- Cheryl Clarke, Barbara Smith, Anita Cornwell, Audre Lorde and bell Hooks amongst others- to address the unique experiences and struggles of black women. The authors of *The Collective* write from a decidedly anti-racist and anti-sexist position, a sentiment eloquently encapsulated in the assertion, "We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously" (Taylor, 19). *The Collective* exerted a profound and cascading influence on the intellectual landscape of the time, shaping the

perspectives and discourse of numerous Black intellectuals. The term ‘intersectionality’ was first coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in her 1989; she built her conceptual framework on the premise that major systems of oppression are interlocking. While the term ‘intersectionality’ may itself be of recent origin, its underlying approach was employed by many scholars before Crenshaw developed it as a conceptual framework. “Intersectionality” as a framework makes “visible the multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it.” (Phoenix and Pattynama, 187)

Intersection helps us to understanding the complex facets of discrimination and exclusion in a society whose members—with often complex racial, gender, or sexual identities—often experience bias in multiple ways. It is essential to underscore that while the genesis of intersectional studies was rooted in the imperative to address the dearth of scholarship within African American and black feminist literary and cultural studies, its contemporary application extends beyond these specific contexts. Currently, intersectional studies stand as a dynamic framework, to dissect the convergences of wide number of other identities.

...gay identity in the United States is skewed in terms of class, race, and gender, i.e., that while homosexual desire and behaviors are multiclass and multiracial phenomena involving both women and men, the self-identification of individuals as gay is more of a white, male, and middle-class phenomenon. This is because it is easier, economically and otherwise, for middle-class white males to identify and live as openly gay people than it is for women, non-whites, and non-middle class people. (qtd. in Knopp, 339)

At the intersection of gender, sex and race, the challenges are unique, complex and multifaceted. Homophobia manifests itself quite differently between the white and the people of color. It also manifests differently between genders. While race operates as a potent category of identification, perpetuating the marginalization of Black individuals, its intersection with sexuality compounds their societal disenfranchisement, amplifying the complexities of their experiences within broader social frameworks. The white male body in an interracial alternate sexuality is at first

white, then gay, but for the black body it is both black and gay simultaneously. It is in this that the black gay body speaks from a position of marginality, while the white gay body speaks from a position of power. Similarly, the black woman's identity is layered with marginality, navigating the complexities of being simultaneously black, female, and lesbian. Theoretical frameworks offered by those like Foucault and Sedgwick amongst others, despite their unparalleled attention to diverse aspects of sexuality, often tend to overlook these complexities. Their theoretical model/analysis does not do justice to the vast spectrum of experience inherent in certain lived realities. Their framework is constrained and limited in constant reference to white cultural standards. They neglected the experiences of those seated on the 'other' side of the gender and racial divide. In not looking at the different ways in which sexuality may intersect with other hegemonic power paradigms, in a way it upheld, strengthened and inadvertently reinforced the same power structures and prevailing power dynamics that it sought to challenge and subvert. In its unprecedented attention to deconstruct and de-homogenize sexuality, it ended up conflating and homogenizing different experiences and erasing differences. This is where intersectional mode of interrogation comes into play. Intersectional paradigm refers to and draws on existing traditions while simultaneously interrupting its critical hegemony. In the evolving landscape of academic inquiry, intersectional studies has surfaced as a robust alternative to what has been characterized as the 'white gaze.' Intersectional studies come across as a corrective lens, as a remedial optic to the encroaching and limiting influence of 'white gaze'. It marks a pivotal departure from antiquated viewpoints, fostering a more inclusive and nuanced discourse in academic discourse.

The idea of intersectionality shares a close affiliation with the contemporary perspective and idea of identities as intricately entwined in multiplicity. Within this paradigm, identity unfolds not in singular or monolithic dimensions; rather, it materializes as a multifaceted mosaic intricately woven from diverse and intersecting strands. Crucial to this discourse is the imperative recognition of the perpetual presence of power dynamics within the social milieu. Societal interactions are invariably imbued with nuanced power relations, exerting influence and shaping the

contours of individual and collective experiences. Jenkins explains it thus: “Identities exist and are acquired, claimed and allocated within power relations. Identification is something *over* which struggle take place and *with* which strategms are advanced- it is means and end in politics- and at stake is the classification of populations as well the classification of individuals.” (45) It is in this context that this research work seeks to understand how the intrusion of such institutions as gender, sex, race and class complicates the entire discursivities on sex. It seeks to understand the complex dynamics that is produced when gender, sex and race clash within the framework of ‘intersectionality research’.

It is important to underline here that the applicability of intersectionality has been met with considerable reservations and criticism. Scholars have expressed various concerns regarding the application of intersectionality in general and in particular its use as a theoretical framework. Sirma Bilge in “Intersectionality Undone: Saving Intersectionality from Liberal Intersectionality” (2013) opines that intersectionality is today used for identity ranking rather than structural analysis. For Bilge, there have attempts to depoliticize intersectionality as a tool and to sanitize it of its historical root. Bilge critiques how feminist intersectionality studies often center white scholars and white feminism and how Intersectionality has been absorbed into neoliberal academic as part of “neoliberal corporate diversity culture” (408) and what she calls “disciplinary feminism” (409). In the process, intersectionality today has becomes a tool for diversity management rather than structural critique. And has been open to “widespread misrepresentation, tokenization, displacement, and disarticulation” (410). Heather Mac Donald is another prominent critic of intersectionality. In *The Diversity Delusion* (2018) Mac Donald offers a sharp and engaging critique of the modern obsession with intersectionality victimhood. She sees intersectionality as a divisive ideology, an non-empirical entity that fosters a culture of victimhood and undermines western institution and therefore harmful to academic standards. Mac Donald, in fact, advances a critique of a worldview that, in her view, portrays Western culture as endemically racist and sexist. Perhaps the most trenchant critique of intersectionality comes from Andrew Sullivan, author of six books and an essayist. Sullivan says

“Intersectionality posits a classic orthodoxy through which all of human experience is explained- and through which all speech must be filtered. Its version of original sin is the power of some identity groups over others. To overcome this sin, you need first to confess, i.e., ‘check your privilege,’ and subsequently live your life and order your thoughts in a way that keeps this sin at bay”. (Sullivan) Similarly, Amia Srinivasan argues that intersectionality can devolve into competitive victimhood frameworks divorced from larger structures of power. Despite these criticism, Intersectionality is often hailed as the “best feminist practice” in the academy (Weber and Parra-Medina 223–224) and “a globally utilized framework for understanding the issues of social justice” (Yuval-Davis xi) today.

Within the nuanced fabric of the cultural milieu in the United States, the prominence of identity is particularly pronounced in ‘race’; race constitutes the central axis of social relation that shape and permeate both identities and institutions. Wiegman writes that “By the late seventeenth century color had become the primary organizing principle around which the natural historian classified human differences, and a century later, it functioned as the visible precondition for anatomical investigations into the newly emergent object of knowledge, ‘man.’” (24) Over the years it morphed first as a ‘political technology of Empire’, and then emerged as a social construct and a hegemonic force instrumental in upholding systems of oppression and reinforcing racial supremacy in a post-Enlightenment, white supremacist global structure. In his seminal work *The Racial Contract* (1997), Charles W. Mills elucidates how race operates as a social contract with hegemonic intent to maintain white supremacy with its own social and political structure conducive to the full exercise of a racialised State and judicial system, capable of determining, and legislating over the life and death of the bodies it subjugates. As a master category, race in the US consciously draws upon concepts of difference, hierarchy, and marginalization and serves as a template for the subordination and oppression of different social groups.

Omi and Winant write that:

To identify an individual or group racially is to locate them within a socially and historically demarcated set of demographic and cultural boundaries, state activities, “life- chances,” and tropes of identity/difference/(in)equality. Race is both a social/historical structure and a set of accumulated signifiers that suffuse individual and collective identities, inform social practices, shape institutions and communities, demarcate social boundaries, and organize the distribution of resources. (125)

The above excerpt underscores how color lines are rigidly defined and enforced, in collective action and individual practices, in institutions and outside. As a social construct, race is enmeshed in questions of representations and as power dynamics, hierarchy and a system of oppression. Race permeates various aspects of society, from individual identities and social practices to institutional structures and resource distribution, thereby reinforcing and perpetuating systems of inequality and social stratification.

Central to racial discursivities is the issue of representation, a key site of social division. We begin by looking at the representation of blacks, since race comes to define much of social relation between the whites/blacks. Blacks and whites are often represented in a series of binaries: inferior/superior, brute/civilized, ignorant/intelligent, primitive/advanced, criminal/law-abiding and aggressive/safe, untrustworthy/trustworthy amongst others. This black/white binary paradigm operates as power mechanism facilitating a politics of inclusion/exclusion and visibility/erasure. It situates white individuals in a distinct position of authority from which they exert control over black individuals. For the blacks, as Fanon says, there is no escape from the epidermal skin and its attendant politics. Constant racial profiling of blacks means that they are segregated, alienated, dislocated, separated not only from a geographical sense of the term but also psychologically. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) narrativizes the entire socio, cultural, literary and political mosaic that went into separating the 'East' from the 'West', prompting reflections on parallels with racial dynamics. Said's reconceptualization of representations,

stereotypes, and narratives and orientalism as deeply entrenched system of knowledge production and power resonates closely with Fanon's own examination of racial crisis, colonial discourse, and mechanisms of power. Fanon's critical insights into the working of race provides us with rich framework on how to understand race, racism, psychodynamics, language, affect and other ideas. His examination of the ontological existence and psychoexistential crisis of the Black man in a white-dominated world in works like *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) constitutes some of the most cited references on the psychodynamics of racism. Fanon's reimagining of the relationship between whites/blacks within a binary framework, as discussed above, constitutes standard discourse in race literature today. Fanon discerns a perpetual entrapment within racial identities, where white individuals are eternally locked in their whiteness and the black people are eternally locked in their blackness. In this paradigm, black individuals navigate a complex interplay of emotions, confronting feelings of inferiority alongside a paradoxical yearning to embrace whiteness while also harboring deep-seated resentment towards it. But, as Derek Hook reminds, the:

desire to be white is not in any way transhistorical or universal; rather, it is an outcome of a specific configuration of power, of real material, economic, cultural and sociopolitical conditions that continually celebrate and empower the white subject and continually denigrate and dispossess the black man or woman. (116)

Race, as mechanism of power, is strategically conceived: while it continually strengthens white subjects, it simultaneously delegitimizes black people. W. E. B. Du Bois, a prominent race scholar, posits that even in instances where whites did not derive direct economic advantages from racism against blacks, they nonetheless attained a psychological advantage, giving them a psychological sense of superiority. Fanon and Du Bois are important in our discussion because their ideas serve as a link between discussions of racism and sexism. How the antiquated and largely discredited concept of race continues to exert influence in social, political, and cultural discourses, and how it intersects with gender and sex to engender complex

dynamics, constitutes one of the central focus of this thesis. It is when we put Fanon, Du Bois and other race-critics in dialogue with those like Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Kimberle Crenshaw amongst others, that we can truly gain a comprehensive understanding of the intricate relationship between race and sexism. As Omi and Winant claim race “operates in the space of intersections...” (x)

The idea that US comprises two distinct nations i.e. the blacks and the whites, exemplified in Hacker’s *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (1992) implies a binary perspective on race and suggests that US comprises of these two distinct races only; it overlooks the diversity of racial and ethnic groups within the United States and simplifies the complexities of racial politics to a black-white dichotomy. And yet besides the blacks, there are many other non-white groups and whose lives are as much entrenched in racial politics as the blacks. “The United States has confronted each group with a unique form of despotism and degradation. “(Omi and Winant, 8) Racial construction of these groups constitutes a problematic area that has been ‘historicized’ and ‘deconstructed’, ‘glorified’ and ‘denounced’, ‘asserted’ and ‘contested’, ‘performed’ and ‘challenged’. The Asian-American racial situation has been called a ‘post-modern paradox’: the Asian-Americans are simultaneously central to race politics and yet often peripheral to discourses about race politics. In a situation where popular and academic understandings of ‘race’ are framed around categories of ‘black’ and ‘white’, the Asian-Americans find themselves frequently overlooked or ignored. This oversight is attributed to the pervasive stereotype of Asian-Americans as a ‘model minority’ or good minority’, which portrays them as universally successful and assimilated into mainstream American society.

The ‘model minority’ narrative, despite its seemingly meaningful connotation embodies a problematic paradigm. It is well understood that stereotypes, whether positive or negative, are invariably motivated by specific intentions or agendas. The model minority paradigm constitutes a motivated act, not merely a passive construct, and ultimately leads to the exercise of power. The representation of Asian Americans as 'good minorities' often reinforces a politics of silence and in/visibility. The term

'good' inherently carries the connotation of being deemed acceptable to the white majority. 'Good minorities' functions as a mechanism to cultivate pliant and conforming, docile and submissive individuals who adhere to established prevailing standards including in areas of race, gender and sexual performances. It also serves as a deterrent to discourage and negate any form of dissent or deviation obviating the need for continuous enforcement/engagement. Dana Y. Takagi writes thus:

In the popular dressing of Asian American identity, silence has functioned as a metaphor for the assimilative and positive imagery of the "good" minorities...If silence has been a powerful metaphor in Asian American history, it is also a crucial element of discussion of gay/lesbian identity, albeit in a somewhat different way. In both cases, silence may be viewed as the oppressive cost of a racially biased or heterosexist society. (26)

The concept of the 'model minority' serves as a compelling paradigm to illustrate the politics of silence and visibility. The 'model minority' discourse frames Asian-Americans as not just successful and assimilated but also conforming citizens. Such a stereotype operates to normalize mainstream gendered and sexual 'performance'. Geraldine Kudaka's *On a B Rice: An Asian American Erotic Feast* explores how expectations imposed upon generations born in America through the pervasive influence of the 'model minority' stereotype leads to undue pressure on individuals to conform to these expectations. The notion of 'good minorities' echoes the historical archetype of the 'good black' cultivated in colonial discourse; this constituted a crucial colonial intervention designed to uphold the prevailing status quo, functioning as a strategic mechanism to preemptively deflect resistance. The 'good black' archetype was constructed to cultivate loyal and obedient black subjects who would conform to mainstream white values, norms, and behaviors. This ensured that power or the exercise of it lay perpetually within the control of the white colonialists. On a similar note, the concept of 'good minorities' nurtures compliant Asian Americans, ensuring that power remains firmly in the hands of the white majority. The portrayal of Asian Americans as a 'model minority' constitutes a strategic exercise of power in another sense of the term. Model minority serves a

dual purpose: it perpetuates a specific image for Asian Americans and at the same time it serves as a shield against black groups. The model minority not only traps Asian-Americans within certain fixed images, it also becomes an instrument to situate blacks within such stereotypes as uncivilized, incapable, untrustworthy etc. In effect, the model minority stereotype not only confines Asian Americans within predetermined notions but also functions as a mechanism to perpetuate racial hierarchies and justify the marginalization of Black communities. If on the one hand, the Asian-Americans are envisioned in terms of 'model' archetype, on the other hand, very often Asian-American groups concurrently encounter a barrage of negative stereotypes perpetuated through various channels such as literature, media, pop culture, cinema, magazines, and other cultural mediums. The struggle for authentic representation and recognition of Asian American identity remains an ongoing challenge in the fight against racial injustice and inequality.

An essential locus of inquiry within the realm of intersectionality research pertains to the intricacies of race and how this relates to questions of compulsory heterosexuality. Intersectionality research has sought to rigorously examine the critical terrain of race and sought to interrogate how it produces complex dynamics in a situation of compulsory heterosexuality, especially in intra-racial situation. Compulsory heterosexuality refers to societal paradigms and normative constructs that presuppose and, in turn, mandate heterosexuality as the inherent and default sexual orientation. The term "compulsory heterosexuality" was introduced by feminist scholar Adrienne Rich in her 1980 essay titled 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence. Rich argued that heterosexual relationships are often enforced and reinforced through various social institutions, cultural narratives, and legal structures. This phenomenon encapsulates the systematic imposition and reinforcement of societal expectations, coercing individuals to conform to a presumed heterosexual orientation as the default standard. In doing so, it perpetuates a compelling heteronormative framework that is inherently coercive in nature. Intersectionality research looks at the connection between this compulsory heterosexuality and race.

Within the multifaceted cultural, racial and sexual landscape of the United States, Asian-Americans emerge as a significant community, alongside their African-American counterparts. Chinese-American, Filipino-American, Indian-American, Japanese-American, Korean-American amongst other collectively contribute to the cultural tapestry of Asian-Americans in the United States. While the umbrella term “Asian American” was coined in the late 1960s to promote political solidarity and cultural nationalism and applied in terms of commonality, the Asian-American life is marked by heterogeneity, hybridity and multiplicity, including in areas of race and sexuality. As a “siteless locale with no territorial sovereignty” (Eng, 31), the canvas of Asian-American exists in a state of fluidity and eludes fixed definitions. Oscar V. Campomanes problematizes this siteless locale and proposes that Asian American identity might well be considered more in conjunction with a discourse of exile and emergence than with one of immigration and settlement. (51) Eng however takes a middle ground and suggests that Asian Americans experiences are “shaped in the space between the domestic and the diasporic” (32) In this ensuing debate, what remains certain is that each ethnic group has its own unique and recognizable narratives to the collective tapestry.

A rich array of literary texts has intermittently emerged seeking to unravel the intricate dynamics inherent in the Asian-American experience. One of the earliest texts to deal with Asian-American experience was *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* published in 1974. Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul, Lawson Fusao Inada and Shawn Wong sought to bring together representative selections from Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino Americans to present ‘a true Asian American sensibility’ to its readers otherwise restricted to stereotypes, inaccuracies and prejudice. Elaine H. Kim’s *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (1984) similarly organizes literary materials spanning from nineteenth century immigrant writers to contemporary descendents with authors representing four distinct nationalities- Chinese-Americans, Japanese-Americans, Filipino-Americans, and Korean-Americans. For Kim and many others, Asians-Americans often denote those of Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Filipino descent. Kim also grapples with such questions as stereotypes and caricatures, racial discrimination,

and the cultural divide between East and West in the tradition of *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974) and William Wu's *The Yellow Peril: Chinese Americans in American Fiction 1850-1940* (1982). Wong and Jeffrey see a methodological shift from a narrative of “cultural nationalism” (of the Aiiieeeee group of authors, for instance) to “transnational culturalism” in the 1990s in Asian-American literature (212). A renewed thinking of what constitutes Asian American identity set into motion a new kind of literature that steered away from the confines of monolithic categorization. In the wake of this methodological shift, Asian American identity came to be continuously defined not in terms of a monolithic site but characterized by the interplay of multiple identities situated across diverse locations ‘out here’ and ‘over there’. It is in this paradigm shift that same-sex queerness came to be forged.

Referring to Asian-American literary scene, Jinqi Ling notes that “it wasn't until the mid-1970s that the issue of gender began to be consciously employed in identity politics in literature.” (313) However, in reading King-Kok Cheung we get the idea that “from the beginning, race and gender have been intertwined in Asian American history and literature.” (10) The exploration of gender and racial identity has been a recurring theme in the works of Asian American writers for quite some time now. This has been built over several texts like *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974), *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (1984) amongst others. Asian-American authors have critically looked at the gender scenes in US. For instance, Yen Le Espiritu observes that “historical oppression of Asian American men and women, along both material and cultural lines ... (re)structures the rules of gender in the Asian American community” (7)

Scholarly discussion on race, gender and sexuality in North American studies prior to 1990s largely overlooked the experiences of Asian-Americans. There was certainly a gap in scholarly engagement about these topics, pushed as these were to the margins of silence. It was not until the 1990s that we see any meaningful gay and lesbian writings. The 90s saw such texts as Jessica Hagedorn's *Charlie Chan Is Dead*

(1993), Sharon Lim-Hing's *The Very Inside* (1994), Geraldine Kudaks's *On a B Rice: An Asian American Erotic Feast* (1995), Russell Leong's *Asian American Sexualities* (1996), Yen Le Espiritu's *Asian American Women and Men: Labor, Laws, and Love* (1997), Song Cho's *Rice: Explorations into GayAsian Culture and Politics* (1998) and David L Eng and Alice Hom's *Q&A: Queer in Asian America* (1998) bring a diverse chorus of voices and experiences from the emerging communities of queer Asian-Americans and herald a new era of exploration and visibility of same sex discursivities. These texts contest entrenched gendered and sexual myths, dismantle generalizations and stereotypes about Asian American, and create conditions for a more authentic exploration of what it meant to be queer and Asian-American at the turn of the twentieth century and in doing so contribute to our understanding of racial, gender and sexual identity in this dynamic cultural landscape.

Understanding the experiences and narratives of same-sex sexuality within the Asian American community is inseparable from the broader historical and social context of racial dynamics in the country. Russell Leong in his introduction to *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience* (1996) explores the interconnectedness of race and same-sex sexuality and writes that "For Asian Americans...looking at same-sex sexuality, means looking at the development of racial formation in the United States." (Introduction, 2) The fabric of Asian American identity, including their sexuality, underwent scrutiny and challenges shaped by the complex experiences of race and racism in the United States (Leong, Foreword xiv) Wong and Jeffrey propose that "specific gender and sexuality themes in Asian American literature cannot be understood apart from Asian American history and that any understanding of Asian American history would be incomplete without in-depth analysis of the central roles that gender and sexuality play in sociohistorical productions of Asian American identity in every period" (214) The Asian-American history that Wong and Jeffrey refers to is the history of race, racial prejudice and racial misrepresentation.

At the intersection of race, gender and sexuality, the challenges and complexities for Asian-Americans are many. One of the significant challenges in this has been the model minority paradox. The 'model minority' discourse, at the intersection of race, gender and sexuality, condescendingly positions Asian-Americans as successful, law-abiding, industrious, civilized, heteronormative individuals. Such a narrative perpetuates a stereotype that confines Asian Americans to the practice of heterosexuality. It precipitates an identity crisis by constraining behavioral and performative expectations, thereby inhibiting individuals from expressing themselves as autonomous agents. In a manner analogous to how the 'good Black' image was played in different mediums to cultivate pliant black individuals and to obliterate authentic Black expressions and diversity, the notion of 'good minorities' similarly is played to cultivate pliant Asian-Americans to suppress and erase genuine gendered and sexual expressions. In "Introduction: Home Bodies and the Body Politic", Russell Leong provides a critique of a prevailing white male culture that denies sexual and gender diversity to Asian Americans. Wong and Jeffrey write that "If queer writings express a boisterous resistance to white racist stereotypes of Asian Americans, they simultaneously articulate colorful and provocative depictions of same-sex love and desire between Asians of various American-born and immigrant ethnicities. Here, erotic visibility counters the disempowering metaphor of silence in Asian-American history." (205)

The model minority paradox is often reinforced within Asian-American cultural nationalism, where cultural nationalists tend to project and impose a heterosexual androcentric framework onto the community. Cultural nationalists advocate a discourse of western origin of homosexuality in the community and propose distance from such ideas. However, starting from the 1990s, both creative writing and critical scholarship in Asian-American literary canvas have actively contested and subverted these portrayals. Many of these texts often intricately weave queer narratives in celebratory and affirmative mode. This "celebratory depictions of same-sex love and desire in Asian American queer writing contest notions of homosexuality as culturally unintelligible in Asian American communities" (Wong and Jeffrey, 205-206) Dana Y. Takagi contends that the very presence of gay and

lesbian Asian Americans problematizes "the silences surrounding homosexuality in Asian Americans" (27)

Asian-Americans straddle a complex dichotomy, wherein they are perceived as embodying model minority and simultaneously depicted as conservative and rigid. Asia/Asians/Asianess/Asian-Americans are constructed as homophobic people, while West receives an open/liberal construction. The broader construction of Asia/Asians/Asianess/Asian-Americans as homophobic people is juxtaposed against an idealized image of 'open' and 'liberal' west. Asian traditionalism is placed in rhetorical contrast to a white egalitarian world (Yang and Maria, 131) This very often contributes to the image of Asian (American) backwardness, constructed as these are in terms of shared monolithic phenomenon that cuts across ethnic and national lines. This 'Pan Asian' oversimplification and stereotype serves to further vilify a community of people who is already a "multiple outsider" to the mainstream white majority.

One of the significant challenges to Asian-American queer sensibility is the issue of representation. Asian-Americans are often imagined and cast as subordinate and effeminate in the popular American imagination, in culture and television, in magazines and literature. The feminization of Asian-American men reinforces harmful tropes that contribute to their continued marginalization and erasure within broader societal narratives. It is important that we problematize the phenomenon of feminization. Feminization often constitutes an act in power play. Feminization operates as a binary framework: it marginalizes and diminishes Asian-Americans while simultaneously strengthening white heterosexist males. This dynamic effectively relegates Asian-Americans to the lowest rungs of the masculine hierarchy, perpetuating power differentials that privilege whiteness and heteronormativity while further marginalizing minority identities. Central to this framework is an underlying imperative to uphold, preserve and perpetuate white power structures in order to shape life and representation. s such, this not only distorts the representation of Asian-American men but also serves to uphold systemic inequalities by reinforcing and normalizing discriminatory narratives. If blacks and

the Asian-Americans represent the extremity of gender and sexual identities, then the whites are seen as inheriting just the right characteristics and representing just the perfect order. The desexualization of Asian-American men serves another purpose: it leaves open the Asian-American women open to white male's heterosexist gaze. In this scheme of thing, Asian-American females are reduced to objects of desire that necessitates salvation. Elaine Kim in her essay 'Such Opposite Creatures': Men and Women in Asian American Literature" (1990) write that: "Asian women are only sexual for the same reason that Asian men are asexual: both exist to define the white man's virility and the white race's superiority" (70) Rooted in colonialist attitudes and Orientalist tropes, these stereotypes have been perpetuated through various cultural artifacts, shaping and reinforcing societal perceptions over time.

Under such a complex landscape, Asian-American men often find themselves at a disadvantageous position vis-à-vis their white counterparts in the hierarchical structure of masculinity. Any pursuit to emulate markers of white masculinity only inadvertently imposes emotional and psychological strain on an individual. Consequently, the lived experience of Asian-Americans derived from the dissonance between their authentic individual identity and the external expectations manifests in a continual negation of the authentic self, an accumulated baggage of internal conflicts as well as a persistent negotiation of one's sense of self. If on the one hand, they grapple with the marginalization and negation of their masculinity, on the other hand they encounter the troubling phenomenon of being objectified and fetishized by white individuals. Many scholarly inquiries have revisited the Orientalist exoticization of Asian sexuality, along with the concurrent themes of emasculation in men and hyperfeminization in women. Asian-American individuals (queer and non-queer) find themselves entangled in a complex and paradoxical dynamic that prompts introspection regarding their authentic place within the intricate tapestry of the American cultural canvas. The prospect of articulating a self within an 'ideologically neutral' nomenclature becomes difficult under such an environment. Thus, negotiating a sense of masculinity within this hybrid cultural identity under differing expectations and stereotypes becomes a complex terrain to navigate.

The racist trope under which the Asian-Americans operates constitutes a quagmire, an escape from which is not very easy but which produces complex psychodynamics. Frequently, Asian-Americans are confronted with standards of white beauty both within and outside the lesbian/gay community. These standards operate within a binary framework: while elevating white physical and sexual characteristics in terms of desirability, it simultaneously insidiously relegate individuals from non-white racial backgrounds to the margins. Within this paradigm, Asian-Americans often find themselves marginalized as the insignificant 'other,' perpetually pressured to conform to white standards of beauty and desirability and to move forever in its pursuit. The repercussions of this dynamic are far-reaching, as individuals internalize these beauty standards, leading to feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and a distorted sense of self-worth. The narrow and often exclusionary nature of the binary framework of beauty standards also contributes to a sense of alienation and internalized prejudices. Such a narrative not only shapes their sense of the self, but also their racial perspective, their capacity for relationships and when they grow up with these 'acquired' values, the damage is to be discerned not just in them but many generations thereafter. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) poignantly captures the intricacies of this phenomenon through the character of Pecola. Many of the current generation of Asian-American authors have offered poignant critiques of gay white male standards of beauty and its aftereffects on Asian Americans. "In criticizing white standards of beauty and desire that negate or limit Asian men's gender and sexuality, queer writers call into question white men's sexual power" (Wong and Jeffrey, 205)

bell hook writes that:

When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders and sexual practices affirm their power over in intimate relations with the Other." (309)

The bodies of Asian-Americans thus become the playground under which white racism and white heterosexuality is enacted. The power equation is stark and oppressive, characterized by systemic inequalities and the exploitation of marginalized identities.

Asian-American literary works frequently grapple with questions related to home/family, exploring such themes as patriarchal family structure, parent-child relationships and the dynamics of acceptance or rejection. It may be important to emphasize here that there is no singular narrative about these; nonetheless specific elements demand thoughtful consideration and exploration. For Asian-Americans, home holds particular significance; it plays a pivotal role in their lives. In an environment that is often marred by hostile ‘othering’ due to race, home serves as a crucial locus of support and love. It provides a sense of belonging and understanding. It also emerges as a locale where one connects emotionally and culturally. However, home also doubles down as a site of control, silence, invisibility and an oppressive unit that perpetuates normative gender roles and sexuality. Long T. Bui writes thus:

“Home” names a place of much ambiguity and violence for many queer subjects. On the one hand, it names the location of familial origins and traditional kinship ties—the place where one originally comes from and supposedly belongs. On the other hand, it marks a contested violent site of struggle that brings up harsh contradictions and unresolved issues. (129)

Bui’s characterization of home as an ambiguous site of contradictions and a battleground of unresolved issues refers to the politics of visibility, silence and discipline. The tension between home as a sanctuary of love and home as a space of control underscores the complex interplay of familial expectations, cultural norms, and individual identity within the realm of the private. In this confined space, the stringent expectations on acceptable gender behavior and sexuality stifle individual expressions and strip them of any individuality. In a society where the gay/lesbian/queer Asian American is a ‘multiple outsider’, confrontation vis-à-vis home disrobes queer Asian-Americans of all sense of security, harmony and love, leaving them in a profound state of vulnerability. Negotiations, under such

circumstances, become a very dynamic and complex process. Existing discourses on 'coming out' assumes a universal process for all groups of people. Universalizing constructions of the 'coming out' process do not take into account these peculiarities and only move in a certain trajectory (read: white coming out) assuming all coming out is same. Coming out becomes a very different process for Asian Americans and therefore should be constructed in its own peculiarities. It requires an entire new set of vocabularies that truly can encompass what it truly means for the Asian Americans. Generalized heteronormative Asian American identity literary model often "relies on the construction of sameness and the exclusion of differences" (L. Lowe, 68) and hence cannot effectively capture the intricacies of Asian American sexualities. If the intricate tapestry of Asian American identity, marked by its multifaceted narratives, cautions against oversimplification, so does engaging with and addressing questions of race, gender, and sexuality in each ethnic group demands a recognition of their unique complexity. Addressing questions of race, gender and sexuality in such terms as 'intersectionality' by assuming that all Asian-Americans relate to the same set of discourses as though there is some universal category that all ethnic and nationalities subscribe to does injustice to the disparate, unique, and recognizable narratives that each ethnic group bring to the discursive table. A comprehensive theoretical solution requires departure from the constraints of a singular universal category and the myopic lens it imposes, and necessitates contextual reading to understand the uniqueness of each experience.

Filipino American literature constitutes a significant area of study within the broader Asian American literary domain. The term Filipino American literature refers to the body of work by Filipino-American literateurs. Amongst other thematic concerns, the Filipino American literateurs have made substantial contribution to gender and sexuality studies. Queer construction in Filipino American literature unfolds against the background of historical echoes of colonial legacies, the dynamics of 'racial' present, the complexities of diasporic experiences as well as the emerging notions of what has been called 'global' queer. It is interesting to note how the Filipino American authors negotiate identity politics and creates a sense of self and belonging amidst all these. Filipino-Americans, unlike other groups like

Chinese-Americans and Japanese Americans, finds itself characterized by a paradigm that does not fit neatly into the discourse of assimilation/diaspora identity that we apply to other ethnicities/nationality; its colonial past gives it a distinct identity. In this sense, queer Filipino-Americans face a distinct challenge and navigating gendered and sexuality performances under these distinct contexts require us to devise frameworks that take into account these distinct peculiarities.

The study of American colonialism in Philippines is central to our understanding of queer in Filipino American experience. The Filipino American queer literature has been shaped by the ‘material, historical and political’ contours set by colonial experience in Philippines; colonial legacies continue to shape and influence notions of identity, gender, and sexuality. American colonialism completely shaped and redefined the Filipino queer historical narrative by imposing its own colonial lexicon. Filipinos were naturalized into the colonial construction of not just gender and sexuality but also race. “The regulation of sexuality and of morality by means of colonially directed collective action and of state intervention” pushed ‘queerness’ to the margins of silence and invisibility.” (Eviota, 73). Alegre notes in the article: “When colonization formalized, so many aspects of our culture has changed. Queerness was made an abomination, a sin, and any forms of homosexuality and gender pluralities became unacceptable.” (56) Brenda Rodriguez Alegre writes that American colonialism “decimated, erased and silenced...our glorious queer past” (51) What emerged in the process is a gender and queer cultural history that is best described in terms of Bhava’s ‘hybridity’. In the wake of colonial encounter, Filipino queer culture underwent drastic change, revealing shifting power dynamics, cultural hybridity, and contested identities in the process. Analyzing the intricacies of colonialism allows us to underscore the inherent limitations of queer ideologies and methods that ascribe stability within non white spaces, including both domestic and diasporic spaces.

The investigation of Filipino past and scrutiny of historical dynamics of colonial encounter unveils a history of tolerance and celebration, of fluidity and malleability of Filipino socio-cultural landscape, markedly different from the

entrenched narrative of monolithic ‘truth’ pushed from the citadels of ‘power’, challenging any notion of fixed or static conditions. Unraveling a queer historicity in the pre-colonial past poses a formidable challenge, given the persistent onslaught of narratives that steadfastly propagate a discourse of compulsory heterosexuality. Unveiling this narrative of (colonial) omissions and commissions necessitates excavating an ‘authentic’ Filipino cultural history from the pillars of ‘history’ and ‘pages’. And yet many Filipino Americans have been doing exactly that i.e. excavating “our glorious queer past” (Alegre, 51) Martin Manalansan's *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (2003) is an important case in point. If Filipino-American queer literature digs into the historical past to make a critical point, then it also skillfully blend creative artistic expression with a critical framework to celebrate queerness within the Filipino-American community. The representation of ‘baklas’ and ‘badings’ in such works make significant difference to the narrative of compulsive heterosexuality. Constructing an authentic queer historical narrative entails more than digging up the pre-colonial past. It necessitates a critical examination of such stereotypes as ‘uncivilized savages’, ‘effeminate Orientals’ and ‘demeaned inferiors’ (Hoganson, 134, 137), as has been built into the identity of Filipinos and Filipino-Americans. It may be of importance to note that such stereotypes are often constructed in the background of what has been called ‘white standards’. Binary oppositions oversimplify complex realities, perpetuate harmful prejudices, and contribute to the marginalization of individuals and communities. The exercise of power, often embedded in these binaries, reinforces hierarchies, fosters discrimination, and limits the recognition of diverse identities and experiences. Filipino queer identity, just as the Filipino-American identity, is then still in the process of ‘becoming’, of forging its own distinct trajectory, lexicon and discourses. It is not just “assimilating into a mature or self-realized state of gay modernity, but rather are contesting the boundaries of gay identity and rearticulating its modern contours” (Manalansan, x)

Japanese American literature constitutes another noteworthy and compelling field of scholarly inquiry into identity politics. Despite its relative size and perceived status as a minor subset within the broader literary landscape, Japanese American

literature unfolds as a compelling lens through which to understand the intricate working of the American gendered, sexual and racial code. How do the Japanese Americans construct their identities in a predominantly white majority space? How do they negotiate questions of gender and sexuality as these intersect with race? What are the avenues available to them to navigate intersectional oppression? What resistance do they put up in the complex interplay of cultural, social, and individual dynamics within their unique context? How do the Japanese and Japanese-American past continue to echo and inform the present? These are some of the questions that emerge in our discussion of Japanese American literature.

The Japanese American literature is a perennial search for identity in its different manifestations: Japanese-American identity, gendered identity, sexual identity and racial identity amongst others. Yoshio Abe writes that the question “What am I?” figures prominently in many of the earlier authors, “as they struggled to live in the United States as members of Japanese-American communities confronting racial discrimination and different cultural values and ideas.” (37) For Japanese-Americans whose identity is troubled by ‘loyalty oaths’, ‘internment camps’, the ‘Immigration Exclusion Act’ (1924) and the ‘Alien Land Law’ (1913) amongst others, navigating the cultural terrain of United States becomes an arduous and challenging task. This becomes a particular cause of concern for those situated at the other end of the sexual and gendered divide.

The evolution and complexities of Japanese American identity in its racial, gendered and sexual manifestation is best understood through the ‘Sansei’ texts; the Sanseis constitute the third generation of Japanese Americans. While the isseis (first generation) and the niseis (second generation) confront a crisis in Japanese American identity in the light of racism, the sanseis delve into additional dimensions of gender and sexuality and their relation to race. The sansei texts deal with a plethora of issues like feminization of gender, stereotypes, ‘heterosexualization’ of Japanese culture and their intersection with race amongst other things. The sansei authors also negotiate on a number of dichotomies including but not confined to ‘us/them, west/non-west, man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual’. They also critically examine

many of the colonial tropes on Chinese-Americans that are mapped on to the Japanese Americans based on erogenous assumptions. The ‘sansei’ texts have also been instrumental in forging a dialogue between western queer cultures and Japanese-American queer culture. These texts also critically examine the Orientalist, racist and sexist lexicons as an act in exercise of power. Japanese-American literature also navigates an intriguing paradox, wherein the Japanese-Americans are simultaneously cast into the dual realms of the ‘model minority’ archetype and perceived as a ‘contaminating influence’. This vast gap in societal construction places them in a perpetual state of dissonance, leaving them overwhelmed, vexed, and ever-vigilant. Sansei men find themselves negotiating between these conflicting cultural dynamics, trying to strike a balance that feels authentic to their own identity and expectations that is placed on them. Applying conventional queer framework to understand these complex dynamics becomes a futile exercise under such circumstances. The politics of interpellation further exert a profound influence on the construction of sexual history within Japanese culture. White-centric gendered norms, sexual standards, lexical frameworks, and the dynamics of interpellation not only not only obstruct the genuine emergence and articulation of an authentic Japanese-American identity, it also challenges and impede the recognition and acknowledgment of same-sex history in Japanese culture. Suganuma writes that “pre-modern Japan embraced the act of male-male homoeroticism as a code of ethics to the level that it was considered as a social norm.” (7) Books like *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan: Cultural Myths and Social Realities* (2000) and *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Japan* (2002) have been instrumental in challenging the notion of Un-Japanese character of homosexuality. Dorrine Kondo’s idea of ‘multiple selves’ in reference to Japanese culture sits fairly with what Suganuma writes.

Japanese-American queer culture and identity is an ongoing dialectic with a complex character. In this ongoing dialogue, a multitude of alternate stories and narratives are emerging, contributing to the overall mosaic of understanding. These stories and narratives have been pivotal in a steadfast confrontation against entrenched stereotypes, prevailing representations, binary constructs, and

intersectional discrimination. These emerging discursivities while challenging societal norms, weave a narrative of self-discovery, authenticity, and the continuous pursuit of understanding and embracing the complexities of their multifaceted identities. With their examined reflections on expressions and experiences, these have significantly contributed to the broader conversation surrounding Japanese-American queer culture.

Stories and narratives of how queer Vietnamese-Americans navigate the constraints of gender, sex and race remains a less studied affair. Conversation about race and same sex in Vietnamese-American context follows a trajectory similar to the Chinese-American or Japanese-American experience but there are also historical and social difference that sets them apart. The Vietnamese-American narrative, unlike those coloured by colonial or quasi colonial contours in places like Philippines, Japan or China, is significantly influenced by the shadow of the Vietnamese war. Ly Thuy Nguyen writes that “Vietnamese American queer people’s trauma exists in the nexus of rampant American orientalist trans/queerphobia as well as through their families’ homeland/diasporic sexual and gender politics, and especially through their parents’ postwar experiences and war memory.” (222) To comprehensively address the intersections of race, gender, and sexual identities within the Vietnamese-American community, it becomes imperative to consider the intricate relationships between these. It is within the crucible of these interconnectedness that their identity is forged.

An important thematic concern in our discussion of queer Vietnamese-American is the question of ethnic enclave. Ethnic enclave, in its metaphorical connotation, may be understood as a high degree of social, cultural and economic interconnectedness among the members of particular ethnic or cultural group, an escape from which is not very easy. Ethnic enclave becomes a problematic site of control and regulation where cultural expectations often take centre stage. This reinforces a cultural standard that situates any other expression of sexuality outside the accepted norm as deviant and odd. Within this, historical events like the Vietnam War are constructed as rallying points for conformity to cultural expectations within

the enclave. Under such circumstances 'Coming out' often entails a two-front battle: a delicate balancing act between loyalty to ethnic collectivity/enclave and the imperative of staying true to innate desires. Staying true to Vietnamese roots or ethnic allegiance often translates to social capital in difficult times for Vietnamese Americans "who lack physical and/or human capital to survive and thrive" in a 'foreign' land. (Zhou and Bankstone III, 81) Besides, being an ethnic group in exile intensifies the inclination among many Vietnamese individuals to maintain a strong connection to their cultural heritage. Consequently, a binary tension emerges characterized and defined by a problematic struggle between the individual's 'desire' for self-expression and the inherent need to 'belong', between American upbringing and ethnic loyalty/allegiance. Under such circumstances, to use Leslie Bow words, the body becomes a site of struggle between "duty and desire, ethnic loyalty and Americanization" (9) The examination of sexuality in Vietnamese-Americans thus becomes an act of interrogation into alliance/allegiance/loyalty to ethnic collectivity.

Another thematic interest that Vietnamese-American queer literature deals with is the institution of family. While the Vietnamese-American queer often situate the queer in a binary background vis-à-vis the ethnic enclave, these also situate the queers in a binary context vis-à-vis the family. Very often ethnic loyalty and family allegiance converges seamlessly, embodying a shared sense of commitment and dedication within the larger intricate fabric of cultural identity. In this, the family very often emerges as a site of control and regulation seeking to direct the lives of the individuals, including gendered and sexual life. Traditional Vietnamese families are often conceptualized in terms of heterosexuality and positioned in a dichotomous relation vis-à-vis homosexuality. Further, homosexuality is systematically framed as a 'disease' originating from white Western influences. This construct unfolds a narrative of 'victimhood' where its Vietnamese-American adherents are cast as 'sick' and 'influenced' forming a stigmatized discourse that interlaces cultural perspectives with notions of illness and foreign influence. The tendency to moralize any deviance from the culturally sanctioned ways of living and behaving introduces a dissonance between individual and family, potentially pushing them away from a vital sources that otherwise ensures a sense of belonging and security in an otherwise adversarial

setting, leading very often to a series of patterns characterized by silence, alienation and disenfranchisement amongst others.

Queer possibility also becomes a formidable challenge in the light of racism that faces the Vietnamese-Americans. The Vietnamese-American queers face 'racialization' not just within the broader US canvas but also within the broader queer community, an experience that mirrors the life of other Asian ethnicities in US. It renders them marginalized and very often invisible, within societal narrative and cultural representations. This exacerbates the challenges confronted by Vietnamese-American individuals identifying as queer as they negotiate their pursuit of authenticity, belonging and allegiance, underscoring the intricate nature of the obstacles embedded in their lived experiences.

Discourse of queer Vietnamese-Americans also serves as a poignant arena for negotiation and resistance, constituting a steadfast endeavor to combat and resist prevailing forms of repression. Lesbians and gay individuals frequently "reconceptualize" what is conventionally perceived as "disloyalty," strategically transforming it into a deliberate act of resistance against oppressive authority. In their pursuit of authenticity, individuals within the LGBTQ+ community frequently take the risk of jeopardizing familial bonds in the hope of discovering a more genuine sense of kinship within the supportive embrace of the lesbian and gay community. Communal affirmation in lesbian and gay groups often serves to negate feelings of alienation or the idea of being an oddity or deviant. Social and political infrastructures like 'Ô-Môi' formed in the 1990s as support space for queer Vietnamese Americans in Southern California serve to highlight camaraderie and feeling of belongingness among queer Vietnamese-Americans.

Thus, we can see that calls for routinized and compulsive introspection of deviant sexual practices, at the back of homo/hetero binary assumptions, frequently reinforce hierarchical values to the intended self-defeat of the sexually different or divergent. Navigating this hierarchy presents considerable challenges. But for those who are situated at the margins of race, gender and sex, there are additional complexities to navigate. Navigating the intricate dynamics at this intersection

requires grappling with a myriad of issues that arise from being marginalized across multiple axes of identity. It is in this that the lived realities of individuals like Moore and Niru, who are Black and gay, differ markedly from those of white individuals who identify as queer, owing to the additional layer of racial dynamics. Similarly, a Black queer woman like Renay navigating a inter-racial lesbian relationship faces unique challenges distinct from both white queer individuals and black gay men due to the intersection with gender. Black queers (gays and lesbians) confront a myriad and distinct set of challenges that includes but is not confined to racism, stereotypes, hyper-masculinity, patriarchy, and the intricate nuances of Black nationalism. On a similar note, Asian-Americans encounter challenges that are distinct from the black-and-white dynamics of queer politics. Their marginalized status is often exacerbated by racial rhetoric, misrepresentation across various domains, issues of culture complex, the intricacies of immigrant experience, the model minority question and the persistent struggle with notions of home and family. These challenges underscore the distinct position in which the Asian-Americans are located. The texts also incorporate discussions surrounding religion, mental health, substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, the criminal justice system, legal complexities, adoption, ethnic loyalty and a host of other issues. These topics are woven into the broader narrative, highlighting their interconnectedness and significance within the discourse. The texts also bring attention to power dynamics, illustrating how the construction of identities among non-white individuals, particularly non-white queers, is connected to power or the exercise of it. All the texts envision a framework in which power circulates in complicated ways rather than unidirectional. A reading of the text shows how narrative surrounding race, gender and sexuality has evolved over the years. While in Shockley, the narratives are at its nascent best, in later authors these achieve a more complex, nuanced and sophisticated handling. The texts show how theorizing and thinking about queers have evolved over the years.

It is within this context and background that this thesis will problematize issues of race, gender and sexuality through the study of the select primary texts - *Speak No Evil*, *No Ashes*, *Brown White Black*, *Loving Her*, *Restoried Selves* and *Slant*. These texts and the queer discourses it embody are not empty effort in rhetoric

building or mere intellectual exercises in theory making but sincere attempts to shift narrative and make difference to the lived experience of those that constantly live under threats of intimidation and violence; the texts are then a conduit for the marginalized and oppressed queer communities of colour. They speak to a politics of visibility, where the marginalized are not merely seen, but celebrated; where their stories are not relegated to the shadows, but brought into the light for all to witness and embrace.

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CHAPTER II

Interrogating Black Gay Identity in *No Ashes in the Fire* and *Speak No Evil*

The chapter ‘Interrogating Black Gay Identity in *No Ashes in the Fire* and *Speak No Evil*’ is situated between both queer studies and black studies and is an attempt to combine both these areas in order to explore and examine the distinct and unique contours of African-American gay identity within the framework of ‘intersectionality’ research. Framed in terms of investigation of Black men’s sexuality- contending with both their homosexuality and their Blackness- it asks such questions as: what does it mean to be a black gay in white America? What are the unique challenges in the intersection of race and sexuality? In what ways do macro institutional and structural forces shape the identities and experiences of African-American gay individuals? How do African-American gay men negotiate their sense of belonging within the unique challenges? How do societal expectations of masculinity intersect with the experiences of Black gay men in America? Asking these important questions helps us to understand the complex quotidian realities and experience around which social power and disempowerment are distributed. This study will undertake an examination of two contemporary literary works: Darnell L. Moore's *No Ashes in the Fire: Coming of Age Black & Free in America* (2018) and Uzodinma Iweala's *Speak No Evil* (2018). These texts interrogate foundational assumptions, claims and counter-claims and positions on black men’s sexuality while locating the specific contours within black-white dichotomy, the colonial profiling, heterosexist nature of Black political engagements and the interlinked workings of institutions. This study will in particular examine and interrogate these ideas through a close and deconstructive study of social institution and systems like home/family, school, religion, law enforcement, criminal justice system/the legal system. In taking a social constructivist approach, this study problematizes these macro institutions structures and forces as laden with ideological heaviness, arguing that while these institutions and systems are biased and prejudiced against homosexuality in general, these, in particular, systematically and disproportionately disempower and marginalize black gays. The legitimacy that comes from these structures and forces serve to generate, maintain and ultimately enforce social norms and cultural

definitions that shape behaviour at the level of social interaction. The study posits that the relation between various social institutions and systems and gay African-Americans is characterized by power dynamics. It argues that African-American gay identity, forged within the crucible of interlocking institutional mechanisms reflects the complex interplay of power, discourse, and social hierarchies. A critical interrogation of 'whiteness' and compulsory hetero-normativity within these institutions and how these disproportionately affect black gay individuals thus form core of the study. By drawing attention to these aspects, this chapter seeks to contribute to a broader conversation about diversity, inclusion and lived experiences of black gay community within American sexual canvas. The study will construct the necessary arguments within the theoretical models set by Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick. Additionally, it will engage with the works of Frantz Fanon, Michael Omi and Howard Winant, Stuart Hall and Richard Jenkins. It will further draw on the works of Jafari S. Allen, Neville Hoad and Joseph Beam amongst others. The study will move ahead with the idea that black/queer writings have been "denied our rightful place in the master narratives of Black history and American life." (Moore 6)

African-American gay individual and collective identities operates in intricate and multifaceted ways. One of the ways in which to understand this is through the prism of institutions. The formation of African-American sexual and racial identities, as well as their overlapping and cumulative impact, often unfolds within the confines of institutions. Institution(s) refers to "pattern of behaviour in any particular setting that has become established over time as 'the way things are done'." (Jenkins 157) Individual power/oppression operates differently from institutional power/oppression. As Moore writes "Individual violence is easy to name and confront, while the violence committed by majority groups, institutions, and structures is harder to discern and undo." (126) The distinction between individual violence and systemic/institutional violence is crucial in understanding the complexities of power dynamics and marginalization of black gays within America's sexual canvas. Unlike individual acts of violence, which often manifests in acts of prejudice, microaggressions, or personal bias, systemic violence operates on a

broader, more insidious scale, embedded within the laws, policies, and institutional practices, shaping hierarchies and status quo, often under the guise of neutrality or meritocracy. Identity formation within these institutions/structures/sites is frequently characterized by a hegemonic, coercive and systematic imposition where black gay individuals find themselves navigating through predefined molds with limited agency; the interactions within family, education, religion, and the legal system frequently unfold in ways that limit personal autonomy and choice. Social structures and institutions, such as pedagogy, medicine, the family and the economy reflect patterns of behaviour an escape from which is not very easy. Institutions, over time, as Jenkins notes, turns from “the ways things are done” to “the way things should be done”. (159) These social structures and institutions often emerge as site of systematic prejudice, bias and violence, shaping sexual norms and values, exacerbating the challenges faced by black men across multiple domains of life. In these contexts, individuals encounter a pronounced lack of empowerment, compelled to conform to predetermined norms and expectations that are imposed upon them. The relationship between social structures and institutions, and norms and values and the ways in which these interact with one another constitutes a fundamental aspect of understanding societal dynamics and power relations. Another essential facet concerning African-American gay individual and collective identities (with/out institutional relation) is predilection to use a unidirectional theoretical discursive practice to document African-American gay “living”. Unidirectional theoretical discursive practice may be understood as a methodological approach in academic or intellectual edifice that tends to focus on only one aspect, perspective, or dimension of a phenomenon while neglecting or oversimplifying its complexity and diversity. African-American/Black same-sex identity often stands as “multiple outsider” within the “progressive” body politics of the United States. Adopting and embracing a unidirectional theoretical discursive practice, that is exclusive and essentializing by nature, does not help much to understand the complexities and intricate nuances of intersecting identities and experiences. Such an approach fails to acknowledge the multifaceted layers of identity, privilege, and oppression and capture the full range of complexities in navigating racial and sexual path simultaneously. Theorizing a single variable politics, under such circumstances, isn’t just theoretically unsound but also

potentially unfair and dangerous for black males. The demonstrated failure of traditional theoretical frameworks of one single unidirectional axis to interrogate questions on black man's sexuality - Black Studies, for example, often take a myopic narrow and confined approach to questions of black man's identity crisis, centres that it itself upon on one identity category (race or sexuality) - has led to meteoric rise in intersectionality literature and theoretical practice, imperative for dismantling structural barriers and fostering genuine equity and inclusion. This study is an attempt to close that research gap both in terms of institutional focus as well as theoretical discursive framework.

The famous introductory lines of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) — “I am an invisible man...invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me” (1) — have long resonated with many black people in the United States. Ellison conjured up those sentiments in a racial context. Moore and Iweala evoke a similar sentiment in *No Ashes* and *Speak No Evil* with some additional differences: their texts offer compelling argument for those who find marginalized by both race and sexuality (in their intersection) and how these intersecting identities are strengthened in institutional support. *No Ashes in the Fire: Coming of Age Black & Free in America* and *Speak No Evil* stand as compelling examples of how black males frequently contend with a complex web of intersecting oppressions that are systematic and embedded within different institutions. These texts reveal the hegemonic and fundamental control and regulation that these institutions have on identity formation of African-Americans who practice same-sex.

Moore's memoir *No Ashes in the Fire: Coming of Age Black & Free in America* (henceforth referred to as *No Ashes*) is an important intervention within Black liberation discourse that contextualizes America's abusive relationship with its black people, especially black gays through knowledge production of racism, black masculinities and black sexuality. The book is an attempt at, in the author's own words, “joining a chorus of voices who have tried their best to narrate the beautiful and messy complexities of race, gender, class, and sexuality as they collide and are expressed in the contemporary United States.” (Moore 11) Moore's book adopts the

interdisciplinary modality of pairing personal narrative with socio-cultural histories: It seamlessly blends the individual with the collective, the private with the public, the past with the present. It is within this intricate interplay that the book finds its distinctive identity — a compelling fusion of memoir and social commentary.

LGBT youth are subjected to harsh treatment in their homes, schools, and spiritual communities. They traverse streets that sometimes double as sites of murder. The reality that LGBT youth are disproportionately affected by homelessness, over-policing in their neighborhoods, and biased treatment within health care institutions is well documented. Trans women of color are murdered at alarming rates, yet these appalling crimes are recast in media headlines without widespread heartbreak or a call to action. The myth of black gay economic progress is tempered by the reality that many black LGBT people carry the weight of poverty. Some do not survive the journey. Attempts to love, marry, have sex, and use public restrooms without the interference of states, municipalities, and businesses are undertakings that require courage and trust. But it is hard to put faith in systems that render you a throwaway. Black LGBT people are not the amoral problems deserving of what has been inflicted upon us, nor are we victims who refuse to fight back or sometimes die while trying. The more precise rendering of the problem is one that exposes both victimizers and an apathetic public that allows bias, violence, and hatred to continue under its watch. (51)

The above paragraph is drawn from Moore's *No Ashes*. What Moore accomplishes, in course of the paragraph, is a sharp critique of the deeply entrenched, systematic bias, endemic violence, and institutionalized hatred within structures of power and authority such as the home, school, medical, media and the police. The text positions anti black gay discourses as a direct and inevitable consequence of institutional exclusion and erasure. Throughout the text, Moore explores this phenomenon through his own quotidian experiences of having to deal with different institutions and structures of power in a predominantly white heterosexual setting. *No Ashes* thus reimagines “what a practice of black radical love

and justice can look like” (141) through an interrogation of these institutions and structures. Moore employs a multifaceted approach to examine the issue of racialized homophobia within different institutions: the methodological spectrum encompasses personal narratives, scrutiny of historical context, linguistic deconstruction, an incisive analysis of institutions and a thorough examination of the consequential trauma inflicted upon individuals.

Moore opens his text by directing the reader's focus to the racial dynamics of Camden, U.S., and progressively shifts the conversation toward the complex intersection of racialized sexuality. In this progression of text, Moore toys with the idea that mainstream institutions are homophobic, heterosexist and racist simultaneously that denies, denigrates and stigmatizes black gays. Moore employs the principle of intersectionality, drawing from his personal experiences to illuminate and foreground how Black gay individuals endure multifaceted oppression, critically examining the complexities this creates and exploring how this group navigates the unique challenges imposed by institutional structures.

Moore's book is divided into eight chapters, with a prologue and an epilogue. Each succeeding chapter is an attempt to let the readers understand the complexities of being an African-American queer. Before engaging with the complexities of these intersecting issues, it is crucial to first consider a revealing incident from Moore's text that encapsulates some of the dynamics at play. In a harrowing episode, Moore recounts a near-fatal encounter in which he narrowly escapes being burned alive by OB and his close circle of friends, who douse him in gasoline, in an act of homophobia. The entire episode featuring OB, OB's friends and Moore constitutes a profoundly disturbing moment in the narrative and is expressed in a certain richness of agony and fear. Moore allows the readers to understand the mindset from which OB and his friends operate.

Why you such a fucking faggot?” OB, the oldest and toughest of the crew, asked as he uncoiled the plastic cap covering the milk jug he held in his hand. The boys walked toward me and surrounded me before I was able to make it home. (Moore, 43)

We quote Moore here. Before dousing Moore with gasoline, OB unleashes a barrage of dehumanizing homophobic slurs—"faggot," "gay," "pussy"—in a violently performative act of bullying. The rhetoric of faggot/gay/pussy forms part of the muscular, patriarchal homophobic vocabulary and at the root of which is identity categorisation. As Jenkins says "to identify someone could be enough to decide how to treat her." (6) OB's identification/characterization of Moore as a "faggot" serves as a justification to mistreat the later. Moore's encounter with OB elucidates how compulsory heterosexuality operates not merely as a normative social expectation, but as a coercive apparatus of oppression, enacted and reinforced through the linguistic encoding of sexual deviance and otherness.

The rationale for introducing the gasoline episode into this discussion here is to illuminate how codified labels confront weak (not only because it is perceived to be 'perverse' but also because the individual in question is alone and surrounded by a group of bullies) homosexual individuals in a strategy of interrogation and bullying, a perilous moment in which the very question of being is negated and existence is a challenge and sealed into nothingness. The image of a few boys interrogation a lone weak homosexual boy in a classic act of bullying constitutes a peak moment in course of the narrative, a moment that Moore touches on in early part of the memoir and discusses in detail somewhere in the middle.

While we confront these individual acts of violence in horror and dismay, our primary focus lies in the intersection of institutional homophobia and institutional racism—examining how the latter informs and exacerbates the former, and how these entrenched systems of oppression mutually reinforce one another and how these shape the struggle of African-Americans for being both black and queer.

Institutions decide on whose stories "are allowed to flourish in our collective memory and whose are blotted out." (Moore 12) When Moore critiques all the "invisible" and "not-so-hidden" forces that "that rendered my blackness criminal, my black manhood vile, my black queerness sinful, and my black city hood" (4), he essentially questions institutions and structures. When Moore reflects on his sexual experience that "I couldn't speak it out...didn't seem to exist for others...full of loud

silences...can feel poisonous” (58-58), he essentially directs our attention to the pervasive influence of macro institutions and structural forces that silence and invalidate his lived reality. If *No Ashes* is a narrative engaged in a “search of the self”, as the text says, then this search unfolds through a critical navigation of institutions and structural forces. As the text chronicles encounters that Moore share with people who share his identity, the readers are drawn to the crisis embedded within the quotidian experience of African-America gay personhood, embodied in the array of Moore’s everyday existence. In exploring and examining the question of identity through institutions and structures, Moore looks at the collective distrust for the blacks, the calculated policing of sexual difference, and the ghettoization of black masculinity and black patriarchy. These form critical part of the text’s gaze.

In his *The History of sexuality* (1976), Foucault identifies pedagogy as a major system of power in the explosion of distinct discursivities of respectability about sexuality. For Foucault, the institution of pedagogy constitutes a key cultural arena for the production and reproduction of sexuality, sexual identities and discourses. Its coded contents and qualified speakers, systematically excluding and marginalizing individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, perpetuate a structure that not only diminishes their visibility but also actively contributes to their social and cultural erasure. Foucault writes:

Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it...What is an educational system, after all, if not a ritualisation of the word; if not a qualification of some fixing of roles for speakers; if not the constitution of a (diffuse) doctrinal group; if not a distribution and an appropriation of discourse, with all its learning and its powers? (227)

For Foucault, the pedagogical technology functioned to regulate discourse, to socialize behaviour, and with the knowledge and power that it carried, it metamorphoses into a major disciplinary force shaping societal norms and values surrounding sexuality. The pedagogical model/the model of classroom practice that Foucault refers to has not changed much over the years. *No Ashes* challenges the

purported liberating assertions about educational institutions, instead viewing them in terms of disciplinary practices. Moore takes up intellectual cues from Foucault and casts pedagogy in terms of regulatory body, competing with other areas such as medicine and religions etc, to take control of the black body. In Moore, schools emerge as a site where sexuality and race are forged together in a hegemonic understanding that privileges whiteness and hetero-normativity while simultaneously marginalizing and erasing the experiences of individuals with diverse racial and sexual identities. Moore writes: “Elementary school and middle school teachers who taught mostly black kids in the schools I attended talked only about white love and heterosexual desire.’ (54) The portrayal of love and desire as predominantly white and heterosexual in elementary and middle school curricula reflects a broader issue of representation within educational materials. Let us understand this through a quote from Moore:

Teachers and adult family members never spoke Joseph Beam’s name to me. No one was brave enough to search out his story. No one told me that a short ten-minute car ride from Camden black gay men like Beam were living and fighting for the black queer futures I dreamt of in isolation. No one placed *In the Life* or *Brother to Brother* on course syllabi or in my backpack. (50)

In the above paragraph, Moore introduces us to issues of representation of black gay desires. Moore is critical of US pedagogy that marginalizes black gay authors like Joseph Beam, whose works often foreground the the difficulties of being black and gay in the United States, sending them to obscurity and invisibility while foregrounding heteronormative white authors. The text’s invocation of heterosexual canons like *Romeo and Juliet* to foreground homosexual invisibility and heterosexual hyper-visibility gives strength to the argument of representational lack. By foregrounding the invisibility and vilification of Black queer experiences, the text highlights the systemic erasure and violence inherent in dominant educational narratives, calling into question the ways in which institutions fail to provide safe and inclusive learning environment and perpetuate and reinforce oppressive norms in the process. Notably, Joseph Beam, gay activist and author, edited the anthology of

queer writings *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (1986), a first by any black gay men in the United States; Beam's anthology *Brother to Brother: New Writing by Black Gay Men* (1991) was completed under the editorship of Essex Hemphill. But despite their unique contribution to the discourse of sexuality and race, these anthologies found no place in the pedagogy of the 1990s. The readers would do well to remember that while Moore is writing of the US of the 1980s and the 1990s, this reality persists unabated into the first and the second decades of the 21st century. The absence of authors like Joseph Beam or James Baldwin from school curricula, juxtaposed with the continued prominence of texts like *Romeo and Juliet*, serves as a stark indictment of the US educational system, which is largely a homogeneous site for white hetero-normativity. Moore takes up the issue of representation of not just black gay authors but also black lesbian authors.

In all the years of my white and heterosexual-oriented K-12 schooling, and during my five years as a struggling undergraduate student at a Catholic university, I went without reading books reflecting any part of the black life I had experienced. Black lesbian girls, transgender brothers, gay fathers, and bisexual lovers were not central characters invoked in mainstream fiction, nor were their lives examined in any discussion I had in my classes. I didn't learn about the works of Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Essex Hemphill, Marlon Riggs, Marsha P. Johnson, and Cheryl Clarke until I searched for them in my late twenties. (5)

The above paragraph forms part of the prologue and serves to highlight how same-sex materials and authors of black descent like Lorde and Clarke amongst others have been deliberately erased from main stream fictions and school syllabus. This omission underscores broader issues of representation and visibility, of systemic biases and inequalities within educational curricula, where marginalized voices are often silenced or overlooked. This in turn points to a broader pattern of marginalization where the experiences, histories, and perspectives of marginalized communities, such as Black queer community, are systematically excluded or overlooked. The omission of prominent Black queer figures such as Audre Lorde,

Barbara Smith, Essex Hemphill, Marlon Riggs, Marsha P. Johnson, and Cheryl Clarke from educational curriculum underscores the systemic marginalization of Black queer voices. A curriculum that prioritizes white and heterosexual narratives and effectively erases the rich and diverse realities creates impacts not just sense of belonging but also being, as it perpetuates feelings of marginalization and otherness, reinforcing the idea that their stories, experiences, histories, and contributions are not valid or worthy of acknowledgment within mainstream educational contexts. What schools and colleges consequently produce is black individuals that come to believe and grow up with the notion that “queer desire wasn’t normal” (Moore 49).

Notably, *No Ashes* draws a distinction between secular educational institutions and those affiliated with religious denominations, portraying the latter as inherently more conservative. Moore's enrollment in a Roman Catholic campus signifies a departure from the ordinary educational environment, bringing with it the anticipation of facing “isolation and moral judgment for loving weed and men.” (74) Literature has glaringly neglected to address the ethical dimensions inherent within ecclesial educational institutions over dissemination of “knowledge”, particularly with Catholic doctrines that create dominance and vulnerability. Roman Catholic institutions in Moore emerge as strong site for orthodox ideas; individuals in these institutes are often socialized into these discursive ideas. The historical evidence and recorded examples for how Catholic groups of institutions in its expressed insensibility and hostility towards homosexuality, sourced from scriptures and traditional teachings, have caused a great many of practioners of same-sex to either keep themselves to ‘closet’ or force into hiding post-resistance or elsewhere bear consequences for embodying ‘sodomy’ are great many. The Catholic insensibility and antagonism stem from the belief that certain human behaviors are inherently immoral, without exception and punishable. “It is not an issue which can be 'smoothed over', because it touches a moral tradition which has deep roots and a very long history in Catholic moral theology.” (Poole 501) It is this catholic conviction, derived from a tradition of moral theology. that is a cause of concern in Moore. Although Catholic universities and church have different governance structures, these remain part of the church’s mechanism to impart moral lessons guiding

relationship between people, including sexual relation. It is a fundamentally symbolic or ideological reality. In the Roman Catholic tradition, human beings are presumed to be naturally heterosexual; in such a context, male same-sex behavior is judged as dishonorable and ipso facto immoral. Moore constructs Roman Catholic institutions, with its traditional interpretations of religious texts, as a strange world where “white people’s cares and well-being were centered” (74) while African-American gays like him “face isolation and moral judgment for loving weed and men.” (74) The text situates the Catholic code of sexual ethics in a dichotomous relation with same-sex desire. Moore questions the racial and sexual ‘gaze’ to which Catholic-affiliated varsities subject black gays to homophobic and heterosexist marginalization. Moore describes the Catholic university that he studies in as a place where “white people’s cares and well-being were centered” and “every time a white student or professor makes a racist claim.” (74) The university’s “underrepresentation of black students, professors” (75) and “the small pockets of black, Latino, and Asian students are cordoned off in small sections of tables” (74) do not escape the reader’s eyes either. Elsewhere we are straight away drawn to the “racial profiling so normalized on a college campus.” (74) In this overbearing racist space, the expectation that Moore would conduct his sexual identity in accordance with Roman Catholic traditions brings tension to the narrative. It is within this background that the text encourages our attentiveness to Moore fight against the dual “threat of erasure and homophobia” within the campus.

In response to systemic invisibility and representational absence, *No Ashes in the Fire* advocates for a pedagogy rooted in inclusion—one that affirms marginalized identities and challenges the silences imposed by dominant cultural narratives. Culture critique Henry Giroux’s concept of “pedagogy of difference” offers a valuable lens through which to interpret Moore’s own vision of pedagogy. Giroux’s theorization of a ‘pedagogy of difference’ constitutes a critical intervention against conventional, authoritarian educational paradigms that uphold notions of sameness, ideological neutrality, and universal subjectivity. In contrast, Giroux advocates for a pedagogical framework that actively engages with and affirms the heterogeneity of learners’ social, cultural, racial, gendered, and sexual identities, positioning

difference not as a deficit to be corrected, but as a foundational element of critical inquiry and emancipatory practice. *No Ashes in the Fire* unapologetically affirms and honors the transformative contributions of Black queer, transgender, and gender nonconforming individuals across multiple spheres of cultural and intellectual life. While Black queer individuals are often marginalized within dominant pedagogical frameworks, *No Ashes* reclaims and celebrates them as pivotal architects of Black liberation, feminist justice, antiwar resistance, and the Black Arts Movement. In doing so, the text embodies the ethos of pedagogy of difference, foregrounding marginalized identities not as peripheral but as foundational to reimagining knowledge, community, and social justice.

Moore's work is situated in the world of growing AIDS. In *No Ashes*, the narrative of AIDS serves as a significant discussion point in Moore's exploration of identity, marginalization, and the intersectionality of race, sexuality, and public health. The AIDS crisis of the late 20th century catalyzed far-reaching social, cultural, and political consequences on a global scale, especially for those positioned at the periphery of dominant gender and sexual consensus. The production and dissemination of information surrounding AIDS reflects a broader shift in which the disease is elevated from a purely biomedical concern to a discursive construct—one that carries profound sociopolitical implications, particularly for already marginalized populations. The intersection of AIDS, knowledge, power, and homophobia highlights the complex ways in which societal perceptions of sexuality, health, and identity are shaped by entrenched systems of power. Moore's engagement with the AIDS epidemic offers a lens through which to examine the profound and multifaceted impacts of this global health crisis on African-Americans. Moore writes of his experience thus:

I was a black gay boy from a working-poor family growing up in the age of AIDS, in an impoverished black American city, within a society antagonistic to LGBT people, in a country that had yet to value black love and bodies. Certainly, black queer love would be dismissed as an impossibility. (50)

Moore's narrative highlights how intersecting forms of discrimination, such as racism and homophobia, compound the marginalization experienced by individuals affected by AIDS, particularly black homosexuals. "The history of AIDS has shown that there is a strong view that some people are worthier of being kept alive than others." (Gronfors and Stalstrom 58) Moore deconstructs the racist framework in which AIDS operates, a framework in which bodies affected by AIDS are systematically assigned to hierarchies of value and priority, based largely on race and sexuality, a hierarchy in which white heterosexual bodies is positioned at the top and homosexual black bodies at the bottom. Moore's narrativization of AIDS, in *No Ashes*, points to a disturbing trend wherein certain individuals are deemed more valuable or deserving of life-saving interventions than others. In this black gay bodies suffer for being black and gay.

In *No Ashes*, AIDS emerge as a powerful mechanism in the control, regulation and marginalization of black gay bodies. Moore's perspective on AIDS reveals a disturbing narrative of the institutionalized exploitation and control of black gay bodies within the realm of medicine and governance. Moore sees AIDS as a mechanism in which black gay bodies become a subject of experiment and of control, regulation and of power projection. Consider the following lines in which Moore also draws the reader's attention to how medical interventions in black gay bodies and AIDS leads to the convergence of power and pleasure:

During my late adolescence, never once did a doctor ask me, while administering an HIV test, if I experienced love or rejection, connection or estrangement. It didn't matter that Billy was beautiful and kind. They wanted to know if I had sex with men. They didn't ask why it was I decided against using a condom despite my awareness of HIV risks. (54)

Queer bodies and particularly black queer bodies are often reduced to objects of scrutiny and control, to be studied and administered, unacknowledged as individuals with inherent humanity, emotions, and agency. At the heart of Moore's analysis lies the recognition that medical interventions, ostensibly aimed at addressing health concerns, often become arenas where power relations are

negotiated and enacted and joined in pleasure. The above paragraph underscores how power and pleasure meet in the black gay body that has been contaminated by AIDS. Moore's critique underscores the ways in which medical interventions contribute to feelings of shame, stigma, and alienation.

For Moore, all these exercises constitute exertion of power and an act in pleasure. Moore's directs such an understanding of control, power and pleasure to draw the readers' attention to the particularities of black gay men's bodies contaminated by AIDS. Moore problematizes this further: "Public health research and community-based interventions then and now focus on the "who" and not the "why" when it comes to advocacy related to black boys and men and HIV." (54) By emphasizing the focus on the "who" rather than the "why," Moore suggests that efforts often prioritize identifying and targeting individuals who are affected by HIV, without adequately addressing the underlying social, economic, and structural factors that contribute to their vulnerability. This approach places the burden of responsibility on individuals (representative of community), framing HIV as solely a behavioral issue rather than recognizing the broader social determinants at play. Such an approach fails to interrogate the root causes of HIV prevalence among black boys and men, such as systemic racism, poverty, lack of access to healthcare, stigma, and discrimination as Moore seems to point out in course of the narrative elsewhere. It is in this that some bodies (read: heterosexual/white/black) deemed vulnerable receives overwhelming focus while others (homosexual/black) are seen as cursed and lewd deviants. (50) AIDS and black gays, are under such circumstances, come to be received in synonymous association. As Moore says "I would never again say "AIDS" and "gay" without interpreting them as synonyms. My fate was sealed. I was gay and, therefore, AIDS would be my fate..." (54) Such narratives that associate AIDS and homosexuality exacerbate the stigma experienced by black gay individuals, compounding the effects of racial othering and further marginalizing this already vulnerable population.

Moore dedicates substantial pages to the role of the Church and religion, underscoring their significant impact on discourses surrounding sexuality. *No Ashes*

makes some very important criticism of religion and church in relation to sexuality question. Let us understand this through what we may call black critical spirituality. Black critical spirituality may be understood as a black criticism of religion and church, and in relation to power as Foucault articulates. In *No Ashes*, the church is a fundamental center of power, a pivotal locus of authority, its entrenched idea of masculinity and patriarchy guiding the churchgoers. Church assumes a fundamental role in the church as Moore, in his attempt to escape from homosexuality, turns to church and religion and becomes actively associated with its, both inside the edifice as well as outside. Moore writes:

I turned to God as a way of turning away from self, in an attempt to become a black man respected, a black man seen as normal, a black man who ended trapped inside a trope. The church did more to shore up my faulty ideas of black manhood and patriarchy than push me toward liberation from the lie of normativity. (89)

This passage from *No Ashes* reveals a complex interplay between religion, identity, and societal norms, particularly within the context of the protagonist's experience as a black man navigating issues of masculinity and acceptance within the church. For a black man to be normal and to be respected, it requires of him to give up on his desires. Moore contextualizes this normativity and respectability through notions of black manhood/masculinity and patriarchy. A little problematization of Black manhood and patriarchy will help us better understand Moore.

Black masculinity often emerges as an 'object of surveillance, policing, containment, and punishment' within religious discourse. The historical construction of black masculinity in church has harped on binary of muscular/feminine and male/female. Given these historical construction, Black men are frequently compelled to conform to rigid, often oppressive norms of masculinity, where any deviation from these expectations is met with swift and harsh judgment, reinforcing a cycle of social policing that punishes vulnerability and nonconformity. The church often reinforces black masculinity construct. It is within this context that *No Ashes in the Fire* critically engages with the role of the church, interrogating its influence on

the shaping of gender and identity within Black communities. Moore depicts religious discourse as intrinsically hegemonic, serving to reinforce dominant ideologies and norms that marginalize alternative expressions of identity and sexuality. Moore writes: “And during the several years that followed, I poured my love into a god I worshipped while slowly denying love to myself.” (89) The idea of loving God and loving oneself, of following life’s purpose and of following God’s will are placed in a binary format where the two are incompatible. In contexts where God’s will and life’s purpose are narrowly defined within the confines of heterosexual norms, God is effectively turned into a judge of black gay desires.

Moore’s problematization of God/church/religion versus black gay desires takes on other paradigms as well. Moore also problematizes the concept of white heterosexual God within Christianity. Moore’s remarks in course of the narrative that “Not all gods are invisible, faultless, presumably straight, masculine, and white” (88), invoked in a personal reference to a certain friend Warren who Moore links to divine in view of his support at Moore’s depressive condition, raises very important issues of racism, homophobia and patriarchal nature to which the church has been subjected to. Within the edifice of church, homosexuality is considered to be a sin, one that is deemed to be in need of “redemption.” This perspective is deeply rooted in the binary construction of body and soul, wherein black gay desires are positioned as inherently sinful and morally deviant. By framing homosexuality as a sin necessitating redemption, the church reinforces a binary understanding of human nature, wherein certain desires and identities are viewed as inherently flawed and in need of correction. The restrictive codes governing black manhood often construct black personhood in terms of hetero-normativity and this creates complexities in the life of gay African-Americans.

Of course, Moore contests and negotiates the complexities of Black homosexuality within the institutional framework of church, critically engaging with its doctrinal influence on marginalized sexual identities. Moore’s characterization of Warren as someone “who loved God and men” (88) together is an attempt to destabilize and subvert notions of truth and purity surrounding body and desires

within the Christian discourse. Similarly, the text's attempt to create a union between Moore and Ursula, a fellow queer church going faithful- in a reminiscent of Moore's relationship with Jason, Terrence, Sean and Billy elsewhere- is an attempt to subvert the God/body dichotomy and create possibilities for black radical love. In a churchly discourse where desires are cast as sinful, Moore seeks to negotiate a place for homosexuality within it. The idea that "some of the most well known, most beloved preachers often live the most complex, fragmented lives" (97) is an attempt to subvert the idea of pure black soul uncontaminated by the demonic spirit of homosexuality.

A central idea that permeates these narratives is power or the exercise of it. The production and dissemination of knowledge about sin, morality, and redemption/salvation exert a form of disciplinary power over their subjectivities. Moore is subject to surveillance, judgment, and discipline. As Moore would say, "The pulpit, and the sermon, can be weapons of manipulation and control." (97) While open to multiple interpretations, the pulpit and sermon may be critically understood as instruments of control, operating within a broader power dynamic that systematically excludes Black queer desire from the realm of socially sanctioned and acceptable bodily expressions. Of course, Moore subverts the notion of church/religion as neutral, apolitical body concerned solely with spiritual matters and exposes their deep entanglement in the production and reinforcement of social hierarchies. The point is underscored by the ecclesiastical context of Moore's own employment, which illuminates the complex entanglement between religious authority and the regulation of identity. We know that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Moore brings the preachers down from their sermon and pulpit to dwell on their thirst for power and show them as ordinary beings who live complex and fragmented lives. As Moore would say "So many lead double, and triple, lives without doing the work necessary to heal the internal brokenness they point out in others." (97) Moore looks at the internal dynamics of such a relation between the church and bodily desires. In seeking to foreground these conflicts, *No Ashes* looks at 'internal brokenness' that comes from the conflict. It is no wonder that the Christian persona/preacher that Moore enacts/performs does more harm than heal

his inner self, although he stands on the side of pulpit and sermon, exercising control over his ‘shepherds’.

That the church fails to dissuade him from his natural proclivity is discerned in the succeeding chapters of the text where he returns back to his ‘normal’ ways of life and living (read: homosexuality). The insidious working of the religious tradition vis-a-vis homosexuality only creates a situation of hybrid and liminal space characterized by ambiguity and contradiction, where the individual in question is neither entirely free nor completely chained, to either the church or to desires and thus remain in, if we may borrow Bhabha, ‘in-betweenness’. The natural electric sensation of physical attraction that readies him to trade flirtatious stares and coded conversations with strangers without any sense of guilt and with the conscience of being fully present in his body, unashamed and alive is pitted against the coerced manipulation of righteous living that the church propounds at the cost of self deception. It is this that brings him peace, happiness and self-love. *No Ashes* thus subverts and upsets God/religion versus bodily desires/black radical love and instead celebrates its transformative potential to take the path of freedom, liberation, magic and gift.

No Ashes is interspersed with questions of patriarchy and masculinity. Patriarchy and masculinity within the Black community are complex constructs, deeply shaped by both internal cultural dynamics and the historical legacies of racialized oppression. Traditional models of masculinity—rooted in dominance, emotional restraint, and heteronormativity—are not merely imported from mainstream patriarchal systems but are often intensified in response to the structural emasculation imposed by white supremacy, slavery, and systemic disenfranchisement. Nevertheless, these models of masculinity and patriarchy exert significant influence within the Black community, shaping social expectations, interpersonal relationships, and cultural norms in ways that often reinforce exclusionary and hierarchical structures. In engaging with some of these models, Moore confronts them head-on critically interrogating their foundational assumptions

and illuminating the profound harm they perpetuate, particularly in their marginalization and erasure of Black queer and gender-nonconforming identities.

Black boys and men are read as hypersexual: strong enough to deal with anything that comes our way, possessed of a brutish masculinity that prevents us from feeling, enabling us to terrorize others' bodies. Our dicks are caricatured as weapons or photographed as objects of desire poking out from our clothes, the only part of our bodies that's coveted. Our eyes as lacking tears. Our hands as tools for violence or pleasure, but little in between. Our lives as worthy of quick conclusions. (55)

In this single paragraph, Moore problematizes a host of interconnected issues confronting African-Americans: the distortion of black desires, the stereotypes that have been built into African-American men, the objectification of black bodies, and the systematic dehumanization that follows in its wake. The above passage critically examines the pervasive stereotypes and societal perceptions that plague black boys and men, highlighting the complex intersection of race, masculinity, and sexuality, leading to what Stockton calls, "intrusion of narratives on narratives". (Stockton 117)

The hyper-sexualization of African-Americans is a major thematic interest in Black studies. Scholars have critically examined the origins/the historical roots of this pervasive stereotype. Fanon's exploration of colonial relationship between the blacks and the whites in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) serves as an essential background to understand the current existential crisis wherein the African-Americans are subjected to extremely dangerous foreign (read: race and sexuality) bodies. Fanon writes that the 'negro' body, a colonial construction, narrativizes a disturbing image of racial defects of blacks as savage that embodied hyper-sexuality and brute masculinity. The black body, narrowed down to its genital, became an object of binary construction vis-à-vis white colonialists, who were seen to embody normativity. This hyper-sexualization not only stripped black individuals of their humanity but also perpetuated harmful myths about black masculinity, portraying it as inherently brutish and lacking in emotional depth. These myths and stereotype served to justify oppressive systems such as slavery, colonialism, and segregation.

Fanon's idea of colonial discourses that constructed black masculinity as inherently violent and hypersexual explains the current stereotypes of African-Americans as embodying uncontrollable sexual desire and aggression, stereotypes that reduce them to mere sexualized commodities. The construction of 'negroes' as hyper-sexual, thus, reduces blacks to base sexual objects, stripping them of their humanity and dignity. But, when African-Americans are collectively constructed as hypersexual then black gays constantly have also to negotiate their sense of self and the pressure to perform hyper-sexuality. This pressure to conform to hyper-sexual stereotypes not only complicates the formation of individual identities but also imposes unrealistic and often harmful standards upon gay black individuals. It is this that Moore examines in the above quoted paragraph.

Obtain a high school diploma. Go to college. Graduate. Leave home. And never return. Marry a woman. Have kids. Work. Pay off student loans. Buy a home. Buy a car. Repeat. Take vacations. Encourage my children to follow in my footsteps. Be declared successful. (No Ashes 72)

The concept of the 'American Dream' has long been a central tenet of American cultural 'mythology', often associated with the ideals of upward mobility, individual success, and the pursuit of happiness. Within its broader ideological framework, the American Dream has increasingly come to be anchored in a set of normative assumptions about family, intimacy, and social respectability—assumptions that privilege the heterosexual, nuclear family as the privileged site of stability, morality, and national belonging. Central to this narrative is the institution of marriage between a man and a woman, which has been culturally elevated as both a marker of personal success and a symbolic fulfillment of citizenship. This idealized configuration not only naturalizes a heteronormative social order but also marginalizes forms of kinship, desire, and community that fall outside its prescribed boundaries. As a result, queer lives—particularly those of Black queer individuals, whose experiences are already shaped by racialized exclusion—are positioned as deviations from the normative trajectory the American Dream purports to offer. Moore's black gay identity, in stark contradiction to the ideals of hetero-normativity

coded in American dream, creates significant tension in course of the narrative. His very existence challenges the very heteronormative expectations embedded within the American dream, particularly regarding marriage to a woman, having children, and conforming to traditional family structures.

The American Dream, though historically articulated through the aspirations and experiences of white Americans, has come to exert a powerful influence on the formation and performance of Black masculinity as well. Its normative ideals—self-sufficiency, economic success, patriarchal authority, and heteronormative family formation—function as cultural benchmarks against which Black men are often measured, both by dominant society and within their own communities. Moore writes “America is obsessed with images of the good black man whom niggas should strive to emulate.” (43) Maurice O. Wallace in *Constructing the Black Masculine* (2002) notes how American preoccupation with gender and sexuality “inflect not only the writerly record but the larger issue of the social ideal of black masculinity” (xi). For Wallace, Black male identity is not formed in a vacuum: it must negotiate (or resist) a “social ideal” rooted in dominant American norms. Black-queer body is frequently measured against a normative ideal that is shaped by constructs of heterosexuality, masculinity, athleticism, and conventional attractiveness as defined by white gaze. This ideal not only operates as a standard of comparison but also exerts a powerful influence on the ways in which Black-queer bodies are perceived and evaluated. Under such a context, the erotic and emotional expressions of Black queer individuals are shaped by this tension between their lived realities and the dominant cultural ideals that erase or distort their experiences.

Black masculinity, over time, has increasingly been shaped in response to the values, expectations, and distortions imposed by the white gaze. Rather than existing as an autonomous identity, it has often been forced into a posture of performance—one that mirrors and negotiates with stereotypes and standards constructed by dominant white society. In such acts of performance/mimicry, behaviors, dispositions, and modes of self-presentation associated with Black men become increasingly calibrated to the frameworks and expectations produced by the white

gaze. Bell Hooks in *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2004) argues that many Black men internalize a “dominator model” of masculinity originally modeled on white patriarchal masters. (4) In such ‘imagined’ mimicry, heterosexuality becomes a proof of masculinity, and masculinity its natural expression. It is precisely within this ideological framework that Moore situates his own reflections, noting: “At seventeen, my secrets were still mine, locked away because of my faith in the sacredness of masculinity, which I assumed was a natural extension of heterosexuality.” (68) Moore’s text illuminates the intricate mechanisms through which such internalization configures the very terms of Black masculine subjectivity and the social practices that emerge from it. They not only absorb these ideological formations as normative givens, but also actively reproduce, regulate, and enforce them within their own communal contexts. In this recursive process, internalization generates stratifying classificatory regimes that often crystallize into both interpersonal and structurally embedded forms of violence. As Jenkins would remind us: “to identify someone could be enough to decide how to treat her (7)

It is in the spirit of criticism of patriarchy, masculinity and hetero-normativity within black life that the text brings in the Black Lives Matter movement to the discursive table. In Moore’s narrative, the introduction of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement serves as a strategic intervention to not only highlight the ongoing struggles for racial justice but also to critique the ways in which these struggles often exclude or marginalize non-conforming voices. The exclusion of Black queer and trans voices within BLM, or their secondary position to the central focus on cisgender Black men, can be seen in both the movement’s rhetoric and its leadership, particularly in its early days. The exclusionary dynamics within the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement have indeed been a focal point of critique and have sparked a robust body of literature aimed at addressing the movement’s perceived patriarchal and masculinist tendencies. Moore’s engagement with BLM challenges the traditional paradigms of Black political activism, which have predominantly centered on the experiences of Black men while often sidelining the voices and concerns of Black women, queer, and gender-nonconforming individuals. Moore problematizes the movement for its lack of, perceived or real, all-accepting nature; this he does in a

term that is subtle and nuanced. Moore writes: “The Movement for Black Lives’ perpetual call for the value of *all* black lives requires critical self-reflection on the part of anyone who claims to be part of the work.” (132) It is interesting to note the use of the italic ‘*all*’ in the above sentence. In the italic ‘*all*’, Moore attempts to negotiate a space for LGBTQ within the Black Lives Matter movement. By confronting this limitation, Moore calls attention to the intersecting forms of oppression that shape the experiences of Black queer individuals.

One of the critical terrains that Moore’s text opens for reflection is the classificatory politics of language. The classificatory politics of language names the subtle yet pervasive operations through which linguistic forms are leveraged to produce, rank, and discipline subjects, thereby embedding them within predetermined social and epistemological hierarchies. Language not only describes the world but also delineates boundaries—between the intelligible and the illegible, the normative and the deviant, the “standard” and the stigmatized. Through processes such as codification, standardization, and labeling, language becomes a tool of social ordering, assigning value to certain modes of speech while marginalizing others.

The construction of sexuality through language is neither benign nor neutral; rather, it constitutes a mode of epistemic and symbolic violence through which dominant ideologies assert control over bodies, desires, and identities- a mechanism vividly enacted in OB’s repeated invocation of slurs such as “faggot,” “gay,” and “pussy” in reference to Moore, whereby linguistic aggression becomes a performative act of gendered and sexual regulation, reasserting heteronormative dominance by coding queerness not merely as deviance but as ontological deficiency, weakness, and otherness within a violently masculinist economy of meaning. The invocation of homophobic slurs functions not merely as interpersonal insult but as a performative act of symbolic subjugation, wherein Moore’s perceived queerness becomes the site upon which OB enacts a reaffirmation of his own positional authority. In this dynamic, language becomes a regulatory apparatus that both reflects and reproduces entrenched hierarchies, exploiting queer vulnerability as a means of consolidating social power and reinscribing the marginalization of

LGBTQ+ identities within a violently heteromascuine epistemology. For OB, the articulation of Black identity is contingent upon a stringent adherence to heteronormative codes and an emphatic embodiment of hypermasculine performativity—an ideologically loaded construct through which strength, dominance, and sexual conformity are positioned as essential markers of legitimacy; Moore’s deviation from these prescriptive norms situates him as a transgressive subject, whose queerness not only disrupts OB’s internalized schema of Black masculinity but also provokes a reactionary impulse to police the boundaries of racial and gendered identity through ridicule and symbolic violence. Consequently, the act of throwing gasoline reinforces a regime in which queerness is constructed as abject and masculinity is affirmed through acts of both verbal and physical domination. The multiple subjective positions that Moore occupies in course of the bullying is thus attended through a intersectional stratagem in which the readers are invited to see the connection between his own homosexuality and femininity versus OB’s homosexuality and masculinity. The explicit recognition of this relation, built in binaries, help us understand the divisiveness and the tension embedded in the conjunction of gay and feminine, heterosexual and masculine.

The linguistic construction of black heterosexuality and masculinity by OB must be understood as an attempt to restrict the production of identities along the lines of what he thinks (one might interpret) to be the natural desire. OB does not name his own desires but names Moore’s desire in negative terms. If we are to believe in what Butler says “The “naming” of sex is an act of domination and compulsion, an institutionalized performative that both creates and legislates social reality by requiring the discursive/ perceptual construction of bodies in accord with principles of sexual difference.” (147), then OB’s act constitutes a political act in domination and control. Consequently, OB’s attempt to strike a match to Moore’s gasolined body constitutes a performance of those linguistic constructions. .

Another critical site in which *No Ashes* foregrounds the mutually constitutive relations between race and gender, alongside the complex configurations of race and sexuality, is the institutional terrain of policing and the wider criminal justice

apparatus. The systemic forms of violence enacted by law enforcement against Black individuals constitute a thoroughly documented social reality, substantiated by extensive scholarly inquiry, sustained community testimony, and numerous civil rights investigations spanning several decades. While systemic violence against Black communities is widely represented in literature, media, and analyses of the criminal justice system, the specific vulnerabilities and experiences of Black queer individuals receive far less critical attention. Their precarity remains disproportionately underexamined, both within literary discourse and across broader cultural and institutional frameworks. In this context, Moore's *No Ashes* emerges as a vital and intellectually consequential contribution to the broader critical discourse. By foregrounding the intricacies of Black queer embodiment within landscapes marked by state-sanctioned violence, social precarity, and contested forms of community affiliation, Moore's narrative intervenes in and recalibrates established understandings of racialized harm. The text not only brings into focus experiential dimensions that have long been marginalized or rendered conceptually invisible, but also compels a reexamination of the epistemic and cultural frameworks through which systemic violence is theorized, narrated, and politically apprehended. *No Ashes* underscores the complex intersection of race, sexuality, and policing that structures the everyday realities of Black queer life. In illuminating these entanglements, Moore extends the analytic terrain previously outlined—demonstrating that the lived experiences of Black queer individuals are shaped not solely by racialized state violence, but by the compounded and often mutually reinforcing operations of homophobia and transphobia.

Policing, in Moore's account, is consistently rendered as a locus of violence, racialized surveillance, and systemic injustice. Law enforcement institutions operate not merely as neutral agents of public order but as instruments historically aligned with white supremacist logics—figured, as Moore notes, through “white law enforcement who saw them as bodies fit for extrajudicial liquidation.” This dynamic is further reinforced by the “violent discriminatory practices of local law enforcement in which the political establishment was complicit,” revealing a deeply entrenched nexus between state power and racial oppression. Within this framework,

police abuse, gun violence, and the routine misconduct of officers are shown to exert a pervasive and devastating impact, shaping the everyday lives of Black and Latino residents in Camden and producing enduring conditions of fear, vulnerability, and disenfranchisement.

Moore consistently draws our attention to extrajudicial killings, of white law enforcement officials presiding over black/queer bodies in course of the text. The records of real life characters, in course of the text, soaked in blood through extra judicial killings gives a sense of urgency and immediacy to the narrative of horror and pity in which black/queer individuals navigate their complexity. In Sakia Gunn and other examples, readers are confronted with the stark and tragic realities of these real-life events, evoking a deep sense of horror and disillusionment. The text records several instance of police violence: where “seventeen-year-old boy who was shot, after the assailant called him a “faggot,” while walking down the street.” (126) and of “DeFarra Gaymon who allegedly made a sexual advance toward a plainclothes undercover police officer, was fatally shot by police during the exchange in a county park in Newark.” (125) Through Moore's narratives, readers are confronted with the grim reality of these real-life tragedies, evoking a profound sense of horror.

Policing and violence against Black bodies is not a novel or isolated phenomenon; rather, it represents a deeply entrenched and enduring historical continuum that traces its origins to the brutalities of slavery and the pervasive racial terror that followed in its wake. The systemic abuse of Black individuals by law enforcement today must be understood as a contemporary manifestation of the same coercive mechanisms of control, subjugation, and dehumanization that were institutionalized during the era of slavery and perpetuated throughout the Jim Crow period. While the methods of violence have evolved, the underlying structures of racial domination and the criminalization of Blackness remain strikingly consistent, revealing a persistent pattern of racial oppression embedded within the fabric of American society. This continuity reflects not only a historical legacy of white supremacy but also a modern iteration of the state's role in regulating and policing Black bodies as sites of subordination and exploitation. As Moore writes: “We could

not unsee the evidence of a contemporary lynching— a lifeless black body on display, and images consumed by a virtual public infatuated by black death.” (130) The spectacle of Black death—historically embodied in lynchings and now circulated through digital media—remains a central feature of racial oppression, reinforcing the systemic devaluation of Black lives. For Black queer individuals, the policing of their bodies is not limited to legal enforcement but becomes an act of racialized and sexualized violence. In Moore’s narrative, law enforcement is framed as a pivotal locus of both structural violence and social control, where Black queer individuals are subjected to systemic brutality at the hands of authoritarian police officers.

Moore draws an interesting contrast between the whites and the blacks. If:

White boys are raised to rule the home, the streets, the banks, the courts, the legislative halls, the church, the academy, the medical industry, the military, and the country. They are granted permission to travel through the world never questioning their need to control others’ bodies and properties, never reflecting on their incessant demand for respect and entitlement, never removing themselves from the center of the public imagination.” (90)

Then: “Outside the home, the streets black boys navigate are controlled by the state and the wealthy, and black boys’ freedoms are restricted and policed.” (90)

These lines have been drawn from *No Ashes* and these distinctly delineate the separate and sharply contrasting domains of white and Black experiences. While, one becomes the ruler: of home, church, banks, courts, legislature, the medical industry etc, the other becomes the ruled, an object to be controlled by the state, whose desires are policed and punished. While the lack of whites is balanced in their whiteness, the black queers suffer in both being queer and embodying blackness. For Moore, these institutions embody both homophobia and racism. It is in this that the text situates “the state, the city, and white people” in an invertible relation with the black people, where the later adopts manipulative and authoritative technique to

create dire social and economic conditions for black people. The text quite unambiguously calls out white supremacy for what it is- a pervasive and insidious system of power and privilege that perpetuates oppression, marginalization, and violence against black and other marginalized communities. It is in this individuals like Moore navigate the violence that harms black people's psyches and well-being.

Moore's text is not a dystopian narrative of pervasive oppression; it is a multifaceted narrative that not only illuminates the entrenched systems of marginalization confronting Black queer individuals but also chronicles the incremental yet significant advances in LGBTQ+ rights, foregrounding ongoing acts of resistance, resilience, and political assertion within and against hegemonic structures. While the text offers a trenchant critique of racial and sexual oppression, it refuses to be confined to a discourse of despair, instead articulating a narrative that interweaves critique with hope, resistance, and the reclamation of agency. In Moore's narrative, educational institutions—from schools to universities—emerge as contested terrains where the hegemonic force of heteronormativity is both reinforced and resisted, revealing an ongoing struggle over the legitimacy, visibility, and articulation of queer identities within spaces historically structured to privilege normative sexual and gender paradigms. Within these institutional spaces, Moore maps the incremental yet potent disruptions to traditional heteronormative paradigms, as LGBTQ+ individuals assert their presence and agency, mobilizing a politics of recognition that aspires, in his words, “to practice a love inclusive of all Black people” (121), thereby reimagining community through the lens of radical inclusivity and intersectional solidarity. The conceptualization of a school commemorating Sakia Gunn, in *No Ashes*, signifies a radical reimagining of educational space—one that resists the epistemic erasures perpetuated by dominant heteronormative and patriarchal structures and centers Black queer lives in the spirit of visibility, justice, and intersectional belonging. It transcends a mere commemorative act, evolving into a radical reclamation of both symbolic and material space, asserting the presence and significance of those whose histories have been systematically erased, marginalized, and rendered invisible by hegemonic structures of power and knowledge. In a similar vein, activism emerges as an

indispensable mechanism for the radical reconfiguration of prevailing paradigms. Within Moore's narrative, activism is not simply an act of dissent but a calculated and strategic praxis, meticulously orchestrated to destabilize and dismantle the entrenched, institutionalized structures of prejudice and oppression that perpetuate systemic marginalization. Activism, in this context, emerges as a compelling imperative to acknowledge and confront the pervasive violence inherent in state-sanctioned homophobia, advocating for a transformative cultural recalibration that actively repudiates the criminalization, objectification, and dehumanization of queer bodies within both institutional and societal frameworks. On a similar note, the Black Lives Matter movement is subtly woven into Moore's memoir, particularly through allusions to the Black Lives Matter Global Network. Within *No Ashes*, Moore intricately intertwines the foundational principles of Black Lives Matter with the transformative concept of radical Black love, thereby forging a profound and often contentious synthesis between two seemingly disparate movements—the traditional patriarchal frameworks that have historically shaped Black liberation struggles and the inclusive, intersectional ethos of the queer movement. This synthesis of ideas endeavors to construct a critical nexus between the Black community's struggle for racial justice and the broader fight for LGBTQ+ rights, cultivating a space for solidarity and camaraderie that transcends the restrictive confines of patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies. Within this framework, both the Black Lives Matter movement and the broader call for Black liberation become sites for reimagining the contours of radical Black love and justice, as Moore contends, "what a practice of Black radical love and justice can look like" (133), proposing an inclusive and intersectional vision that challenges and redefines existing paradigms of liberation and equality.

In contemporary discourses on alternative sexualities, queerness is increasingly reframed not as deviance, but as a radical, revolutionary act that disrupts hegemonic regimes of gender and sexual normativity. Within dominant cultural imaginaries, a persistent binary casts heterosexuality as respectable, natural, and morally upright, while relegating homosexuality to the realms of deviance, pathology, and social disgrace. This dichotomy sustains a hierarchy of legitimacy

that not only marginalizes queer individuals but also reinforces broader structures of patriarchy and heteronormativity. By reclaiming queer identity as a site of resistance, contemporary queer narratives—including Moore’s—fundamentally challenge these normative boundaries.

No Ashes conceptualizes Black queer homosexuality as a profoundly “revolutionary” act (66), framing it not merely as an expression of sexual identity but as a radical assertion of freedom and self-determination in defiance of interlocking systems of racial, sexual, and gendered oppression. In Moore’s narrative, queerness functions as a form of political insurgency—a direct challenge to the normative structures that seek to pathologize and erase Black queer bodies. By reclaiming queer identity within a Black cultural and historical framework, Moore destabilizes hegemonic binaries that uphold heterosexuality as natural, respectable, and desirable, while casting homosexuality as aberrant and shameful. This reframing positions queer existence as an emancipatory project, capable of unsettling dominant paradigms and reimagining what it means to live freely and authentically within communities historically burdened by racialized and gendered expectations.

For Moore, the past—both personal and collective—functions as a critical epistemological site through which identity, resistance, and belonging are articulated. History, in his narrative, is not a static chronology but a contested terrain imbued with silences, absences, and erasures that demand interrogation. For Moore, the search for history becomes an act to understand and engage with the present. His search for history functions as a means of reclaiming narratives that have been systematically silenced or distorted—particularly those of Black queer individuals whose experiences remain peripheral in mainstream historiography. If Moore positions Black same-sex love in *No Ashes* as a revolutionary and subversive act, he strategically invokes images, intellectual genealogies, and historical incidents to embed this radical love within a broader continuum of Black queer resistance. It is thus that, Moore draws upon the intellectual and emotional legacy of figures like Joseph Beam, whose work foregrounded the affective and political dimensions of Black queer existence. Beam’s insistence on visibility, kinship, and self-definition in

works such as “Brother to Brother” and “No Cheek to Turn”, becomes a template through which Moore constructs his own narrative of liberation. By interweaving past and present, Moore reclaims history as a living archive—one that not only validates Black same-sex love but frames it as a site of enduring political insurgency. As Moore says:

We have always been here. Black queer, transgender, and gender nonconforming people loved and fucked on some racist master’s plantation. We wrote theories debunking white racial supremacist ideology. We, too, were architects of Black liberation, women’s justice, antiwar movements, and the Black arts. We are the unnamed black sisters, brothers, and nonbinary people who lived queer theory before it was popular among those in white academe. (Moore 10)

In *No Ashes*, Darnell Moore offers a trenchant critique of institutionalized structures. Moore reframes them as symptomatic of a deeper, more insidious systemic order—an order in which educational institutions, religious structures, the criminal justice system, and public health discourses collectively participate in the marginalization and disciplining of non-normative sexualities. Moore refuses to isolate individual acts of homophobic violence from the broader systemic matrix that renders such acts both intelligible and permissible. Individual acts of homophobic slurs and violence, as such, are understood as natural outcomes of entrenched institutional bias, prejudice, and hostility. It is in the face of institutional cushion, that black gays become object of legitimate target for people everywhere- on and off the street. Yet even amid this architecture of abandonment, Moore locates a counter-discursive force in Black queer love and kinship—a praxis of resistance that reclaims subjectivity against the carceral logics of silence and solitude. As he poignantly observes, “Black queer life is a life of solitary confinement” (58), but one animated by an enduring struggle for visibility, liberation, and radical reimagination.

Unlike Moore’s *No Ashes in the Fire* which is a memoir, Iweala’s *Speak No Evil* is a fictional work whose narrative centers on the interior and sociocultural dissonance experienced by Niru, a queer Nigerian-American adolescent navigating

the intersecting terrains of sexuality, race, and diasporic identity within the ostensibly liberal but covertly normative milieu of a middle-class Washington, D.C. suburb. Iweala's text explores the intricacies of homosexuality/heterosexuality conflict, while also exploring the black/white binary and its impact on the black body, adding layers of complexity to the broader spectrum of identity dynamics. Such an exploration is carried out on an individual merit as well as in their interaction. The text negotiates a constellation of intersecting identities—probing the layered complexities of Blackness within the American sociopolitical landscape, the dislocation and hybridity inherent in the immigrant condition, and the fluid, often marginalized contours of queer subjectivity through its central protagonist. Iweala skillfully intertwines elements of religion, cultural dislocation, family dynamics, police violence and trauma, all of which further deepens and complicates discursivities on identities. The church, the police/the criminal law system, the institution of family—all that has come to embody and uphold normative frameworks of morality, authority, and belonging - become a site of interrogation. In *Speak No Evil*, heterosexual norms become profoundly entangled with racial identities, engendering a complex web of experiences. The amalgamation of these two constructs generates a unique set of challenges, as individuals grapple with not only the pressure to conform to heteronormative ideals but also confront the pervasive influence of race-based expectations and stereotypes. This intricate intermingling of compulsive heterosexuality and race reverberates across multiple social strata, insidiously permeating the fabric of interpersonal relations, the sedimented norms that govern societal expectations, and the institutionalized power structures. It engenders multifaceted discourses on privilege, oppression, and representation, as marginalized identities negotiate the duality of their existence, contending with a cascade of systemic obstacles. *Speak No Evil* presents a thoughtful discourse on these aspects.

Iweala organizes the entire narrative into two distinct parts: Part One, comprising nine sections, unfolds the story from Niru's perspective, while Part Two of the book, containing five chapters describes from Meredith's. While the first half of the book narrates Niru's growing awareness of his sexuality, the institutional breaks on him from family and church, the second part details with his increasing

confidence in his own sexuality as well as its actualization alongside questions of racial intersection and police brutality. If the first part of the book may be considered to be the theoretical framework, then the second part constitutes its practicality. Consistently threaded throughout the narrative is a compelling exploration of how institutions wield a profound and pivotal influence, intricately shaping the trajectory of unfolding events.

Amongst other things, Iweala's text looks at institutional excesses and overreach in matters of sexuality and the interplay between race and these excesses. In his *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault conceptualizes power as productive, diffuse, and exercised through a "dense network of interlocking mechanisms" (48) that continually reinforce one another, rather than emanating from a singular, centralized source. Within Foucault's theoretical framework, the operations of power are anchored in key institutional sites—such as the family, education, and religion—which function as critical nodes in the diffuse network of disciplinary mechanisms, actively producing and perpetuating the normative logics through which subjects are constituted and governed. Iweala's *Speak No Evil* offers a poignant illustration of how these interlocking networks of power operate in concert, seamlessly collaborating to construct, normalize, and enforce hegemonic standards of identity, behavior, and belonging. Iweala further elucidates the insidious ways in which race is interwoven into the very fabric of these regulatory networks, functioning as a constitutive axis through which normative standards are both formulated and differentially imposed. The crisis in the text emerges as Niru, the central protagonist, "is not allowed to be himself, not allowed to be true to his nature and his urge to "disappear completely, gone, nothing, no trace, forever." (104) The centrality of institutions and structures accentuates the intensity of this crisis, as these act as restricting guidelines and regulatory framework in the free expression of individuality. As the characters traverse the intricate socio-institutional terrains shaped by intersecting structures of power, the narrative enables readers to discern the deeply embedded contradictions and violence inherent in these normative systems.

The institution of family is one of the central focus of Iweala's interrogation. Foucault contends that within the broader social framework, the institution of the family serves as the primary locus where the earliest disciplinary mechanisms are instituted, subtly constraining and regulating expressions of homosexuality. The family, as a foundational social institution, emerges as the primary locus of struggle, where societal norms and heteronormative expectations surrounding sexuality are not only enforced but deeply internalized, shaping the very framework within which sexual identity is constructed and regulated. Family functions as a disciplinary mechanism and contributes to the broader network of power relations in society. Foucault's assertion underscores the formative role that familial structures play in shaping attitudes and behaviors. Iweala constantly draws the reader's attention to the role that family plays in both the direct and insidious regulation of sexual identity, illustrating how it functions not merely as a space of emotional support but as an apparatus through which heteronormative values are instilled, policed, and perpetuated.

Niru's father's character serves to foreground how family serves as a conduit for the perpetuation and enforcement of heteronormative ideals, embodying the entrenched societal belief that heterosexuality is not merely a sexual preference but a foundational axis around which familial identity, moral authority, and social legitimacy are constructed and validated. Iweala continually foregrounds for the readers the linguistic charge and the binary mode in which homosexuality and heterosexuality are received within this family, particularly Niru's father: homosexuality becomes a despicable "sinful, satanic rubbish" (27) that needs to be redirected to "natural" ways of heterosexuality. Niru's family perpetuates and reinforces a heteronormative framework by endorsing a binary model where individuals are traditionally paired based on gender: girls with boys, men with women, and male with female. Niru's alternate sexuality does not fit with the family's already premeditated idea of what sexuality is and how it is constituted; in that sense it becomes a problem that needs "fixing". Niru's father's reaction to the revelation of his son's homosexuality crystallizes the systemic pathologization of queer identities within the familial institution, where the son's sexual orientation is

not only framed as an existential anomaly to be "explained" but as a fundamental threat to the social and moral fabric of the family. The onus to be explained places an undue burden of clarification exclusively on Niru's homosexuality, perpetuating a dynamic which his identity is inherently marginalized and subordinated to the dominant heteronormative order. The imposition of this onerous demand by Niru's father not only epitomizes the entrenched pattern of pathologizing homosexuality within the familial sphere but also functions to perpetuate and solidify prevailing power structures, reinforcing the subjugation of queer identities within the intimate, yet authoritative, space of the family. The father's threat to disclose the situation to Niru's mother not only magnifies the previously articulated dynamics of entrenched societal norms but also underscores the insidious pervasiveness of the stigma that homosexuality accrues within the family unit. Niru's family actively perpetuates and fortifies a rigid heteronormative framework by endorsing a binary paradigm that rigidly pairs individuals within traditional gendered couplings—girls with boys, men with women, and male with female. Niru's nonconforming sexuality stands in stark contrast to the family's entrenched, preordained conception of sexuality—one that is rigidly defined and governed by heteronormative imperatives—; in that sense his disruptive anomaly becomes a problem that needs "fixing" and that needs to be redirected to "natural" ways of heterosexuality. In *Speak No Evil*, Niru's homosexuality, thus, creates an oppressive atmosphere within the house where the natural dynamics between parents and children are obscured by the insidious tension of unspoken expectations and societal taboos, making authentic familial interactions increasingly untenable.

Homosexuality, framed within the family as both a psychological and spiritual deviation that necessitates intervention and redirection towards "correct" and "natural" behavioral norms, represents a pivotal moment in the novel—a critical juncture where the entrenched forces of institutionalized heterosexuality come into direct conflict with individual desires, exposing the profound tension between societal expectations and personal identity. It constitutes a critical moment in the text in the struggle for acceptance and authenticity amidst a tapestry of emotional and psychological complexities. This struggle for acceptance and authenticity, to use

Jenkins' term, happens in internal-external dialectic (77) or in what he also terms "interactional space" (47). An interactional space may be understood to be that space in which an individual interacts with other individual or group or an institution for that matter to make sense of who one is and where one situates herself/himself in the social order or the nature of relationships. Niru's identity formation thus happens amidst these interacting claims and counter-claims.

Love writes that "Many of the fiercest gendered battles are fought on the bodies of newborn infants, elementary school children and adolescent." (159) Sexual norms are enforced with greatest force during this period because "Very young humans lack the competence to counter successfully their identification by others. They have limited capacities to question or resist (Jenkins 84) Young men often lack the cognitive maturity, experiential depth, and social resources accessible to older individuals; it is precisely this vulnerability that renders Niru especially susceptible to being forcefully and consequentially defined by the expectations, projections, and judgments of others. Niru's father's comments that "You clearly don't have the judgment to make the right decisions...So I am making them for you, as your father..." or "you're still a child and you don't know what you are doing to your life." (Iweala 39) foreground the vagaries of being a child, young and defenseless against the impositions and authoritative definitions imposed by adults and institutions. With a father who has an over-proportionate sense of what is right and what is wrong, Niru becomes an unwilling and disempowered subject—trapped beneath the surveillant force of a heterosexual gaze that permits no deviation. Niru consequently emerges as a figure deprived of autonomy, his life circumscribed by decisions unilaterally imposed upon him—absent of his consultation or consent—thereby reinforcing a structure in which his agency is systematically negated. His sporadic outbursts, such as "I just can't do anything about it," (44) serve as poignant expressions of his profound lack of agency in shaping his own life. The family, in this configuration, functions as a reactive apparatus of surveillance, regulatory control, disciplinary enforcement, and punitive response—mobilized to neutralize deviations from normative expectations and reassert hegemonic ideals of identity and behavior.

An important thematic aspect that Moore brings to the thought table is the contested notion of homosexuality as "un-African". The idea that homosexuality is "un-African" by nature frames queerness as a foreign imposition, incompatible with African identity and tradition; it constructs queerness as an external intrusion upon African cultural identity—an alien aberration positioned in opposition to indigenous traditions and nationalist imaginaries of authenticity. Such a discourse strategically centralizes heterosexuality within the African epistemological and cultural framework, constructing it as the normative axis of sexual identity and thereby reifying it as the sole legitimate expression of African sexuality. The "un-African" proposition finds its most fervent votaries among a constellation of political, religious, and cultural actors across Africa, whose authoritative positions have enabled them to exert considerable influence over the production and circulation of normative ideologies within the sociopolitical and moral imaginaries of the continent. However, scholars have contested such a notion- through historical and ethnographic evidence- to argue instead that such constructions were part of colonial imposition, wherein imported legal and religious regimes systematically pathologized and repressed indigenous sexual expressions to mirror Euro-Christian moral paradigms. Daniel Vignal writes that “For the majority of [African writers], homophilia is exclusively a deviation introduced by colonialists or their descendants; by outsiders of all kinds: Arabs, French, English, metis, and so on. It is difficult for them to conceive that homophilia might be the act of a black African.” (qtd. in Dunton 422) Murray and Roscoe similarly contend that “Among the many myths Europeans have created about Africa, the myth that homosexuality is absent or incidental in African societies is one of the oldest and most enduring.” (Murray et. al Preface XI) They add: “African homosexuality is neither random nor incidental— it is a consistent and logical feature of African societies and belief systems.” Importantly, they further add: “The colonialists did not introduce homosexuality to Africa but rather intolerance of it— and systems of surveillance and regulation for suppressing it.” (XVI) The African-American immigrant discourse on gender and sexuality, which often draws inspiration and alludes to this way of articulating gender and sexuality often assumes homosexuality as a western disease and an import to the former colonies. Within this framework, Niru’s same-sex desire is not

simply a personal inclination but a culturally fraught transgression—one that positions him in direct opposition to the values upheld by his family. It is thus that Niru's interest in boys of his own sex becomes an act of "shame and disgrace for this family" (Iweala 28). Operating under this paradigm, homosexuality is not merely a moral failing; it becomes a signifier of Western corruption and an affront to the perceived sanctity of African traditions. Consequently, Niru is not only estranged from his family emotionally but is also rendered culturally illegible—positioned outside the boundaries of what it means to be a "good" African son. His queerness, therefore, is burdened with the weight of collective shame, viewed as an existential threat to familial legacy and cultural authenticity.

Another crucial institution that Iweala rigorously interrogates is the educational system— as residues of homophobic and racial discourses. Educational institutions often function as sites of power, as regulating mechanism and formative agent, exerting pressure to conform to standard norms and collective adherence; these academic entities serve as powerful conduits of socialization, molding individuals into participants who mirror and uphold accepted conventions. Foucault's scholarship has inspired an entire body of literature directed at interrogating how pedagogy and educational institutes operate not merely as sites of knowledge transmission, but as complex mechanisms of surveillance, control, and social regulation in the reinforcement of hegemonic societal norms.

Speak No Evil adopts an intersectional framework to explore educational institutions, seamlessly intertwining the issue of race and sexuality with the larger dynamics of power, identity, and belonging. Through its critical examination of educational institutions, the narrative unveils how seemingly neutral space like education are insidiously transformed into domains wherein entrenched power relations are perpetuated, the imposition of racial and sexual norms is subtly woven into the fabric of institutional life, and the criteria for belonging are rigidly defined by one's conformity to hegemonic paradigms of identity and behavior. The intersection of race and sexuality, in this view, is not merely additive but multiplicative, producing unique forms of marginalization that are both entrenched in

institutional practices and deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of society. The embarrassment and the misery of being identified, publically outed and mocked at for being a gay and being a black by his friends constitute a critical element in the narrative's examination of educational spaces in *Speak No Evil*. The High School that Niru attends emerges as strong residuary of homophobic and racial discourses. Within the text, Iweala enacts for his reader to witness hostile "white boys and white girls" pass racial and sexual insults as Niru is inexorably drawn to the recognition of the systemic inequities and sociocultural asymmetries that circumscribe the lives of individuals who, like himself, inhabit marginalized intersections of race and sexuality. The linguistic choice of 'nigga' (70) for Niru combined with derisive homophobic slurs represents a dual strike that African-Americans often contend with in the intricate landscape of sexual dynamics in the United States. It highlights the intersectional nature of their struggles, as they navigate a complex interplay of racial bias and homophobia within the broader societal framework. The palpable weight of racial prejudice and homophobic slur becomes a formidable force that Niru has to transcend.

A substantial portion of Iweala's novel unfolds in Nigeria. The geographical transition in locale from US to Nigeria not only serves for a seamless progress of the story/plot but also extends the thematic preoccupation with compulsive heterosexuality and racial dynamics, albeit with certain differences. The geographical transition also represents a notable shift from family dynamics to dwell on church. It facilitates an exploration of the interplay between different cultural contexts, power dynamics, and societal norms, thereby enriching the profound thematic tapestry woven throughout the work.

Iweala dedicates a major part of the book to the exploration of church dynamics and religious discourse and the broader socio-cultural contexts in which they are situated. Through a meticulous exploration of the institution of religion, Iweala invites readers to contemplate the intersections between faith and identity, observing how religious ideologies become powerful agents in shaping the characters' worldviews. The text skillfully navigates these intersections, shedding

light on the conflicts and resolutions that emerge when individuals grapple with the complex interplay between their religious convictions and the evolving dynamics of the world around them. In this, Nigeria serves as a compelling and dynamic terrain.

Speak No Evil constantly banks on binaries to expose religious indoctrination into heterosexuality. Reverend Olumide and Bishop Okereke, in the text, serve as emblematic manifestations of institutionalized heterosexuality, embodying the moral and ideological rigidity of religious authority that seeks to regulate and normalize sexual identity through the prism of patriarchal and heteronormative doctrines. Reverend Olumide and Bishop Okereke articulate a vision of homosexuality that is framed through the lens of moral deviance, often characterizing same-sex desire as the result of unclean experiments, spiritual weakness, and insidious temptations. Within the framework of conservative Christian doctrine, temptation is not merely a moral lapse but is closely aligned with the concept of sin—an act of defiance against divine order. Consequently, the implication that homosexuality constitutes a sinful aberration from God's ordained plan reinforces a deeply entrenched binary: that heterosexuality is sanctified and beloved by God, while homosexuality is a transgression subject to divine condemnation. This theologically grounded dichotomy becomes a powerful source of internal and external conflict within the narrative, particularly evident in the fraught and emotionally charged interactions between Niru and religious figures Reverend Olumide and Bishop Okereke, wherein Niru's identity is rendered incompatible with the sacred ideals they espouse.

The character of Reverend Olumide emerges as the quintessential religious figure represents the church's view about homosexuality. Iweala presents Reverend Olumide as an energetic and youthful Nigerian preacher and whose church is described as a bastion of the word of God, where gospels and sermons are drove into every head that visits it. Iweala presents Olumide as the representative of God and compulsive heterosexuality, whose recurring monologues on sexuality often spread through pages. In allowing Olumide to articulate in a binary language, Iweala allows his readers to see through the linguistic construction of homosexuality/heterosexuality. This linguistic construction of sexuality is available

for everyone to see and examine. Olumide every now and then refers to homosexuality in terms of ‘unclean’ and ‘unnatural’, while concurrently framing heterosexuality in positive terms as ‘clean’ and ‘natural’. Similarly, while homosexuality is talked in terms of sin/sinner/sinning, heterosexuality is referred in such terms as kingdom of heaven and godly. It is therefore quite ironic that Olumide’s church should bill an inclusive board that reads “ALL ARE WELCOME” (Iweala 31) while inwardly declaring war against homosexuality. This presents a complex paradox where the seemingly open invitation of the church is accompanied by implicit restrictions on the expression of diverse sexualities. The discrepancy between the overt message of inclusivity and the implicit boundaries set within the church's doctrinal framework problematizes existence for people like Niru.

Iweala situates Olumide’s religious sermons and Niru’s father’s discourses on homosexuality straightly against Niru’s homosexuality. This contrast unveils a stark dynamic wherein two adults, equipped with ample resources and unwavering convictions, cast their judgment upon a young adolescent who possesses limited means and experiences to shield himself from such scrutiny. The power imbalance inherent in this situation accentuates the vulnerability of the young protagonist. Olumide and Niru’s father assume metaphorical roles akin to ‘doctors’ and ‘psychologist’ who have the great task of setting Niru right and to show him his proper place in the realms of sexuality. Niru’s assertion that “The idea of church doesn’t appeal to me....” (33) does not make any difference to the power of church to shape his life. If it does anything else, it essentially recognizes that the institutional capacity of church’s power to shape an individual’s life extends beyond personal feelings or inclinations. Church as a religious institution very well serves spiritual discourses, but church as a social institution fuses politics with morality and tampers personal with the public, blurring any sense of distinction between these.

Iweala deftly echoes and intensifies the earlier encounter between Reverend Olumide and Niru by recreating a parallel, yet more charged, interaction between Niru and Bishop Okereke, thereby reinforcing the oppressive continuity of religious authority in policing queer identity. The overarching dynamic in which Niru is

subordinated by authoritative adult figures remains consistent across both encounters; however, what distinguishes his earlier experience with Reverend Olumide from the later confrontation with Bishop Okereke is the heightened severity and urgency with which the latter approaches Niru's sexuality—marked by a more forceful assertion of doctrinal authority and a palpable intensification of moral condemnation. Okereke, much like Olumide, functions to elucidate the sexual binaries of which the individuals are presented with: between heterosexual “faith” and homosexual “devil” (54), between “morality” and “perversity” (59), between “God-given and natural” and “unnatural” (60) The idea of “one man, one woman at a time” (60) is constantly hammered as an unquestionable moral axiom. The entire episode that unfolds between Okereke and Niru is emblematic of inherent constraint in the free expressions of sexuality and a poignant illustration of restricted vocabulary and simple categorizations that accompany these discussions. Okereke, as a representative figure, becomes a compelling lens through which readers are invited to witness the rigid nature of ecclesiastical construct, illustrating the challenges individuals face when attempting to navigate beyond established binary frameworks. Notably, Okereke intertwines every reference to homosexuality with a subsequent reference to heterosexuality, and vice versa. This intentional sequencing constitutes not just a simple ‘orientation’ towards heterosexuality, but also an orientation against homosexuality. It constitutes the proverbial ‘one’ stone that kills ‘two’ birds.

Significantly, the institutional setting of church echoes the private family dynamics at a broader societal and institutional context. It mirrors and amplifies the sentiments and values and contributes to the formulation of larger attitudes towards gender and sexuality. The father's constantly allusion to the “psychological and spiritual corruption in my son's brain” (38) and the burden to “undo” it at an ‘internal’ level (read: family) transitions to the realm of the ‘external’ (read: church). What Iweala accomplishes with remarkable finesse, in this, is the adept transmission of an enduring trajectory of thought to the readers, elucidating the unbroken continuum of such ideation. Consequently, notwithstanding an individual's chances of escape or capacity to extricate oneself from the clutches of ‘family’, other

formidable and more potent mechanisms spread their net to thwart and hold any autonomous and aspirational expressions back from 'flight'.

A key thematic concern that emerges within these binary narratives is the question of power and the exercise of it. According to Foucault, binary serves as instruments through which institutions and dominant ideologies and discourse define norms, shape perceptions and maintain control. In elucidating this perspective, Foucault contends that binary distinctions, whether in language, societal structures, or modes of thought, are not neutral or merely descriptive but inherently possess a dynamic nature shaped by power dynamics. In essence, Foucault's assertion implies that the establishment and maintenance of binary categories are not arbitrary; rather, they are strategic exercises of power. The role of church in *Speak No Evil* must also be understood from this perspective: that all binaries, good or bad, inevitable leads us to power or the exercise of it. This exercise of power is metaphorically and most convincing captured in the image of "greedy hands" in "Bishop Okereke's greedy hand flexes its way towards mine." (54) The term 'greedy' encapsulates the intricacies of power politics, emphasizing Bishop Okereke's reveling/delight in the control that he exerts over Niru within the narrative.

In drawing a distinct line between heterosexuality and homosexuality, Olumide repeatedly calls homosexuality a 'sinful' desire/act deserving punishment but also 'repentance'. Similarly, Okereke makes a demand to "confess your sins and rededicate yourself to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ". (54) Confession and repentance, within the Christian paradigm, suggests a process of seeking forgiveness and redemption for perceived moral lapses. Confession and repentance constitute a problematic area as Iweala shows in *Speak No Evil*: Iweala connects these seemingly spiritual endeavors to power structures that underpin religious institutions. The act of confession and repentance implies a submission to the authority of religious doctrine, where the definition of what constitutes a 'sin' and the terms of redemption are 'externalized', an act in which an individual forfeits his autonomy to decide what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad, what is moral and what is immoral. The power to forgive someone constitutes centralized mechanism of

control and regulation within the church. This control is wielded by those who hold authority within those institutions, giving them the capacity to define, judge, and grant absolution based on the parameters set by prevailing norms. In *Speak No Evil*, Olumide and Okereke assume a commanding role, wielding substantial influence over a seemingly powerless Niru, thereby embodying a dynamic where religious authority exercise power over the faithfuls. Olumide and Okereke's repeated exhortation to Niru for moral realignment and salvation dictated through the terms 'confession' and 'repentance' must be seen not merely as a spiritual directive but an exertion of authority and control within the narrative. Homosexuality, Olumide's asserts, "the Lord alone can fix" (38). In saying that Lord alone can fix, Olumide simultaneously takes it (power) upon himself to set things right in accordance with his own authority vested seemingly on him by the scriptures. His proclamation that "it's through scripture that your son will be saved" (35) is layered with multiple connotation, particularly in its implicit connection to the exercise of power. Niru being subjected to acute and chronic interventions in the form of counseling closely resembles a Foucauldian patient whom his psychologist/doctor seeks to correct. The power dynamics inherent in religious authority create a complex interplay between individuals and the institution, fostering a relationship where the faithful navigate moral landscapes shaped by the interpretations and judgments of those in positions of religious leadership. Their ability to define and judge reinforces established norms and contributes to the reinforcement of social hierarchies or the marginalization of individuals who deviate from accepted standards.

It is in this that Niru becomes the panoptical 'other', constantly under the watch of these religious heads. It places Niru in a space of being obedient, and being exploited, while giving the preachers significant power over him. What Iweala achieves in positioning Niru vis-a-vis Olumide and Okereke, who wield significant influence by virtue of their connection to a powerful institution, is exposing the nature of their hegemonic relationship. In situating Niru's sexuality and his innocence against institutional powers, the narration cast a shadow of immediacy of the dangers and the problems that lie ahead for Niru. The engagement between Niru on the one hand and Reverend Olumide/Bishop Okereke on the other hand

underscores the inherent power asymmetry in their exchanges: They speak to Niru from a position of strength.

An interesting observation that one might discern within the text is Iweala's choice to not delve into the historical dimensions of black cultural nationalism, at least directly. He clearly refrains from using those terms. Very often, African-American texts that have dealt with questions of sexuality often allude to black cultural nationalism as a thematic interest. In that sense, the omission in *Speak No Evil* is an aberration, a break from traditional narrative. Nevertheless, Iweala subtly navigates this terrain by indirectly engaging with the discourse. This subtle approach unfolds through his exploration of the thesis suggesting that individuals of Black descent neither participate in nor are drawn to same-sex relationships, a theme that gains depth and complexity through the central protagonist's exploration of his innermost desires and experiences in the narrative. It might be of interest to know and understand that Iweala strikes deep into this debate by subtly embedding its essence within the very title of the text, "Speak No Evil", a connotation to homosexuality as a sin/evil. The text extends this exploration of the theme by intricately weaving it into the experiences and perspectives of diverse characters, skillfully avoiding direct mention while artfully enriching the fabric of the narrative. Let us take for example Okereke's statement that "this demon of homosexuality has become so entrenched in America that you can't really fight it there" (54) and his assertion "You are right to bring him here; this is a place where the faith is strong and hasn't been infiltrated by the devil" (54). In framing the Nigerian church as "divine" in opposition to the U.S. church that has been "afflicted," the implicit message is that the Western/American disease of homosexuality, has no historical, current, or future place within the context of Nigeria. Similarly, Niru's father consistently attributes his son's homosexuality to the American environment, repeatedly stating, "This is not our way...you see what this place is doing to this boy." (39)

The father's warning that "this is not our way" may be analyzed in two ways. It can either mean it is not in the nature of human to crave for homosexuality; it can

also mean that homosexuality is not the Nigerian way of performing sexuality, signifying the perceived UnNigerian/UnAfrican nature of sexuality. A part of the argument is that Niru is black and that the blacks do not practice and should not practice such 'white' immodesty. Iweala would later revisit and address this thematic interest in a more subtle way than it has been discussed. A succinct exploration on what Iweala calls "Nigeriatoma" helps us to elucidate this. Iweala coins the term "Nigeriatoma", to refer to the "acute swelling of ego and pride that affects diaspora Nigerian men, rendering them unable to accept the idea that a true home might exist outside of their birth country. Symptoms may vary but are exceptionally pronounced upon return to native soil and include hyperactivity, elevated mood, grandiose thinking and increased aggression." (41-42) The introduction of the term "Nigeriatoma" and its accompanying definition provides a comic relief to the seriousness of the plot, yet this playful concept also opens the door to a deeper tension between homosexuality and heterosexuality in course of the narrative. This manifests most poignantly in the character of the father. As Niru notes, the "transformation is swift." (42) We must not forget that the entire shift in the locale of the plot from US to Nigeria is occasioned by the father's firm belief that Nigeria would 'cure' his son of his 'evil'.

Amidst all these, *Speak No Evil* casts a significant spotlight on LGBTQ rights in Nigeria. With all its diversity, democratic strides and modern ethos, Nigeria emerges as a starkly challenging environment for gay rights, underscored by its conservative Criminal Law System, its constricted public spaces and institutional violations of LGBTQ rights, all contributing to significant social and legal challenges.

A significant thematic interest embedded within this homophobic discourse is the narrative of resistance that Iweala builds within the plot of the novel. Foucault's concept of power as a multidirectional force, operating in reciprocal movements, finds a thematic echo in *Speak No Evil*. The text invites readers to contemplate on the lovemaking scene between Niru and Damien, where the image of his father and of Reverend Olumide constantly cuts into their narrative of romance to remind the

readers of the underlying significance of the act. In choosing to be with Damien in a room alone, Niru not only rebels against religious sermons and the doctrines of presumed righteousness but also the conventional institution of family, which is so much characteristic of Foucauldian criticism. But this love making scene is important in more ways than one. It constitutes one of the major highlights of the text. The love making scene seeks to break the binary of faith and desire, of sin and loving: Damien and God are forged together through an act of loving and desire, blurring any sense of distinction and burying any semblance of hostility as these merge together; God and Damien thus converge together to transcend the homo-hetero binary. In one single paragraph describing the love affair, the text thus foregrounds the shared realm in which homosexuality and heterosexuality might come together as mutually acceptable and diverse expressions of desire. This narrative development in the novel also serves as a precursor, priming readers for Niru's eventual resistance, which unfolds before he becomes a victim of racial crime.

While examining the complexities of sexuality, *Speak No Evil* also interlaces the narrative with the theme of race. Race making as an ideological construct and as a master category (Omi and Winant, 105), in Iweala, functions not just as an individual category but also as an intersectional category operating within the broader tapestry of his narrative, weaving a complex web of social dynamics, power structures, and identity formation. Race-making in Iweala must be understood in terms of 'othering and difference, 'hierarchy and marginalization', and 'subordination and oppression'. These structural violations coalesce and escalate into brutal consequences for those situated at the intersection of sexuality and racism.

Iweala demonstrates a keen observational prowess for highlighting racialization. "We define racialization as the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group." (Omi and Winant 111) This definition is however not exclusionary by any means; on the contrary it is sensitive to racial profiling, racial consciousness and racial violence as we generally understand. In *Speak No Evil*, racial interpellation is not a passive phenomenon but an active process that infiltrates various aspects of relationships,

social practices, and groups. Iweala meticulously examines the ways in which race-making assumes a central role in shaping not only individual identities but also the broader socio-cultural landscape as well as how racial meanings are extended to elements that were previously considered outside the realm of racial classification. Race constitutes a problematic category but an inseparable facet of the broader black experience. Iweala exploits this problematic category throughout the novel. An earliest manifestation of this deep divide is explored in the early part of the novel: “What if her parents come back to find a halfnaked black man standing in the middle of their upstairs hallway. This kind of thing never ends well for the black man, no matter how innocent.” (18) The idea of a black man inside a white house is anathema to the black-white dynamics; this experience of skin difference becomes manifest only in the encounter with whiteness as Fanon would argue. The pervasive fear and suspicion attached to the presence of a black man is a historical continuum entrenched in racist white gaze and as Fanon would argue “it perpetuates a state of conflict in which the white man injects the black with extremely dangerous foreign bodies.” (36) Niru’s experience encapsulates how black are a suspect merely for existing within certain spaces. Iweala looks at the racial dynamics within the institution of school: Niru’s exasperation about how “The white kids used to touch me all the time when I was younger, like they owned me...” (17) is a stark reminder to the readers how race acts as a major force in the white-black relation. The psychological and traumatic dimensions explored in the novel illuminates how individuals grapple with a sense of belonging, identity, and self-worth in the face of pervasive racial prejudices. But it the institution of police that is the focal point of scrutiny in *Speak No Evil*; it is also here that the tragic narrative finds its culmination.

Iweala explores this phenomenon through a rape ‘performance’ of Niru upon Meredith. Niru’s fate as a ‘perpetrator’ of rape is at once sealed because of the colour of his skin. The idea that “Right now at least fifty percent of America thinks you were assaulted” (128), as Meredith’s father reveals it to her, speaks of racial profiling of blacks as assaulters and the white people as victims. Crenshaw writes:

Historically, the dominant conceptualization of rape as quintessentially Black offender/white victim has left Black men subject to legal and extralegal violence. The use of rape to legitimize efforts to control and discipline the Black community is well established, and the casting of all Black men as potential threats to the sanctity of white womanhood was a familiar construct that antiracists confronted and attempted to dispel over a century. (1266)

This unjust victimization of Niru echoes a historical racist imagination where blackness is associated with a litany of negative stereotypes like “tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: 'Sho' good eatin'." (Fanon 112) Blacks like Niru constitute a fixed category: inherently aggressive, potential assailant and problem creator. Inherent in this construction of identity category is a binary, wherein the whites are positioned as victims of presumed black aggression. Although Meredith explains to her mother “I’m not the victim, I shout, he is.” (128), there is nothing that can change the racial world that works on stereotypes.

The pervasive influence of racial dynamics on the institution of police in the United States is a central theme explored by Iweala in his book, reflecting a critical examination of the complex interplay between law enforcement and racial disparities within the criminal justice system. This thematic interest in law enforcement and criminal justice system undermining the very principles of justice and fairness that the system purports to uphold is emerging as a major feature in black literature. This issue of institutional racism within law enforcement and the criminal justice system has been a persistent feature of America’s lived experience. Visible manifestations of racial divide within law enforcement, as tentacles of systematic racism, is increasingly being seen as reminiscence and continuum of slavery, Jim Crow laws and systemic segregation that marked much of the interrelations between the whites and the blacks in the socio/culturescape of US. African American individuals are disproportionately targeted which in turn perpetuates a cycle of mistrust between communities of color and the police. The disproportionate targeting, harassment, and

use of force against black individuals, the mistrust between law enforcement and the very communities they are meant to serve have become a subject of scholarly investigation and academic scrutiny.

Racial dynamics within law enforcement frequently mirror the broader racial dynamics where the blacks often feature as perpetrators of crime and white its victim. In *Speak No Evil*, Niru is the perennial hypersexual ‘black’ suspect and Meredith his ‘white’ victim: The idea that “Right now at least fifty percent of America thinks you were assaulted” (128) is an apt illustration of this. It is of interest to note that Iweala’s text does not name racial violence/conflict, much less call the embedded racism in the institution of police. The narrative steers clear from directly naming this thematic interest. But nevertheless, these find its way into the text in view of tragic narrative that unfolds in course of the plot. In a place where black bodies are positioned as a threat to national “law and order” and “national security” (132), it becomes easy to assault it. In other words, to assault a body, we first need to “fix” it. Niru’s skin colour, by default, fills that gap. The idea of a black man/boy allegedly desperately attempting to violate the modesty of a ‘white’ girl conforms to the prejudiced cultural trope, however problematic that may sound. It is in this that Niru is at once charged of sexual assault, of attempts to rape and is shot on spot. In Iweala, racial profiling in police is inevitably linked to the exercise of power, where white ‘bodies’ feel sanctioned to perpetrate violence upon ‘black’ bodies without constraints of legal accountability. Such an idea is reinforced through lack of consequences for those that perpetrate such violence as we see on Niru. This symbiotic relationship thus underscores how systemic issues and biases prevalent in society manifest within the specific context of law enforcement.

This chapter, thus, sought to bring queer studies into dialogue with Black studies in order to analyze the specific contours of African American gay identity and the ways it emerges and takes shape in the contemporary United States as these find reflection in *No Ashes in the Fire* and *Speak No Evil*. Darnell L. Moore’s *No Ashes in the Fire* and Uzodinma Iweala’s *Speak No Evil* differ significantly in form, perspective, and thematic emphasis. Moore’s text is a nonfiction memoir grounded in

his lived experience as a Black queer man navigating poverty, community violence, and eventual political activism, offering a retrospective and transformative narrative. In contrast, Iweala's novel is a work of fiction that follows a privileged Nigerian American teenager whose queer identity is constrained by familial expectations, silence, and fear, culminating in tragedy rather than empowerment. Despite their differences, *No Ashes in the Fire* and *Speak No Evil* share several important thematic and conceptual similarities. Both texts center the experiences of Black queer men and illuminate the challenges of growing up in environments shaped by homophobia, racialization, and restrictive models of masculinity. Each narrative explores the emotional and psychological costs of living at the intersection of Blackness and queerness, as the protagonists struggle with fear, shame, desire, and the longing for acceptance. Both books also depict how family, community, and cultural expectations shape queer self-understanding—whether through silence, violence, or conditional love. Both texts engage in a sustained project of institutional and linguistic deconstruction, unsettling the normative frameworks through which identity, power, and belonging are conventionally articulated, even as they narrate intertwined histories of trauma, resistance, and queer self-formation.

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CHAPTER III

The Politics of Visibility in *Loving Her* and *Brown White Black*

This chapter is an attempt to understand the politics of visibility within the framework of intersection in Nishta Mehra's *Brown White Black* (2019) and Allen Shockley's *Loving Her* (1974). The politics of visibility refers to the ways in which individuals and groups seek to gain visibility and recognition for their identities, experiences, and struggles within a larger social and political context. It is rooted in the idea that certain groups have been historically marginalized and excluded from mainstream discourse and representation, and therefore must actively work to make themselves visible and heard. *Brown White Black* and *Loving Her* are important interventions in addressing the complexities surrounding the politics of visibility within the intersectional framework. These texts examine the shared and distinct challenges and complexities inherent in navigating intersecting identities. Shockley was one of the earliest American authors to look at the intersection of race, gender and sex and the complexities and dynamics that these produce in the life of average African-American lesbian women. Mehra, an emerging author on the other hand, is focused on the experiences of Indian-American same-sex loving 'queers' and their struggle for visibility, recognition and acceptance. Visibility at the intersection of gender, sexuality, and race in the said authors recognizes that individuals experience multiple crises. This politics of visibility, as examined in this chapter, is worked out within the intricate intersections of gender, sexual and racial identities. To be more precise, this visibility politics looks at three core identities: of being a homosexual, of being women and of being non-white and the dynamics these produce in course of their intersection with one another. It seeks to examine how being born as a female/girl/woman in a non-white background and being in a lesbian relationship entails navigating a unique and intricate intersection of identities, creating what can be described as a "triple strike" of challenges. It interrogates such questions as: What are the distinct challenges for individuals who face the triple strike of gender, sexuality and race? How do individuals who have triple strike against them navigate their distinctive challenges? How does power operate within these intersectional dynamics? What is the role of institution? What nuances characterize individual experiences in diverse contexts? Additionally, it also interrogates the linguistic

construction of identity categories within the context of the text. It also delves into such ideas as cultural nationalism. It is within this context, that this chapter seeks to examine how Mehra and Shockley interrogate and contest hegemonic ideas on gender, sexuality and race in the context of Asian-American and African-American quotidian experience as these present itself in the texts. In a cultural context, where the presence of brown/black skin and queer desires constitutes uncomfortable and unwelcome distraction, it becomes important to explore what visibility means and how it affects the life of people/characters. Nishta Mehra and Allen Shockley belong to two different generations, two different racial background, two different ethnicities, two different national identities and yet both these authors share remarkable analogous experiences as they explore issues of gender, sexuality and race in course of the narrative.

In her 1989 article titled “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”, Kimberle Crenshaw makes a very profound statement about black women’s experiences. She writes: “Black women's experiences are much broader than the general categories that discrimination discourse provides.” (28) In her relatively unprecedented and groundbreaking book *Loving Her* Shockley examines and interrogates this complex existence of black women in the intersection between gender, sexuality and race. Shockley’s book helps us explore the systemic disenfranchisement that permeates black women’s existence, how their limited agency within societal frameworks engenders structural power differentials, precipitating a state of marginalization and invisibility. In *Loving Her*, Renay, the central protagonist, has triple strikes against her- she is a woman, she is a same-sex loving woman and she is black. Renay becomes a subject of scrutiny, examined and stigmatized as she is, by those within and outside the African-American community for embodying all those attributes of what she is not- heterosexuality, respectability, domesticity and normativity. Renay’s predicament symbolizes the experience of whole lot of women-loving-women African Americans who have historically deviated from national and communitarian ideals of socialization and loving and ventured into ‘unaccepted’ territories. Shockley's personal journey as a writer

exploring lesbian themes, during which she faced being labeled as "untouchable," vividly illustrates this phenomenon of visibility and invisibility inherent in such experiences. The text explores this interest in sexuality, and its intersection with gender and race through a complex mix of public/historical events and creative personal narrative. In doing so, it invites readers to critically engage with the intersections of power, privilege, and oppression, and to contemplate the ways in which these intersecting forces influence notions of identity, belonging, and agency.

Within the politics of visibility, home/family emerges as a significant site of study: of conformity, violence, power dynamics and disciplinary practices. Foucault's "family milieu" (Foucault 42), Walker's "loveless homes" (Mhandu 6), Hurston's "domestic violence" (Kanthak, 113)- all refer to the domestic scene of conformity, violence, power dynamics and disciplinary practices within the confines of home. Within the expansive tapestry of these narratives, a disquieting truth emerges: of the entrenched inequalities within the hetero-patriarchal framework, one that exposes the profound disparities experienced by black women and the relative positions of dominance and privilege enjoyed by black male. The manifold consequences of being a black woman, marginalized by different forces in a hetero-patriarchal paradigm and the entrenched biases that underpin its very foundation is at the root of Shockley's domesticity. *Loving Her* invites the readers to interrogate the politics of visibility within this and connect these to ideas of black masculinity, black patriarchy and black respectability within the Davis family.

The Davis family, in Shockley, is a site of grave violation. The tumultuous relationship between Renay and Jerome Lee offers a stark depiction of the power dynamics and gendered violence that defines domesticity. Remarkably, Shockley begins her text with a critical input on the power relation between Renay and her husband Lee. As the plot of the novel unfolds, Shockley lets the readers understand how Renay's body becomes a terrain upon which the forces of patriarchy and black cultural nationalism converge and manifest. Lee constantly seeks to tie and confine Renay to the traditional and conservative ways of performing gender. In his rigid framework, black womanhood embodies a narrow and prescribed domesticity,

encompassing the domains of household management, culinary duties, childcare, and spousal support. Lee represents the archetypal “conqueror, the master, the subduer” (Shockley 129) and Renay his “lamb who sat at home and waited in misery” (130). Shockley presents Lee as alcohol drinking, gamble loving black patriarch who has abandoned any sense of responsibility towards the family. Lee embodies black masculinity, an idea that is often defined in terms of black men’s ability to “own” and “control” their women. Evelyn Higginbotham conceptualizes this dynamic in terms of “politics of respectability” (45). Politics of respectability refers to a political strategy wherein marginalized communities emphasize and enforce conscious choices in attitudes and behaviours in social and cultural living in projecting an image of respectability to the world outside.

Shockley views race, akin to gender, as a contentious construct and a problematic category, and subjects it to critical examination. And, akin to gender, subjects race to the politics of visibility and invisibility. The race problem adds layers of complexity to the overarching discourse as it intersects with existing social, political, and cultural dynamics. Shockley theorizes, historicizes and personalizes race in the narrative’s unfolding; such theoretical elucidation, historical contextualization, and poignant personalization of race, enacted through linguistic construction, engagements between characters, historical backdrop and narrative development, serves to enrich and deepen the reader’s understanding of the complex dynamics at work.

Loving Her provides a critical reflection at the color problem in course of the narrative, examining the nature of hostility, prejudice and stereotypes inherent in white racism. The text moves back and forth in time, weaving together elements of the past and present through fluid shifts in narrative, seamlessly transitioning between Renay’s personal experiences and the black racial history, to appeal to the idea of ‘color problem’: Renay’s own racial experiences are put side by side with what her mother and her ancestors had to face; the idea of putting the two together not only amplifies the gravity of racial oppression but also imbues the narrative with a profound sense of historical continuum.

Central to Shockley's examination is the stark binaries in which the blacks and the whites are placed- superior/inferior, master/domestic help, rentable/unrentable, trustworthy/untrustworthy. *Loving Her* deconstructs and dissects these binaries in terms of power dynamics: she sees power embedded within racial dynamics. Two scenes in the text distinctly illuminate the racial dynamics that permeate the cultural landscape of the United States, standing out amid numerous interactions as powerful reflections of the nation's deeply embedded racial tensions: the encounter between Renay and Miss Wilby, and between Terry and Mr. Herald. While visiting Terry's home, Renay is confronted with the presence of Miss Wilby, the housemaid, whose role is shaped not merely by servitude but by the racialized power structures embedded within the household. Although Wilby herself occupies a subordinate position, the pervasive racism of the environment positions Renay as an outsider, subjecting her to suspicion, curt treatment, and moments of deliberate erasure. Shockley problematizes the entire encounter between Renay and Miss Wilby by exposing the subtle yet deeply ingrained racial hierarchies at play; Miss Wilby's inability—or refusal—to accept Renay's presence stems not from simple personal prejudice, but from an internalized racism so pervasive that it renders Black existence within certain spaces as inherently disruptive or illegitimate. Miss Wilby, in all her capacity, construes Renay as a servant: "Because she [Renay] was black, she had to be the maid." (Shockley 50)

The construction of blacks as mammies/maids is a major stereotype in the US popular discourse and has a slave lexical history attached to it. Embedded in the image of mammy is the historical construction of the relation between whites and black women in terms of master/servant trope; the presence of blacks in white neighbourhood is often constructed in terms of mammy archetype. The mammy imagery is fraught with further complexity.

Though constructed as symbols of selflessness and unwavering support, the mammy figure is paradoxically burdened with the stigma of being inherently untrustworthy—a contradiction that exposes the racial anxieties and power imbalances underpinning this stereotype, an idea that closely resembles Fanon's

thesis of construction of blackness in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) Furthermore, the mammy caricature is deliberately constrained to roles of servitude, reinforcing a racialized social order that denies Black women autonomy and complexity. Miss Wilby's excessive surveillance of Renay reflects the insidious reach of this racialized stereotype. Collins sees mammy stereotypes as a controlling image "designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life." (69) *Loving Her* illustrates the power imbalance embedded within these racial stereotyping. The imbalance is stark and clear for everyone to see and understand; Miss Wilby's hostile attitude, her high-pitched voice, her insults and her accusations that Renay must have stolen the money exemplify a blatant exertion of control and dominance. By casting suspicion on Renay's integrity, Miss Wilby reinforces a legacy of distrust and subjugation that has historically defined the relationship between white authority figures and Black domestic workers. In all of this, the text simultaneously foregrounds the precarious and marginalized condition of Black domestic workers in white neighborhoods, most notably embodied in the character of Renay's mother. Her experiences serve as a powerful lens through which the narrative critiques the racial and class hierarchies that structure domestic labor.

Shockley reconstructs this thematic interest in racial profiling through an encounter between Terry and Mr. Herald. The later, in his capacity as the manager of the white neighbourhood, opposes the presence of the "Negress"/"sleep-in maid" (read: Renay) in the white neighbourhood to Terry. (Shockley 59) While the racial basis of this opposition is unmistakable, what is of interest is the manner in which Mr. Herald frames his proposition:

To be perfectly frank, if you've noticed, there are no Negroes living in this particular section of the city. The unwritten policy of the owners of the building has been not to rent to Negroes. (60)

Mr. Herald's proposition is problematic in two key ways: first, in his use of the term 'Negro,' which reinforces outdated and derogatory racial language, and second, in the unwritten policy regarding rents, which subtly enforces discriminatory

practices under the guise of neutrality. “Race names have long been associated with the development and maintenance of racial attitudes.” (Fairchild 47) The linguistic construction of the blacks as ‘negro’ has racial overtones, and in the context of the text, is in dichotomous marker to maximize the difference between the whites and the blacks. The use of the term 'Negro' is strategically employed to reinforce the racial hierarchy, positioning white individuals above Black individuals in a clearly defined power structure. Theoretical models of “Us” versus “Them” provides valuable framework through which to understand this phenomenon better. But it is Mr. Herald’s statement on housing segregation that permeates white spaces of living that particularly draws our attention. “Systematic white racism has long involved the control of space and territory in the United States” (Feagin 81) White neighborhoods are not just places of living but rather "expectations in tangible or intangible things that are valued and protected by law" (Harris 1729). As Harris says "in the worlds of de jure and de facto segregation, whiteness has value, whiteness is valued, and whiteness is expected to be valued in law." (1777) Shockley may not delve deeply into the specifics of the law, but *Loving Her* unmistakably directs our attention to these critical areas, highlighting the broader social and legal implications. The unwritten policy of housing segregation has been variously described as a national problem and as the foundation of white racism (Feagin 79). In *Loving Her* we are told that the white neighbourhood lives as “one big closed club” (Shockley 61) The idea to not rent out to ‘negroes’ and live as one closed, unified and insular community comes from intricate web of social constructs and stereotypes in which the blacks are received. By denying black individuals access to housing in these communities, they are effectively rendered invisible. This ostracism perpetuated by social policies is a focal point of Shockley's critique, as she interrogates the problematic implications of such exclusionary practices. Mr. Herald’s subsequent warning that “I must ask you to either rid yourself of your friends—or move” and that “when Negroes move in, there follows a rash of them, and -” (Shockley 60) is a continuation of unpleasant aberrations in which the blacks are imagined in US popular culture and the segregation culture therewith. Consequently, acts of segregation are exercises in power play and is meant to tell and assert who the ‘boss’ is. Prior to Shockley, books like Frank London Brown's Trumbull Park (1959) and

Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* (1953) have examined the realities of segregated residential. What differentiates Shockley from Park, Brook and others scholars of segregation narrative is the former's capacity to reconceptualize the entire discursivities on housing segregation and drive it to intersecting identities like gender and sexuality. In all these, it is pertinent to note that Shockley intermittently scratches the annals of black history, the history of racial profiling and the history of black rebellion to draw a historical parallel to contemporaneous struggle to give a sense of continuity.

Loving Her offers much more than a normal and routinized examination of gender relationships and racial dynamics. The text connects the thematic interest in race/racism and gender performance to issues of sexuality, more particularly black sexuality in an intersectional framework. Shockley depicts the struggle of a lesbian mother as she grapples with the dual challenge of fulfilling her own quest for self-actualization while navigating the daunting realities of parenting within a community deeply entrenched in heteronormative ideals. Shockley's novel constitutes epistemological intervention into black women's sexuality; it was one of the earliest texts to reconceptualize it. Although the exploration of lesbian theme in English literature dates back to Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928, it would not be until 1974 when Shockley would step into the scene and take up the issue of unique challenges and complexities faced by black lesbians. In *Loving Her* Shockley "allows us glimpses at physical intimacies between women that have been, in the past, deliberately ridiculed or obscured." (qtd. in Melancon 647) In giving us rare glimpses into physical intimacies between women, Shockley strikes at the very heart of politics of visibility. This assumes more significance given intersectional nature of the work and the historical context in which the novel was penned. In 1975, Critic Frank Lamont Phillips would write in 'Black World' that Shockley's fiction ought not to be published in the journal presumably because it was not "black" enough" and that "this bullshit should not be tolerated." (89-90) Houston writes that "Shockley's first novel received very little critical attention from the black press, a fact that Shockley herself attributes to the "rampant homophobia" within the black community." (236)

The ridicule and obscurity with which the black lesbians and more especially black lesbians in an interracial relationship are received encapsulates the intricate dynamics of the politics of visibility and invisibility. Shockley explores this politics of visibility/invisibility through the character of the central protagonist Renay. This is done through an examination of her relationship with other characters in the novel- her husband, her friends, the neighborhood and also through interrogation of such ideas as patriarchy, race and black nationalism. Shockley structures the text around two distinct groups of characters: those who uphold the norms of compulsory heterosexuality and those who either embrace or are at ease with same-sex desire. It is the conflict between these two groups that generates the central tension driving the narrative. Shockley lets her readers understand the position from which the characters speak- for and against.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault posits that “we are dealing less with a discourse on sex than with a multiplicity of discourses” (33). This he wrote in 1976, two years after *Loving Her* was published. Shockley was no theoretical scholar as Foucault was- much less was she familiar with the totality of Foucauldian thesis- and yet demonstrates some remarkable theoretical acumen in her interrogation of sexuality. Foucault sees home/family as a principal structure of exclusionary politics, entwined with broader systems of social exclusion and marginalization, and deeply invested in how in/visibility may be managed, controlled and achieved. In Shockley, home emerges as a principal dynamic organization, implicated in processes of exclusion and visibility, expectations and restrictions, not solely within the domains of gender but equally invested in the governing sexual norms. Furthermore, home is attuned to nuances of power and mechanisms of domination. *Loving Her* draws the readers’ attention to the many nuances in which sexuality is constructed in black households.

Shockley invites our attention to mediate on what Gilbert and Gubar call “the sexuality of linguistics and the linguistics of sexuality” (515). The intricate relationship between language and sexuality beckons us to consider language not just as a reflective tool but also a catalyst, shaping perceptions, expressions, and

experiences, to unravel the diverse dimensions of human identity. The discursive and fictional constructions of sexuality “are not simply mimetic; they are not confined to describing worlds, real or imaginary. They are productive in giving rise to renewed performances of themselves in which the readers play a necessary and active part.” (qtd. in Crous 50)

Loving Her illustrates how language embodies and reflects cultural attitudes and norms; while also demonstrating how linguistic structures and expressions convey and influence sexual connotations and representations. In *Loving Her* the lexical construction of same-sex desires are framed through taunts and jibes, notably the use of the term ‘queer’, and ‘dike’ amongst others. Lee in his series of taunts and jibes to address Renay’s sexuality particularly makes use of the term ‘queer’: Renay’s desire is framed in terms of ‘queer’. Queer receives a negative connotation and in Renay while meaning strange, odd and eccentric, it also means of questionable character. While the current use of queer by academics embodies a critical lense challenging normative constructs —as “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant”- (Halperin 62) since at least the 1990s, it is important to mention that ‘queer’ constituted a slang/derogatory term in the 1950s, 1960s and the 1970s. The use of the term ‘queer’ by Lee for Renay must therefore be identified by the derogatory meaning- eccentric, perverse and abnormal- during its time and placed in its proper historical context. “Dike” (Shockley 128), slang for lesbian like ‘queer’ constitutes another stock example in how homosexuality was framed then and still continues to be framed.

“Interactional space” (Jenkins 47), as a social space in which identities are asserted, defended, imposed and resisted, constitutes a crucial site wherein the complex interplay of social dynamics, power relations, and individual agency converges to shape the contours of identity formation. Interactional space, aimed at creating competent social actors, often operates from “binary binds”. (Ghisleni et al. 766) This notion encapsulates the intricate entanglements wherein societal norms and linguistic conventions impose a dichotomous understanding of sexual identity and expression, constraining individuals within rigid categories of normativity and

deviance. These binary binds serve to delineate and regulate the boundaries of acceptable sexual discourse and behavior, relegating nuances and complexities to the periphery while reinforcing hegemonic power structures. The heterosexual assumptions of heterosexuality as the 'default' and 'natural' sexual category often stem from binary binds of male/female, girl/boy and masculine/feminine. Lee's characterization of Renay's interest in women- "---you couldn't get a man?" (Shockley 128), his threat to kill both Renay and Terry owing to their sexual desires and the violent attack which he actually perpetrates on Renay towards the end of the text exemplifies the underlying classificatory politics embedded in the, "universal assumption that the world consists of only two biological sexes and that this is the natural and necessary way of things" (qtd. in Herdt 33) Notably, such characterization/classification or 'binary binds' becomes sufficient ground for deciding how to treat someone. It is interesting to note that the text opens with a failed marriage between Renay and Jerome Lee. And Lee attribute and pins that on Renay's lesbian desire- as the primary driver for the failure. *Loving Her* repeatedly recreates this phenomenon in course of the narrative: Lee's threat to Renay for corrupting their daughter with same-sex desires, Lorraine's resignation as an art instructor for her avowed lesbian rumours with Vance, Miss Pearl's closeted existence - all these owes to classificatory politics of "binary binds". Of course, Shockley problematizes these assumptions and endorses a politics of subversion, dissidence, transgression and visibility. Notably, Shockley connects these ideas to notions of patriarchy and black cultural nationalism.

Postmodern texts are distinguished in their sophisticated and persuasive critique of essentialism and a pronounced defiance of hierarchy and prevalent power dynamics; conversely these also define themselves in terms of multiplicity, fluidity and possibilities. Postmodernists propose that there are many ways of knowing, and knowledge claims are seen as partial, fragmented, and incomplete' (Flax 36-61) From this constructivist perspective, sexuality is viewed as a process, as a continuum profoundly shaped by prevailing environment and characterized by its transformative potential. Black feminists approach to postmodernism has been to abandon singular, monolithic overarching explanatory constructs and serve as fertile ground for the

interrogation and deconstruction of grand narratives and prevailing ideologies. In this deconstructive examination, black patriarchy, black masculinity and black (cultural) nationalism have emerged as primary subjects of interrogation. *Loving Her* makes some choicest critique of these dominant ideologies that have come to define much of black life and identity. “In her pioneering novel *Loving Her* (1974), Ann Allen Shockley challenges rigid discourses on sexuality that do not provide apt paradigms that either capture or illuminate the complex terrain of black women's sexuality.” (Melancon 643) Performances of blackness in *Loving Her* for black women becomes a complicated act and hangs on a delicate balance between self-expression and ‘authentic’ black expectations.

What constitutes authentic black sexual expression(s) has been an ongoing subject of enquiry in black studies; scholars grapple with the multifaceted dimensions of black identity and cultural authenticity. Over time, a plethora of social, cultural, political, and intellectual movements have sought to shape and redefine the contours of black sexual identity. Among these, Black Nationalism emerged as a prominent ideological force. Within the political and social landscape of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, Black Nationalism projected and articulated a diverse array of ‘authentic’ black cultural and political expressions, particularly in the realms of gender and sexuality. Black nationalism operates as a problematic category because Black Nationalism not only erases and invisibilizes the vast history of same-sex among the African-Americans (as well as Africans) but also operates as a disciplinary framework with redefined rules of engagement. Studies in Black Nationalism illuminate how its pursuit of a unifying wholeness as a cornerstone for black liberatory practices ends up creating an exclusionary gendered and sexual model, one that complicates life of black women. Not only did the movement project heterosexuality as the first default sex for African-Americans, it firmly situated itself against any expression of alternate desires in African-Americans by steadfastly underscoring the Un-African (and therefore Un-African-American) nature of homosexuality.

While many scholars have readily embraced Black Nationalism as an ostensibly unproblematic paradigm, other, and in particular black women authors, have been more nuanced and less prone to idealization in their understanding of its strengths and limitations. bell hooks, for instance, calls Black nationalism a largely a patriarchal and misogynist movement, seeking to overcome racial divisions by strengthening sexist ones. Audre Lorde asserts that sexual violence against Black women is “a disease striking the heart of Black nationhood, and silence will not make it disappear.” (120) Four years after *Loving Her* was published, Michele Wallace caused significant storm in the black intellectual and political circle with her classic critique of sexism in the black nationalist movement. Others like Collins, while recognizing its historical significance as a response to systemic racism and white supremacy, caution how ‘Afrocentrism’ remains trapped in exclusionary gender tendencies and practices. Consequently, their insights offer a richer and more complex understanding of Black Nationalism.

Scholars like Alycee Lane and Madhu Dubey argue that *Loving Her* offers a strong critique of black nationalism. Notably, the text nowhere explicitly mentions Black Nationalism and yet the prints of Black Nationalism permeate the entire narrative throughout. Shockley brings a wealth of nuances in her interrogation of Black Nationalism- and all these lead us to the politics of visibility. In Shockley, the black female lesbian becomes the locus for anxiety around not only sexuality but more specifically around a Black nationalism in crisis. Articulation of same-sex desires (especially lesbian desires) in blacks are construed in terms of threatening the very bonds of cultural and racial collective which black cultural nationalism seeks to uphold. Notably, these become a cause of tension in the narrative. Such a tension underscore the complex negotiation of identity and belonging faced by black women within the framework of Black cultural nationalism, where their sexual expression becomes a contested site of both resistance and conformity.

Loving Her produces a robust critique of black women’s marginalization within the nationalist framework; it interrogates how nationalist discourse hinder emergence of authentic female subjectivity and create a hierarchy of acceptability

based on adherence to its exclusive doctrine. Shockley connects black nationalist discourse to notion of patriarchy and masculinity; she discerns masculinist and heterosexist principles deeply entrenched within the fabric of Black Nationalism. Melancon characterizes Jerome Lee as embracing black nationalism who articulates masculinist and heterosexist ideologies (647) Lee's narrow conceptualizations of Renay in terms of "—another man, perhaps, yes—but not a woman" (Shockley 110)-exemplify a broader masculinist gender hierarchy within nationalism that characterizes women in love with women in terms of transgression and a violation of the patriarchal norm. The idea that "—another man, perhaps, yes—but not a woman" simply parrots masculinist and heterosexist values entrenched in black nationalism.

For many black women, black nationalism constituted a central paradigm on which black nationhood had to be built; it was a liberatory discourse that empowered both black men and black women. Collins writes that many black women reject feminism because they see it as being antifamily and against Black men." (152) It may well also be said that many black women reject 'lesbianism' because they see it as being antifamily and against black men. In a situation where any departure from black nationalism is interpreted in terms of violation of black code, such an idea naturally situates many black women against their own kind. Frans' (Renay's friend) appearance in the text seeks to explore this idea: Fran imbibes these ideas in the mode of belief; "For her to be in love with a woman who was white and a Lesbian—Fran would never understand." (31) Shockley describes this phenomenon thus:

Black women were the most vehement about women loving each other. This kind of love was worse to them than the acts of adultery or incest, for it was homophile. It was worse than being inflicted with an incurable disease. Black women could be sympathetic about illegitimacy, raising the children of others, having affairs with married men—but not toward Lesbianism, which many blamed on white women. (31)

Black nationalist discourse often operates on a binary model. Pushing ostensibly positive images of black women as gender conforming, heteronormative compliant and superstrong has been at the core of black nationalist worldview; these

images were firmly placed in a binary framework against gender non-compliance and homosexual black women. To Shockley, these images constitute mechanisms of compliance and coercion working to consolidate heteronormative patriarchal ideals. The above context foregrounds how black codes of engagement programme women into believing that acts of adultery, incest and illegitimacy constitutes forgivable transgressions, while lesbian desires are not. For individuals like Renay who bear invisible scars of emotional abuse alongside physical violence, these ideas exacerbate a profound sense of disenfranchisement and marginalization. Such images of Black women...make some women more likely to accept domestic violence as routine (qtd. in Collins 159) than to seek out partner outside. This perhaps explains why Renay stays with Jerome Lee notwithstanding his irresponsible conduct and propensity for violence.

Black Nationalism is a source of constant tension in course of the narrative in the text. In Renay, *Loving Her* looks at the complex interplay between race, gender, and sexuality within the black family vis-a-vis Black Nationalism. Collins writes that “Black women who have willingly chosen white male friends and lovers have been severely chastised in African-American communities for selling out the “race.” (162) “Black women who date and marry white men are often accused of losing their Black identity. Within this context, Black women who do engage in relationships with White men encounter Black community norms that question their commitment to Blackness.” (163) Similarly, black nationalism restricts black females from having sexual communion with white women. “It’s more acceptable in the Black community for Black men to go out with white women than for Black women to go out with white men.” (119) This dynamic underscores a broader power imbalance. It grants black males a privileged position wherein they can pursue relationships across racial boundaries without facing significant societal backlash, while simultaneously constraining similar behaviour in black female. This power relation extends beyond heterosexual relationship to encompass interracial desires between females. Shockley's portrayal of Fran's reaction to Renay's friendship and attraction to Terry demonstrates how Black women's expressions of desire are often construed in terms of divisiveness and transgression of the black code of engagement. Within the

intricate framework of codes on individual autonomy and identity expression within black communities dictated by Black Nationalism, Renay's affection for Terry necessitates secrecy, even from her closest confidante: "Her love for Terry would have to be a secret hidden even from her best friend." (Shockley 32) Renay's dilemma of prioritizing her emotional fulfillment while contending with the potential repercussions of defying communal norms represents the general predicament of black women who transgress the black code of engagement vis-à-vis whiteness/sexuality.

Broader anxieties surrounding Black cultural nationalism are further compounded by its ambivalent stance towards black gay sex and lesbian desires. If Black Nationalism situates black males in a position of power vis-à-vis the black female, then it also situates black gay sex in a position of power vis-à-vis lesbian desires. The text illuminates a troubling disparity in these acts: While "nothing was ever said or done about them except for a sly wink or a giggle" (122) and that they were liked by everyone, lesbians engaging in same-sex like Vance are called "lepers" (122) This disparity underscores the complex intersectionality of oppression within Black cultural nationalism, where gender, sexuality, and power dynamics intersect.

Of the current structural rhetoric in gay and lesbian identity politics is the inherent question of closet. 'Closet' together with 'Coming Out' constitutes two central metaphors in queer visibility. "The twin tropes of the closet and coming out assumed their current, primarily homosexual, inflection in the context of gay and lesbian liberation movements in the 1960s and 70s." (Bobker 34) The image of the closet "has been mobilized to invoke and sustain a series of binary oppositions experienced by, on one side, those "in the closet" and, on the other, those who have made the step of "coming out of the closet": community versus isolation, pride versus repression, political action versus apolitical apathy, moral truth versus hypocrisy." (Stewart 76)

In Shockley, Miss Pearl Sims is an interesting study in closet, coming out, silencing and visibility. Miss Pearl Sims appears as a piano teacher to Renay and mostly occurs to the readers through Renay's recollections and memories of their

interactions. Her character is built around secrecy, isolation, remoteness and mystery. Shockley builds in Miss Pearl a closeted lesbian who for the major part of the novel gives away her character in nuanced and subtle terms. Through Miss Pearl, Shockley invites the readers to critically reflect on the complexities and power dynamics inherent in closeted/uncloseted life and the intricate interplay between personal agency, societal expectations and the quest for authentic visibility. Miss Pearl, we are told, “preferred to hide or ignore her sexual inclination, suffering in isolation, silence and loneliness.” (Shockley 84) Miss Pearl, we are told, “preferred to hide or ignore her sexual inclination, suffering in isolation, silence and loneliness.” (Shockley 84) Miss Pearl's apprehension stems from a fear of disrupting the established societal norms and potentially inviting unwelcome hostilities. This reluctance to challenge the status quo is beautifully summed up by Vance: “People are afraid of anything that upsets the status quo of their tight, comfortable little worlds.” (162) One might be tempted to call Miss Pearl's seclusion a choice; and choice it is in a certain way. “For Sedgwick, not telling, not describing one's identity or desire, still represents an articulation of sexuality. (Winning 57) And yet we must understand, closet experiences are not choices but constrained by broader social forces that limit her agency and options; framing Miss Pearl's invisibility as a ‘choice’ risks overlooking systemic inequalities and power dynamics that shape her lived experience. In other words, while Miss Pearl may navigate her invisibility within the confines of her circumstances, it is crucial to recognize the systemic forces at play and the limitations placed upon her agency. By problematizing the notion of choice, we confront the underlying injustices that perpetuate invisibility and marginalization within society. Rich observes that “Heterosexual, patriarchal culture has driven lesbians into secrecy and guilt, often to self-hatred and suicide.” (225) Cheryl Clarke echoes Rich in saying that lesbians were “hidden from history” (129) While Miss Pearl doesn't resort to suicide or harbor self-hatred, her response is marked by a deliberate retreat into secrecy, evading visibility and opting to remain hidden from historical accounts, particularly in the initial stages of the narrative.

If on the one hand, Miss Pearl stands for closet and secrecy, her resistance towards the end of the novel represents a push towards visibility for these desires.

The introduction of unnamed woman alongside Miss Sims in the latter portion of the novel serves as a profound vehicle and a deliberate effort to challenge status quo and to grant much-needed visibility to same-sex experiences and relationships. Shockley also seeks to give visibility to same-sex loving through Renay's own admiration for Miss Pearl. Such an admiration, in the first few appearances of Miss Pearl in course of the narrative, subtly borders on if not outright (repressed) sexual longing than at least a (repressed) romantic inclination to be. Such a repressed romantic inclination is later materialized by throwing Renay and Terry together in an act of love making, an embodiment of infinite possibilities as Shockley would call in one section of the narration.

Shockley's narrative briefly touches upon the role of judicial institutions and legal systems in perpetuating compulsory heterosexuality, its complicity as tools of oppression, as instrument of enforcement, wielding power that stigmatizes non-normative relationships. Shockley situates legal system as a site of systematic violence and discrimination where individuals like Renay have no hope and place. Couched in a concern for the welfare of the child, the custody in the hands of straight parent(s) and heterosexual family is construed as 'natural' and 'deserving'. Protected in judicial code, Lee threatens Renay thus: "Wait until I tell the court about your he-she friends. You won't get Denise or a goddam motherfucking thing. You hear me?" (127)" While Shockley does not dwell on length on the role of judiciary in perpetuating compulsive heterosexuality; and yet with this succinct but powerful introductory reference reorients the reader's gaze in foregrounding its complex interplay in shaping the dynamics of visibility. In Jerome Lee's threat to his wife, the text prepares the readers to interrogate and question legal frameworks as instrument of coercion and arbitration. Renay's mere identification as a lesbian translates into adequate justification to deny her the custody of her child.

Daniel Rivers in his study of lesbian and gay parenting custody in the 1960s to the 1980s argues that "institutional anti-gay and lesbian prejudice constructed same-sex sexuality as antithetical to parenting, actively stripped many lesbians and gay men of their parental rights, and kept a whole generation of lesbian and gay

parents in fear of being estranged from their children.” (917) The looming dread of potential estrangement from her child resulting from discrimination and marginalization vis-à-vis the legal system, no doubt, stops Renay from approaching the court. Jerome Lee, on the other hand, fortified by institutional norms favoring compulsory heterosexuality, represents the entrenched power dynamics within societal structures. While the text does not extensively delve into these dynamics, it prompts readers to contemplate their implications. The narrative explicitly underscores the legal limitations in challenging heterosexuality, as evidenced by Renay's realization that her case against Jerome Lee would find more traction in conventional criminal charges- “assault and battery, intent to kill, housebreaking, every damn thing” (135) - rather than addressing homophobia.

But it is when white racism intersects with gender and sexuality simultaneously that we get to see some of the real highlights in *Shockley*. It has already been said that *Loving Her* occupies a pivotal position in the literary canon, regarded as one of the foundational works that intricately examines and addresses the multifaceted concerns of Black lesbian identity, all the while engaging with these issues through a sophisticated and critical intersectional lens that considers the complex interplay of race, gender, sexuality, and social justice. This intersection of race, gender and sexuality finds best expression through Renay's encounter with a certain middle aged white man in course of the novel. In one pivotal moment, the man remarks to Renay: "How about you? You don't really go for that woman-loving stuff now, do you? I know what Negro women like. The real thing!" (*Shockley*, 75) In one single sentence, *Shockley* foregrounds several problematic aspects. There are a few important things to consider here: first lesbian love is constructed in terms of ‘woman-loving stuff’. The use of the word ‘stuff’ smacks of power dynamics and constitutes an attempt to trivialize, discredit and above all dehumanize lesbian desires. If “stuff” constitutes an attempt to trivialize, discredit and dehumanize lesbian desires, the use of the words “The real thing” for heterosexuality is an attempt to give authority, authenticity and privilege to heteronormative values. This construction is firmly entrenched within a binary framework, reinforcing the dichotomy between heterosexuality and other forms of sexual orientation. In doing

so, it implicitly seeks to reinforce, without having said, heterosexuality as the default sexual marker.

Another key critical observation lies in the inherently racist connotations embedded in the use of the term 'Negro'. The use of the word "negro" carries inherent racism as it historically originates from a period of racial subjugation and oppression, where it was used to dehumanize and marginalize black individuals. Its usage within the current context serves as an act of reinforcing racial hierarchies and perpetuating systemic discrimination. Further, in saying that "I know what Negro women like" the text foregrounds the intersection of race, gender and sexuality. In claiming that he 'knows what negro women like' he immediately dismisses Renay's race, her gender, her ethnicity, her sexuality, in short her whole individuality. It might be of interest to note that young black women are often objectified as 'Jezebel' in US cultural scene. In contrast to the 'mammy' stereotype, the Jezebel image objectifies younger African-American women as inherently promiscuous and sexually available. Thus, in claiming that he 'knows', he seeks to take control of that 'Jezebel' body. This becomes immediately apparent when he proceeds to make suggestive gestures, confirming our suspicions regarding his intentions. Another illustrative instance "He danced in the white man's superior way with black women, believing he was doing her a great favor or honor" (76) captures this powerful dynamic of gendered, racial and sexual politics.

In Byron, Shockley simultaneously questions racial prejudice, binary gender division as well as narrow notions of sexuality. Unlike others, Byron's (a self proclaimed liberal) racial and sexual prejudices are couched in finesses and cleverly articulated through subtle linguistic maneuvers. His statement "colored people have a right to live, too" and "every person's sex life to himself" (Shockley 116) veers more towards a begrudging tolerance rather than genuine empathy and respect. Shockley's narrative compels readers to contemplate the societal constructs of acceptability and normalcy, juxtaposing the extramarital affairs of characters like Byron with the genuine affection and warmth evident in the relationship between Renay and Terry.

The erasure/dismissal of black women's identity in terms of racial, gender and sexual manifestation is not the monopoly of white male alone, it is also a luxury that white women leisurely exercise. It is important to recognize that though straight white man and white woman have their respective positions within systems of power and privilege, both enjoy an unprecedented power vis-à-vis the black women. The character of Terry serves as a saving grace to the tragic unfolding within the plot of the novel. But with Terry, the text also highlights white privilege. As a single, accomplished lesbian woman, Terry's portrayal starkly juxtaposes Renay's complex and fraught existence, emphasizing the contrasting societal treatment and opportunities afforded based on racial identity and privilege.

Shockley's novel is much an attempt to bring visibility to same sex desires among black women as much as it is about fraught existence discussed above. Dubey (1994) contends that *Loving Her*, unlike many other early 1970s novels by African American women refuses to "conclude with a strained adjustment to the heterosexual parameters of black nationalism." (152) In an era marked by the severe taboo surrounding same-sex desires among black women, Shockley bravely brings these desires into visibility.

One of the ways in which the text gives visibility to same sex among black women is by formulating a political alternative to black cultural nationalism. "Terry and Renay's lesbian relationship provides an alternative to the failed traditional, heterosexual family model." (Van Ausdall 59) In *Renay and Terry*, Shockley gives her readers a first full instance of love making between a black women and a white woman: the love making constitutes a stark and radical break from historical silences and constraints surrounding interracial and same-sex desire. The transgression redefines the cultural standards of what is worthy of visibility and what should be relegated to obscurity. The unresolved tension in book between individual desires and compulsive heterosexuality is resolved through a leap of faith in friendship, relation, freedom and individuality. Renay's return back to Terry signifies the onward march of those elementary elements. Through the book, the author shows not only how black lesbian bodies as a site of intersecting oppressions but also how

black women's sexualities can become an important place of resistance. In throwing Renay to bed with Miss Terry, the text overturns normative gender and sexual imaginings and gives a window of visibility for her readers who had hitherto been trained into the binary framework of 'man-woman' loving and single 'white-white' sexual axis.

The presence of places like Willow Wood gives further impetus to the idea of visibility in the text. Willow Wood, the new home that Terry and Renay shift to, comes across as a saving grace for homophiles, as a place "far away from the madding crowd" (Shockley 66) Cast against the white neighbourhood, Willow Wood emerges as a preferable site that gives security and visibility. The presence of characters such as Vance and Lorraine, Benjie and Phil and later Renay and Terry is a compelling testament to its liberal character.

Loving Her also shows familiarity with the gay liberationist movement, a liberation movement that emerged during the late 1960s and early 1970s as part of the fight for the rights and visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals. The reference to 'The Gay Liberationists' (73) in course of the narrative is not just an act of acknowledgement of the existence of the Gay Liberationists but also an attempt to contextualize the characters' identities and experiences within a larger historical framework, emphasizing the interconnectedness between personal narratives and broader social movements. Shockley's invocation of the movement is a testament to her intellectual acumen to interlace her artistic vision with contemporary historical context of collective struggle for LGBTQ+ visibility, elucidating the multifaceted intersections between art, social consciousness, and civil movements. The reference to gay liberationists encapsulated in "A lot of us are coming out of the closets these days" (73) is also an attempt to give same-sex desires visibility in course of the narrative.

It is imperative to contextualize Shockley's perspectives on same-sex relationships within the historical backdrop in which her works were written. Situating her in a historical context enables a comprehensive understanding and does justice to the text. Shockley did not have the benefits of being part of circle of social

networks, nor did she had mentor texts and prior precedents to guide her to craft her own art. “In speculating about why so many competent Black women writers and reviewers have avoided examining lesbianism, Ann Allen Shockley suggests that “the fear of being labeled a Lesbian, whether they were one or not” has been a major deterrent.” (Collins, 167) Shockley’s text, in that sense, emerges from a context marked by a scarcity of representation and a prevailing reluctance to engage with non-heteronormative themes. Shockley gives representation and visibility to same-sex desires among women, particularly black women and more particularly black women in an interracial framework. In contrast to the conventional narrative dominated by patriarchal, racial, and cultural nationalist paradigms, which perpetuate the marginalization and invisibility of non-heteronormative sexualities, Shockley's narrative disrupts these oppressive structures. She offers a vision of comprehensive inclusivity for blacks and whites, for gays and lesbians, beyond racial lines, in individual category or in intersectionality as well as a profound sense of belonging.

Like Shockley, Mehra draws the reader’s attention to “questions of visibility, and what visibility can and cannot accomplish” (Mehra 159) through honest conversations about gender, sex, race and immigration in *Brown White Black*. The text combines these issues in an intersectional framework to let the readers understand what politics of visibility/invisibility may do some sections of the people. The central tension within the text arises from this pursuit of visibility; such a pursuit becomes a canvas upon which the narrative grapples with questions of self-expression, authenticity, and societal expectations. This idea is well captured in “I struggled to figure out what level of visibility made sense. (10) because “Visibility matters” (27) The construct of visibility within the narrative is underpinned by the intersectionality of Mehra's identity categories, intricately woven through her gender, her homosexual relationship with Jill, and the complex positioning of her black son at the crossroads of multiple intersections. The text examines and interrogates this question of visibility further in reference to pervasive structural discrimination witnessed in family, pedagogy, media, courts of law etc. In the delicate journey of discovery, the narrative gently unwraps the nuances woven into stereotypes and ingrained binaries. The title of Mehra’s book aptly sums up the thematic concern of

the text. 'Brown White Black' in the title refers to brown mom, white mom and black son- the three central character in course of the text and refers to their experience as such. At a broader level, it refers to brown, white and black nationhood within the American cultural paradigm. Mehra interrogates how these brown-white-black navigate the tough waters of visibility/invisibility in an intersectional framework.

Unlike Shockley, whose text starts with gendered tension, Mehra begins her text by examining and interrogating questions of race. As Mehra confronts the disconnect between the stated values of American society and its actions, the narrative foregrounds the vast social divide in which certain people are cast as "others". The "othering" of these people on racial lines are enacted in different social spaces like schools, malls, birthdays, clubs, government offices, private retails. Racism is accounted for in paperwork, in pop culture, in legislature. (18) Mehra writes that the "white, upper-class Memphis...existed inside its own bubble, its own self-sustaining world with its own set of rules." (4) Her "white classmates moved through the world differently from the way I did". (4) This thematic interest in race is then gradually intertwined with issues of gendered and sexual identity.

In Mehra, the three identities i.e. racial, gendered and sexual cut crosses one another to produce complex dynamics of existence. These make the book a compelling study in identity crisis, of navigating different identities, of resilience and courage and in the context of our discussion the politics of visibility. The author brings a 'visceral, firsthand knowledge' of American society for her readers to understand the quotidian experiences of her characters. 'To be accepted by the dominant culture and also seeking to find a space inside her minority identity' means constant navigation through a series of oppositional standards. As Mehra writes "It's difficult, perhaps impossible, to separate the layers of our family's dynamics: the attention we attract as same-sex parents; the attention we attract as a mixed-race family; the attention we attract simply through our respective personalities." (103) The text constantly looks through the binaries in which Nishta conducts her life: as a brown versus white, as a homosexual versus heterosexual, as idolizing whiteness

versus resenting it etc. The Mehra family becomes a collectively face for everything that is alternate.

Mehra philosophizes on the nature of sexuality, asking a series of questions on individual's (including children's) sexual propensity, interrogating responses, registering impulses, interrupting every now and then to see into that some of her own codes are not outdated, untangling herself from the discourses at large, inquiring and cross-examining the instability of our gender and sexual norms, challenging binaries and delivering on the futility of assigning certainty to sexual norms, questioning politics or beliefs, questioning institutions and championing the idea of free and open sexuality. *Brown White Black* can be read as a personal archive into public conversations about gender, sex and race. It is interesting to note how 'brown' bodies become a site where 'white' discursivities on race and sexuality project their assumptions in this conversation. In a society where energies are invested in correcting heterosexual lack, the brown and the black bodies become an easy site in social circles to project and enforce acceptable ways of socializing.

In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler argues that gender is not a fixed or essential aspect of a person's identity, but rather a social construct that is performed and reiterated through cultural norms and practices. (33) According to Judith Butler, gender performance is not a deliberate or voluntary act, but a compelled repetition of behaviors, gestures, and roles dictated by prevailing social norms and expectations—an enactment shaped more by cultural coercion than individual choice. These norms and expectations are perpetuated and naturalized through language, embodied behavior, and a range of cultural practices, collectively shaping how individuals come to perceive, experience, and perform their identities—often with profound implications for their sense of self and their relations to others. Mehra's own thought are not different from what Butler calls 'performative' acts. Mehra writes "All social interaction is, on some level or to some extent, performative. All social interaction is, on some level or to some extent, performative. We are always performing, always reading social cues and dancing in between them, deciding what we can and can't say, anticipating how others will respond, putting up

walls when we anticipate an attack.” (22) Individuals frequently internalize societal cues and normative patterns, constructing their identities in response to the frameworks imposed by the cultural milieu. Consequently, identity emerges not as a fixed essence but as a performative construct—strategically enacted, modulated, and negotiated in relation to context, audience, and expectation. Such performance is inherently reactive and contingent, shaped by a continual anticipation of social recognition, validation, or rejection. It is a dialogic process, always attuned to the gaze of others, calibrated to elicit affirmation or mitigate disapproval within the constraints of prevailing cultural expectations. As Mehra says we judge, we perceive and we perform. (27)

Mehra’s text intricately weaves together themes of sexuality, race, and gender, positioning them within the framework of the Indian socio-cultural context to reveal how intersecting identities are shaped, constrained, and contested. Socially acceptable modes of behavior are often sustained through the repeated performance of culturally sanctioned actions. In Mehra’s narrative, this performativity is deeply anchored in her Indian identity, which becomes central to how she navigates and negotiates societal expectations. The book intricately chronicles Nishta’s evolution from childhood- through young adulthood- to young adulthood enacting difficulties and complexities of being a "first-generation". In doing so, it critically interrogates the relentless tension between Nishta’s dual identities as both American and Indian, exposing the psychological fragmentation and cultural dissonance inherent in navigating these opposing roles. As readers confront the complexities of managing and performing dual roles, the narrative underscores how these identities are not simply negotiated internally, but are intrinsically tied to the relentless pursuit of social acceptability.

Mehra’s book is constitutes one of the finest specimen in what constitutes social acceptability. What constitutes social acceptability cannot just be reduced to sexuality alone; it encompasses a broader array of bodily features, all of which fall under the panoptic gaze of societal scrutiny. In this context, notions of beauty are not

only strictly defined but fiercely guarded, particularly when it comes to women, girls, and feminine bodies.

In Mehra's text, the bodies of the female, girl, and woman emerge as potent sites where societal norms of acceptance and rejection are enacted in negotiation for power and agency. Whether it pertains to hair, clothing, piercings, tattoos, body weight, or overall physical appearance, each of these markers is subjected to the rigorous mechanisms of social and cultural codification, where conformity to hegemonic ideals of beauty and propriety becomes a requisite for social legitimacy. As the book underscores, these physical markers are far from mere adornments; they function as powerful signifiers, their meanings shifting according to the sociocultural context in which they are placed. It is thus that while to her father's frame of reference, long and flowing hair signified beauty, compliance and social acceptability- in short a traditional Indian daughter, it also signified marriageability or not in a different context. Values are intricately tied to appearance, positioning the body as a form of cultural capital that is continually negotiated at the shifting threshold between social acceptance and rejection. Mehra's text presents numerous instances illustrating how seemingly positive attributes—such as a person's unique background or distinctive personality—can swiftly be reframed as markers of difference, leading to subtle forms of exclusion. Within the broader project of “othering”, food habits, musical expressions, sartorial practices and every cultural marker achieve distinct hierarchies, functioning as markers of difference that reinforce exclusionary cultural norms and sustain systems of marginalization. In this context, the clay angels displayed in the cafeteria—figures that Nishta notes are overwhelmingly white—operate as yet another cultural marker that enforces such hierarchical distinctions. Their uniform whiteness recalls Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), where Pecola's longing for blonde hair and blue eyes exposes how aesthetic standards anchored in whiteness become naturalized as symbols of beauty, purity, and superiority. Both instances illustrate how seemingly benign cultural artifacts participate in broader processes of othering by normalizing whiteness and marginalizing all that falls outside its frame.

The pathologization of difference operates as a fundamental and insidious mechanism through which power consolidates and perpetuates its dominance across social, cultural, and institutional structures, transforming deviation from normative standards—be it in terms of race, gender, sexuality, ability, or appearance—into a site of suspicion, control, and marginalization. As readers come to terms with these truths, they are compelled to reassess the experiences of Asian-American immigrants, as vividly illustrated in Mehra's own journey.

Mehra's narrative operates on multiple critical registers: on one hand, it exposes the politics of pathologizing difference, and on the other, she draws our attention to the unexamined privilege that whiteness occupies within the American culturalscape. In questioning white privileges, Mehra's text unveils the ideological narrowness of American cultural frameworks while simultaneously illuminating the existential and performative struggles non-white individuals face in negotiating identity within those frameworks. Mehra's own life becomes a site through which the complexities of immigrant subjectivity are foregrounded, revealing how the internalization of white ideals produces psychological tension and cultural dislocation. This critique is powerfully encapsulated in the image of the white clay angels displayed in the school cafeteria, as referenced by Nishta. Far from being innocuous decorations, these figures symbolize the pervasive dominance of white aesthetic standards and the emotional and social costs they impose on those who do not align with them. As Mehra's readers confront these layered critiques, they begin to question constricting cultural framework that alienates and disempower those who do not conform to its narrow parameters.

At the heart of the politics of visibility/invisibility lies the issue of representation—of who is seen, how they are portrayed, and who remains obscured or erased within dominant cultural narratives. Representation constitutes what Richard Harvey Brown calls “coherent gestalt” (659) Coherent gestalt refers to a set of elements selected and assembled for consumption by the public/readers. The intricate interplay between cultural representation and ideological domination or the ideological thrusts in representation and their relationship to the politics of

visibility/invisibility is known to us. Truth and representation are discursively enacted over different mediums to create a system of hierarchy. This hierarchy is not only a system of signification, but also a structure of domination (Kress 1979). Through diverse representations in media literature, culture, these come to be naturalized and made to appear as unquestionably authentic and absolute truths. Brown writes that “notions of cultural difference readily become systems of judgment and coercion by which one group marks off and dominates others.” (660) Cultural differences within and across societies and civilizations have been a constant throughout history; the problem emerges, however, when these differences are systematized into fixed categories and hierarchies. Representation, as Brown argues, has practical application of legitimized domination. It is in this that “Cultural difference becomes political deviance, and cultural representation becomes ideological legitimation.” (Brown 661) Mehra’s own body, together with Shiv, becomes a lens for us to see what misrepresentations can and cannot accomplish. In Mehra, the issue of mis/representation receive a personal/historical narrative.

An important thematic interest in the politics of representation is the issue of commonalities- —how shared experiences or identities are constructed, emphasized, or erased within representational frameworks to either forge solidarity or mask difference. Commonalities, as conventional approach to representation, typically “emphasized sameness, focused on what we had in common, and refused to speak about—or even acknowledge—anything that was different.” (Mehra, 14) “There are many techniques for creating/representing the other, but in all of them the people to be othered are homogenized into a collective they...” (Brown, 662) This approach, while seemingly inclusive, often imposes limitations by reducing the richness and complexity of diverse experiences to mere shared traits and experiences. The inclination to emphasize and prioritize commonalities/sameness while simultaneously criminalizing differences and avoiding discussions about cultural biases about gender, sex and racism (in their intersections) is a significant feature in American cultural fabric. Such reductionism can exacerbate identity crises for those whose experiences do not conform to the dominant narrative, as their unique perspectives may be overlooked or invalidated. Furthermore, this emphasis on

commonalities can be understood as a power play, as it reinforces existing structures of dominance and marginalization. By privileging certain shared traits or experiences over others, those in positions of power maintain control over the narrative and perpetuate hierarchies that exclude or marginalize voices that deviate from the norm.

Immigrant children like Mehra are often at a crossroad caught between their Indian-American heritage and their American upbringing. The dynamic fusion of cultural elements, values, and expectations results in what Bhava calls a culture in “hybridity”. Nevertheless, within this culture of hybridity, it is the commonness in gendered and sexual discourse that is pushed forward. Mehra critically examines this phenomenon. *Brown White Black* problematizes tropes like “just like everyone else”, “born this way” and *Hath not a Queer eyes? If you prick us, do we not bleed?* (34) predicated on sameness and finds these strategic insistence limiting and inhibiting, emphasizing that what the LGBTQ at best gets is pity, not real positive gains. It argues that the emphasis on sameness has lessened the ability of people to tolerate difference. Observing that such tropes limit their (LGBTQ) meaningful existence, their right to be the way they are and live the life that they choose for themselves, the narrative pits ‘pity’ against ‘choice’. It pitches aggression against meekly existence, refusing to be judged on the basis of someone else’s default standard and challenging the compulsive panoptical heterosexual eyes of the hostile majority. On the contrary, the text urges to move beyond the superficial veneer of polite acceptance and instead engage with the structural and affective dimensions of alterity, in the spirit of genuine recognition and respect. Indeed, the recognition and respect for difference emerges as a central thematic preoccupation within the text, not merely as a call for diversity in representation, but as a deeper philosophical and political engagement with alterity.

Media and particularly films have emerged as significant instrument in ‘commonalizing’ identities. Medias, especially films, often cater to the dominant white homosexual audience. Such preferences, cast in positive terms, are constructed as universal category. Consequently, unique characteristics that define non-white gender and sexual conducts like those of Mehra and Shiv are too often criminalized

and framed as Un-American. Their experiences are marginalized and they end up invisible to the vast score of people glued to the television. Consequently, a huge section of the US population grows up believing in certain identities while despising others.

Omission constitutes an important ideological tool of representation. Omission, as a method of representation, operates not merely through what is said or shown, but more significantly through what is left unsaid or unseen. This absence is not neutral; it is an active ideological practice that shapes meaning by regulating visibility, access, and power. Mehra examines patterns of omissions as method of representation. Within the American sexual landscape, representations and discourses surrounding same-sex desire, particularly among women, are conspicuously absent or marginalized, reflecting a broader cultural tendency to erase or silence female homoeroticism. This erasure becomes particularly pronounced in the context of non-white lesbian sexuality, which is doubly marginalized by the confluence of racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies. Mehra's search for cultural icons and models of gendered, sexual, and racial deviation in films, magazines, and television highlights a profound disillusionment with the limited and often distorted representations available to her. In her quest to find figures that resonate with her own experiences and identity, she encounters a glaring absence of authentic and multifaceted portrayals. Instead, she is confronted with narrow, stereotypical depictions that fail to capture the complexity and breadth of her own lived reality. It may be inferred that within the intersectional matrix, the erasure of non-white lesbian sexuality is not a mere absence of representation, but a deliberate mechanism of marginalization, which seeks to delegitimize and disempower these identities within the broader framework of hegemonic norms. Mehra's frustration in the lack of models for people like herself is expressed in the following words:

There were no modes of representation other than the ones I created for myself, pieces I would collage from the broader culture and rework to make them fit. There were no Indians anywhere—not in books, on TV, or in magazines. (5)

Representations are either negative, antiquated and limiting or they do not exist at all. The above cited words are an apt reflection on the politics of silence and invisibility. It is important to note here that Mehta's search for Indian cultural icons in particular and Asian in general and their lack thereof is but a reflection of a larger phenomenon that applies equally to other similar groups. Similarly, the idea that "I'd never even heard of other brown people who weren't straight" (60) further serves as a poignant testament to the speaker's historical absence of exposure to, or engagement with, individuals of South Asian descent who identify outside of heterosexual norms. Without a clear frame of reference or established standards to guide them, individuals positioned at intersecting axes of identity are often left to navigate and define their own sense of self, carving out their own path in the absence of external guidance or representation.

If media and cultural spaces engage in the politics of omission—silencing certain identities—they simultaneously wield commission as a tool of power, actively shaping narratives to reinforce dominant ideologies and marginalize dissenting or non-normative voices. Media and television frequently exaggerate and distort representations of non-white, non-heteronormative, immigrant, and Black individuals, rendering them especially vulnerable to persistent stereotyping and systemic misrepresentation that reinforces existing power structures and cultural biases. In writing how 'others' are homogenized into a collective they, Brown writes that the 'other' "is distilled even further into an iconic he...or she...The features of the other are represented as fixed and unchangeable, an endlessly repeated element in a given natural order of differences. (662) By shaping narratives and reinforcing societal norms, media subtly guides cultural perceptions, contributing to the reinforcement or challenging of existing biases and stereotypes. The narratorial voice in Mehra's text critically examines the lack of accurate representation and role models for non-white sexuality, particularly non-white lesbian sexuality, in medias/films in the United States. Mehra writes that the "limited representations to which I had access" (130) is mired in biases and stereotypes. Elsewhere she adds: "There were no Indian cultural icons to speak of and barely any Asian ones; what did exist landed firmly in the category of stereotype." (5) Consequently, individuals like

Mehra find themselves being othered and perpetually standing out. The confinement of representation within narrow boundaries not only limits the richness and complexity of diverse narratives but also perpetuates a cycle of stereotyping and othering. The act of 'othering' not only alienates them from the broader cultural narrative but also reinforces a sense of being anomalous within a societal context. Consequently, Mehra is critical of this media landscape that disproportionately amplifies and prioritizes certain identities, while systematically neglecting others.

The Mehra family stands as a poignant illustration in intersecting identities of race, gender and sexuality. The Mehra family's collective identity is forged from a rich tapestry of diversity, encompassing varied expressions of gender, sexuality, and racial backgrounds. It toys with the idea of diversity and multiplicity away from conventional notions of what constitutes family. And yet representations like the Mehra family are notably absent from mainstream media, television, magazines, literature, and other cultural genres. The conspicuous absence of portrayals akin to the Mehra family within mainstream media and cultural spheres underscores a profound deficiency and significant in the realm of full and proper representation comprehensive representation. This absence not only signifies a failure to depict the full spectrum of familial diversity but also implies a tacit endorsement of a limited and exclusive understanding of what constitutes a legitimate family unit. In relegating families like the Mehra, which embrace and celebrate diversity in all its forms to the periphery of visibility, mainstream media and other cultural mediums inadvertently reinforces and perpetuates the notion that only certain types of families are worthy of visibility and validation. Notably, this dearth/absence of diverse family representations in media and cultural narratives contributes to a cycle of ignorance and misunderstanding about the true nature of family structures. It reinforces narrow definitions of what constitutes a 'normal' or 'acceptable' family, thereby marginalizing those whose experiences diverge from these narrow standards.

Strikingly, *Brown White Black* illuminates the model minority myth as a quintessential manifestation of representational politics wherein the simultaneous acts of omission and commission coalesce to produce a deceptively affirmative yet

deeply constraining narrative. The "model minority" stereotype, often applied to Asian-Americans, is a deceptively flattering yet deeply problematic construct that masks structural inequality and reinforces racial, gendered and sexual hierarchies. At its core, this stereotype portrays Asian-Americans as uniformly successful, industrious, law-abiding, and academically exceptional. While the notion of the "model minority" at first glance seems to possess a positive connotation, it is fraught with ideological complexity and subtle coercion. It imposes an unrelenting pressure to conform to rigid, stereotypical expectations of success, obedience to home culture, and simultaneously and very paradoxically cultural assimilation. For Asian-American women who are also sexually "deviant"—that is, who diverge from heteronormative expectations—the burden of the model minority stereotype becomes doubly oppressive. They are caught in a double bind: expected to uphold cultural values rooted in patriarchal norms while also assimilating into a dominant white culture that exoticizes, fetishizes, or erases their identities altogether. Consequently, they are frequently circumscribed by intersecting regimes of cultural expectation and social surveillance, rendering them unable to fully inhabit or express the intricacies of their individual identities—especially in relation to non-normative gender expressions and queer sexual desires. Their subjectivities are often fragmented, caught between the imperatives of racial respectability and the silencing demands of heteropatriarchal norms, leaving little discursive or affective space for articulating experiences that resist or exceed dominant paradigms of identity and belonging. The idea of model minority is a source of constant tension in *Brown White Black*.

Mehra illustrates through her own example how restrictive framework of model minority stereotype situates her in a unique position of conformity and success on the one hand and the natural impulse of alternate desire on the other hand. Mehra is expected to uphold a veneer of excellence and respectability and this leaves little room for her to be true to her original self (read: her lesbian self). Caught between these conflicting imperatives, Mehra occupies a liminal space where her subjectivity is both hyper-visible and constrained, revealing how the model minority discourse functions as a mechanism of cultural and gendered regulation.

All stereotypes, positive or negative, invariably leads to power or the exercise of it. Stereotypes, irrespective of whether they carry positive or negative connotations, function as powerful mechanisms that shape social dynamics and reinforce existing power structures. Far from being innocuous, they operate as instruments of control, enabling the exercise and maintenance of power over individuals and groups through reductive and often prescriptive representations. The non-performance of the model minority myth, particularly in relation to gender and sexual expression—as exemplified through Mehra and emblematic of broader Asian American experiences—emerges as a potent instrument of ideological control wielded by heteronormative structures. Mehra’s racialized body positions her as an easy target of social and ideological correction and of being “othered”.

If *Brown White Black* looks at how brown and black skin is marginalized in the gendered, sexual and racial scape, then Mehra’s text simultaneously looks at how white skin receives a privileged position in the racial, gender and sexual landscape of US. In the U.S., white skin operates as the unquestioned baseline of what is normal, relatable, and neutral. White skin is not just a color—it functions as cultural capital. If non-white skin triggers cultural scripts of risk, foreignness and disposability, white skin functions as a signifier of ease, legitimacy, and unearned authority. Because American institutions are built to reflect dominant cultural assumptions, they often reproduce the skin-tone hierarchy automatically in different areas of life. Mehra mobilizes Jill’s racial privilege in contrast to her own marked skin, illustrating how whiteness mediates gendered and sexual dynamics within the texture of everyday life. Jill, within the text, is not just protected in the colour of her white skin but also in her sexuality. Jill’s whiteness provides her with a form of unspoken entitlement, allowing her to navigate gendered and sexual norms with greater freedom and lesser scrutiny. In contrast, Mehra’s racialized identity subjects her to a constant process of negotiation, where her gender and sexual expressions are fraught with the added weight of racial prejudice and cultural expectations. Mehra draws a cultural parallel to this and writes “When white kids defy gender norms, they are certainly vulnerable but still protected by their white privilege.” (146) The white skin is not just privileged in skin but also in gender and sexual identities. Conversely, Mehra and

Shiv feel “othered” not in the colour of their skin but also in their performance of gender and sexuality.

Representation is central to understanding how racialized hierarchies of skin are produced and sustained. When cultural, political, and aesthetic spaces overwhelmingly center whiteness—visually, narratively, and symbolically—they reinforce the idea that white bodies and white experiences are the normative ground from which all meaning is derived. Representation, therefore, is central to the exercise of power, carrying with it far-reaching and often insidious consequences. For individuals like Mehra and Shiv, the repercussions are not merely personal but deeply social, as they are ensnared in a tangled matrix of silence, stereotyping, hyper-visibility, and constant surveillance, each element compounding the others in a relentless cycle. Perhaps the most troubling aspect of this dynamic is the way these imposed representations sink inward and become part of how people come to see themselves. With such influences, characters like Nishta and Shiv are led into equating white skin with ‘beauty’ and into believing that black or brown is, if not outright ugly, at least undesirable. Such a narrative not only shapes their sense of fashion but also their racial perspective, their capacity for relationships and when they grow with these ‘acquired’ values, the damage is not just to be discerned in them alone but entire generations thereafter. Mehra’s own internalization of these stereotypes helps us to understand the fraught experience in which the Asian-Americans conduct their identity.

Institutional and structural networks which is at the crux of Foucauldian criticism is a major subject of interrogation in *Brown White Black*. Mehra examines different institutions like family, pedagogy, government etc in marginalization of Asian-American deviant bodies in an intersectional dynamic. Through a critical examination of these institutions, the text illuminates the ways in which these institutions grant selective visibility to certain identities, while simultaneously criminalizing or rendering others invisible. It exposes the underlying mechanisms by which power structures not only highlight and validate specific ways of being, but

also suppress, distort, or marginalize those who do not conform to the dominant ideals.

Institutional and structural networks which is at the crux of Foucauldian criticism is a major subject of interrogation in Mehra. *Brown White Black* takes a notable departure from *Loving Her* in its interrogation of institutional and structural networks. *Brown White Black* examines different institutions like family, pedagogy, government etc in marginalization of Asian-American deviant bodies in an intersectional dynamic. Through a critical examination of these institutions, the text illuminates the ways in which these institutions grant selective visibility to certain identities, while simultaneously criminalizing or rendering others invisible. It exposes the underlying mechanisms by which power structures not only highlight and validate specific ways of being, but also suppress, distort, or marginalize those who do not conform to the dominant ideals.

Pedagogy emerges as a crucial focal point of institutional critique in Mehra. Mehra is critical of how schools continue to function as remnants of entrenched, traditional ideas about race, gender, and sexuality. Educational institutions, in this context, serve as powerful illustrations of the politics of visibility, reinforcing societal norms and selectively acknowledging certain identities while marginalizing others. For Mehra, institutional critique is not merely a theoretical imperative but a necessary political intervention, especially when institutions collude through intersecting structures of race, gender, and sexuality to produce and normalize multilayered forms of oppression. Mehra's narrative reveals how the structures of schooling- the curriculum, teacher expectations, classroom interactions, and even peer dynamics- subtly yet persistently center whiteness, cis-heteronormativity, and patriarchal structures as the default, rendering any deviation from these norms as aberrant or deficient. The text weaves together personal anecdotes and critical observations to theorize how pedagogy deliberately prioritizes certain desires while compartmentalizing others. Mehra's anecdotal stories at schools involving but not limited to committees and functions are a grim reminder of what Foucault calls the

education of children in sexuality. The text looks at how educational institutes are warned against taking it 'too much' or "too far":

That's always the message: You can be gay as long as you aren't *too* gay. Or you can be gay in private. We'll let you stay if you live a compartmentalized life; keep the freaky stuff where we can't see it. (36)

Choosing to be a gay comes with unspoken caveat: to be within limits where none can "see it". (Mehra 36) The underlying message of conditional acceptance/conditional restriction forms the core of identity politics. The conditional acceptance/conditional restrictions implies an implicit demand for a compartmentalized life, reinforcing the idea that expressions of one's identity are only permissible if they remain discreet and conform to established societal norms. The above cited lines also constitute a poignant commentary on the dichotomy between superficial tolerance and genuine acceptance. This thematic interest gains a sense of urgency in Shiv, who is at the centre of intersection. In Shiv, schools not only emerge as residues/repositories of racial prejudices that caters to white skin, but also fixed notions of gender and sexuality. Shiv's sartorial choices, combined with his skin color, becomes a determining factor in how he is perceived and assessed when he reaches preschool age, shaping decisions about his admission and revealing the early onset of bias within educational spaces.

Brown White Black offers a critical examination of how the politics of visibility functions within the framework of the institution of family. Mehra's book offers a Foucauldian criticism of family/home for what she believes it to be pushing a compulsory heterosexual agenda. The Indian immigrant family, the idea of model minority and its construction of what constitutes 'success' becomes a site through which the text meticulously probes the politics of in/visibility. Mehra situates home with its traditional culture as a source of tension: She writes "I didn't seek out representation in traditional Indian culture because it felt even more foreign to me than the white American culture I wanted so desperately to see myself in." (7) Mehra's strict upbringing within heterosexual framework, her journey through being a young adult in a straight India-American family, the Indian-American construction

of success and her own evolving sense of self becomes a microcosm through which the text explores the complexities of post-modern identity construction. Not only is Mehra, as a child, groomed in the heterosexual ways of behaving and performing, she continues to face resistance as a growing up young adult. 'Straight' sexuality in such homes are constructed in terms of 'value' and homosexuality in terms of disappointment and shame: Homosexual desires in Mehra become parental disappointment and shame. The Indian-American's version of success modeled in terms of heterosexual marriage and kids amongst other things finds a parallel in white America's version of success weaved around straight, wealthy white people. (130) Concessions in other areas of life is always accompanied by "limits" in areas of gendered performance and sexual desires. Alternate desires in Mehra is cast in terms of "as a phase", "an American thing", and "first-generation rebellion gone extreme." (47) Mehra's dad's first reaction manifested in his request for "a serious talk" (49) and his earnest desire that she would "make a different choice" (143), that should eventually marry and beget children is emblematic of the attitude towards same-sex desires in Asian-American homes. Similarly, his desperate attempts to fix her through emotional indictments even at his death-bed and her mother's own concern about homosexuality implying shame or wrongness are reminiscent of how children are raised to be straight in traditional Indian-American home. Mehra's strained relationship with her father is archetypal and emblematic of what visibility or non-visibility may be turned against alternate sexualities. Together with all these, the text constantly draws the attention of the readers to the binary in which heterosexuality and homosexuality is constructed.

Mehra incorporates the politics of visibility into the legal discourse, intricately examining how the interplay between legal frameworks and compulsory heterosexuality shapes the quest for recognition. The intersection of the institution of marriage and legal considerations has emerged as a central focus in discussions regarding matters of legitimacy and illegitimacy. Marriage has become central to the agenda of the same-sex rights movement over the past few decades and with it the legal contestation over same sex. Cary Franklin writes that "For much of the twentieth century, stereotyped conceptions of homosexuals as enemies of the family,

sexually predatory, and dangerous to children (both physically and psychologically) formed the basis of a social status regime...” (824) Such a perspective eventually permeated legal discourses, influencing the way legal frameworks were addressed and framed issues related to same-sex relationships.

Marriage has been conceptualized as an important institution and a crucial foundation in ensuring a robust and stable family structures; a robust and stable family is synonymous for heterosexual family. Legal safeguard is construed in terms of reaffirmation of this robust and stable foundation. In this, legal safeguards work to secure rights and privileges of heterosexual couples, thereby shaping the broader cultural understanding of what constitutes a stable family unit. Mehra is critical of this. The text situates legal impediments to marriage (read: homosexual marriage) in terms of institutional excesses and entrenched bias, seeing them in a broader legal and historical context and treating them not in isolation but part of a network or system that have deprived same-sex couples of equal citizenship. Mehra interrogates the institution of marriage within legal frameworks to articulate a compelling argument on the politics of discrimination, silence, and invisibility. The text sees marriage as a major enabler of hetero-normativity wielding significant power in conferring legitimacy to desires, bodies and identities. Mehra not just theorizes marriage as an institution that selectively pushes a certain sexual discourse, but it also historicizes its evolution in the scheme of things. Mehra’s book shows familiarity with historical events such as the Obergefell v/s Hodges case: she calls the event “sweeter than we thought.” (40) It is noteworthy that the Obergefell v/s Hodges case in the 2015 marked a significant turning point in the legal fight of the homosexuals for legal recognition of their sexual orientation. Through it the narrative looks at the legal side of the debate but it also gives personal touch to the narrative. Mehra’s marriage to Jill in the wake of the landmark Obergefell v/s Hodges case marks a significant emotional culmination in the narrative.

Within this legal discourse, the text weaves issues of adoption and motherhood, illustrating how institutional frameworks selectively confer visibility upon certain ‘motherly’ identities while simultaneously silencing and marginalizing

others. Legal institutions, such as those governing marriage, wield significant influence in determining which bodies are deemed eligible for adoption, thereby shaping the landscape of parenthood. In locales where legal recognition of marriage is withheld from same-sex couples, it becomes a difficult task performing motherhood: the institution of marriage and its legal character acts as an impediment in adoption. Mehra delicately unveils Shiv's adoption journey, inviting readers to understand the nuances of adoption for same-sex/inter-racial couples. The fact that Mehra is brown and Jill is white makes the entire adoption process problematic. It marks a moment in the text where race and sexuality coincide to produce a new dynamic. Nishta and Jill's personal experiences with adopting Shiv epitomize the systemic hurdles and biases entrenched within adoption processes, elucidating the multifaceted dimensions of regulatory control over parenthood and of the intersection between race and sexuality. Furthermore, Mehra's interrogation of institution registries that oversimplify relationships to the binary of husband and wife exposes the inherent politics of visibility and invisibility. By relegating non-heteronormative relationships to the margins or omitting them altogether, these registries perpetuate the invisibility of LGBTQ+ individuals and their relationships within societal structures. Such reduction, the text notes, ends up 'othering' the homosexuals with an implicit message that "you are not like everybody else". (Mehra 34)

Brown White Black interrogates and challenges constructs of gender performativity and gender division epitomized in "ideal man" and the "ideal woman," (113). Mehra spends a significant section of the text examining and problematizing standards that defines "what a girl looks like" and "what a boy looks like." (112) She meticulously dissects these constructs, exposing the intricate web of norms and expectations that dictate what is deemed acceptable in terms of gender expression through an interrogation of clothes, shoes and other accessories. Clothes, shoes and other accessories are not just a statement of fashion but constitute strong political statements in identity. Peter Corrigan in *The Dressed Society: Clothing, the Body and Some Meanings of the World* notes that "clothing can be looked upon in

terms of its brute concrete reality or as an element in some greater conceptual scheme transcending its mere materiality” (1)

Not only are the two sexes dressed differently, but within each of these categories the individual switches clothing frequently according to age and social condition, for the particularities of clothing indicate all the circumstances and positions of the members of society. Childhood and youth, the ages of puberty and majority, the condition of being married, single, widowed or remarried, the different professions and various functions – everything is indicated by clothing. Everyone sharing the same social condition wears the same uniform; but thousands of different uniforms match thousands of different conditions. (qtd. in Corrigan 18-19)

Clothing serves as a significant identity marker, enabling individuals to project their desired image to the external world and assert their identities. It functions as a tool for visibility, allowing individuals to assert their identities and communicate their chosen image to the world outside. But clothes also become enmeshed in stereotypes and often lead to marginalization. In the light of mismatch between her official ‘gender’ role and her authentic desires, Mehra uses clothes as a political statement to articulate her authentic self. While Mehra sees clothing as a means of empowerment, there's recognition that, more often than not, clothing reinforces gender stereotypes and binary modes of thinking. In that sense, it becomes a problematic category. Mehra sees clothing as an issue in social situations and problematize it thus: “People see a dress and automatically decide “girl,” even when he’s displaying no other recognizable attributes of femaleness.” (145) This discussion on clothes and the politics of visibility finds a greater relevance in Shiv. Shiv's wardrobe choices spark important conversations on identity, choices, subjectivity and resistance. Mehra situates Shiv in a direct challenge to traditional clothing norms. In positing Shiv through girl's dress, Mehra seeks to address the question of fluidity and subjectivity of gender. Shiv's choice of clothing becomes a deliberate and political statement against rigid categorization of gender roles. However, Shiv's wardrobe choices and the visibility that it brings become a

problematic category in that it attracts unwanted attention and scrutiny. Very often, this translates into a problematic category in spaces that enforce rigid gender roles.

What constitutes social acceptability is not reduced to clothes alone. Social acceptability extends far beyond sartorial choices, encompassing a panoptic scrutiny of the body in its entirety. The text illustrates how a constellation of traits—“lack of makeup, almost exclusive preference for pants, familiarity with tools, cars, motorcycles, and construction” (50)—automatically translates a certain Rebecca into a lesbian to the observing gaze. In this framework, bodily comportment, mannerisms, and affinities become sites through which social norms are enforced, producing categories of identity that are as performative as they are surveilled. The narration further underscores how hair operates as a site of social regulation, signaling both acceptance and censure: long, flowing hair is coded as a marker of beauty and marital desirability, whereas short hair is interpreted as a deviation, reflecting a perceived failure to cultivate a more “traditional” femininity (44). Whether it is hair or clothing or piercings or tattoos, or weight or the overall appearance, all of these must go through social and universal acceptance or risk unacceptability. These are not just ornaments, as the book text posits, but also serve as visible expressions of identity and self-expression, subject to societal scrutiny and judgment.

If *Brown White Black* looks at homosexual desires are silenced and marginalized, then the text is also an attempt to give visibility to same-sex desires, especially in the intersection between race, gender and sexuality. Performing both her (Mehra’s) brown skin i.e. her Indianness and as well as her queerness comes to define much of the discussion in the text. Similarly, Shiv who occupies so many different societal intersections gives a new meaning to the entire idea of intersectional studies. Shiv, we can argue, is at the centre of the intersections. His black identity, his brown and white parents, his homosexual parents, his multicultural upbringing, his own fluid gender and sexual identity amongst others, embodying a kaleidoscope of identities and experiences, speaks to a politics of acceptability.

Mehra employs innovative narratorial devices to advocate for gender and sexuality justice. For instance, the narration combines Christian gaiety with

Eastern/Indian/Hindu spirituality, where Durga and Mary are yoked together on personal equation to appeal to the divine feminine. This fusion of (tangible) reality and (ethereal) transcendental to evoke the image of divine feminine gives a powerful momentum to the overarching thematic agenda of the text. The book at times adopts a didactic narratorial voice working through allegories from children literary texts and gears the readers towards an understanding of Nishta's own compelling narrative about her personal life. The text also envisions a new vision of life, an ever-expanding definition of family, a dynamic way to construct gender, a novel way to understand sexuality. Home receives an all together different treatment in *Brown White Black*. The text alters the way we perceive about home, giving it a distinct modern character. It prompts readers to reconsider and redefine our traditional narrative entrenched in notions of father-mother and prompts contemplation on the evolving nature of familial structures in which individuals construct and experience the idea of home in diverse ways. Mehra's own family comprising people of different racial, ethnic, and sexual background becomes an embodiment of this new ways of thinking about home and family. Owning and reclaiming words like 'dyke' that Nishta adopts in course of her experience of being a queer also finds space in Nishta's discursivities.

An important development in the history of visibility of same-sex has been the pride parades. A Pride Parade may be understood as a public event celebrating LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and other non-heteronormative) identities, communities, and rights. A Pride Parade can be understood as both a cultural performance and a political act that asserts the visibility, legitimacy, and dignity of LGBTQ+ identities. Beyond the celebratory spectacle of music, banners, and costumes, Pride functions as a site where marginalized sexual and gender identities are publicly articulated, challenging heteronormative and cisnormative structures that historically render such identities invisible or delegitimized. In *Brown White Black* Memphis emerges as a vibrant hub for pride parades, nevertheless a site that Mehra avoids on her personal capacity. Nevertheless, in foregrounding these parades, Mehra creates a visible space of resistance and affirmation, where LGBTQ+ identities are not only celebrated but also

legitimated against the backdrop of societal marginalization. The parade becomes a lens through which broader dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, and performative identity can be explored, allowing readers to see how visibility itself is a form of agency and reclamation. To the message that “You can be gay as long as you aren’t too gay. Or you can be gay in private.” (Mehra 36), pride parades emerge as powerful platforms for individuals to boldly step out of the closet and assert their identities publicly and unapologetically.

Mehra writes that “...being brown is not something I can hide, nor is it something I have to declare. It simply is. Being queer has proved slightly more complicated.” (37) But as the book shows, it is the intersection of gender, sex and race that proves to be more consequential. This is aptly expressed in: “I was constantly being held up to different sets of standards but found lacking on both sides.” (63) In the intersection of gender, sex and race, the challenges are unique and manifold. Here, the politics of in/visibility become particularly pronounced, as individuals find themselves contending with intersecting systems of privilege and oppression that shape how they are seen and treated in society. The visibility of certain aspects of identity, such as race or gender, render individuals more vulnerable to discrimination and marginalization, while the invisibility of others, such as queerness or non-binary gender identities, leads to erasure and exclusion. Mehra’s book allows us to move beyond “the specific threats the world holds for black men and boys” (27) to understanding the intersectional dynamics in individuals like Shiv, who navigate the complexities of being both gay and black. Similarly, the text provides us an opportunity to move from specific lesbian threats to intersectional discrimination that lesbians like Mehra encounter with an immigrant and brown background. In this, the text confronts the politics of visibility as examined and interrogated above.

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CHAPTER IV

**‘Fragmented Entries, Multiple Selves’: Performing Asian-American in
*Restoried Selves and Slant***

The title of this chapter is located in parenthesis between Roland Coloma’s ‘Fragmented Entries, Multiple Selves’ and Butler’s theory of performance. Fragmented entries and multiple selves refer to the politics of classification and exclusion, to the complexities and multiplicities inherent in identity construction and experiences; the fragmented nature of personal narratives and the multifaceted dimensions inherent in the construction of identity adopt a performative function. This chapter critically explores queer politics among Asian-Americans, framing these dynamics through the intersecting lens of race. At the heart of the exploration lies the profound quest to understand how the Asian-Americans navigate the complexities and challenges that comes from the intersection of race, gender and sexuality. Asian-Americans traverse through a series of hegemonic norms within the US cultural milieu: in areas of language, food, the colour of skin, the accent, clothes and fashion, the social and cultural capital, amongst others. Amidst these challenges, Asian-Americans grapple with a myriad of issues including the quest for belonging, the conflicting societal norms, search for correct and full representation, shared struggles of resilience and the pursuit of visibility. This study will investigate these issues through an intersectional framework, emphasizing the complex entanglements of race, gender, and sexuality and how these interweave to shape experiences of marginalization, identity formation, and structural inequality. In our exploration of Asian-American queer politics, we will also interrogate such ideas as colonialism, hegemonic masculinity and how these relate to questions of race, gender and heterosexism. “While Asian American attainment defies theories of racial disadvantage, their experiences with xenophobia, racism, and anti-Asian violence vex theories of assimilation – pointing to an assimilation paradox.” (Lee 70) This chapter is also an attempt to understand this assimilation paradox among queer Asian-Americans in the US cultural canvas. The investigation into the dynamics of Asian-American sexual politics within the complex tapestry of US racial landscape remains inadequately addressed and is often overshadowed by either dominant racial

narratives or a disproportionate focus solely on sexuality. This study is, as such, an attempt to close that gap.

This chapter explores these complex and diverse experiences of queer Asian-Americans through a study of *Restoried Selves: Autobiographies of Queer Asian/Pacific Activists* (2004) and *Slant: A Novel* (2011). *Restoried Selves: Autobiographies of Queer Asian/Pacific Activists* (hereafter referred to as *Restoried Selves*) comprises of select queer autobiographies from Asia/Pacific Americans. The book is edited by Kevin K. Kumashiro. *Restoried Selves* provide invaluable insights into the struggles and triumphs of individuals navigating their identities within a complex web of intersecting social constructs. *Slant: A Novel* (*Slant* from hereafter) on the other hand is written in the form of a semi-fragmented college memoir and is Timothy Wang's debut novel. *Slant* addresses alienation by race and sexuality. This chapter investigates the ways in which these texts engage with and negotiate the complexities of racial, gender, and sexual identities.

In order to work out the theoretical part, this study shall draw on theorists like Michel Foucault, Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler. In addition, this study will incorporate the ideas of Frantz Fanon, Michel Omi and Howard Winant, Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said and Richard Jenkins. It will further draw on the scholarship of King-Kok Cheung, Sau-ling C. Wong and Jeffrey J. Santa Ana, David L. Eng, Alice Y. Hom, Elaine H. Kim, Rosalind S. Chou, Frank H. Wu and Russell Leong amongst others. Intersectionality research, as outlined by Kimberle Crenshaw, will be at the foundation of this study.

In the context of our study of Asian-American queer politics, it becomes imperative to ask such questions as: How do the political and personal identities of Asian-American queers emerge out of the intersection of gender, race and sexuality? How do traditional cultural norms and values within the Asian-American community influence perceptions and experiences of gender and sexuality? What unique challenges do Asian-American individuals face as they negotiate the simultaneous construction and expression of their racial, gendered, and sexual identities? How do hegemonic media representations and stereotypical cultural narratives shape and

constrain the intersectional lived experiences of Asian American individuals? How do issues of immigration, acculturation, and generational differences inform and complicate the negotiation of gender and sexual identities among Asian American individuals? What resources and support networks exist within the Asian-American diaspora to address intersecting and systematic marginalization? How activism and advocacy efforts have come to redefine politics of resistance in Asian-American intersectional paradigm? These pressing inquiries merit rigorous scholarly examination. Investigating these inquiries and finding answers to the questions will help us provide valuable insight into the current state of Asian-American queer discursivities.

At the nexus of race, gender and sexuality, queer Asian-Americans encounter a multitude of intricate challenges. Since at least the mid 1960s with legal reforms for immigration, Asian Americans have increasingly moved to the center of the discussion of race, ethnicity, gender and discrimination in the United States. But it wasn't until the mid 1990s that Asian-American authors tried to address the intricacies inherent in the intersections of identities. *Restoried Selves* was published in 2004 and forms part of America's burgeoning queer discourse in the tradition of intersectionality literature of the mid 1990s. *Restoried Selves* foregrounds the life of seventeen gay, bisexual, lesbian, transgender and transgender and self-identified queer Asian and Pacific American authors. These stories are partly autobiographical tales and partly critical rhetoric and discourses on gender and sexual orientations. These stories reflect on the complexities and challenges of identity formations/negotiation within the US cultural canvas. The writers of these autobiographies come from different nationalities, different classes, different professions, different ethnicities, different age-groups, different genders, and different races and together they are hyphenated with the American identity. The text, therefore, is motley of discourses highlighting the complex challenges in navigating queer Asian-American identity.

As an immigrant community, Asian-American queers constantly find themselves pulled apart by different forces operating within the US cultural milieu.

Caught between intersection of Queerphobia and Anti-Asian Sentiment, ethnic conservatism and cultural assimilation, queer Asian-Americans are often forced into a precarious existence, living as a minority within a minority. In one of the autobiographical sections of *Restoried Selves* Dang, the author of “You’re a What? An Activist??” writes: “It is not easy living as a minority within a minority.” (33) In a situation where “Asian-Americans have been historically situated in triangulated position in relation to the black-white binary” (Junn and Natalie 729), it becomes a complicated task to live the life of a queer. This unique construction of Asian-Americans between the blacks and the whites come to have strong ramifications for Asian-American gendered and sexual identity, especially for those that are situated at the periphery of such identities. Living as a minority within a minority presents a complex intersectionality of challenges and conflicts, of discrimination and marginalization, of exclusion and micro aggressions leading to situations of invisibility, alienation, or being misunderstood by different groups of which they are part of. The intersection of race, gender and sexuality constitutes a discourse of oppression. Dariotis writes that “they are oppressions that support each other.” (45).

In our discussion of *Restoried Selves*, it becomes imperative to clarify that that the inquiry doesn't revolve around determining whether race takes precedence over gender and sexuality, or vice versa. Instead, the central concern lies in examining how these categories of difference constantly play on each other. *Restoried Selves* throws interesting light on how these categories of difference i.e. racial identity and queer sexuality in Asian-Americans interconnect in mutually shaping and complicating ways. This idea is repeatedly delivered throughout the text. Nur-e-alam S. Chisty writes “Although I did try to construct my racial and sexual identities separately, I found it increasingly difficult to think about my sexuality without thinking about my race.” (9) Pabitra Benjamin echoes Chisty’s sentiment when she writes: “I think racism and homophobia are part of the same fight.” (3) Loren R. Javier articulates the intersection thus: “My life experiences have made me appreciate how sexism, homophobia, and forms of discrimination based on gender identity go hand in hand. I have also come to learn about important intersections of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.” (57) The narratives within the book

vividly illustrate the interconnectedness of these seemingly divergent experiences, how these are deeply intertwined and mutually constitutive. Personal accounts of mothers and fathers, of brothers and sisters, of neighbors and strangers, of institutions and structures within the author's narrative's unfolding demonstrate how racism and homophobia permeate everyday interactions and discourse.

In Asian-American literature, the challenge of compartmentalizing identities emerges as a central and pressing theme. Asian-Americans are often torn between situations where "racial and sexual identities were distinctly separated and purposely compartmentalized. (Coloma 27) and where "our abilities to recognize and address intersections" (Kumashiro xxii) is emphasized.

Can we really fight all of those things at the same time? Don't we need to concentrate our efforts on the thing we see most clearly—racism? Can't the gays and women just wait until we gain equality in terms of race first? We don't need the distraction, the division of our energies. (Dariotis 44)

The above quoted lines have been drawn from Dariotis's "On Becoming a Bi Bi Grrrl" in *Restoried Selves*. The quoted lines, presented in the form of a question, addressed to Dariotis from one of her students, delve into a fundamental inquiry within the realms of sexuality studies and identity studies and may well be asked by any of us, considering the subject matter of this study. It suggests that addressing multiple forms of oppression simultaneously may dilute efforts or detract from the urgency of combating specific issues. Such questions have been under scrutiny for many years now. While the idea of prioritizing one form of oppression over others may seem pragmatic, it ultimately undermines the principles of intersectionality and solidarity. Such a framework neglects the lived realities of those situated at the intersections—individuals whose experiences cannot be neatly compartmentalized into single-axis frameworks.

It is important that we further problematize this issue. Membership in specific social groups often imposes constraints, requiring individuals to prioritize one aspect of their identity over others, thereby necessitating abandonment or suppression of

certain facets of their being. *Restoried Selves* articulates this complexity, illustrating how Asian-Americans confront and negotiate their sense of self in situation where they are called upon to decide which membership to prioritize. Nur Chisty problematizes it thus: “I began questioning why I had to leave my queerness at the door upon entering any ASA meeting, and similarly, why I had to mask my color when engaging in a dialogue about and with LGBTQ people.” (11) Chisty's exploration of this complexity within her avatar as an Indian-American underscores the profound struggle many individuals face in reconciling their various identities. The idea that one must discard the other is rejected in favor of a communion where readers are invited to look at the connection between the two. Not only do these authors understand the complexities in which these two identities operate as separate and independent entities, they are also acutely aware of the intersecting framework in which these operate. Recollecting his own experience with such a situation Coloma writes that “In most cases, the agenda focused solely on race/ethnicity or on sexuality, depending on the organization, and often made no concrete correlation between the two.” (27) Coloma quotes Reginald Shepherd to ask certain important questions:

My feelings about men are too entangled with my feelings about white men, and my feelings about white men too entangled with my feelings about white people and about black people, especially black men. . . . How to determine how much is racial and how much is sexual when the two are so entwined that they are, in practice, identical? (qtd. in Coloma 9)

Coloma answers such a predicament with the following words:

My bold attempts to raise topics of sexuality among people of color or issues of racism in queer groups have been met with quizzical looks, blatant denial, or patronizing dismissal. Similar to my experience in my predominantly white fraternity, my identity as a person of color is relegated to secondary priority in the predominantly white lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender organizations. The same is true in communities of color in which the topic of

sexuality and nonheterosexual perspectives are hardly discussed. I search endlessly for ways to simultaneously address race and sexuality. (27)

The above quotes lines reflects the deeply entrenched structural silences and exclusions that queer people of color face within both queer and racialized communities. In queer organizations, whiteness remains the unspoken norm, reducing racial identity to an afterthought, while in communities of color, queerness is often silenced or dismissed. This dual exclusion forces individuals to fragment their identities, navigating spaces that demand either racial or sexual conformity. For Coloma, racial and sexual identities are two sides of the same coin and therefore any attempt to see them in separation not only distorts the lived realities of queer people of color but also reinforces the very systems of exclusion it seeks to critique.

Restoried Selves represents a discursive space wherein the authors enact an identity that defies reductive categorizations, embodying a subjectivity that refuses the fragmentation of their experiential reality. Wei Ming Dariotis, similarly, wrestles with the question of whether it is advantageous to explore sexuality through an intersectional perspective or to address and engage with them separately in course of the narrative in *Restoried Selves*. The authors of *Restoried Selves* do more than articulate the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality—they embody them through quotidian experience to reveal how these intersections actively shape and complicate their lived experiences. Complementing this approach is the concept of author-activists, who advocate action-oriented efforts aimed at dismantling intersecting oppressive discourses.

An important conversation that *Restoried Selves* brings in connection with race, gender and sexuality is the role of language in shaping identities. Language plays an important role in the construction and visibility of identities. “Language not only reflects who we are but in some sense it is who we are, and its use defines us both directly and indirectly.” (Llamas and Dominic 1) Linguistic construction of identities signals membership or exclusion, visibility or erasure, belonging or marginalization in specific social groups, such as nationality, ethnicity or religion. Jenkins writes that “Identification is something over which struggle take place and

with which stratagems are advanced- it is means and end in politics- and at stake is the classification of populations as well the classification of individuals.” (45) “Classification is rarely neutral and implies evaluation. To identify someone could be enough to decide how to treat her.” (6)

Restoried Selves raise some basic questions about language and linguistic constructions in the politics of identification and classification: “To what degree is language just language? When does speech become action?” (Dariotis 45) These are important questions that must be interrogated while we look at language and the complicate workings of race, gender and sexuality. Speech constitutes not just linguistic construction but performative acts with real-life consequences. “Classification is rarely neutral and implies evaluation. To identify someone could be enough to decide how to treat her.” (Jenkins 6) In that sense, language is a tool of judgment, as instrument in the assertion of superiority. *Restoried Selves* look at how Asian-Americans are received in binary paradigm: The pervasive presentation of race, gender and sexuality as binary categories such as white/black, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual, imposes a restrictive framework for Asian-Americans and offers minimal space for the expression of desires and identities. This binary paradigm constructed through oppositional terms not only erases the nuanced experiences of individuals but also perpetuates systems of power and privilege that benefit those who conform to the dominant categories. It reinforces hierarchies of race, gender, and sexuality, perpetuating discrimination and marginalization against those who fall outside the binary norms. *Restoried Selves* registers these binaries in the following terms: “Straight is good.” “Gay is bad.” “Out is good.” “Closeted is bad.” “Asian is good.” “White is bad.” (Collins 15) And as Collins notes “Different social and cultural dynamics were at work determining what is good and what is bad and compelling us to abide by these ideas.” (15)

Queer in Asian-Americans are often constructed in terms of unnatural, as aberrant and sinful. The social stigma and shame attached to queer often leads to a situation of marginalization and invisibility. In early part of the text, Kumashiro engages these issues thus:

Some stories define same-sex attraction as unnatural, and gender deviation as a problem to be fixed. Some classify nonhetero sex acts as crimes to be persecuted or, at least, sins to be pitied. Some depict queer people as ill, as contagious, and as recruiters, corrupters, or molesters of youth who, free from such exposure, would otherwise grow up heterosexual. Furthermore, some stories suggest that society would be better off if the queers were silenced, excluded, beaten down, and even eliminated.” (Kumashiro xx)

The quoted lines catalogs the ways in which literature and cultural narratives pathologize and criminalize queer identities. Such constructions, as has been noted, harps on binary division with heterosexuality. “Queer people, in this schema, destroy the community because they break up the stability of the man-woman unit.” (Dariotis 44) The stories in *Restoried Selves* question epistemological violence created through binary divisions. Homosexuality, in Asian-Americans, in that sense become a dystopia that meets continuous linguistic scrutiny along with rituals of hatred and violence, all geared towards setting the normative agenda of conformity.

At the intersection of race, gender and sexuality is the question of representation. The politics of representation involves the contested process through which meanings are assigned to images and portrayals within a particular cultural context. It encompasses the processes through which narratives, images, symbols, and discourses are constructed, circulated, and interpreted within social, cultural, and political contexts. The politics of representation is rooted in the idea that “all artistic expression is a political act” (Hinz iv)

The construction of Asian-Americans is ensnared in a web of misrepresentations. These representations are not monolithic but rather diverse and nuanced. To mimic Foucault, we are dealing less with a discourse on representation- in considering the dimensions of sexuality about Asian-American communities – and more with a multiplicity of representations produced at different periods in time, discourses that are products of different circumstances. What binds these different discourses is the misrepresentation therewith. In fact, the history of Asian-American queer community is the history of misrepresentations and stereotypes. *Restoried*

Selves questions it thus: “There are a select number of sexual and ethnic representations out there but are they accurate?” (Thompson, 114) The accuracy of representations is a major concern for the authors of *Restoried Selves*. Javier dives into the particularities of these representations and writes:

The exotic Asian is consistently presented to them in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender media. Although there has been some improvement, many of the images I see of Asians and Asian Americans in LGBT media are still those that are sexualized or those that are stereotyped as passive, quiet, and foreign. (56)

Asian-Americans originate from diverse nations, each with distinct histories, cultural frameworks, and sexual mores that often differ significantly from those in the United States. Within these countries of origin, there exists no monolithic experience; instead, gender oppression and homophobia manifest in varied and complex ways shaped by local traditions, colonial legacies, religious ideologies, and socio-political contexts. However, Western constructions of Asian-American sexuality often erase these intricate cultural and national distinctions, instead collapsing diverse experiences into homogenized and reductive tropes perpetuating misrepresentations across different mediums such as theatres and films, popular culture and literature, cyber space and even pornography. Such misrepresentations not only erase the complexities of Asian-American identities but also reinforce power dynamics that prioritize western perspectives and marginalize Asian-American queer narratives.

One such misrepresentation constitutes the exoticization and eroticization of Asian-American bodies. *Restoried Selves* critically examines the exoticization and eroticization of the Asian-American body. Consider the fetishization and exoticization of Chinese-Americans, Japanese-Americans and Thai-Americans as Javier notes:

I remember sitting at a table with white acquaintances who started making comments about an Asian American man who entered the coffeehouse in

which we were sitting. First came the comments of the exoticized Asian, likening him to a “China doll” or “geisha.” Then came some stories of knowing people who’ve had a wonderful time exploiting sex workers in Thailand. Better yet, the comments about how they would like to “get some of that rice” made me feel as if they were bartering a commodity. (56)

Oriental bodies are frequently constructed as exotic playgrounds for Western desires and gazes, existing primarily as objects to be consumed and fetishized. Terms like ‘China doll’ or ‘geisha’ evoke orientalist fantasies and reduce the complexity of Asian identities to simplistic, sexualized caricatures. The reference to Thailand makes for an interesting case study. As Rosalind Morris observes, “Few nations have been so thoroughly subject to Orientalist fantasies as has Thailand. Famed for its exquisite...pleasures of commodified flesh, the Thailand of tourist propaganda and travelogues is a veritable bordello of the Western erotic imaginary.” (15) Such simplistic, sexualized objectification reflects a disturbing normalization of exploitation, a disturbing intersectionality of racism, sexism, imperialism and a disturbing culture of othering and marginalization. It is of interest to note here that sexualization and exoticization of various ethnic groups/ Asian-American bodies often disregards ethnic distinctions, indiscriminately portraying individuals with a broad stroke and erasing the nuanced diversity that characterizes Asian-American living. It is in this that ‘China doll’ (of Chinese origin), ‘geisha’ (of Japanese origin) and Thai sex-workers are clubbed together to present one single narrative of Asian-Americans as exotic, submissive and de-sexualized stereotypes.

The sexualization, exoticization and emasculation of Asian-Americans are rooted in orientalist discourse; in other words, orientalism is at the root of Asian sexualization, exoticization and emasculation. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) throws interesting lights on how Western societies have historically constructed and represented the ‘Orient’ as mysterious, exotic, feminine and inferior ‘Other’. Said writes that “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.” (1) In this orientalist frame, East has been built in a binary

with west: west represented virility, masculinity and manhood, while East was constructed as effeminate, weak, and submissive. Said contends that Orientalist discourse of effeminacy, weakness, and submission perpetuates stereotypes that undermine masculinity and agency, effectively diminishing the worth of oriental men. In his examination of early European writings about the Orient, Joseph Boone interrogates how Western men's fascination with the Near and Middle East extends beyond academic or exploratory to eroticization and exoticization, to the binary politics of hetero west/homoerotic east west. As Boone puts it:

For many western men the act of exploring, writing about, and theorizing an eroticized Near and Middle East is coterminous with unlocking a Pandora's box of phantasmic, homoerotic desire, desire whose propensity to spread without check threatens to contaminate, indeed to reorient, the heterosexual "essence" of occidental male subjectivity. (qtd. in Han 27)

White racial frame in US models itself on colonial oriental frame. Media plays a significant role in shaping these experiences and perceptions. Javier articulates this influence, noting, "The media played a large part in my life when I was younger" (53), and observes that "The exotic Asian is consistently presented to them in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender media." (56) David C. Lee's 'All-American Asian' describes the Chinese-American scenario thus:

In the media, we're the sexless Hop Sing from *Bonanza*—the Chinese cook with buckteeth and a caricaturized Asian accent. We're the screaming kung fu master who gets his butt kicked by the white man. We're the follower, the half-witted sidekick (Jackie Chan—you better fight back!). We're the nerdy Asian foreign exchange student who never gets a date. We're the scrawny, queeny, effeminate guy who likes to work in clothing retail and squeal at discount tags. (76)

The above quoted paragraph highlights the pervasive and harmful stereotypes of Asian individuals perpetuated by the media, portraying them as one-dimensional caricatures and reinforcing harmful tropes of race and ethnicity. These stereotypes

reduce Asian individuals to narrow and often degrading roles, erasing their complexity and humanity. Such imagination and representation perpetuates a narrative of otherness and reinforces the marginalization of Asian identities. It is interesting to note that media often ghettoizing the non-whites by what Duong calls “giving them their own show.” (47) While ‘giving them their own show’ suggests a form of tokenism where non-white individuals are granted limited representation within the media landscape, and while it may appear to offer representation and visibility to non-white communities, it often perpetuates harmful tropes and reinforces existing stereotypes. In this politics of ‘own show’, Asian-Americans are stripped of their masculinity, of their diversity, of their complexity and very often cast as ‘lacking’ the necessary vitality both in terms of race and sexual appetite, with whites existing in a binary relation on a positive light.

Construction of Asian-American as a homogeneous site is closely connected to the idea of power. Rosalind Chou argues that “Asian-American sexuality is socially shaped in ways that maintain social and political dominance for whites, particularly white men.” (2) Sexually exploitative and controlling images stemming from the white racial frame exist “to define the white man’s virility and the white man’s superiority.”¹²⁷ (21) Controlling images of Asian-Americans maintains/reifies white supremacy. Defining white male virility and superiority through demeaning images of Asian Americans is essential in retaining white supremacy. (21) While functioning in both similar and different ways for Asian American men and women, model minority and fetishization act as fundamental mechanisms in maintaining white supremacy and privilege and white hegemonic ideals. (Chou 3) Colonial stereotype of Asian-American men as asexual, nerdy and Asian American women as hyper-sexualized and submissive Asian women mirrors the historical colonial power model.

This white racial frame is old, enduring, and oriented to assessing and relating to Americans of color in everyday situations. Operating with this racial frame firmly in mind, the dominant white group has used its power to place new non-European groups, such as Asian immigrants and their

children, somewhere in the racial hierarchy that whites firmly control— that is, on a white-to-black continuum of status and privilege with whites at the highly privileged end, blacks at the unprivileged end, and other racial groups typically placed by whites somewhere in between. This white racist framing is centuries old and continues to rationalize racism that has been systemic in this society. (Chou and Joe 8)

The Asian-American identity hinges on two extremes. If on the one hand, they are seen as ‘weak’ types, on the other hand, they are also constructed in terms of good model minority. Model minority refers to the stereotypes of Asian-Americans as intelligent, successful, assimilated but also exemplars of strong traditional and family values. Model minority myth represents a binary shift from the rhetoric of “yellow peril” of the 1920s, 1930s and the 1940s that posits Asian-Americans as contaminating, threatening and potentially undermining western culture and society.

Despite appearing positive, the model minority is framed within white racist lense and becomes problematic for citizenship, nationhood, gender and sexuality. Chou and Feagin write that “This model imagery may appear to be a compliment, but such stereotyping is...oppressive and damaging.” (139) The pervasive and reductive nature of such stereotypical labeling exerts substantial pressure on individuals to conform to a white-dominated societal framework, typically demanding adaptation in a singular, unidirectional manner. Model minority stereotype constitutes a set of superimposed identities that masks many concerns of Asian-Americans and creates unnecessary stress for performance. Queer Asian-Americans are constantly under pressures to play the good immigrant, which often entails conforming to conservative expectations around gender and sexuality. *Restoried Selves* look at how Asian-Americans in different areas of life are pressured into performances of traditional gendered and sexual bodies in different capacities of life. The pressure to be ‘good’ and ‘model student’ that Kumashiro alludes to in his story is a universal story for kids and children of immigrants.

A critical issue these autobiographies confront is the glaring absence of queer Asian-American role models in both mainstream media and broader cultural

discourse. Many of the authors foreground the lack of proper models upon which the Asian-Americans could reconstruct their life and identity. The media in particular is a subject of critique. Kumashiro notes that in the mainstream media “being gay or lesbian...was often reserved for white Americans. (62) Loren R. Javier writes that in US media “There were really no Asian American role models on television...” (54); “Basically, white heroes and white people falling in love.” (53) The queer Asian-Americans are under constant pressure to emulate those values. In the absence of visibly ‘connecting’ role model in television, media and elsewhere, the immigrant gay life is tough. The lack of visibility given to Asian-Americans queer in US media, literature and the popular imagination contributes to feelings of isolation and alienation. This lack of a visible model is constantly touched upon by different authors in *Restoried Selves*.

Another thematic concern thematic interests these autobiographies take up is the home culture expectations. Home culture expectations refer to the multifaceted expectations imposed on Asian-Americans at home to keep themselves to traditional norms and values in areas of family, marriage, and gender roles. Benjamin’s essay foregrounds home culture frame thus: “But parents need to accept the ways their children are different, be they GLBT or simply choosing to do some things and not following the paths of others. Parents need to talk to their kids, know how to help them, and even define some boundaries together, but let them be on their own.” (6) Pauline Park writes that “Going away to college brought liberation from the constraints of family and childhood.” (94) You Yun exhumes a similar sentiment. The proposition that “she did not want me to come out to our parents for fear that they would get hurt” (124), furthers the Foucauldian idea of family as a repository of anti-gay prejudices.

Many immigrant or children of immigrant choose not to reveal their sexual and gender orientations to their family, driven by fear of rejection, cultural stigma, or other potential negative repercussions. Nur-e-alam S. Chisty takes this a little forward when she writes “my parents did not and perhaps would never understand or empathize with my struggles in constructing an Asian American identity.” (8) The

“home-culture” frame brings in profound challenges in reconciling one’s authentic self with the often rigid expectations of familial and cultural traditions, compelling individuals to continuously negotiate the meanings of ethnic, racial, gender, and sexual identity.

These autobiographies illuminate the intricate and often fraught journeys of Asian-American queer individuals as they navigate the complexities of dual identity—striving to embrace their authentic selves while contending with the deep-seated obligation to honor and uphold their cultural heritage. In doing so, “These autobiographies raise questions about the legitimacy of those familial and cultural expectations and values that often force queer Asian and Pacific Americans to reinforce the code of silence and impose shame upon themselves because of the nature of their sexual orientation.” (Kumashiro xv)

At the intersection of race, gender and sexuality, home emerges as a complex site in *Restoried Selves*. While coming out in opposition to home becomes a great symbolic act of liberation, it is also a site of tension. While, the gay world outside offer a sense of community and support, yet the absence or loss of ‘home’—with all its emotional, cultural, and familial weight—casts a long shadow over their journey. Dependent on their parents in various ways, individuals must also navigate and resist the constraints imposed by familial expectations, striving to move beyond the limitations set by those closest to them.

The interplay between home culture and authentic self often creates a complex and challenging dynamic. Consequently, this tension manifests as a state of hybridity—where individuals must constantly negotiate between cultural expectations rooted in family and heritage, and the desire for personal and sexual autonomy. Hybridity emerges in a moment of cultural differences- “the overlap and displacement of domains of difference”- in what Bhabha calls “in-between spaces”. *Restoried Selves* situate the authors in a liminal and hybrid existence where the authors struggle to assert their identities while navigating both their sexuality and cultural heritage, often finding themselves suspended between the two. Consequently, immigrants often experience a sense of cultural ambiguity, grappling

with whether to assimilate into American culture, preserve their home culture, or create a hybrid identity that blends elements of both. As a result, they often inhabit what Homi Bhabha calls the 'third space'—a distinctive realm tailored to their own unique individual experiences and identities.

Close to home culture frame is the idea of what is called ethnic conclave. Ethnic conclave refers to specific localities of neighbourhood communities where ethnic minorities congregate and partake in communitarian, religious and cultural practices, fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity within their community. Ethnic enclaves are powerful bulwarks of solace, camaraderie and resilience for ethnic minorities against pervasive racism; these often emerge as sites of struggle for social justice. (Liu and Geron 22) Historic Chinatowns, Japantowns and Manilatowns have long been renowned as prominent ethnic enclaves in the 19th and 20th century and continue to be so in the present times. Ethnic enclaves, together with home, constitutes what may be called competing hegemonies.

Ethnic enclave often serves as a site for testing loyalty and allegiance. It serves as a mechanism for establishing and reinforcing social boundaries. Ethnic enclaves play an important role in determining gender and sexual frameworks. “The crisis of “nationality” in Asian American literary texts across historical time periods and ethnicities often appears as the question of reconfiguring loyalties and allegiances” (Bow 17). “What becomes clear is also that ethnic and national affiliations are determined in part by conflicts over how sexuality is performed, potentially situating the female body as a register of international and domestic political struggle, as a site of national divisions and loyalties.” (10) As Bow writes, “The expression of sexuality both signify and interrogate political alliance and ethnic collectivity” (8) “Accusations of disloyalty clearly serve to regulate female sexuality” (8)

Restoried Selves presents multiple critiques of ethnic enclaves by showcasing how these communities, while offering cultural familiarity and safety, often act as sites of exclusion for queer Asian-Americans. Javier, Thompson, Coloma and others consistently question ethnic enclaves for their rigid adherence to traditional norms,

which often stifle the diversity of experiences within these communities, particularly those of queer individuals. Coloma highlight in course of the text how ethnic enclaves lead to “quizzical looks, blatant denial or patronizing dismissal” (27) adding that “the topic of sexuality and nonheterosexual perspectives are hardly discussed”. Conceiving a queer possibility becomes extremely difficult under the rhetoric of allegiance for Asian-Americans in the autobiographies.

The institutionalization of prejudice, hostility in racism and homophobia is a major thematic concern in sexuality studies. The institutionalization of racism and homophobia refers to the systemic embedding and normalization of discriminatory practices and beliefs within social, political, and economic institutions. Dariotis writes: “That boundary—between “white” and other—is the only structural racial boundary in this country because even though there is prejudice between groups of people of color, the divisions meant to maintain “white purity” are the only ones to have been institutionalized and legalized.” (39) The institutionalization of racial divisions, primarily built upon the notion of whiteness as the standard or norm, with other racial and ethnic identities positioned in relation to it, perpetuates systemic disadvantages for Asian-Americans. This institutionalization of racism coupled with the institutionalization of homophobia, creates intersecting systems of oppression that disproportionately affect Asian-Americans. Sandra Lipsitz Bem writes:

Although the concepts of heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality may be historically and culturally created fictions, like the concepts of masculinity and femininity, and the concepts of black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and white, they are fictions that come to have psychological reality if they are institutionalized by the dominant culture. (175)

Pedagogy serves as a crucial locus of conformity and peer pressure for the regulation and control of sexualities, as articulated by Foucault. However, it also functions as a dynamic arena where the negotiation of racial and sexual identities takes place, highlighting their interconnectedness. Schools, in the stories in *Restored Selves*, goes beyond performing ‘academic’ exercise and become a site of

indoctrination into customary and conservative outlooks and projects. Racially homogenous high schools are often a site of oppression, especially for queer Asian-Americans. Anh-Tuan Dang writes “High school is a difficult time for youth. But for queer youth buried deep in the closet it can be an especially tumultuous experience.” (32) Academic success, to Asian-Americans, signifies not only personal achievement and intellectual prowess but also societal validation and affirmation of cultural values such as diligence, perseverance, and filial piety. Chisty challenges the notion that academic success can serve as a compensatory mechanism for the societal stigmatization of marginalized identities. Chisty’s essay ‘Curry Potatoes and Rainbow Banners’ critically looks at “the idea that academic success could compensate for the “sinful” aspects of my racial and sexual identities.” (10) Thompson’s essay gets into the particularities of the complexities that emerge in the event of intersecting identities within institutional context. Thompson initially echoes Foucault’s idea of regulation of sexuality but gradually and progressively veers into the core idea of intersecting oppression experienced in institutions. The story situates Thompson in an oppressive environment where “In school, I was called names and picked on for not acting like a regular girl.” (112) and “I was shamed and ostracized by the kids at school for being attracted to women and women’s bodies.” (112) Thompson’s story unfolds as a narrative journey of a young adult grappling with complex questions surrounding her sexuality. Through a poignant recounting of anecdotes, personal experiences, fears, doubts, and inclinations, the story seeks to navigate the intricate terrain of self-discovery and identity formation. Thompson’s narrative adds complexity to discussions of sexuality by intertwining themes of race. As the author says, “It was hard being branded a “lesbo” or “pervert” by my classmates, and being one of the few mixed-race people at my school only further complicated things.” (112) Thompson highlights the unique challenges faced by individuals who occupy multiple marginalized identities, as they confront not only homophobia but also racism and the intersecting dynamics between the two. In another story ‘Three Masks’ Kumashiro explains the political nature of schools thus:

Schools do not teach only academics. They are places where much else is learned, where much else is experienced, where much change takes place that

often contradicts the official goals of the school. Permeating schools are stereotypes, norms, and identities that privilege some students and marginalize others; that describe who we are and prescribe who we are supposed to be; and that harm students in invisible ways. (62)

Schools, as Kumashiro describes, are important projects in pushing stereotypes and norms that privilege some while marginalizing the others. Schools reinforce binary and heteronormative frameworks often create a restrictive environment where Asian-American students must navigate multiple, sometimes conflicting, expectations. In frequently upholding binary and heteronormative ideas of identity, schools create complex dynamics for queer Asian-Americans. Pabitra Benjamin's autobiographical piece, is a little more direct, confronting the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality with unflinching honesty:

This is one of the most important areas where teachers need to do more. They need to acknowledge that gay-bashing happens, that little things like name-calling are part of a bigger circle of homophobia that permeates schools. If teachers heard the word "nigger," they would automatically jump, but if they hear the word "gay," they often let it go instead of stopping and saying, "You know, let's talk about this. (4-5)

In recounting her personal relationships, Pabitra Benjamin intricately unpacks the ways in which both homosexuality and homophobia are embedded within the fabric of the school community, revealing how these forces simultaneously shape and complicate the formative landscape of adolescence.

Educational institutions, while historically complicit in reinforcing rigid, normative ideas surrounding race and sexuality, also possess the paradoxical potential to serve as sites of resistance and transformation. *Restoried Selves* registers this potential of educational institutes to become critical arenas for challenging these very structures. When Dariotis writes "I decided to make my students comfortable with the idea of my bisexuality, and the need not to be heterosexist, or homophobic (or, for that matter, biphobic) in my classroom, and hopefully beyond." (44), the text

illustrates how educators can actively participate in reshaping the ideological contours of the classroom. Dariotis' ability to impart lessons on sexual diversity to children in the classroom underscores the changing nature of educational institutions.

In *Restoried Selves*, educational trajectories reveal a stark contrast between the restrictive, often silencing environments of schools and the relatively more open, dialogic spaces of colleges. While schools tend to enforce heteronormativity through formal curricula and informal social codes that inhibit meaningful engagement with issues of homosexuality, colleges emerge as more generative arenas where alternate sexualities can be more freely articulated and explored. *Restoried Selves* maps a movement from regulation to reimagination, positioning the university as a site where the normative boundaries around sexuality may begin to be interrogated and potentially redrawn. Consequently the text makes an appeal "... for all queers of color to take up the struggle against racist, homophobic, sexist, xenophobic, and essentializing practices and beliefs experienced within the confines of our educational institutions...." (Misa 90-91)

One of the important thematic aspects of the book lies in engaging with the question of intersectionality within the queer community. A persistent and deeply entrenched challenge within the queer community is the internal stratification produced by racial hierarchies, whereby the politics of sexuality are often complicated—if not undermined—by the pervasive influence of racism. In his foreword to *Restoried Selves* Kumashiro writes that "We often claim that our Asian/Pacific American and queer communities are places where we can turn for support and to hear alternative and more affirming stories of who we are and who we can be. However, all too often, our communities make it difficult to embrace our identities as both queers and Asian/Pacific Americans. (xxii) "Racism in the gay community is largely based on beliefs about the desirability of one race over another as potential sexual partners. Within this hierarchy, white men are promoted as being the most desirable, while Asian men are perhaps the least. This highly racialized hierarchy of desire leads to gay Asian-American men seeing each other as competitors for white male attention and hinders community formation for members

of this group” (Han 17-18) David Lee notes in ‘All-American Asian’ that in the queer community white supremacy is so entrenched.” (Lee 80) Pauline Park writes that “The problem at the national level is perhaps even more acute, as virtually the entire national leadership of the transgender political community is white” (96) It is a valid concern and reflects a broader problem of representation and power dynamics within many social and activist movements, including the LGBTQ+ movement. The US LGBT community is diverse, encompassing people of various racial, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. However, the voices and perspectives of white individuals, particularly cisgender white gay men, have historically been overrepresented and prioritized in mainstream LGBTQ+ discourse. When white individuals dominate the leadership and decision-making positions within the queer community, it has led to the centering of whiteness, where the concerns and priorities of white queer individuals receive disproportionate attention and resources. This has also contributed to a situation of what has been called "white queer dominance" or "white queer privilege", a situation where whites command disproportionate influence over the definition of queerness and the broader direction of the community's discourse and progression. Within the broader queer community, LGBTQ+ people of color experience feelings of exclusion, neglect, or erasure, as their voices and lived experiences are frequently marginalized in favor of a narrative centered around whiteness. New age books like *Restoried Selves* delve into these complexities, offering insightful explorations of the intersections between identity, race, and sexuality within the queer community. Alain Anh-Tuan Dang writes that “Queer communities can be as racist as Asian/Pacific American communities can be heterosexist.” (33)

Racism within the queer community manifests in various forms, one of which involves the phenomenon of exoticization and fetishization. Peter Jackson writes that “In gay cultures across the Western world race and desire intersect to produce entire argots, specialised commercial venues, and social networks with tightly monitored boundaries of inclusion and exclusion based entirely on the ethnic background of the men one is presumed to find erotically interesting.” (182) Race is central to how Asian-Americans are exoticized and eroticized in the US popular imagination. Just

like model minority, these are also part of white racial frames. White fetishization of Asian-American bodies, as distinct from appreciation, that reduced Asian-American bodies to mere sexualized objects, is rooted in colonial gaze and the historical imagination of Asian-Americans. David C. Lee raises the fetishization of Asian-Americans through an interrogation of Rice Queens:

I attracted mainly the “rice queens.” Rice queens are typically older, nonathletic, and somewhat “cultured” gay white men who have distinct tastes for Asians, particularly the smooth, lean, boyish-looking ones. But I wanted someone my own age, not someone who exoticized me. (75)

The term “Rice Queen” is a product of contemporary western gay vernacular. The label rice queen while being applied to white men constitutes a negative projection of Asian-Americans. While “rice queen” is a Caucasian man who dates Asian man, conversely, an Asian man who dates white men exclusively is called “potato queen”. “Potato queen” in the queer lexicon also constitutes a negative projection of Asian-Americans. It must not be lost on the readers that the use of the food metaphors “rice” and “potato,” carry explicit racial connotations and “runs the risk of being co-opted into various racist discourses.” (Chan 179) Nor should the readers situate the ‘rice’ and ‘potato’ couple outside the dynamics of cultural domination and power. “The cultural and financial domination of the Asian man often translates into the sexual dynamics of the bedroom where the Caucasian is frequently the “top” (the “man” of the relationship) while the Asian the “bottom” (the “woman”)” (Chan 179) The cultural and financial advantage, Chan asserts, also quickly translates to significant psychological and emotional leverage over potato queens (179-180) Consequently, the rice queens become the “prize” over which Asian men compete. (Lee 75) The idea that “attractive men don’t look like us. Attractive and desirable men are white, not Asian” (Lee 175) illustrates the internalization of such relational dynamics. Thus, the relationship between the whites and the browns is marked by power imbalance, skewed greatly in favour of the former. It is in this that the Asian-Americans find themselves in a disadvantaged position vis-à-vis the whites within the queer community. If Asian-Americans are

fetishization within the broader queer community, then they are also de-erotocized at the same time. “The dominant de-eroticisation of Asian men within White gay cultures occurs by an effeminisation of Asian men’s bodies and the privileging of a model of masculinity based on the idealised attributes of a Caucasian male.” (Jackson 183)

Restoried Selves features a small number of Asian-American female writers whose autobiographies offer insight into their distinctive experiences within the realm of racialized sexualities of United States. Asian-American men and women share some of the most racialized experiences in sexuality; yet these experiences often unfold in distinct ways for Asian women. Asian-American women also have different perspectives and life experiences than white women and other women of color. The struggles in constructing an Asian-American identity for queer women is manifold and includes- “sexism, racism, homophobia, anything.” (Benjamin 5) Not only are Asian-American queer women “identified by others and located onto the hetero/homo map of desire”, they also find themselves subject to both racial and gendered expectations and stereotypes, which influence how others perceive their desirability and sexual identity. While queer Asian-American men’s identity is fraught with racial and sexual question, queer Asian-American women face an addition of sexism “that teaches girls to value and adhere to sick sexist gender roles” (114) In ‘Activism and Identity Through the Word: A Mixed-Race Woman Claims Her Space’ Wendy Thompson speaks out “as a bisexual woman, a poor woman, a young woman, and a mixed-blood woman who has survived sexual violence.” (111) Thompson’s autobiography foregrounds what it means to be a woman, a queer and an Asian-American as she deals with questions of racism, with sexual and physical violence, and with sexism and homophobia. Thompson writes:

My skin color and appearance betray my Asian American identity. My identification as a bisexual person invites assumptions that I cannot make up my mind or that I am still questioning and will one day find my true sexual identity as either gay or straight. A certain stigma is attached to being both queer and Asian American: It just doesn’t happen, or when it does, it’s

because the person has been Americanized and has adopted this freestyle form of “American” sexuality...I was taught to be an obedient Chinese daughter...to be a good woman who would someday become some man’s wife. (111-112)

As someone who exists at the cross roads of Chinese/African-American ethnicity Thompson’s predicament is singularly unique, but at the crossroads of race, gender and sexuality she typifies a select narrative of intersectionality. The above quoted lines foreground the struggles and complexities of reconciling authentic self desires with familial/cultural expectations, where one is expected to fit neatly into categories of gay or straight and to perform gender and racial roles accordingly. Thompson further problematizes this intersection through enacting a ‘coming out’ for queer Asian-American category like herself. She writes:

In coming out sexually and coming to terms with my identity in a society obsessed with labels and categorization, there was always some kind of backlash from men who thought I was “not woman enough”; from (white) feminists who rejected my theories of having a feminism that was geared toward the “agenda” (that is, the mere survival and education) of women of color and poor women; from GLBTQ community organizations inside and outside of school that seemed to be dominated by white queers and in which I could never really feel accepted, only seen/treated as a token; and from my mother, whose sole want was for me to have a good life and to be a normal girl. (113)

In one single paragraph, Thompson situates the whole range of complexities and discursivities that define quotidian experience of people of her own kind: question of sexism, race making, home culture frame, the white domination of queer community, the school as an oppressive institution and issues of familial pressures. The text situates Thompson in a unique position where she is unacceptable in none of her identity: neither as a woman, nor as a queer and nor as an Asian-American, both inside and outside the queer community. If Thompson’s text is a study in navigating queer Asian-American woman experience, then it is also a subversive study in

identity politics. The text is an attempt to change the status quo in favour of a more egalitarian world where queer discursivities would “permeate their minds and make them really question their positions regarding gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity.” (114) The text pulls up queer Asian-American women from the politics of homo/hetero, the politics of race making and the ideology of gender performance. Thompson’s transformation from being an “undercover Chinese American girl and...an undercover girl who loved girls (and boys occasionally)” (113) to a queer activist who work towards realizing her unique place in society constitutes an act of subversion of those ideologies that attempts to hold individuals from flight.

Another critical axis of analysis these narratives engage is the hyper-feminization of women, which functions as a pervasive cultural script inscribed onto female bodies through both institutional and interpersonal mechanisms. If Asian-American men have been constructed as castrated/impotent and denied manhood, Asian-American women have consistently been constructed as exotic docile bodies who are forever sexually available to white men. Han writes that “Asian American women’s experiences with racism have been fundamentally different from those of Asian American men. Where Asian men have been denied masculinity, Asian women have been hyperfeminized. Whereas Asian men have been marked as undesirable because of their race, Asian women have been marked as sexual prizes for white male consumption and, because of their alleged hyperfemininity, more sexually desirable than white women.” (6) This hyper-feminization of Asian-American women creates immense tension for those who are born women but identify as male. Consider these lines from Thomson:

The first time I ever knew of any girl who self-identified as a queer was in high school. There was a biracial girl I had known since tenth grade. From day one, she had always dressed like a tomboy, wearing basketball jerseys and baggy “boys” clothing. The girls she hung out with talked about her behind her back, gossiping that there was something wrong with her and she must be gay because of her nonfeminine mannerisms. (113)

The hyper-feminization of Asian-American women imposes a narrow and restrictive set of expectations on individuals, particularly those who identify as queer. It perpetuates the stereotype of Asian women as submissive, passive, and hyper-sexualized, which can create immense pressure for queer Asian-American women to conform to traditional feminine roles and behaviors. As Thompson illustrates, there is a constant pressure to stick to 'feminine' norms and to perform gender in accordance with it, deviation from which often leads to scrutiny, criticism, or assumptions about sexuality of queer Asian-American women.

Helen Zia's 'Out on the Front Lines' presents another compelling narrative of gender dynamics within the mode of intersectionality. Zia problematizes intersectionality thus: "I was an Asian American and I was a lesbian, but in those days I couldn't be both in the same space. It was easy to maintain a facade in a world that presumed all Asian Americans to be heterosexual, and all gays to be white and generally male." (129) 'Out on the Front Lines' looks back to the "memories of my lesbian trial and the threat of ostracism" (129) within traditionally masculine spaces, such as construction sites in Boston. Zia's narrative stands out as a rare account that does not speak of experience of the middle class but of "community of sisters" (128) of the labor class, those who are situated at the bottom of the American social and economic hierarchy. Such an account of the experiences of lesbians in traditionally blue-collar environments like construction sites in Boston questions and disrupts our assumptions that non-heteronormative identities are primarily the domain of the affluent, an exclusive upper and middle class phenomenon so as to say. These dynamics reinforce the fundamental idea that 'sexuality' is a universal phenomenon that cuts across class divisions. But while doing this, Zia's account also foregrounds how sexuality continues to be a challenge regardless of class and cultural affinity. The pervasive discrimination and hostility experienced by lesbians within these spaces, the scrutiny and judgment, the interrogation or condemnation for expressing and practicing one's sexual desire, as Zia encounters with the construction site, underscores the pervasive climate of exclusion and marginalization of those that challenge traditional gender and sexual norms. Forming a positive self-identity becomes extremely difficult under such a context. Wei Ming Dariotis' story presents

a typical homophobic environment in which she as a woman has always to be on guard against what she calls “low-level war”. (42)

“Being both queer and Asian-American was paradoxical, if not impossible.” (Kumashiro 62) *Restoried Selves* endeavors to unravel the paradoxical nature of being both queer and Asian-American, challenging the notion that such identities are inherently contradictory or incompatible. Han writes that “Asian Americans have also been active producers of alternative narratives meant to counter the text, talk and images that degrade and manipulate them.” (8) In *Restoried Selves*, queer Asian-American men and women construct their social identities through the stories that they tell about what it means to be both gay and Asian. Homosexuality is pulled into the realm of “misunderstood” but a “natural a part of human sexuality” (Yun 126) and “intrinsic part of me” (Zia 128). Many of these texts bring their own cultural material to try to seek build alternative discursivities. Consequently homosexuality becomes an experience that moves from being ‘one of the most frightening experiences’ to being counted as one of the most liberating and growth facilitating ones.” (Yun 126) It builds a discourse of intersectionality that transcends race, class, gender, ethnicity, nationality and age. The text looks beyond privileging one’s own oppression to look at how ‘others’ may be oppressed and to work towards a more equitable re/distribution of power. Readers/people/individuals “who suffer under one form of oppression” and “who fail to recognize another form of oppression” (Park 97) are invited to work from a broader framework to consolidate wins and prepare for further struggle.

Timothy Wang’s *Slant*, published in 2011, constitutes a significant contribution to the discourse surrounding Asian-American queer literature, with a focused emphasis on Chinese-American queer life. *Slant* is Wang’s debut novel and constitutes what is called epistemic disobedience, a body of literature that examines, interrogates and challenges the coloniality and universality of rational Western epistemology. *Slant* looks at knowledge production of queer/gay Asian/Chinese-Americans at the intersection of race and sexuality and shows how Asian/Chinese-Americans are alienated by their race and sexuality. Racism, racial identity, racial

complexity informs much of the discursive space in the text and constitutes a central thematic interest. But Wang's scholarly interest is primarily centred on exploring the complex and interstitial dynamics that materialize at the intersection of race and sexuality. In course of this exploration, Wang examines an array of concomitant considerations and concerns encompassing issues such of stereotypes and representation, cultural hybridity and hegemonic normativity amongst others. While Wang explores the gay experience of a growing up young adult protagonist navigating the complexities of being both gay and Asian-American, the text examines how prevailing white cultural standards of beauty challenge and shape lives of those that are not born with it or who do not naturally conform to these ideals. In exploring the sexual world at Boston, Wang brings question of how Asian-Americans navigate the cultural barriers and standards through pursuit that are detrimental to their self to the point of existential crisis. Through the character of James, a Chinese-American teen, a math student at MIT and in his interaction with the white heterosexual world, Wang foregrounds the difficulties of hyphenated existence of Asian/Chinese-American sexual experience within the ostensibly "liberal" sociocultural landscape of the United States. This thematic interest in *Slant* goes side by side with personal stories of triumphs and struggles.

Within the multifaceted cultural, social, racial and sexual tapestry of the United States, the Chinese-Americans literature has emerged as a significant body of work. Chinese-American literature may be understood to be that body of literature produced by writers of Chinese descent living in the United States. Chinese-American literature originated from a tradition of storytelling of communitarian experience in the early days of immigration. In their early forms, these narratives often centered on the tensions of cultural displacement, the challenges of assimilation, and the intergenerational struggles between heritage and belonging. Race, in particular, functioned as a central axis around which questions of identity, visibility, and systemic marginalization were explored. Over the years, these narratives gradually expanded beyond their initial focus on immigration and racial identity to thoughtfully engage with issues of gender. Since the 1990s, this trajectory has further deepened to incorporate explorations of sexuality and queerness,

reflecting both broader cultural shifts and the growing visibility of LGBTQ+ voices within minority communities.

Notwithstanding the gradual thematic expansion of these narratives, the intricate interrelations between race, gender, and sexuality remained conspicuously under-theorized, occupying a marginal position within critical discourse and receiving only cursory scholarly engagement. This dynamic began to shift in a more substantive and affirmative direction during the final decade of the 20th century, as scholars and cultural critics increasingly turned their attention to the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality.

Writing in 1998, David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom note that “this theoretical issue [of the intersection of race, gender and (homo)sexuality in Asian-Americans] has yet to be broadly interrogated in either Asian American studies or lesbian/gay studies.” (1) Only in recent times has there been a concerted effort to scrutinize and unravel these interconnected dimensions within the broader framework of identity studies. “Contemporary Asian American literature reflects increasingly diverse perspectives among the people...There has been a new confidence inspired by the increased use of freer forms and language since the 1960s and by Asian Americans' increased appreciation of cultural pluralism in American society, which has encouraged them to express their own personal experiences in literature and to see them as part of a larger cultural tradition.” (Elaine H. Kim 78) And although “there is no satisfactory theoretical vocabulary for the interconnectedness, mutual constitution, and operational simultaneity of race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality” (Wong and Jeffrey 171), Chinese-American cultural critics have shown willingness to partake in evolving critical tradition of intersectionality to address the complex quotidian experience of Chinese-American. Questions of “unsettling representations and curious misreading” (1) informs much of the discourse surrounding race, gender and sexuality, more so in their intersection. Timothy Wang's *Slant* constitutes an effort in that direction. It represents an epistemic shift from earlier discourse.

Walter D. Mignolo makes some very important observation on how the politics of knowing and knowledge operate on an epistemic level in *The Darker Side*

of *Western Modernity* (2011). Amongst other things, Mignolo introduces his readers to the idea of “zero point epistemology” (118). Mignolo argues that the zero point is the epistemological location that places a privileged knowing body as occupying a detached and neutral point of observation, and from this neutral place “maps the world and its problems, classifies people, and projects what is good for them” (118). According to Mignolo, western epistemology is presented as though it is untouched by geopolitical configuration but in reality it constitutes a rigid system that maps and labels the world in a distinct hierarchy. The crux of Mignolo’s thesis may be beautifully summed in his own words: “The first world has knowledge; the Third World has culture”. (118) This knowledge is often framed in terms of neutrality, standard and universality. Mignolo’s theory of First world and Third world closely resembles Edward Said’s theory of West and the East where the former engages in specific knowledge production about the later. The coloniality of the entire phenomenon never misses the readers. The production of knowledge rooted in colonial times continues to inform much of the debate on what constitutes true Americanism. Mignolo’s decolonial manifesto zero point epistemology where he breaks away from what he calls “western code” or “universal epistemic code” helps us understand and critically access the unique situatedness in which the Asian/Chinese-Americans are often mapped and labeled, especially within the interconnectedness of race and sexuality. Wang works on this thesis through the character of James.

Slant introduces a series of problematic issues within the Chinese-American queer discourse for the readers who are otherwise unfamiliar with the unique experience. Questions of manhood, stereotypes, white racism, orientalism, identity crisis, heritage complex, the problems within the greater gay community, drug abuse, Asian fetish etc finds representation within the text. Wang threads these issues to enact a coming of age/coming out narrative about a college student trying to figure out who he is and where he belongs. The title of the text is derived from his complex about his eyes (which in effect is his identity) and his desire for change.

The narrative trajectory of *Slant* subtly mirrors Wang's own personal journey in MIT as a student of Computer Science and his experiences with racism and homophobia within the academic edifice and outside. James' many encounters echo Wang's own identity navigation as an Asian/Chinese-American navigating both academic and socio-cultural sphere. Through the character of James, Wang artfully explores his own dalliance with the American gay community, charting a course through the labyrinth of online interactions and offline encounters. James's quest for self-discovery echoes Wang's own uncertainties surrounding his identity, mirrored in the intricate dance between cultural expectations and individual expression. Wang's portrayal of James's familial dynamics, tinged with disappointment and rooted in conservatism, serves as a poignant reflection of his own experiences grappling with familial expectations and the complexities of Asian-American identity. In short, Wang projects in James the emotions, experiences and processes of being and in performing a gay Asian/Chinese-American. Of course the book is fictional and does not project all of Wang's own experience.

Slant introduces the thematic interest in same-sex and its attendant problems vis-a-vis race in the very introductory part of the text with the introduction of the central protagonist. The narration situates this thematic interest first within educational campus and then to the larger world. The initial experience of the protagonist happens within the MIT campus.

American educational campuses have been a major locale for same-sex narratives within American literary canvas. These educational campuses often function as paradoxical spaces wherein the potential for exploring and affirming same-sex desire coexists with institutional mechanisms that simultaneously regulate, discipline, and suppress non-normative sexual expressions. This paradox reflects the incongruity between the idealized notion of America as the land of the free and the persistent presence of homophobia and racism within its societal fabric, including its educational institutes.

Wang constructs a nuanced portrayal of the MIT campus as a paradoxical space—one that outwardly embodies the liberal ethos and intellectual freedom

traditionally associated with elite institutions of science and technology, yet simultaneously harbors deeply entrenched structures of rigidity and exclusion. While such institutions are ostensibly envisioned as bastions of progress, innovation, and ideological openness, Wang interrogates their professed commitments to inclusivity and liberty. Through his narrative, Wang exposes the dissonance between institutional rhetoric and lived reality, revealing how these educational spaces often reproduce narrow, parochial, and heteronormative ideologies under the guise of academic neutrality. *Slant* directs the reader's attention to the ideological constraints embedded within institutions like MIT by narrativizing the central protagonist's lived experience. It draws our attention to the "anti-gay attitudes prevalent on campus", with a particular focus on how these prejudices are disproportionately directed at individuals of Asian descent.

The intersection of Asianness and queerness is subtly introduced in the early stages of the novel, when James receives a pointed and disapproving gaze from his college peers simply for having disrupted a conversation about homosexuality with his presence. As James says, the frosty encounter "flabbergasted me" (8). As the narrative unfolds, the text illuminates the profound disjunction between the United States' idealized rhetoric of freedom and the stark realities faced by individuals whose sexual identities intersect with racial otherness. In doing so, Wang challenges the oversimplified narrative of progress and inclusivity that has come to dominate American studies. A palpable tension and rich cultural critique emerge from the intersectionality of the protagonist's Asian and gay identities, set against the paradoxical cultural landscape of the educational institution.

The Asian/Chinese-American body is a major subject of interrogation in *Slant*. In James, Wang intricately illustrates how the Asian/Chinese-American body becomes a site upon which biopolitical forces enact dual modes of regulation and marginalization—both as a non-white subject and as a queer individual, both in their interaction and without. James' racial identity as an Asian-American renders him hypervisible and yet profoundly objectified—positioning him not as a fully realized subject but as a figure flattened into a set of racialized expectations and fantasies.

James' initial encounter with racism unfolds as he attempts to enter Art Deco in trying to meet Michael, a space he is not welcome to by the white doorman.

The encounter is emblematic of a broader pattern in which any deviation from the normative 'white' archetype in America is met with discomfort and suspicion in the hands of those who find the exercise of Americanism in a 'non-white' body a thing difficult to grasp. Not only is James looked at suspiciously but also subjected to discourteous treatment and rudely talked to. While James initially interprets this behavior as mere 'arrogance,' it is, in fact, symptomatic of a deeper, more insidious dynamic—one rooted in racial entitlement and the structural power to dismiss, invalidate, or diminish those who fall outside the normative cultural center. James' 'non-whiteness' instantly renders him illegible within the symbolic lexicon of Americanness, at least in the eyes of the doorman; his racial identity disqualifies him from being recognized as a legitimate participant in the national narrative. In stark contrast, Michael—embodying the culturally sanctioned markers of whiteness and normative Americanness—is received with a 'servile smile,' a gesture that underscores the deeply ingrained politics of racial privilege. The text persistently revisits the theme of racial discrimination across a multiplicity of social and institutional settings—hospitals, clubs, libraries—each functioning as a distinct yet interconnected site where the mechanisms of racialization are enacted and normalized.

But it is sexuality (same-sex) and its relation to race that is of primary interest in Wang *Slant* delves into non-traditional values, challenging conventional acceptance among readers, particularly white conservative American and traditional Chinese/Chinese-American readers. These non-traditional values and activities encompass a spectrum including homosexuality, intra-racial relationships (which are also homosexual), drug use, and more. James's asserts in course of the narrative that "nothing we did was traditional" (30). This theme of non-conformity permeates throughout the narrative, highlighting the characters' inclination towards unconventional choices and lifestyles, a desire for authenticity and individuality, as well as a rejection of societal expectations. The idea that "nothing we did was

personal” serves as a narrative touchstone, prompting contemplation on the myriad possibilities that exist beyond conventional paradigms of love and relationships. In a critical context, James's statement contributes to a broader cultural conversation about the fluidity and expansiveness of love and desire. By emphasizing the non-traditional nature of their experiences, James invites readers to reevaluate preconceived notions and societal expectations surrounding love and desire.

The non-traditionality of text is more particularly pronounced in James' homosocial nature. The protagonist's discerning gaze, his close observation of boys, their features, their gaze, their clothing and everything, becomes a narrative lens through which readers are invited to delve into the protagonist's homosocial nature. The non-traditionality of the text is also to be discerned in his expansive choice of white partners. In course of the text, James shares intimate moments with many characters, primarily his love interest Stan.

If the acts being portrayed deviate from normative traditions, the narrative form itself often mirrors this disruption. Wang's narrative approach deliberately eschews conventional literary representations of intimacy, instead embracing a stylistic mode marked by unflinching explicitness and linguistically raw depictions of sexual encounters. As the narrative traverses James' series of one-night encounters, Wang renders these sexual episodes in deliberately stark, graphic, and unembellished language—a stylistic choice that sharply contrasts with the more metaphorical or lyrical depictions that other authors make choices for. Though moments of sporadic poetic elements emerge from the narrative fabric, they are consistently undercut by the visceral rawness with which sexual acts are both enacted and described—an aesthetic dissonance that deliberately challenges and unsettles the reader's expectations of lyrical continuity in the treatment of intimacy. Wang's narrative strategy functions as a form of literary defiance, actively rejecting euphemistic, idealized, or sanitized representations of intimacy in favor of a raw, corporeal immediacy that foregrounds the visceral realities of queer experience. In doing so, the text subverts conventional aesthetic frameworks typically associated with literary representations of sex, displacing the polished, euphemistic, or

romanticized modes with a stark, unmediated portrayal that resists both moral and stylistic sanitization- in thematic alignment with the text's broader preoccupation with authenticity. Such stylistic tension invites and prompts readers to confront a more expansive multidimensionality of human experience and understanding of intimacy.

However, Wang's emphasis lies not so much on the unconventional nature of the acts themselves, but rather on the responses, the reactions elicited by those acts and the intricate cognitive processes that precede, accompany, or follow them. As the narrative progresses, readers are swiftly attuned to the protagonist's dual marginalization, where the intersection of racial and sexual identities creates a distinct form of alienation that is both cumulative and multifaceted. The narration in the text lets the reader understand how James and his experience are often mapped by what Mignolo describes as "the hubris of Zero Point" highlighting the presumption of objectivity and standardization that masks the underlying biases and cultural impositions inherent in such viewpoints. James is constantly judged by American standards. In this standard, his gay as well as his skin color constantly fails him.

Within the interactive relation between race and sexuality with respect to Asian/Chinese-Americans, questions of representation and stereotypes hold significant paramount. These issues not only shape public perception but also influence the lived experiences of individuals at this intersection. Asian/Chinese-American texts often wade through questions of representation and stereotypes that often subsumes/consolidates a big majority of people into certain fixed notions and pathologize the "differences". In the U.S. cultural landscape, the disproportionate attention given to the dominant white-black racial binary often means that the question of representation of Asian/Chinese-Americans remain a marginalized affair. In the binary between the whites and the blacks, the question of Asian/Chinese-Americans representation becomes a hardly discussed thing within the mainstream. And yet questions of representation or misrepresentation is central to the Asian/Chinese-American authors and scholars, more so within the race and sexuality

interest group. Addressing these questions is essential for understanding and validating the unique identities and experiences of Asian and Chinese American queer individuals, whose stories are often overlooked in broader discussions of race and sexuality. What misrepresentation can do to people of non-white queer has received varying commentaries from the scholars of diasporic/racial/sexuality/American studies group. These provide a comprehensive, interdisciplinary discursive framework that facilitates a nuanced analysis of the intricate dynamics at play, enabling a deeper understanding of the interwoven social, cultural, and psychological forces that shape individual and collective experiences. Put another way, it questions the ideologies, discourses, and aesthetics of racism and colonialism while weaving in racialized sexual politics to critically examine concepts of selfhood, identity, the politics of difference, power dynamics, and the possibilities for resistance and liberation.

The issues of representation and stereotyping hold significant relevance within the discourse of zero-point epistemology, as they are central to understanding how knowledge and identity are constructed and deconstructed. Asian/Chinese-Americans are consistently subject to misrepresentation within the fabric of U.S. popular imagination, where their identities are frequently distilled into reductive and often erroneous portrayals. These distorted representations manifest across various mediums, including film, television, literature, and other cultural productions, where they are relegated to stereotypical roles or reduced to oversimplified caricatures. As a result, the lived realities of Chinese-Americans are obscured, and the average Chinese-American individual is often viewed through the narrow, one-dimensional lens of these pervasive and limiting stereotypes. These limited representations not only distort public perception but also impact the self-identity and social experiences of Chinese-Americans, reinforcing cultural misunderstandings and perpetuating discrimination. The material conditions under which Chinese-Americans participate within the culture canvas of the country, thus, are extremely challenging and unpredictable. The portrayal of the Asian/Chinese-American body in Wang's work reflects this complex interplay between cultural identity, self-perception, and external perceptions. The Asian/Chinese-American body in Wang is a significant source of

tension, fraught with stereotypes, misrepresentations and misidentifications of which the text interrogates.

One of the pivotal moments within the narrative unfolds during the conversation between James and the Thorndike family, particularly Patsy, Michael's mother. The entire conversation transcends mere dialogue between two sets of people, and instead evolves into a tumultuous exchange laden with entrenched stereotypes and misrepresentations concerning Asian/Chinese-Americans and serves as a poignant commentary on the persistent ignorance that pervades certain segments of white American society, perpetuating a cycle of cultural misunderstanding and marginalization. Despite Patsy overtly identifying as a "liberal, her reaction to James' parents' whereabouts: "So, when are they going back to China?" (164) in their first meeting underscores the precarious position that Asian-Americans often find themselves in within the American societal fabric. The incongruity between Patsy's liberal self-proclamation and her immediate association of James and his parents with a foreign origin unveils a troubling facet of unconscious racism. The subtle racial undertones inherent in Patsy's language epitomize a pervasive mindset among a significant portion of white Americans, wherein 'non-white' bodies are perceived as inherently less American and transient rather than integral to the nation's fabric. We are given to understand that the entirety of Michael's family is ignorant of what is what and to which nationality/ethnicity James belongs to. James astutely characterizes this encounter as resembling a farcical scenario, drawing attention to the comical incongruities arising from the family's uninformed assumptions. Despite James' verbal assertion, "I'm not offended" (166), the discourse unfolding within this familial exchange is fraught with layers of ignorance, privilege, and subtle racism. The conversation's farcical nature is compounded by the family's unintentional display of privilege, wherein their assumptions remain unchallenged due to an absence of critical self-awareness. The failure to recognize and engage with his individual identity reflects a form of racial insensitivity, even if unintended. James' declaration of non-offense in person could be interpreted as a diplomatic response, potentially masking the deeper impact of such microaggressions on his

sense of self and belonging. In Patsy and her family, Wang interrogates the question of what an archetypal American looks like.

In US popular culture and media, the pervasive portrayal of white bodies as the standard or default representation of American identity continue to persist despite the shifting demographics and evolving cultural landscape of the United States. While the nation has witnessed a burgeoning diversity of individuals from various racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds contributing to its rich tapestry of identities, over the years white bodies and white standards continue to define much of what an American (should) looks like. The perpetual “outsiders” or “foreignness” imposed upon Asian/Chinese-American body constructs an enduring sense of otherness in them. It is no wonder that James says: “I knew that no matter how many generations of Asian families had been in the United States, we would always be perpetual foreigners.” (164-165) James' poignant assertion, “We're Americans too” (164), serves as a powerful rebuke to the prevailing narrative of perpetual foreignness thrust upon Asian Americans. Far from a solitary expression, it resonates as a collective plea from a community striving for recognition of its complete and equal American identity. It reflects a persistent struggle to be recognized and accepted as authentically American, a struggle that transcends generational timelines.

Yet the Thorndike family can be openly racist too. The Thorndike family's open expression of racism becomes palpable when Denise draws a comparison between the American context and a presumed Chinese dietary practice, stating, “In America, we use only certain cuts of the animal because not everyone is used to eating intestines and other things like that” (166). “Ironically, when Asians eat animal innards it’s because they are poor and can’t afford real meat...but when the French eat organ meat, it’s “haute cuisine””. (166) This juxtaposition implies a cultural hierarchy, positioning American dietary preferences as the norm and implicitly characterizing Chinese culinary practices as deviating from this purported norm. The use of phrases like “not everyone is used to” subtly insinuates a cultural superiority, implying an assumed universality of American tastes while framing Chinese practices as exotic or unconventional. Tropes of a poor China where

“everyone was so poor there”, “They sleep in clay wall huts” and “they use all parts of animals as food” are perfect example of not just ignorance but deeply ingrained racism. Such narratives contribute to the construction and reinforcement of a racialized "other," reinforcing existing power dynamics and hierarchies. This discourse not only fosters an inaccurate understanding of Chinese culture but also perpetuates a form of cultural imperialism wherein Western norms are positioned as the benchmark against which other cultures are judged.

Questions of misrepresentations and stereotypes also necessitate firmly contextualizing Asian/Chinese-American cultural practices within the unique historical contexts in which they emerge. Very often the reactions are intricately embedded in historical and cultural contexts, including the enduring legacy of anti-Asian sentiment in the United States, exemplified by legislative measures like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II and in the encounter between the East and the West or as Edward Said says between the “Orient” and the “Occident”. These historical contours have contributed to the perpetuation of stereotypes about Asian-Americans as being foreign, exotic, or interchangeable over the years. Rosalind Chau argues that “sexual stereotyping of people of Asian descent has mutated throughout American history, changing based on the needs and interests of whites.” (3) Critical studies and its disciplinary counterparts have wrestled with and confronted the dynamic and intricate interplay between the colonial immigrant, racial contours and power dynamics and its continuity in the present times.

One of the notable distinctions that we see in the texts of the 2000s and thereafter is the significant evolution of gay rights in the domain of internet. The advent of virtual spaces as new frontier revolutionized gay interactions by providing anonymity and facilitating partner choices for connection and intimacy without the attendant prejudices. Virtual spaces have enabled a more diverse and inclusive representation of gay identities and experiences. *Slant* registers some of these possibilities for romantic and sexual connections through James’ interaction with gay sites and virtual spaces. This evolution represents a profound departure from the

traditional modalities of previous eras, illustrating a significant shift in the ways social interactions and relationships are navigated and experienced within the LGBTQ+ community. Such a shift, in Wang, is exemplified by explicit references to online platforms like GayBostonGuide.com and nifty.org, signifying a transformative accessibility to homosocial and sexual materials. James's recurrent return "to the computer to find more gay materials" (10) serves as a narrative testament to the newfound accessibility and connectivity fostered by online platforms; in doing so it underscores the changing landscape of LGBTQ representation. The act of seeking out such materials online becomes emblematic of a broader cultural shift, where the internet emerges as a democratizing force, facilitating the dissemination and consumption of LGBTQ narratives. James's engagement with these platforms mirrors a collective endeavor to carve out spaces that validate and normalize diverse sexual orientations.

In *Slant* the internet gay world serves more important purpose than just serve as a conduit that facilitates improved gay dating opportunities. The world of gay internet in *Slant* serves to examine and interrogate the interplay between race and sexuality. Wang problematizes the often-overlooked undercurrents of racial bias and discrimination that permeate these virtual spaces. Wang not only challenges the notion of the internet as a universally liberating platform for gay individuals but also exposes the complexities and contradictions inherent in these digital interactions. The text elucidates the intricate rules of engagement that govern interactions within the gay world of internet, demonstrating that the gay world operates within a context that is not merely race-conscious but explicitly racist. In doing so, it questions the entrenched and often unacknowledged prejudices that shape social dynamics within these virtual spaces. In James, the text questions how gay virtual spaces becomes conduit for "white, blond-haired, blue-eyed guy" standards against anything remotely Asian/Chinese. (84). James' experiments with different profile pictures within the narratorial context serves as a powerful and telling example of the stark discrepancy in which whites and Asians are received within the ostensibly "inclusive" digital spaces of the gay community.

However, it is the offline world that commands Wang's primary interest. Wang critically examines and brings to the forefront the pervasive issue of racism within the US gay community, challenging readers to confront and reflect upon the deeply ingrained prejudices that persist in physical social interactions. One of the strengths of the text lies indeed in how it addresses such a subject position and identifies some issues faced by gay Asian-Americans—being shunned by much of the white gay community ("no fats, femmes, or Asians" is something tossed around by white gay men about what kinds of people they will not date); being chased by rice queens (typically older white men who only date younger Asian guys); and feeling physically unattractive amidst a culture in which Asian men are emasculated and desexualized.

Slant offers a critical reflection on not just white heterosexual bias but extends to encompass the complexities that Asian/Chinese-Americans encounter within the broader gay community. James' realization that "This gay thing is harder than I thought" (16), serves as a poignant reminder to readers of the intricate and multifaceted dynamics that unfold within the complex milieu of the gay community in US. Wang successfully initiates a discussion for readers to ponder upon on the broader cultural discourse on the internal dynamics of marginalized communities, emphasizing that while these spaces offer a sense of camaraderie, they are not immune to the complexities that arise from diverse individual experiences and perspectives. The acknowledgment of the challenges within the gay community invites critical reflection on the intersections of identity, emphasizing that unity within a shared identity does not preclude the existence of internal struggles and diverse narratives.

Slant interrogates a multitude of the competitive codes and unwritten rules that govern the intricacies of gay life in the United States. The text demonstrates key insights into the intricacies of the gay scene, into the social hierarchies, cultural expectations, and interpersonal dynamics that shape the experiences of Asian/Chinese-American gay individuals, revealing the complexities and often unspoken pressures that influence their interactions and identities within the larger

gay community. James' experiences within the US gay community, particularly his interactions with Jim, vividly illustrates what it means to be an Asian/Chinese-American gay, underscoring the pervasive presence of racism within this ostensibly "inclusive" sphere. Jim appears in the text as a "Midwestern boy" who James happens to come across in a party. While James approaches him with "interest", Jim rejects his advances with the term "Abercrombie". Abercrombie, the text explains, is coded for lack of interest in Asian gays.

Throughout high school, I had thought I didn't fit in because scrawniness and lack of athletic abilities. I hoped to fix that by going to the gym three times a week. I had thought gay guys would be attracted to any handsome, well-built, smart guy. Realizing that race also mattered to other gay guys was upsetting because I knew it was something I could never change. (58-59)

Racial prejudices remain a significant and unchangeable obstacle to social acceptance and belonging. Within the gay community, these biases manifest through the articulation of preferences and exclusions rooted in racial distinctions, frequently cloaked under the ostensibly innocuous pretext of personal preference. The above quoted lines encapsulate a painful reckoning with the intersectionality of race and sexuality, in the context of desirability politics within the queer community. James realizes this hard way, through a series of personal encounters and social interactions.

The character of Michael further serves to underscore the dynamics of racialized desirability and social privilege. His effortless navigation through social and institutional spaces by virtue of the colour of his skin, in stark contrast to James's fraught experiences highlights desirability and privilege in different racial groups. Michael's character also introduces another racial dimension concerning Asian/Chinese-Americans, i.e. the issue of fetishization. If on the one hand James is rejected on grounds of "Abercrombie", on the contrary his acceptance is simultaneously complicated by fetishization. Michael's preference (perceived or real) for Asians referenced through "rice queen" foreground the question of race and racial code in the greater gay community. If "Abercrombie" is coded for a narrow and

exclusive preference for young, athletic, and predominantly white models, then fetishes reduces individuals to simplistic stereotypes, perceiving them predominantly through a framework of exoticism and objectification, rather than recognizing them as complex and multifaceted human beings. Both "Abercrombie" and "fetish" represent problematic concepts deeply embedded within racial contexts. The power dynamics behind "Abercrombie" and "fetish" must not be lost either. Rosalind Chau argues that such over stretched representations, controlling images and stereotypes function to maintain white supremacy. (3) James, in that sense, is thus a victim of both "Abercrombie" and Asian fetish.

The question of Asian fetish requires further problematization here. The emphasis on the fetishization of Asians is exemplified through the term "rice queen, in the text" yet the narrative delves deeper beyond this portrayal. Rice queen apparently beneath its seemingly positive imagery (preference for Asians) acquires a negative connotation. The idea that "rice queens often deny that they were rice queens as if association with Asians embarrassed them" (59) reflects a complex interplay of power dynamics and privilege within the hierarchical structure, implicating both rice queens and Asians alike. The concealment of one's identity as a "rice queen" suggests a narrative of white superiority and the perceived inferiority of Asians within the sexual marketplace, thereby illuminating intricate dynamics of racial hierarchies and power imbalances within this context. The gay sexual market, in Wang, emerges as a space characterized by a pervasive aversion towards Asians, as evinced in "a lot of guys...don't like Asians" (60) The idea that "a lot of guys...don't like Asians" is reinforced in Michael's hesitation and discomfort when questioned by James on the veracity of the statement. Michael's reaction not only affirms the racialized dynamics of desirability within queer spaces but also illustrates the uneasy complicity of white allies and lovers in sustaining these unspoken hierarchies.

Wang deepens the critical examination of intracommunity tensions within ostensibly progressive queer spaces by foregrounding the persistent undercurrents of racial hierarchy and exclusion. The observation that "Some white guys wanted to be

black and some black guys wanted to be white. Some Asian guys wanted to be black or white. But, no black or white guys who wanted to be Asian” (86) incisively exposes the entrenched racial preferences and invisibility that Asian men face—revealing how racial desirability operates as a form of social capital, even within marginalized communities. It highlights the existence of racial hierarchies, where whiteness is often positioned at the top, symbolizing privilege, power, and societal acceptance and Asian identity is relegated to a lower position on this hierarchy and attributes lack of the same cultural capital or desirability. James’ own experience explores the racial edge at which the gay Asian/Chinese-Americans are situated and what difficulties they find themselves in while navigating their racial identity. Similarly, the idea that “Guys who said they didn’t care about the race of the guys they dated were liars. Everyone has a preference. And white was the majority preference within all ethnicities.” (86) critiques the dishonesty and hypocrisy in the publicly stated preferences of some individuals within the LGBT community. It is in this power that whites exercise in the sexual marketplace that “...older white men...somehow thought that, even though they were in their sixties, they could still date an eighteen year old Asian boy.” (86) The idea that many white American gays aren’t “into Asians” is emphasized every now and then- “You aren’t my type” (85) often acts as a polite substitute for a more open and racist “into Asians”. The discrimination inside Boston’s gay community is real and genuine and James experiences this first hand. In this context, his desire for “some gay Asian friends of my own” emerges not merely from a longing for companionship, but from a need to inhabit a cultural and emotional space where his racial and sexual identities are not in tension but in resonance. *Slant* gives us many interesting perspectives on racial dynamics operating within America’s gay neighborhoods, exposing both the overt and insidious forms of racism embedded within the gay sub-culture of US. Through its layered narrative and emotionally resonant characters, the text foregrounds the lived realities of individuals negotiating the compounded marginalizations of race and sexuality.

Labels, categorisation and classifications constitutes important areas of study in identity politics. As Jenkins says “Classification is rarely neutral and implies

evaluation. To identify someone could be enough to decide how to treat her (6) Classifications and labels frequently engender the marginalization of individuals positioned at the lower echelons of the hierarchical structure. In course of the text James remarks that “I didn’t fit in here either. I didn’t fit in anywhere.” (79). At another point in time he says “I hated myself for not being white. I hated everything Asian, the most fucking absurd culture in the world. I wanted to be anyone else but me.” (92) As someone who neither fits into neither the white America, nor the American-Chinese world symbolized in Chinatown, the text poignantly articulate the internal conflict and identity crisis experienced by individuals grappling with cultural and racial marginalization. James' departure from the conventional norms of physical appearance and sexual orientation, as upheld by the hegemonic ideals of mainstream American society, instigates a multifaceted and intricate dynamic fraught with complexities and challenges. James's struggle reflects the broader issue of how marginalized communities with “racial” and “sexual” background navigate their identities within a social framework that privileges certain racial and cultural characteristics over others.

James's Asianness, epitomized by his skin tone, hair texture, and the shape of his eyes, assumes a deeply problematic dimension against the white setting in which he is cast. His acute preoccupation with his eyes, notably their lack of depth, as evidenced by his statement, "If I could replace my eyes by gouging them out, I would do so without hesitation" (93-94), represents a climactic moment in the narrative on what it means to be labeled and categorized. Notably, this infatuation with reworking his Chinese eyes to resemble Caucasian - “Can you make it more like white people’s?” (95)- despite the “asymmetrical”, “infectious” and other risks associated with plastic surgery shares a uncanny similarity to Toni Morrison’s *The Blues Eye* (1970) where the young African-American Pecola constantly desires blue eyes in an act of inferiority complex. James and Pecola share a similar inferiority complex, a not-too-different infatuation with eyes and which is linked to whiteness.

The question of sexuality, while being applicable and applied to binary paradigm of whiteness versus Asian/Chinese-American, assumes an equally

important if not more critical concern on the discussion of home, home culture and family in Wang. Home plays a central role in Asian/Chinese-American texts. To understand home, one must transcend Foucault's basic proposition of home as a site of continuous incitement of suppression as well as what Foucault calls "ars erotica" to describe Asian way of thinking sexuality. In Asian-Americans literature, home emerges as a crucial locus of support, empathy and safety against pervasive racism and othering. It provides a sense of belonging and understanding, where one connects emotionally and culturally distanced from the scrutinizing and prejudiced eyes. *Slant* gives us some insights into the emotional bond between mother-child relationships. The protective cocoon of home- in the form of his mother- gives strength to James. However, home also doubles down as a site of control, silence, invisibility and an oppressive unit that perpetuates normative gender roles and sexuality. Long T. Bui writes thus:

"Home" names a place of much ambiguity and violence for many queer subjects. On the one hand, it names the location of familial origins and traditional kinship ties—the place where one originally comes from and supposedly belongs. On the other hand, it marks a contested violent site of struggle that brings up harsh contradictions and unresolved issues. (129)

Bui's characterization of home as an ambiguous site of contradictions and a battleground of unresolved issues refers to the politics of visibility, silence and discipline. The tension between home as a sanctuary of love and home as a space of control underscores the complex interplay of familial expectations, cultural norms, and individual identity within the realm of the private. Rosalind Chau's conception of "home-culture frame" (21), one that demands excessive loyalty to and reproduction of traditional values and ethos on matters concerning gender and sexual performance and Bui's enumeration of home as a place of ambiguity make for interesting read in exploring the duality in which home is received.

In *Slant*, James is constantly under pressure to perform "hopes, worries and dreams" (42) from his parents at home. The parental aspirations, although well-intentioned, become a complex tapestry that weaves together cultural hopes, familial

concerns, and the aspirational dreams projected onto the Asian-American experience. Asian-American children like James also frequently find themselves ensnared in a guilt-laden narrative, exemplified by the refrain, "You are our only child; we want the best for you" (41). The parental desire for the "best" is laden with implicit societal norms and cultural benchmarks, often tied to conventional paths of success such as academic achievements, stable careers, and adherence to established norms. This rhetoric constructs a narrative wherein the child's fulfillment of parental aspirations becomes a paramount duty, eclipsing individual desires and aspirations. The guilt trip becomes a tool through which familial expectations are communicated and internalized, creating a dynamic where the child's pursuit of personal happiness may be at odds with ingrained cultural values. Wang invites an examination of the societal expectations and emotional pressures placed on individuals within these familial structures, fostering a deeper understanding of the intricate balance between personal autonomy and filial obligations.

James' mother's response to his coming out marks a pivotal narrative juncture that problematizes the ideological contours of what is called "home". James' mother's invocation of the term "normal" in response to his queerness—"What you mean by gay? You perfectly normal kid" (90)—encapsulates a deeply ingrained heteronormative worldview. In this narrative, James' parents manifest a lack of acceptance and discomfort with his gay identity, mirroring the struggles faced by numerous Asian-American immigrant offspring. James' steadfast assertion of his homosexual identity, juxtaposed with his mother's dismissive framing of it as a transient "phase" from which he will inevitably emerge, generates a sustained tension within the narrative. James's prolonged silence regarding his sexual orientation is deeply entwined with the overbearing parental "grip"—a manifestation of cultural authority and familial expectation that operates not merely as parental concern but as a disciplinary force. The metaphorical "grip" embodies not just the physical and emotional control exerted by his parents, but also the deep-rooted influence of traditional expectations and societal norms that shape their cultural worldview. It represents the insidious force of cultural conformity, where familial

authority intersects with broader societal pressures, constricting personal autonomy and shaping James's ability to express his authentic self.

The narrative surrounding James's "coming out" to his parents in the text elucidates the intricate and multifaceted dynamics present in Asian/Chinese-American households, offering readers a profound understanding of the cultural and familial complexities involved. James' revelation to Michael that "My parents would probably blame you for turning me gay and robbing me of my innocence" (163) and his poignant declaration to his mother that, "I wouldn't be bringing a nice girl home" (42) resonate with a profound sense of melancholy within the text. Above all, it underscores the quintessential response of immigrant parents to their child's non-conventional sexual identity. James's acknowledgment of the potential blame and the insinuation of innocence being robbed unveils a complex web of cultural expectations and the imposition of a binary perspective on sexuality. But the lack of prejudiced eyes for race also means that home stays closer to heart. Without the burden of external societal judgments on race, "home" becomes a sanctuary where the individual can anchor themselves in the comfort of unconditional familial love and cultural familiarity. Thus, "coming out" becomes a disconcerting and disorienting process, a process that "is not reducible to either familial embrace or ostracism- the two primary forms for coming out of the insularity of the gay closet." (Bui 131)

Conversely, Michael's parents symbolize a paradigm shift, embodying a more progressive and accommodating worldview. Their acceptance of diverse identities, as suggested by their support for Michael, serves as a counterpoint to the conservatism portrayed through James' familial experience. The narrative strategically positions James' and Michael's parental figures as stark foils, illuminating the contrasting experiences of growing up in a conservative immigrant family versus a more liberally oriented. The contrasting parental figures serve as archetypes, inviting reflection on the complexities faced by individuals navigating their identities within the intersection of familial expectations and the broader cultural landscape.

Wang also situates homosexuality within a religio-socio-historical context and offers a polemical critique of Confucianism and Judeo-Christian conservatism. Notably, Confucianism evolved from the teachings of Chinese philosopher Confucius (551-479 BCE). Confucianism as a philosophy/value system emphasizes on personal morality, correctness of social relationships and virtue. While Chinese-Americans relate Confucianism to positivity, Wang makes some choicest critique on Confucianism. Confucianism comes across as a rigid philosophy/value system in Wang that has strong opinions on especially on heterosexual marriage with a particular emphasis on offspring. Wang's text is particularly critical of how Judeo-Christian values shaped and influenced Chinese and Chinese-American value system on homosexuality. Judeo-Christian conservatism, in the current context, refers to the theological and philosophical underpinning that constructs and defines sexual practices in terms of male/female binary desires, positioning such practices within the sanctified bounds of marriage. and in terms of stability. *Slant*, needless to say, is critical of this.

Wang's brilliance also lies in his ability to seamlessly integrate theological debate with political discourse. The text draws on the rigid principles emphasized by those like Sun Yat-sen, Stalin and particularly the Chinese Communist party. Notably, Sun Yat-sen was a Chinese revolutionary whose baptism to Christianity would subsequently influence Chinese society's views on homosexuality including in terms of constitutional control over peoples' choices and desires. Notably Sun Yat-sen saw homosexuality as "one of the corrupting forces that weakened Imperial China." (89) Wang's narrative deliberately refrains from delving into the historical intricacies of Yat-sen's reign, instead utilizing this backdrop as a framework to critique broader political and ideological currents on sexuality. Wang takes particular issue with the bourgeois character that homosexuality is ascribed within communist political discourse. As Wang writes: "Since, Confucianism was based on conservative values to begin with, the anti-gay sentiment was readily adopted and amplified by the Chinese culture." (89)

A pivotal element in Wang's narration is its adeptness at intertwining controversial topics with a personalized narrative. Wang frequently engages with the dichotomy between Democrats and Republicans in a manner that some might view as a simplistic and polarized representation. The book unabashedly confronts controversy, explicitly designating "Evangelical Christians and the Republicans" (9) as adversaries of homosexuality, underscoring a deliberate and confrontational approach towards these contentious issues. While there may be elements of truth in this assertion, the brevity of the mention suggests a deliberate choice not to steer the plot or the linguistic capacity of the text into the realm of controversy. While the omission of an exhaustive discussion may rightly invite critique for its selective engagement with historical or political detail, the succinct reference can simultaneously be interpreted as a strategic contextual framing—one that subtly foregrounds the fraught terrain in which individuals must negotiate identities under the intersecting pressures of religious dogma and political ideology, both of which continue to hinder the broader acceptance of non-normative sexual orientations. This narrative strategy enables the text to foreground the intimate psychological and emotional dimensions of the characters' lived experiences, without forgoing an implicit recognition of the broader religio-political structures that shape and complicate their trajectories—thereby striking a deliberate balance between personal subjectivity and the systemic forces that contour their realities.

Amidst these layered socio-cultural and political commentaries, it also becomes imperative to undertake a critical examination of the character of James, whose subjectivity not only anchors the narrative but also functions as a lens through which the intersecting tensions of race, sexuality, and diasporic identity are both articulated and contested. Wang presents James not as a stock character but as a round character, a complexity well illustrated by his continual adjustment of his personality throughout the narrative: "I believed that in life, we are who we choose to represent to other people. Each person we know may see us as a different person. Like most people, I acted differently in front of different people." (182) James's adept adjustment of his persona in response to varying situations and individuals reflects an evolving artistry in his character. The performative dimension of James's

self-presentation—his conscious negotiation of identity through speech, behavior, and social interaction—infuses his characterization with a dynamic vitality, effectively precluding the narrative stagnation or monotony that might have arisen in the absence of such deliberate self-fashioning.

The readers are constantly drawn to James' manipulative, shrewd and underhanded conduct. In *James*, Wang creates a manipulative character whose manipulative inclinations extend beyond mere material deception to encompass nuanced forms of emotional subterfuge. Amidst his profound affection for Stan, James strategically leverages Michael's affluence to further his personal agenda, all the while shrouding Michael in ignorance regarding the true nature of his intentions. James's unapologetic admission, encapsulated in "I wasn't proud of it, but guilt melted to a trickle as I anticipated my impending transformation" (179), reveals a stark psychological calculus in which personal reinvention is prioritized over ethical accountability. The readers are able to read into the "wretched person that I had turned into" (188). The readers' awareness of James's manipulative prowess introduces a layer of critical engagement with the narrative. James's admission of guilt, rather than evoking understanding, intensifies the readers' disapproval of his actions, exposing a moral vacuum within his character. The juxtaposition of Michael's trust and James's strategic manipulation creates a compelling narrative dynamic. It may be said of Wang that he deliberately distances himself from a reductive, stereotypical portrayal of the marginalized queer subject by crafting a protagonist whose identity resists idealization, instead illuminating the complexities of queer Asian-American subjectivity. Such a characterization subverts the reductive and often oversimplified representations of queer characters, which typically confine them to roles as either mere victims or idealized paragons of virtue, instead offering a more intricate and multifaceted characterization that acknowledges the complexities of identity formation within the context of intersectional marginalization. In exposing James's shortcomings alongside his vulnerabilities, the narrative provides a more balanced and realistic character study, highlighting the complexity of human nature irrespective of sexual orientation.

The normalization of interracial relation is another feature in Wang. The text occasionally engages in some philosophies like “love doesn’t bring happiness, it brings dread” (172) or “this all consuming emotional prison called love” (172) or still “The ability to fall in love was a weakness” (172). Such a narrative seeks to engender emotional connection. This empathetic engagement illuminates the universality of the human experience in matters of the heart, irrespective of sexual orientation. As the narrative navigates the landscape of heartbreak, it seamlessly aligns the emotional trajectory of James's relationships with the experiences commonly associated with heterosexual counterparts. The delineation of these sentiments within the context of James's series of homosexual relationships serves to broaden the representation of love, demonstrating that the challenges and emotional fluctuations associated with romantic entanglements are universal, transcending sexual orientations. By focusing on the universality of emotional upheavals, the narrative works to normalize homosexual relationships, reinforcing the idea that the intricacies of love and heartbreak are shared across diverse romantic orientations. It fosters a more egalitarian understanding of the emotional landscapes in homosexual relationships. By emphasizing shared emotional vulnerabilities, the narrative dismantles stereotypes and fosters a critical reevaluation of societal norms, thereby contributing to a broader cultural shift toward recognizing the normalcy of diverse expressions of love.

In conclusion, both *Restoried Selves* and *Slant* serve as profound interrogations of the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality within the context of Asian-American subjectivity, offering nuanced critiques of the ways in which these identities are constructed, contested, and marginalized. Situated within the broader tradition of queer writing, these texts advocate for the "unfixing" of identity categories, rejecting the reductive, monolithic frameworks that often dominate discourse in favor of a more dynamic, fluid, and intersectional conception of selfhood. In so doing, they illuminate the intricate and multifactorial process by which individuals navigate their identities as they emerge from the confluence of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. By drawing attention to the myriad ways in which Asian-American experiences are shaped by both historical and

contemporary forces—ranging from familial expectations, cultural frameworks to institutionalized racism, homophobia, and heteronormative power dynamics—these works reveal the complex web of oppressive systems that define and restrict the possibilities of queer Asian-American identities. *Restoried Selves* and *Slant* do not merely highlight the structural forces that inhibit these individuals; rather, they also underscore the resilience, resistance, and self-definition that emerge in response to these forces. The authors examine how Asian-American queers, often positioned at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities, struggle to carve out spaces of belonging, agency, and autonomy within an inhospitable cultural landscape.

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CHAPTER V

Conclusion

The United States remains enmeshed in a persistent dialectic of structural asymmetries, wherein deeply entrenched socio-cultural and political fissures continue to challenge and negate self-referential narratives of progress and inclusivity, particularly in the realms of race and sexuality- two critical sites where the dissonance between America's professed ideals and its material realities are marked by persistent inequities and narratives of contested belonging. This is particularly true of such racial categories like African-American and Indian-Americans and the Chinese-Americans whose lived experiences are often shaped by intersecting forms of marginalization. Structural and systemic challenges related to race and sexuality continues to shape the lived experiences of many individuals, influencing access to education, healthcare, economic mobility, legal protections, and social acceptance. Historical legacies of discrimination, reinforced by contemporary institutional biases, have contributed to ongoing struggle for racial justice and LGBTQ+ rights. As a result, while the nation prides itself on democratic values and personal freedoms, these principles remain unevenly distributed, calling into question the extent to which liberty and opportunity are truly accessible to all.

From the cultural ferment of the Harlem Renaissance to the catalytic defiance of the Stonewall Uprising; from the American Psychiatric Association's pivotal classification/declassification of homosexuality as a mental disorder to its contemporary reconfigurations in medical diaries; from the literary subversions of Radclyffe Hall and James Baldwin to the postmodern narratives of Jeanette Winterson and Russell Leong; from the terminological interventions of Karl-Maria Kertbeny to the genealogical critiques of Michel Foucault and the intersectional analyses of Patricia Hill Collins—the trajectory of queer thought and resistance has been anything but linear, continually evolving through shifting paradigms and contested terrains into the present moment. All through these, the American literary canvas has consistently grappled with the fraught tensions between visibility and erasure, normativity and deviance, identity and performance- rendering queer

existence not merely as subject matter but as a fundamental site of cultural reimagination.

The six primary texts that have been taken up for discussion in this study- *No Ashes in the Fire: Coming of Age Black and Free in America* by Darnell L. Moore, *Speak No Evil* by Uzodinma Iweala, *Brown White Black: An American Family at the Intersection of Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Religion* by Nishta J. Mehra, *Loving Her* by Ann Allen Shockley, *Restoried Selves: Autobiographies of Queer Asian / Pacific American Activists* edited by Kevin Kumashiro and *Slant: A Novel* by Timothy Wang- serve as critical loci in this cultural reimagination- in its exploration of desire, identity and embodiment- each offering a distinctive lens through which the intricate interplay between sexuality and socio-cultural positionality is examined and interrogated. Throughout the preceding four chapters, this study has engaged in a sustained critical examination of race, gender, and sexuality, attending closely to the complex, often contested dynamics that arise from their intersection and co-constitution within literary and cultural discourse. It has sought to illuminate how these intersecting axes of identity co-constitute one another, giving rise to complex formations of subjectivity, power, and resistance that both disrupt and reconfigure dominant narratives.

This concluding chapter aims to synthesize the preceding discussions, analyses, and present key findings, drawing together the central arguments developed throughout the study. The first chapter in this study has been titled “Introduction”. It serves as the conceptual scaffolding for the study, articulating its central research questions and delineating the broader thematic and intellectual terrain in which it is situated. It contextualizes the study’s focus on the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, offering a critical overview of the socio-cultural imperatives that inform its inquiry. The chapter introduces the six primary literary texts selected for analysis, briefly situating each within its historical, cultural, and authorial framework. Furthermore, it outlines the theoretical paradigm employed—drawing on intersectionality, queer theory, and critical race studies amongst others—to establish the methodological foundation upon which the subsequent chapters were built.

The authors featured in this study represent a newer cohort, predominantly producing works in the post-2000 literary landscape, with the exception of Shockley. The selection of these emerging writers was deliberate, as this study aimed to confront the unique and urgent sociocultural challenges confronting contemporary African-American and Asian-American generation of gay, lesbian and trans communities. Shockley's inclusion in this discussion serves a dual function. First, her work provides a historically grounded account of Black queer cultural production, with particular emphasis on its often-overlooked lesbian dimensions. Second, and more significantly, her contribution constitutes a critical intervention into the early articulations of intersectionality, challenging the limitations of prevailing theoretical models by foregrounding the entanglement of race, gender, and sexuality as co-constitutive forces. Additionally, integrating Shockley's work into this discourse facilitated understanding discursive shifts over time.

Of the six books that have been examined, three books (*Speak No Evil* by Uzodinma Iweala, *No Ashes in the Fire* by Darnell L. Moore and *Loving Her* by Ann Alley Shockley) explored the African-American experience, offering unique insights into the challenges, triumphs, and complexities of African-American life, while three others (*Brown White Black* by Nishta J. Mehra, *Restoried Selves* edited by Kevin Kumashiro and *Slant* by Timothy Wang) delved into the Asian-American experience, shedding light on the diverse narratives and perspectives within the Asian-American community. In terms of sexual orientation, three books (*Speak No Evil* by Uzodinma Iweala, *No Ashes in the Fire* by Darnell L. Moore and *Slant* by Timothy Wang) addressed gay theme i.e., while two books (*Loving Her* by Ann Alley Shockley and *Brown White Black* Nishta J. Mehra) dealt with lesbian theme, while one remaining (*Restoried Selves* edited by Kevin Kumashiro) encompassed narratives that traverse gay, lesbian, and transgender experiences.

Within the study's intersectional matrix, the lived reality of a Black homosexual diverges markedly from that of his white counterpart, shaped by the compounded effects of racialization. Similarly, the positionality of a Black lesbian is rendered even more precarious—thrice distanced: from her Black gay male

counterpart, her white gay female counterpart, and her white lesbian counterpart—thus illuminating the multiply inflected contours of her social and cultural alienation. In this same critical gesture, the distinctiveness of Asian-American queer experiences must also be disaggregated from homogenizing frameworks, recognizing how racialized histories, diasporic identities, and cultural specificities mediate their relationship to normativity and deviance.

The introductory chapter acknowledges this multifaceted and complex nature of these dynamics and contends that a meaningful engagement with such complexity necessitates the adoption of an intersectional analytical framework. It lays the groundwork for the theoretical model employed in the analysis of the selected texts. It positions the work of foundational theorists such as Foucault and Butler as significant to the critical framework, acknowledging their contributions to understanding power, discourse, and identity. However, it also contends that these theories—rooted primarily in European intellectual traditions—often overlook or insufficiently engage with the complexities of race and ethnicity. As such, the introductory chapter argues for adoption of an intersectional framework to critically examine the overlapping and interdependent systems of identity and oppression that inform the narratives under examination. Intersectionality serves as a central lens, throughout the study, through which the complexities of identity, power structures, and social categorizations—such as race, gender, class, and culture—are critically examined and understood.

An exhaustive survey of the vast corpus of Asian American literature lay beyond the purview of the first chapter. Rather, its objective was to offer a concise yet critical engagement with select seminal texts, foregrounding the thematic preoccupations and cultural interventions these works articulate within the broader contours of the present inquiry. It was, however, imperative to establish a foundational understanding of both African-American and Asian-American literary traditions—examining what constitutes these bodies of literature, their central thematic concerns, and the ways in which they engage with pressing issues affecting the communities and identities they represent. A broad overview of various racial

groups- African-American, Indian-American, Chinese-American, Filipino-American etc- needless to say, was the first step forward in our exploration of various discourses concerning the intersection of race, gender and sexuality. A succinct exploration of the historical, social, and cultural contexts enveloping these texts, thus, makes it within the scope of the first chapter.

The first chapter also brings attention to power dynamics, illustrating how the construction of identities among non-white individuals, particularly non-white queers, is connected to power or the exercise of it. It argues that the construction of stereotypes and the misrepresentation of marginalized identities within cultural discourse are deliberately orchestrated mechanisms of control, strategically employed to regulate, constrain, and pathologize non white and non straight sexualities within dominant social narratives. All the texts envision a framework in which power circulates in complicated ways rather than unidirectional.

“Although identity theory and queer theory continue to push boundaries and ask challenging questions about what “normal” is and how “the normal” is continually redefined, there is still a large gap between these theoretical insights and the lived experience of identity difference.” (Shipley 196) The African-American gay scene serves as a poignant illustration of the gap between theoretical insights and the complex realities of lived experience of identity politics. Studies in Black America often points to a scenario where race is seen as the proper sphere of study for African-Americans (and therefore the whole discourse heavily tilted in favor of race), and any discussions on race and queer to be studied in isolation. In a situation where category of sexuality is subordinated to that of race, discourses on black sexuality are often studied in isolation and very little attention is paid to intersectional dynamics, the complex lived realities of African-Americans become a thing that is undermined.

Many black authors and scholars have resisted such a compartmentalized analysis and insisted on the inseparability of racial and sexual identities as fundamental to any meaningful understanding of Black subjectivity. The works of Darnell L. Moore and Uzodinma exemplify such meaningful construction of sense.

Moore and Iweala position their work within the framework of intersectionality to unravel the multidimensional marginalization of Black gay individuals. The second chapter in this study examines this phenomenon through a critical analysis of Moore's *No Ashes in the Fire* and Iweala's *Speak No Evil*.

The second chapter maps how Black gay men navigate homophobia through distinct racialized experiences wherein both Black behavior and embodiment are subjected to rigid normative scripts. It confront a nexus of other oppressions—hypermasculinity, patriarchy, and Black nationalist ideologies in the analysis of black gay discursivities. In examining America as a “safe” shelter for those living on the margins of race and sexuality, this chapter interrogates the restrictive rules governing the code of blackness and homosexuality in different institutions and structures.

The second chapter particular looks at how different institutions and structures make sexuality a complex and risky enterprise for African-American men as in evinced in the two texts mentioned above. This exploration caters to essential institutions like family, school, religion and the legal system shedding light on their roles in shaping the challenges surrounding sexuality. Additionally, the exploration extends to other societal entities, including law enforcement and legal systems, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted influences. Institutions, including family, education, religion, and the legal system, wield substantial influence in African-American gay life.

It emerges from the study that homosexual and racial prejudice and biasness are deeply entrenched within the fabric of social institutions and systemic structures—it permeates their policies, practices, and norms. In Moore's narrative, the church and religious doctrine emerge as pivotal sites of ideological formation and social control, particularly in their role in regulating and disciplining Black sexuality. Moore's work reveals how religious institutions become vehicles through which patriarchal and heteronormative values are naturalized, shaping both personal identity formation and collective social expectations. This study interrogates the rigid binary oppositions—(good/evil, moral/immoral etc.)—in which homosexuality and heterosexuality comes

to be received in religious domain. This chapter on Moore also interrogates pedagogical institutions as critical sites where dominant ideologies surrounding race, gender, and sexuality are both transmitted and enforced. Schools, in Moore's account, become formative arenas where love, desire, and identity are shaped by the intersecting pressures of white heteronormativity and racial marginalization. Moore highlights the issues of lack of representation/misrepresentation in school syllabus and calls out for its heteronormative bias. The systemic erasure of Black queer experiences from educational curricula not only reflects institutional bias but also underscores the profound impact of representational absence on identity formation and belonging. Notably, *No Ashes* draws a distinction between secular educational institutions and those affiliated with religious denominations, portraying the latter as inherently more conservative. Schools, colleges and universities, in Moore become a site of power struggle in which the twin forces of hetero-normativity and homosexuality struggle for space. It emerges as a site of negotiation for black homosexuality "to practice a love inclusive of all black people." (121) Moore believes that a safe environment for LGBTQ must come from schools exclusively devoted to LGBTQ people. The idea of a separate school for LGBTQ gays and black LGBTQ as Moore envisages in his speech towards the end of the memoir is a radical idea, an idea that his attendees, however, are at odds with.

The second chapter on Moore also critically examines the role of Black domestic spaces as sites of constraint, particularly in their policing of gender and sexual nonconformity. Moore's fraught relationships—with a father invested in patriarchal authority and a neighborhood bully enforcing hypermasculine norms—underscore how Black homes reproduce the very structures of oppression they are presumed to shield against. As the text notes, "While the world outside "may not be as hospitable... homes, can be just as hostile." (32) By challenging the idealization of the Black household as a sanctuary from racial injustice, this study reveals how respectability politics within these spaces often mandate conformity to heteronormative and gender-normative expectations, thereby marginalizing queer identities from within.

Moore's text is situated in the growing world of AIDS. Moore narrativizes AIDS as a discursive site, as a site of control and power in which black gay bodies receive a series of representations. Foucault's discourses on medicine and psychiatry as institutions/centers of control serve as excellent background to Moore's own discourses on AIDS and sex. Foucault contends that medicine and psychiatry led to multiplicity of discourse through which to control and regulate sexualities in men. In Foucault's worldview, these centers of power perpetuate and enforce marginalization. Moore's narrative also reveals the deeply entrenched hierarchies of corporeal value and multiplicity of discourse that structured public responses to the AIDS crisis. He uses the framing of control, power, and pleasure to highlight the specific experiences of black gay men's bodies marked by AIDS.

Moore's text not only critiques the structures of oppression that marginalize Black queer identities but also gestures toward a progressive horizon, one marked by the emerging presence and visibility of LGBTQ discursivities. The presence of LGBTQ commissions, Pride Alliances and NGOs in the text are a major break from Stonewall episode where queers were oppressed. Moore's text encourages a practice of critical self-reflection, a practice that catalyzes internal transformation whereby the readers are invited to look at their own prejudice and bias. Moore's own self-reflection on his acquired masculine and patriarchal prejudices builds an environment of critical self-reflection. Crucially, Moore rejects the passive notion of merely occupying a place within historical memory; instead, he positions himself as an active agent of change, advocating for a praxis-driven engagement with history that seeks not simply to be recorded but to transform the structures that define it.

Moore's text emerges as a powerful work of resistance, foregrounding the struggle to assert marginalized identities within educational institutions, religious spaces, and state structures. It articulates a sustained contestation of hegemonic narratives that seek to silence or erase queer Black experiences. Moore challenges and disrupts the dominant hegemonic discourses by consistently questioning, undermining and destabilizing rigid notions of identity by deconstructing binaries of heterosexual/homosexual and masculine/feminine in these institutes. Moore's text is

not a “definitive take on blackness, manhood, and sexual politics” as Moore himself says. Instead they are quotidian experience of a man, a black man who is also queer and who happens to be a citizen of the United States. Moore writes that “this book is a search for self” (10). In a way it can be said that the book is a search for the self of the entire African-American community.

Like Moore, Iweala examines the distinct positionality of African-Americans; however, whereas Moore centers an adult figure, Iweala foregrounds an adolescent protagonist as the site through which these complexities are explored. The co-constitution of the categories of race, gender and sexuality through intersectional mode of articulation finds poignant expression in the experience of the central protagonist Niru. Through its central protagonist, the text explores multiple identities, grappling with what it means to be Black in America, to live as an immigrant, and to exist as a queer individual. Iweala adeptly integrates motifs of religion, cultural dislocation, familial structures, police violence, and trauma, thereby intensifying and complicating critical discourses surrounding identity formation.

Among its many concerns, Iweala’s text examines the overreach of institutional power in regulating sexuality, while also tracing how these excesses are inflected by racial dynamics. Fundamental to these mechanisms are key institutions like the family, the educational system, and religion, each instrumental in structuring and sustaining the operations of power and control. In Iweala, the institution of family emerges as a central site of interrogation, revealing how it functions as a primary mechanism for the enforcement and normalization of societal norms surrounding sexuality. Love writes that “Many of the fiercest gendered battles are fought on the bodies of newborn infants, elementary school children and adolescent.” (159) This study contends that the family, as a foundational space of socialization, plays a pivotal role in shaping and regulating individual sexual identities. *Speak No Evil* critically explores how children are systematically indoctrinated both into and against homosexuality, illustrating how birth marks not just the entry into the human world but also the imposition of rigid, socially constructed identities (Jenkins 77).

Like Moore, Iweala critically examines the educational system as a site in which homophobic and racialized discourses are not only reproduced but actively sustained. In Iweala's work, educational institutions operate as instruments of power, functioning both as regulatory mechanisms and formative forces. They impose pressures toward conformity, demanding allegiance to dominant norms, and act as potent agents of socialization, producing subjects who internalize and reproduce established social conventions. Niru's encounters with hostile "white boys and white girls," who subject him to racialized and homophobic abuse, expose the school's role in legitimizing structures of exclusion. However, while educational institutions are acknowledged as sites where normative ideologies are reproduced, Iweala's narrative primarily centers the institution of religion as the dominant force shaping the protagonist's experiences of repression and identity conflict.

Iweala devotes a substantial portion of the text to a sustained critique of the institution of religion, positioning it as a central apparatus in the regulation of sexuality and the enforcement of normative moral frameworks. Notably, the institutional structure of the church mirrors the dynamics of the private family, amplifying these relational patterns on a broader societal scale. The study on religion interrogates how church operates on a binary model ('clean/godly' and 'sin/sinner' etc) to construct and discipline bodies and sexual subjectivities. Through the figures of Reverend Olumide and Bishop Okereke, this study reveals how ecclesiastical authority conflates spiritual doctrine with sociopolitical control, collapsing the boundary between private belief and public morality. The study connects this to the exercise of power, arguing that Olumide and Okereke's repeated calls to Niru for moral realignment and salvation, framed through the terms 'confession' and 'repentance,' should not be viewed solely as spiritual guidance. This study shows that they represent a deliberate exertion of authority and control within the narrative, underscoring the intersection of religious doctrine and institutional power.

This chapter on Iweala also interrogates Black nationalism as a vehicle of oppression, revealing how it can reinforce exclusionary norms around race, sexuality, and cultural authenticity. Moore critically interrogates the notions of black

nationalism through the geographical shift in the narrative's setting from America to Nigeria. A key thematic concern Moore raises within black nationalism discourse is the African/Un-African debate regarding homosexuality. Within this framework, Niru's same-sex is framed as a source of "shame and disgrace" (28) not just for the family but the whole black race. A central strand of the argument positions Niru's blackness as inherently incompatible with what is perceived as "white" immodesty, suggesting that such expressions of non-heteronormative sexuality are alien to, and thus impermissible within black identity. This study argues that such constructions reflect not an intrinsic cultural rejection of queerness, but rather the lingering effects of colonial ideologies—specifically, the internalization of colonial homophobia within African and diasporic consciousness.

In this chapter on Iweala, we also examine the stereotyping of Black bodies, particularly the hypersexualization of African American men—a construct deeply rooted in colonial histories and critically explored by Frantz Fanon. Within this racialized dynamic, Black individuals are often cast as perpetrators of a supposed "bestiality," while white individuals are positioned as victims. This chapter draws on these entrenched stereotypes to explore how the intersection of race and sexuality imposes profound challenges on queer Black men. In *Speak No Evil*, it is stereotypes that lead to the impending tragedy in course of the plot. This chapter links constructs of bestiality and criminality to the policing and brutalization of Black sexualities, exposing a social order bent toward their regulation through "death and destruction."

In Iweala, race-making functions as an intersectional process, not merely a singular identity marker but a mechanism of othering, hierarchy, and subordination that shapes power and identity across the narrative. The intricate interplay between compulsive heterosexuality and race engenders a confluence of novel dynamics, ushering forth a multifaceted tapestry of social intricacies. This intricate interplay is explored through an interrogation of hyper-sexualization of African-American men and consequently an interrogation on police violence and legal particularities.

Iweala's text also narrativizes protest and rebellion against compulsive heterosexuality. Like Moore, Iweala also frames his narrative in terms of resistance.

Niru's subtle but persistent acts of defiance—asserting that “This is my life” (39) and insisting, “I’m perfectly capable of deciding for myself” (39)—mark significant moments of resistance not only against his father’s authority but also against broader ideological forces that frame homosexuality as both “Un-African” and religiously deviant. His rejection of religious authority, captured in his admission, “I rejected Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior” (36), further positions him as a figure of minor but potent rebellion. Niru’s resistance echoes Foucault’s proposition that power is always accompanied by forms of counter-power; however, it is crucial to recognize that Niru’s acts of dissent are shaped by the profound limitations of his young-adult self and inexperience. As a teenager navigating deeply entrenched structures of familial, cultural, and religious domination, Niru’s small gestures of rebellion acquire profound significance.

The third chapter has been titled “The Politics of Visibility in *Loving Her* and *Brown White Black*” and deals with the question of in/visibility of non-white female queer sexuality. The chapter examines the politics of visibility within an intersectional framework, with particular reference to Nishta Mehra’s *Brown White Black* and Allen Shockley’s *Loving Her*. The chapter opens by examining the concept of in/visibility as it emerges at the intersection of gender, sexuality, and race. It argues that visibility enables individuals from marginalized groups to be recognized, their experiences validated, stereotypes challenged, and identities affirmed. It sets the precedent for the contextual discussion of the two primary texts mentioned above, the role of institutions and the linguistic construction of identity categories amongst others.

The first half of Chapter Three undertakes a detailed deconstruction of Allen Shockley’s *Loving Her*, examining how the text engages with and challenges dominant narratives surrounding gender, sexuality, and race, and situating its analysis within broader socio-cultural and historical contexts. Shockley’s novel provides a lens through which to examine the systemic marginalization that shapes the lives of Black women, highlighting how restricted agency within societal structures produces enduring power imbalances and contributes to their continued

invisibility. Lesbian romance has long been an integral aspect of human experience, yet it wasn't until 1928 Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* announced itself to the public. The exploration of homosexuality, particularly lesbian relationships, was confined to the portrayal of white women. Allen Shockley's *Loving Her* marked a transformative shift in this regard.

Black gay men are predominantly marginalized through the intersection of racial identity and non-normative sexual expression; Black queer women, on the other hand, contend with an added layer of gendered oppression. Shockley articulates the condition of Black womanhood as one of inescapable structural entrapment, wherein the convergence of racialized, gendered, and sexualized subjugation constitutes a triadic matrix of exclusion. This “triple strike” renders Black women legible primarily through intersecting regimes of marginalization, situating their subjectivity at the nexus of compounded erasure and hypervisibility.

The study situates Renay as a site of scrutiny who is subjected to judgment and stigma by both the African-American community and the broader society for embodying identities that diverge from dominant norms—heterosexuality, respectability, domesticity. Renay's experience, in course of the narrative emerges as a potent symbol of the intricate struggles endured by numerous African-American women-loving-women who, by transgressing established paradigms of love, socialization, and identity formation, have historically been relegated to the margins and rendered invisible within intra-communal constructions of belonging and respectability.

In Shockley's work, home and family surface as critical arenas for examining conformity, the exercise of power, the enactment of violence, and the operation of disciplinary mechanisms. *Loving Her* challenges readers to examine how visibility is politicized, linking this to themes of Black masculinity, Black patriarchy, and Black respectability as they are portrayed within the Davis family. The study investigates how Renay's body serves as a site where the pressures of patriarchy and Black cultural nationalism collide and take shape. In *Loving Her*, performances of Blackness for Black women become fraught and deeply complicated because they

must constantly negotiate between asserting their own individuality and conforming to rigid, often externally imposed, notions of what it means to be ‘authentically’ Black. This balancing act is delicate: self-expression risks being labeled as a betrayal of communal identity, while strict adherence to ‘authentic’ Black expectations can stifle personal freedom and complexity. Within black families like the Davis family, Black women are expected to embody particular ideals — strength, loyalty, respectability — that often leave little room for deviation or vulnerability. This study demonstrates that Black nationalism functions as a deeply problematic category, as it not only suppresses and erases the long and complex histories of same-sex relationships among African-Americans (and Africans more broadly), but also establishes a rigid disciplinary framework that imposes newly defined rules for identity, belonging, and behavior as seen in Renay. Although the text never directly names Black Nationalism, its influence is woven throughout the narrative, subtly shaping the characters' experiences, relationships, and struggles. Black Nationalism is a source of constant tension in the text.

Shockley’s text is crafted within an intersectional framework. In this intersectional model, Shockley does not treat social categories as isolated or independent; rather, she highlights how they interact dynamically, shaping and reshaping meaning in ways that are deeply interconnected and context-dependent. Through the narratorial plot, Shockley underscores the intersectional dynamism of race, gender and sexuality exemplified through characters like Miss Wilby, Mr. Herald and a particular unnamed middle aged white man. The intersection of white racism with gender and sexuality finds best expression through Renay’s encounter with the middle aged white man in course of the text.

Shockley’s work operates as both a radical intervention into the erasure of non-white, non-heteronormative intimacies and a vital contribution to resistance literature, positioning Black lesbian bodies as contested terrains where intersecting oppressions are confronted and reimagined. By foregrounding same-sex desire amid historical silences and infrastructural absences, her narrative not only destabilizes dominant paradigms but also reclaims discursive space, necessitating a historically

attuned reading that situates its aesthetic and political significance within its conditions of emergence. At a time when same-sex desires among Black women were heavily stigmatized and silenced, Shockley boldly brings these desires into visibility, challenging dominant narratives and reclaiming space for marginalized voices. This study contends that a critical examination of Shockley's portrayal of same-sex relationships must be grounded in an understanding of the historical conditions under which her work emerged. The absence of mentor texts and the lack of supportive cultural and literary infrastructures are foregrounded to contextualize and, to some extent, mitigate the perceived limitations within the novel.

The second part of Chapter Three interrogates the politics of visibility in Nishta J. Mehra's *Brown White Black*. Similar to Shockley, Mehra directs the reader's focus to the complexities of 'visibility' and its limitations, highlighting what it can and cannot achieve. Through candid discussions on issues of gender, sexuality, race, and immigration in *Brown White Black*, Mehra explores these themes with depth and honesty. The text integrates these issues within an intersectional framework, thereby enabling readers to critically examine the implications of the politics of visibility and invisibility on queer people like her. The concept of visibility in the narrative is shaped by the intersectionality of Mehra's various identity categories, intricately interwoven through her gender, her same-sex relationship with Jill, and the multifaceted positioning of her Black son, who exists at the convergence of multiple intersecting social identities. This study on Mehra critically examines and interrogates the issue of visibility in relation to the pervasive structural discrimination that manifests across various domains, including family dynamics, educational systems, media representations, and legal institutions."

In Mehra's work, the intersecting identities of race, gender, and sexuality converge to create intricate dynamics of existence. Brown writes that "notions of cultural difference readily become systems of judgment and coercion by which one group marks off and dominates others." (660) In Mehra's narrative, cultural sanctions and the complexities of misrepresentation are examined through a nuanced interplay of personal and historical perspectives. This study shows how immigrant children,

such as Mehra, frequently find themselves at a crossroads, navigating the tension between their Indian-American heritage and the influences of their American upbringing. In doing so, it considers ideas like uniformities, commonalities, omissions and commissions in representation of queer immigrants.

A key distinction between Shockley and Mehra lies in their treatment of representation. While Shockley's narrative largely omits direct engagement with media or pedagogical frameworks, Mehra's text explicitly interrogates these structures, foregrounding their role in shaping and disseminating conceptions of identity and difference. The narrative voice in Mehra's text offers a critical analysis of the absence of authentic representation and role models for non-white sexuality, with a particular focus on non-white lesbian sexuality, in U.S. media and films in contrast to white sexuality which is amply represented. This study argues that the issue of representation in media, literature, and other spheres is intricately tied to the politics of omission and commission, where what is excluded and what is included reflects and reinforces power dynamics, often marginalizing certain voices while privileging others. Central to the narrative is a sustained thematic engagement with the recognition and genuine affirmation of difference as a means of resisting such misrepresentations.

One of the key misrepresentations that this study examines is the model minority myth. This chapter interrogates, through the example of Mehra, how immigrants and immigrant children, particularly from Asian background, under the model minority myth are constantly under pressure to conform to rigid gender roles and performance of sexuality. The idea of the model minority serves as a continuous source of tension throughout the text.

This chapter also critically examines 'family' as a normative institution that enforces heteronormative ideologies, particularly within diasporic contexts. Mehra is critical of the institution of family, which she perceives as a site of confinement and conformity, often reinforcing traditional gender roles and heteronormative expectations that marginalize non-conventional identities. This chapter interrogates the adversarial dynamic between Mehra and her father to illuminate the dissonance

produced by their divergent constructions of identity, cultural affiliation, and normative social expectations within a domestic sphere marked by ideological rigidity and intergenerational tension. This chapter also explores the institutions of pedagogy, examining how it contributes to the marginalization of gendered, sexual, and racial identities both independently and at their intersections. Mehra also weaves the politics of visibility into legal discourse, offering a nuanced analysis of how the interaction between legal structures and compulsory heterosexuality influences the struggle for recognition. Amongst other interests within the legal framework, this study interrogates issues of adoption and motherhood, emphasizing how institutional systems selectively grant visibility to some identities while marginalizing others.

Both Shockley and Mehra resist the systematic politics of erasure and violence. The writers are body-conscious and intend to defend the body over other ideas that produce repression and self-hatred. They toy with the concept of the body as an autonomous unit. Identity formation, then, is understood in the postmodern sense of the term. Shockley and Mehra share several key thematic concerns in their works, including a critical examination of heteronormativity, an engagement with intersectionality, an exploration of family and institutional dynamics, and a focus on the concept of resistance.

But there are numerous ways in which the two books differ significantly from one another. Shockley's work, written in the 1970s without the benefit of a foundation in intersectional studies, presents a relatively simplistic and less nuanced exploration compared to Mehra's. Written in the 21st century, Mehra's *Brown White Black* is informed by a wealth of critical texts and frameworks, making it a more comprehensive and incisive read. Mehra engages with a broad range of issues—motherhood and parenthood within an intersectional context, the power structures that seek to homogenize worldviews, performativity, stereotypes, othering, identity formation in children, and the immigrant experience. These themes are explored in depth throughout *Brown White Black*, offering a thorough analysis of resistance and social dynamics. But there are many other ways in which the two books are more different than one another. Shockley's book was written in the 1970s and with no

mentor in intersectional studies, the book is easily much simplistic and less complicated than Mehra's. Mehra writes in the 21st century and with a plethora of texts to guide her, *Brown White Black* is easily a more comprehensive and more critical read. The diverse issues of motherhood and parenthood in intersectional context, power structures that be that seeks to homogenize the worldview, or issued of performativity, stereotypes, othering, identity formation in kids, the issues of immigrant in the context of intersectional study or of resistance- these find a comprehensive discussion or treatment in course of Mehra's *Brown White Black*. From general and universal parenting worries and plans to more subjective concerns like blatant racism, inter-racialism, compulsive-heterosexuality, the narration draws on the experience of its characters as they face hard realities of life.

The fourth chapter in this research study is dedicated to understanding the precarious position of Asian-American sexualities through an intersectionality framework. It explores queer politics within Asian-American communities through a racial lens, examining how racialization shapes and intersects with experiences of queerness, and how these dynamics challenge dominant frameworks that often universalize queer identities without accounting for cultural and racial specificity. This chapter looks at these ideas through an interrogation of *Restoried Selves* and *Slant*. The chapter has been titled 'Fragmented Entries, Multiple Selves': Performing Asian-American in *Restoried Selves* and *Slant*."

This chapter undertakes a critical interrogation of a wide spectrum of interrelated themes, including the pursuit of visibility, the quest for belonging, the conflicting societal norms, history, questions of home and ethnic enclave, enduring impact of stereotypes and search for correct and full representation. It further engages with the complexities of immigration and processes of acculturation, as well as the generational tensions that arise within diasporic Asian-American communities. In doing so, it also examines the evolving forms of activism and advocacy that emerge in response to these layered experiences of intersectionality, paying close attention to how individuals and communities navigate identity, resistance, and belonging across multiple axes of difference. In our exploration of Asian-American

queer discursivities, we also interrogate such ideas as colonialism, hegemonic masculinity and how these relate to questions of race, gender and heterosexism. It draws on theorists like Michel Foucault, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Richard Jenkins, David L. Eng, Rosalind S. Chou and Russell Leong amongst others.

The first section of the fourth chapter concerns with *Restoried Selves*. *Restoried Selves* centers the narratives of seventeen Asian and Pacific American authors who identify as gay, bisexual, lesbian, transgender, or queer, bringing their diverse lived experiences to the forefront. One of the central thematic interest of *Restoried Selves* debates how categories of difference constantly play on each other. The unfolding of the authors' narratives—through personal recollections of mothers and fathers, siblings, neighbors, strangers, and encounters with institutions and societal structures—reveals the insidious ways in which racism and homophobia are embedded within the quotidian rhythms of social life.

In *Restoried Selves*, the challenge of compartmentalizing identities emerges as a central and pressing theme. The text explores the idea if racial and sexual identity be compartmentalized and studied in isolation. The narratives reveal that for queer Asian-American individuals, identity cannot be neatly divided into isolated categories. Instead, these aspects are deeply intertwined, shaping and informing one another in ways that reflect the complexity of lived experience. This study contends that while prioritizing one form of oppression over another may appear pragmatic, it ultimately weakens the core principles of intersectionality and solidarity. Such an approach fails to account for the lived experiences of individuals at the intersections, whose realities cannot be reduced to singular, isolated categories of oppression. The text highlights how resisting this fragmentation is both a political and personal act—one that affirms the wholeness of self in the face of societal forces that demand simplification or erasure.

Another recurring thread woven throughout these autobiographies is the nuanced and contested terrain of representation—specifically, the struggle to articulate and assert marginalized identities within cultural, social, and literary frameworks that have historically rendered them invisible, stereotyped, or distorted.

The fourth chapter on *Restoried Selves* critically examines the politics of representation by analyzing how Asian American identities are constructed, mediated, and often distorted through pervasive stereotypes across cultural and media landscapes. This study interrogates how Chinese/Japanese/Thai-American individuals— are frequently subjected to exoticization, eroticization, and fetishization, constructed through orientalist frameworks as objects of Western desire and fantasy— across mediums ranging from film to digital platforms. It shows that such representations reduce complex identities to hyper-sexualized tropes, reinforcing systems of racism, sexism, and imperialism. The model minority myth also makes a significant presence in course of the narrative in *Restoried Selves*.

Just as in Nishta J Mehra, one of the dominant representations critiqued throughout *Restoried Selves* is that of the ‘model minority’. This section connects the model minority myth and other stereotypes of Asian-Americans to the dynamics of power, and argues that such misrepresentations ultimately functions to silence dissent, obscure the diversity of Asian-American experiences. As Rosalind Chow argues, “Asian-American sexuality is socially shaped in ways that maintain social and political dominance for whites, particularly white men.” (2)

A central theme in *Restoried Selves* is the "home culture" frame, which imposes traditional expectations around family, marriage, and gender roles that Asian-Americans are often pressured to uphold. An examination of the autobiographies reveals that for queer Asian-Americans, the concept of "home" emerges as a fraught and contradictory space—simultaneously a site of belonging and exclusion. It is a space where familial and cultural expectations often conflict with individual identity, creating a terrain marked by both intimate connection and profound alienation. This creates significant tension in course of the narrative. ‘Home Culture’ framework, together with ethnic enclave, constitutes powerful bulwarks of solace, camaraderie and resilience as well as sites of struggle for social justice. Ethnic enclave often serves as a site for testing loyalty and allegiance. As Bow writes, “The expression of sexuality both signify and interrogate political alliance and ethnic collectivity” (8)

The fourth chapter also brings critical attention to the role of language in the formation and negotiation of identities at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality, highlighting how linguistic practices both reflect and produce the power dynamics that govern marginalized subjectivities. Together with this, this chapter also looks at the role that institution like pedagogy play to regulate non-white non-straight bodies. The institutionalization of racism in schools coupled with the institutionalization of homophobia, creates intersecting systems of oppression that disproportionately affect Asian-Americans. Schools, in these autobiographies, go beyond performing ‘academic’ exercise and become a site of indoctrination into customary and conservative outlooks and projects. Racially homogenous high schools frequently function as spaces of marginalization, particularly for queer Asian-Americans, who often navigate intensified forms of exclusion and identity erasure within such environments. Thomson, Dang, Chisty, Benjamin, Kumashiro amongst others all critique American schools for their political nature, for pushing stereotypes, for upholding binary models of identity and thus shape and complicate the formative landscape of adolescence. The study demonstrates how educational institutions often sustain dominant, patriarchal, and Eurocentric frameworks under the pretense of objectivity and neutrality. In *Restoried Selves*, educational trajectories reveal a stark contrast between the restrictive, often silencing environments of schools and the relatively more open, dialogic spaces of colleges. The study also underscores the potential for transformation, as exemplified by Dariotis' efforts to teach sexual diversity within the classroom, highlighting education's evolving capacity to foster critical dialogue and social change.

Another key thematic aspect of the book is its exploration of intersectionality within the queer community, particularly how racism privileges whiteness—especially that of cisgender gay white men—as the normative standard, marginalizing queer people of color in the process. “Racism in the gay community is largely based on beliefs about the desirability of one race over another as potential sexual partners. This study finds that leadership and decision-making structures within mainstream queer communities are frequently dominated by white individuals, resulting in the systemic centering of white queer experiences.

Consequently, the concerns, narratives, and priorities of white queer individuals tend to overshadow those of queer people of color, leading to an unequal distribution of visibility, resources, and influence. The "white queer privilege" very often renders Asian-America experiences invisible, while their fetishization and exoticization—such as Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese—reduces them to sexualized objects. David C. Lee's analysis of the "Rice Queen" phenomenon offers a compelling critique within this context.

A critical observation in this study is the strategic embrace of activism by the authors in *Restoried Selves*, using it as a tool for social change. For many contributors, activism goes beyond personal struggle, becoming a deliberate political act to challenge systems of racism, homophobia, and gendered oppression. These autobiographies evolve from personal narratives into collective calls to action, particularly through campus-based activism, urging queer Asian-Americans and allies to confront and dismantle structures of marginalization.

The autobiographies reflect a more combative strain of queer youth politics that challenge stereotypes, break barriers, and redefine the contours of queer identity within the Asian/Pacific American context. These author-activists articulate narratives that are deeply embedded in personal history, shaped by the socio-cultural environments they inhabit, and mediated through the dominant discourses that frame and often constrain their identities. It contributes to the creation of a cultural environment where the complexity and diversity of Asian-American identities are not only acknowledged but actively affirmed. Their work fosters a cultural landscape in which the multiplicity of Asian-American queer experiences can emerge—experiences that challenge normative assumptions, assert intersectional identities, and demand space within broader political and cultural discourses.

Timothy Wang's *Slant* (2011) is final primary text considered for study. It constitutes a pivotal contribution to Asian-American queer literature, with particular emphasis on the experiences of Chinese-American queer individuals. As a central text in the second section of the fourth chapter, it deepens the exploration of identity, representation, and intersectionality within its specific cultural and sexual context of

Asian-Americans. *Slant* critically examines the production of knowledge around queer and gay Asian/Chinese-American identities, foregrounding how the entanglement of racial and sexual difference contributes to their systemic marginalization. At the intersection of race, gender and sexuality, Wang examines an array of concomitant considerations and concerns encompassing issues such of stereotypes and representation, cultural hybridity and hegemonic normativity amongst others. Through the portrayal of James—a Chinese-American teenager and mathematics student at MIT—Wang critically engages with the fraught terrain of hyphenated identity, illustrating how Asian/Chinese-American queer experiences are often marginalized within the ostensibly inclusive yet implicitly exclusionary liberal narratives of the United States. James’s interactions with the dominant white, heterosexual milieu underscore the tensions, erasures, and cultural dissonances that shape the lived realities of queer diasporic subjectivity.

This chapter on Wang draws on Mignolo’s decolonial manifesto ‘zero point epistemology’ to interrogate the unique situatedness in which the Asian/Chinese-Americans are often mapped and labeled, as we see in *Slant*, especially within the interconnectedness of race and sexuality. The narrative structure in Wang reveals how James’s experiences are continually shaped by “the hubris of Zero Point, thereby rendering his identity as deviant or other within a supposedly universal framework. James is constantly judged by American standards. In this standard, his gay as well as his skin color constantly fails him.

While Wang works on exposing the American educational system for its homophobia and racial prejudice, this study finds that Wang’s critique of the educational campus remains relatively brief and peripheral, especially when contrasted with *Restoried Selves*, where academic institutions serve as central sites for sustained interrogation of racial, sexual, and cultural marginalization. Wang’s focus seems to be more on unraveling the biopolitical mechanisms through which Chinese-American bodies are inscribed, regulated, and pathologized through linguistic construction. In Wang’s work, the use of labels, categorization, and classification derived from linguistic politics becomes a critical lens through which

the complexities of identity are explored. This chapter on Wang critically interrogates constructs of masculinity, orientalist stereotypes and white racism, and explores themes such as identity fragmentation, cultural inheritance, marginalization within mainstream gay communities, substance abuse, and the fetishization of Asian bodies amongst others.

An important thematic concern that Wang raises in course of the narrative is the lack of representation/misrepresentation of Chinese-Americans in popular discourse. This study shows that representation of Asian-Americans and Chinese-Americans are deeply shaped by longstanding historical and cultural influences. It argues that historical contours have contributed to the perpetuation of stereotypes about Asian-Americans as being foreign, exotic, or interchangeable over the years. Wang offers a deeper and more genuine representation of Chinese-Americans, moving beyond reductive stereotypes. Through the character of James, the story's protagonist, Wang confronts dominant cultural clichés while encouraging a more nuanced understanding and appreciation of the richness and diversity of Chinese-American identity.

Wang's text is an important work of fiction on the pervasive racism within the U.S. gay community, urging critical reflection on how racial biases shape social interactions and intimacy. James' remark—"This gay thing is harder than I thought" (16)—captures the layered exclusions faced by queer people of color. Through Wang's critique of "Rice Queens," the study interrogates Asian fetishization as a racialized power dynamic, revealing how whiteness is idealized while Asian identities are marginalized. These narratives uncover the racial hierarchies embedded within ostensibly inclusive queer spaces. A key distinction in Wang's text is its nuanced exploration of the internet as a transformative yet fraught space for non-white, non-heteronormative identities. While offering visibility, connection, and alternative self-representation—as seen through James's interactions in *Slant*—the digital realm also reproduces racial hierarchies and sexualized exclusions. This study highlights internet's dual role as both a site of liberation and a mirror of offline prejudices both within and outside the queer community.

This study, akin to *Restoried Selves*, critically explores the dual nature of home within Chinese-American households, presenting it both as a source of stability and support and, simultaneously, as a site of control. It highlights how the home, while offering a semblance of security, also functions as an instrument that reinforces cultural and societal boundaries, shaping the experiences of those within it in ways that complicate their sense of belonging. In Wang, coming out becomes a disconcerting and disorienting process, a process it that “is not reducible to either familial embrace or ostracism- the two primary forms for coming out of the insularity of the gay closet.” (Bui 131)

Classification is rarely neutral; it inherently involves a degree of evaluation and judgment. In this, to identify someone could be enough to decide how to treat her (Jenkins 6) Richard Harvey Brown writes that “classifications - such as true or false, good or bad, legal or criminal, sane or mad - ...are definitions of personhood, hierarchies of value, and forms for power.” (659) Systems of classification provide ways to socially perceive and ignore, to recognize and misrecognize, to be and to act (Bourdieu 85). The classification of those who inhabit liminal or non-normative positions along the axes of sex, gender, and race as deviant subjects engenders multifaceted and enduring forms of social, cultural, and political disenfranchisement. The six primary texts explored in this study— *No Ashes in the Fire*, *Speak No Evil*, *Loving Her*, *Brown White Black*, *Restoried Selves* and *Slant* —shows what it means to be classified, identified and shaped by intersecting systems of race, gender, and sexuality.

In summation, the six primary texts undertaken for critical examination of the intersection of sexuality, gender and race reveal a dynamic interplay between individual and collective identities, offering a rich exploration of the ways in which African-American and Asian-American communities, particularly queer individuals, navigate the complexities of marginalization, exclusion, and resistance. It critically examines the ideological apparatuses—such as family, education, religion, media, law—that not only shape and regulate subjectivity but also complicate, constrain, and, at times, destabilize the processes through which queer and racialized

individuals navigate and construct their sense of self. These texts are framed in resistance. Rather than offering narratives of assimilation or reconciliation, these authors stage disruptions—refusing the comforts of respectability politics, heteronormativity, and the fantasy of multicultural inclusion. They expose the structural violence masked by liberal discourses of tolerance, and instead foreground the affective, psychic, and material costs of living at the interstices of multiple axes of marginalization. Collectively, these texts form a counter-archive: a body of work that not only bears witness to the erasures and silences within dominant narratives, but also theorizes alternative modes of belonging, kinship, and resistance. By centering the voices and lived experiences of queer Black and Asian-American subjects, they unsettle the presumed universality of whiteness and heteronormativity in American cultural production. In doing so, they demand a reconfiguration of how we read, who is seen as a legitimate subject of literary inquiry, and what constitutes the very category of the human in its fullest complexity.

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ABSTRACT

NEITHER STRAIGHT, NOR WHITE: GENDER, SEXUAL AND RACIAL INTERSECTIONALITY IN SELECT AFRICAN- AMERICAN AND ASIAN-AMERICAN TEXTS

**AN ABSTRACT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF
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**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND CULTURE STUDIES
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NOVEMBER, 2025**

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INTERSECTIONALITY IN SELECT AFRICAN-AMERICAN AND ASIAN-
AMERICAN TEXTS**

BY

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Submitted

**In partial fulfillment of the requirement of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in English and Culture Studies of Mizoram University, Aizawl.**

This study titled “Neither Straight, Nor White: Gender, Sexual and Racial Intersectionality in Select African-American and Asian-American Texts” examines sexual identity formation among queer African-Americans and Asian-Americans. Sexual identity in queer African-Americans and Asian-Americans often emerges through the intersection of racialized histories, gendered expectations, and socio-cultural pressures. This study examines the idea that sexual identity in African-Americans and Asian-Americans is tied to and must continually be understood in relation to other paradigms like gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, and such other identity categories. The title reflects the central premise of the thesis: that identity category like gender, sexuality and race work as interlocked mechanism to produce complex subjectivities.

The study examines how gendered, sexual, and racial intersection complicates and shape lived dynamics of African-Americans and Asian-American communities through a close reading of six select texts. In course of this close reading, the study interrogates such questions as: Are same-sex discursivities in the United States primarily a white and male phenomenon? Do ‘gay’ community formations deliberately exclude people of color and women? If so, why? Who benefits from it? Who is most affected by it? In what many ways is this manifested? What unique challenges define the African-American and the Asian-American sexual landscape? Does identity formation in non-white gays and lesbians take on different trajectories? What unique positions they find themselves located in? Do they face hostilities differently? How do these social categories navigate the tough waters of intersection? What role do American institutions play in these? These are some of the questions that this research work seeks to interrogate.

In asking these questions, the study enquires into how the intersection contributes to the politicization of the body. It unpacks sexual identity formation as a social construct as well as a political act in which power is exercised. It further examines the dynamics of transgression and resistance. Finally, it considers the role of language in articulating, negotiating, or contesting identity, and investigates the role of institutions—such as family, church, pedagogy, legal and judicial system, and

racialized systems of power in shaping identity formation for African-American and Asian-American individuals. It engages with these concerns, albeit not in a sequence that strictly mirrors the order in which these have been articulated. At the core of the examination- of the complex interplay of social categories and individual subjectivities- is how literary narratives articulate, negotiate, and challenge the construction of sexual identity within African-American and Asian-American contexts.

This study takes into account six primary texts – *No Ashes in the Fire: Coming of Age Black and Free in America* (2018) by Darnell L. Moore and *Speak No Evil* (2018) by Uzodinma Iweala; *Brown White Black: An American Family at the Intersection of Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Religion* (2019) by Nishta J. Mehra and *Loving Her* (1974) by Ann Alley Shockley; *Restoried Selves: Autobiographies of Queer Asian / Pacific American Activists* (2003) edited by Kevin K. Kumashiro and *Slant: A Novel* by Timothy Wang (2011) for the purpose. With the exception of Shockley, the authors featured in this thesis work represent a newer cohort, predominantly producing works after the 2000s and as recent as 2018. The selection of these emerging writers is deliberate, as this thesis aims to confront the pressing issues encountered by the contemporary African-American and Asian-American generation of gay, lesbian and trans communities. These texts have been selected for study as they are relatively recent contributions and provide substantial scope for an intersectionally informed inquiry into questions of sexuality.

Jenkins writes that: “Identities exist and are acquired, claimed and allocated within power relations. Identification is something over which struggle take place and with which stratagems are advanced- it is means and end in politics- and at stake is the classification of populations as well the classification of individuals” (45). The texts selected for this study not only foreground the fluid and contested nature of identity but also narrativizes the very processes through which identities are negotiated, imposed, or resisted within shifting configurations of power.

Foundational theorists such as Foucault, Sedgwick and Butler have exerted a profound and enduring intellectual influence on the field of sexuality studies. Their

interventions have been pivotal in elucidating the discursive formations, institutional apparatuses, and regulatory binaries through which same-sex desire has been historically disciplined, marginalized, and rendered culturally intelligible through regimes of power and normativity. While engaging these critics, it becomes important to understand that because of their rootedness in European experiences, these theoretical models often do not do justice to the vast spectrum of experience within intersectional paradigm. This observation gains particular relevance in a society such as the United States, where the intricate intersections of diverse ethnic groups, racial backgrounds, and class distinctions significantly influence individuals' lived experiences. A unidirectional single-axis framework, under such a paradigm, often erases experiences of Black/Asian/women in the conceptualization, identification and remediation of race and sex discrimination by centering on the experiences of those within the group who are otherwise privileged. This study, as such, even as it revisits canonical theoretical foundations, advances its argument through the analytic prism of intersectionality.

The Combahee River Collective (1977) was one of the earliest texts to refer to the idea that “major systems of oppression are interlocking” and that some sections of people confront “manifold and simultaneous oppression” (Taylor 15). However, it was Kimberlé Crenshaw who first introduced the concept of intersectionality, pioneering it as a crucial methodological framework for understanding the interconnectedness of social identities. Crenshaw, in her essay, “Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique” (1989) addresses the core of the debate when she writes: “[T]he problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference... but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intra group differences” (1242).

Drawing upon theoretical discourses like Queer Studies, Black Feminism, Gay Studies, Critical Race Theory, Performance theories, Post-Colonialism, Critical Discourse Analysis and more importantly Intersectional Studies, this study, thus, turns towards text, discourse, language, representation, embodiment and affect to

make sense of the queer experience of African-Americans and Indian-Americans in the US cultural milieu.

Chapter I: Introduction

This chapter introduces the thematic interest of the study and the six primary texts that have been taken up for discussion. It builds the theoretical background for the study. It also introduces the idea of intersection which forms a core of this study.

Queer African-Americans and Asian-Americans frequently encounter significant challenges in navigating the complexities of the U.S. cultural milieu. Heteronormative expectations embedded within the American socio-cultural landscape—particularly those related to marriage, procreation, and conventional gender and sexuality performances—create significant tension in the lives of Black/Asian-Americans. The complex interplay of gender, sexuality, and racialization further produces deeply interwoven, layered, and mutually reinforcing modalities of oppression for them.

White male/female gay/lesbian body in US cultural landscape is at first white, then gay/lesbian, but for the black/Asian body it is both black/brown and gay simultaneously. It is in this that the white body speaks from a position of power, while black/brown bodies speak from a position of marginalization. Close to this is the idea that LGBT women of color navigate a complex intersection of non-whiteness, femaleness, and queerness, and battle triple strikes of oppression. The institutionalization of gendered, sexual, and racial biases exacerbates their challenges. It is within this context that these six primary texts seek to understand how the intrusion of such identity categories as sexuality, gender, race, nationality and ethnicity complicates the entire discursivities on sex.

A unidirectional single-axis theoretical framework often erases experiences of Black/Asian/women in the conceptualization, identification and remediation of sex discrimination by centering on the experiences of those within the group who are otherwise privileged. This restrictive lens oversimplifies complex issues and in doing

so fails to fully acknowledge and address the nuanced realities faced by more vulnerable members of the group. It is in this context that intersectionality studies prove to be particularly valuable.

Intersectional framework comes across as a corrective lens, as a remedial optic to the encroaching and limiting influence of white western gaze that generally characterize the works of Foucault or Sedgwick. It refers to and draws on existing traditions while simultaneously interrupting its critical hegemony. Intersectional approach not only looks at how identities are shaped, controlled and construed by a host of intersecting identities but also situates literary narratives within a larger continuum and socio-historical, political, and cultural context.

The psychodynamics of racism has been a persistent contradiction of U.S. society. The legacies of the colonial development of 'race' as a form of categorisation and racism as a 'political technology of Empire' place 'race' as a key site of social division in a post-Enlightenment, white supremacist global structure. Books like *The Racial Contract* (1997), by Jamaican philosopher Charles W. Mills, Frantz Fanon's *White Skin, Black Mask* (1952), W. E. B. Du Bois in *Black Reconstruction* have been influential reads to understand such a legacy. Mills, Fanon and Du Bois are important in our discussion because their thoughts serve as a bridge between racism and questions of gender and sexuality. It is when we put Fanon, Du Bois, Edward Said, Jamaica Kincaid, Paul Gilroy, Homi Bhabha and other race and post-colonial critics in dialogue with Michel Foucault, Adrienne Rich, Patricia Hills Collins, Barbara Smith, Kevin Mumford, Chandan Reddy, Rosalind Chou, Yen Le Espiritu, David L Eng and Lisa Lowe and amongst others that we can truly understand the complexities that queer African-American and Asian-Americans face.

The introductory chapter, thus, posits that the issue of sexual identity formation within African-American and Asian-American community of people cannot be fully understood without an intricate analysis of how these identities are continually molded and constrained by pervasive gendered and racial biases and structural inequities. It argues that enduring legacies of racial hierarchies permeate the cultural, linguistic, and institutional dimensions of sexuality, perpetuating a

complex matrix of privilege and marginalization. It is in the intersection of gender, sexuality and race that these complexities can be unraveled. The second, third, and fourth chapters of this study explore these complexities as they unfold across the six primary texts under consideration.

Chapter II: Interrogating Black Gay Identity in *No Ashes in the Fire* and *Speak No Evil*

This chapter undertakes an examination of two contemporary literary works: Darnell L. Moore's *No Ashes in the Fire: Coming of Age Black & Free in America* and Uzodinma Iweala's *Speak No Evil* and is an attempt to combine queer studies and black studies to explore and examine the distinct and unique contours of African-American gay identity as they collide and are expressed in the contemporary United States. This study interrogates foundational assumptions, claims and counter-claims and positions on black men's sexuality while locating the specific contours within black-white dichotomy, the colonial profiling, white controlled legal-criminal system and heterosexist nature of Black political engagements. It in particular looks at the interlinked workings of institutions like home/family, school, religion, law enforcement, criminal justice system/the legal system. It argues that while these institutions and systems are biased and prejudiced against homosexuality in general, these, in particular, systematically and disproportionately disempower and marginalize BlaQueer i.e. people of Black/African descent in US.

Moore writes that "Individual violence is easy to name and confront, while the violence committed by majority groups, institutions, and structures is harder to discern and undo" (126). Moore looks at how educational institutes, church, medicine, the police and the criminal justice system contribute to shaping discursivities, regulating identities and in controlling black gay bodies. In exploring and examining the question of identity through institutions and structures, Moore's text looks at the collective distrust for the blacks, the calculated policing of sexual difference, and the ghettoization of black masculinity and black patriarchy. In Moore, identity categorization together with anti black gay discourse and violence are logical consequence and a natural extension of institutional exclusion, erasure

and biases. *No Ashes* reimagines “what a practice of black radical love and justice can look like” (141) through an interrogation of these institutions and structures.

The institution of pedagogy constitutes a key cultural arena for the production and reproduction of white heterosexual discursivities in Moore. Moore challenges the purported liberating assertions about educational institutions, instead viewing them in terms of disciplinary practices that regulate black sexuality. Moore writes:

Black lesbian girls, transgender brothers, gay fathers, and bisexual lovers were not central characters invoked in mainstream fiction, nor were their lives examined in any discussion I had in my classes. (5)

The representational abundance of white heterosexuality/homosexuality and representational lack of black heterosexuality/homosexuality in elementary and middle school curricula often reflects a broader issue of representation in US cultural milieu. Notably, *No Ashes* draws a distinction between secular educational institutions and those affiliated with religious denominations, portraying the latter as inherently more conservative.

The black-queer body is often judged against a straight, masculine, athletic, hyper-sexual body. The pressure to conform to these stereotypes not only complicates the formation of individual identities but also imposes unrealistic and often harmful standards upon gay black individuals like Moore. Moore’s quotidian experience exemplifies how black queers are pushed to the abyss of indifference, omitted from the democratic concern centered on white people, and live on the edges of both race and sexuality.

The politicization of AIDS forms a critical part of the text’s critical gaze. The construction of AIDS in medical profession and in academia intertwines with the experiences of African-American homosexuality, revealing complex intersections of race, sexuality, and health. Moore allows his readers to understand how HIV in blacks and more particularly in black queer individuals like Moore is often framed in

terms of behavioral issue. Medical interventions, in Moore, become an arena where power relations are negotiated and enacted and joined in pleasure.

Moore dedicates substantial pages to the role of the Church and religion, underscoring their political nature with profound consequences for black queer individuals. The text shows how the production and dissemination of knowledge about sin, morality, and redemption/salvation and the construction of African-Americans in terms of straight, masculine, athletic, hyper-sexual body exert a form of disciplinary power over their subjectivities. *No Ashes* subverts and upsets God/religion versus bodily desires/black radical love and instead celebrates its transformative potential to take the path of freedom and liberation.

In Moore, the institution of police emerges as sites of violence and injustice. Moore's literature meticulously chronicles deaths and brutality-of white law enforcement officials presiding over black/queer bodies, exemplified by individuals like Sakia Gunn. The black queer body becomes an easy object for extrajudicial liquidation for being both black and queer. Their stereotypes as hyper-sexuals make them easy target in law enforcement agencies. The institutional excesses in police and law enforcement are often a reminiscence of lynching in the slavery era.

When institutions like police endorse compulsory heterosexuality and promote homophobic rhetoric, the streets turn into site for random violence against queer people. The image of a few boys interrogating a lone weak gay Moore in a classic act of bullying with rhetoric of faggot/gay/pussy and a subsequent pouring of kerosene constitutes a peak moment in course of the narrative early in the memoir.

Unlike Moore's *No Ashes in the Fire* which is a memoir, Iweala's *Speak No Evil* is a fictional work whose narrative revolves around the character of Niru, a queer Nigerian-American high school teen living in a middle-class suburb of Washington, D.C. Iweala's text explores the intricacies of homosexuality/heterosexuality conflict, while also exploring the black/white binary and its impact on the black body, adding layers of complexity to the broader spectrum of identity dynamics. Iweala skillfully intertwines elements of religion,

cultural dislocation, family dynamics, police violence and trauma, all of which further deepens and complicates discursivities on identities. The church, the police/the criminal law system, the institution of family become a site of interrogation in Iweala.

Iweala constantly draws the reader's attention to the linguistic charge and the binary mode in which homosexuality and heterosexuality are received within the family. With a father who has an over-proportionate sense of what is right and what is wrong, Niru becomes an unwilling and helpless child under his heterosexual gaze. He constantly seeks to redirect him to the 'natural' ways of heterosexuality. In the father figure, Moore brings to the thought table the question of Un-African nature of homosexuality. Murray and Roscoe write, "Among the many myths Europeans have created about Africa, the myth that homosexuality is absent or incidental in African societies is one of the oldest and most enduring." (Murray et. al. Preface XI) It is in this that Niru's same-sex desire becomes an act of "shame and disgrace for this family" (28).

If family constitutes the first critical moment in the text in the struggle for acceptance and authenticity, educational institution emerges as the next pivotal arena. *Speak No Evil* highlights the intersectional nature of black queer bodies, as they struggle and navigate a complex interplay of racial bias and homophobia within educational institutes. The linguistic choice of "nigga" for Niru combined with derisive homophobic slurs represents a dual strike that African-Americans often contend with in the intricate landscape of sexual dynamics within educational institutes in the United States.

In *Speak No Evil*, church and religious discourse constantly competes with other institutions such as home and pedagogy to take control of the black queer body. Significantly, the institutional setting of church echoes the private family dynamics at a higher level. In letting Olumide and Okereke, as representatives of God, constantly bank on binaries [between heterosexual "faith" and homosexual "devil" (54), between "morality" and "perversity" (59), between "God-given and natural" and "unnatural" (60)], Iweala allows his readers to see through the linguistic

construction of homosexuality/heterosexuality. Notably, the question of Un-African nature of homosexuality is repeatedly addressed by Olumide, Okereke and Niru's father. Niru's race in that sense becomes a stumbling block in the free exercise of his sexuality. The engagement between Niru on the one hand and Reverend Olumide/Bishop Okereke on the other hand underscores the inherent power asymmetry in their exchanges. Niru becomes the panoptical 'other', constantly under the watch of these religious heads. It places Niru in a space of being obedient, and being exploited, while giving the preachers significant power over him.

Race constitutes a problematic category but an inseparable facet of the broader black experience. In Iweala, race functions not just as an individual category but also as an intersectional category. Iweala connects race with questions of sexuality to uncover for his reader the workings of America's law enforcement. Racial dynamics within law enforcement frequently mirror the broader racial dynamics where the blacks often feature as perpetrators of crime and white its victim. In *Speak No Evil*, Niru is the perennial hypersexual 'black' suspect and Meredith his 'white' victim. Racial profiling in police is inevitably linked to the exercise of power. In a place where black bodies are positioned as a threat to national "law and order" and "national security" (132), it becomes an easy object of assault in the hands of law enforcement, without constraints of legal accountability. Niru's identity formation thus happens amidst these interacting claims and counter-claims.

Chapter III: The Politics of Visibility in *Brown White Black* and *Loving Her*

This chapter attempts to understand the politics of visibility within the framework of intersectionality in Nishta Mehra's *Brown White Black* and Allen Shockley's *Loving Her*. The politics of visibility refers to the ways in which being *seen* or *not seen* in public, cultural, or institutional spaces carries political consequences, particularly for individuals and groups that seek to gain visibility and recognition for their identities, experiences, and struggles within a larger socio-cultural context. This chapter examines how being born as a female/girl/woman in a non-white background and being in a lesbian relationship entails navigating a unique

and intricate intersection of identities, creating what can be described as a 'triple strike' of challenges.

Kimberle Crenshaw writes that "Black women's experiences are much broader than the general categories that discrimination discourse provides" (28). In *Loving Her*, Renay, the central protagonist, has triple strikes against her- she is a woman, she is a same-sex loving woman and she is black. Renay becomes a subject of scrutiny, examined and stigmatized as she is, by those within and outside the African-American community for embodying all those attributes of what she is not- heterosexuality, respectability, domesticity and normativity.

Shockley invites the readers to interrogate the politics of visibility within this and connect these to ideas of black masculinity, black patriarchy and black respectability within the Davis family. The tumultuous relationship between Renay and Jerome Lee, offers a stark depiction of the power dynamics and gendered violence that defines domesticity. In *Loving Her*, Lee represents the archetypal "conqueror, the master, the subduer" (Shockley 129) and Renay his "lamb who sat at home and waited in misery" (130).

Shockley theorizes, historicizes and personalizes race in the narrative's unfolding and links it to questions of sexuality. Central to Shockley's examination is the stark binaries in which the blacks and the whites are placed- superior/inferior, master/domestic help, rentable/unrentable, trustworthy/untrustworthy. *Loving Her* deconstructs and dissects these binaries in terms of power dynamics. The encounter between Renay and Miss Wilby, and between Terry and Mr. Herald exemplify this.

Shockley invites our attention to mediate on what Gilbert and Gubar call "the sexuality of linguistics and the linguistics of sexuality." (515) Lee's threat to Renay for corrupting their daughter with same-sex desires, Loraine's resignation as an art instructor for her avowed lesbian rumours with Vance, Miss Pearl's closeted existence - all these owes to classificatory politics of 'binary binds'. Of course, Shockley problematizes these assumptions and endorses a politics of subversion, dissidence, transgression and visibility.

In Shockley, the black female lesbian becomes the locus for anxiety around not only sexuality but more specifically around Black nationalism in crisis. Lee's narrow conceptualizations of Renay in terms of "—another man, perhaps, yes—but not a woman" (Shockley, 110)- exemplifies a broader masculinist gender hierarchy within black nationalism that characterizes women in love with women in terms of transgression and a violation of the patriarchal norm. Renay dilemma- to own or not to own her lesbian identity- in course of the text represents the general predicament of black women who transgress the black code of engagement vis-à-vis whiteness/sexuality.

Loving Her is widely recognized as one of the pioneering works to address black lesbian concerns from intersectional standpoint. The text explores what it means to be a black lesbian woman in a predominantly white American background. In a pivotal moment in the text a certain middle aged white man says to Renay: "How about you? You don't really go for that woman-loving stuff now, do you? I know what Negro women like. The real thing!" (Shockley 75) In claiming that he 'knows what negro women like' he immediately dismisses Renay's race, her gender, her ethnicity, her sexuality, in short her whole individuality. In doing so, Shockley problematizes questions of race, gender and sexuality.

Shockley endorses a politics of subversion, dissidence, transgression and visibility. One of the ways in which the text gives visibility to same sex among black women is by formulating a political alternative to white heterosexuality as well as black cultural nationalism. "Terry and Renay's lesbian relationship provides an alternative to the failed traditional, heterosexual family model." (Ausdall 59) The transgression, embodied in the relationship between Renay and Terry, redefines the cultural standards of what is worthy of visibility and what should be relegated to obscurity.

Shockley's narrative briefly touches upon the role of judicial institutions and legal systems in perpetuating compulsory heterosexuality, its complicity as tools of oppression, as instrument of enforcement, wielding power that stigmatizes non-normative relationships. Shockley situates legal system as a site of systematic

violence and discrimination where individuals like Renay have no hope and place. In Jerome Lee's threat to his wife, the text prepares the readers to interrogate and question legal frameworks as instrument of coercion and arbitration.

Loving Her is widely recognized as one of the pioneering works to address black lesbian concerns from intersectional standpoint. The text explores what it means to be a black lesbian woman in an American background. In a pivotal moment in the text a certain middle aged white man says to Renay: "How about you? You don't really go for that woman-loving stuff now, do you? I know what Negro women like. The real thing!" (Shockley, 75) In claiming that he 'knows what negro women like' he immediately dismisses Renay's race, her gender, her ethnicity, her sexuality, in short her whole individuality. In doing so, Shockley problematizes the entire intersection of race, gender and sexuality. The readers are unmistakably drawn to the power politics involved therein.

Like Shockley, Mehra draws the reader's attention to "questions of visibility, and what visibility can and cannot accomplish." (Mehra 159) This idea is well captured in "I struggled to figure out what level of visibility made sense" (10) because "Visibility matters" (27). The construct of visibility within the narrative in *Brown White Black* is underpinned by the intersectionality of Mehra's identity categories, intricately woven through her gender, her homosexual relationship with Jill, and the complex positioning of her black son at the crossroads of multiple intersections. The text examines and interrogates this question of visibility further in reference to pervasive structural discrimination witnessed in family, pedagogy, media and courts of law.

Mehra begins her text by examining and interrogating questions of race. The text locates racial profiling across different social spaces like schools, malls, birthdays, clubs, government offices, private retails as well as in pop culture and legislature. This thematic interest in race is then gradually intertwined with issues of gendered and sexual identity. In Mehra, the convergence of racial, gendered, and sexual identities produces a dense and shifting set of dynamics that shape how non-white women inhabit their worlds.

At the heart of the politics of visibility/invisibility discourse lies the issue of representation. Representation constitutes what Richard Harvey Brown calls “coherent gestalt”. (659) Coherent gestalt refers to a set of elements selected and assembled for consumption by the public/readers. In *Brown White Black*, Mehra shows how Un-American bodies/identities like herself and Shiv receive a series of misrepresentation and ‘truths’ in different genres like literature, magazines, television and how these are constituted within ideological parameters. Mehra problematizes identities predicated on sameness in media, literature and elsewhere and finds these strategic insistence limiting. The text also problematizes seemingly positive representations like model minority. In fact, model minority becomes a source of constant tension in the text. In *Brown White Black*, the exploration of stereotypes, whether positive or negative, is deeply intertwined with the dynamics of power.

In Mehra, pedagogy is a significant focal point of institutional examination in Mehra. Mehra combines anecdotes and observations to theorize how pedagogy deliberately prioritizes certain desires while compartmentalizing others. *Brown White Black* also offers a critical examination of the institution of family. Mehra’s strict upbringing within heterosexual framework, her journey through being a young adult in a straight India-American family, the Indian-American construction of success and her own evolving sense of self becomes a microcosm through which the text explores the complexities of post-modern identity construction.

Mehra incorporates the politics of visibility into the legal discourse. The text interrogates the institution of marriage within legal frameworks to articulate a compelling argument on the politics of discrimination, silence, and invisibility. Within this legal discourse, the text weaves issues of adoption and motherhood. Mehra delicately unveils Shiv’s adoption journey, inviting readers to understand the nuances of adoption for same-sex/inter-racial couples.

Mehra’s text is also framed in terms of resistance. Performing both her (Mehra’s) brown skin i.e. her Indianness and as well as her queerness, against familiar, and institutional expectations, comes to define much of the discussion in the

text. Similarly, Shiv whose black identity, mixed parents, homosexual parents, multicultural upbringing, his own fluid gender and sexual identity amongst others, embodying a kaleidoscope of identities and experiences, speaks to a politics of resistance.

Mehra writes that “...being brown is not something I can hide, nor is it something I have to declare. It simply is. Being queer has proved slightly more complicated.” (37) But as the book shows, it is the intersection of gender, sex and race that proves to be more consequential.

Chapter IV: ‘Fragmented Entries, Multiples Selves’: Performing Asian-American in *Restoried Selves* and *Slant*

This chapter is an attempt to understand queer politics among Asian-Americans from a racial perspective. Asian-Americans grapple with a myriad of issues including the quest for belonging, the conflicting societal norms, search for correct and full representation, shared struggles of resilience and the pursuit of visibility. This chapter explores these complex and diverse experiences of queer Asian-Americans through a study of *Restoried Selves: Autobiographies of Queer Asian/Pacific Activists* and *Slant: A Novel*.

“Asian-Americans have been historically situated in triangulated position in relation to the black-white binary.” (Junn and Natalie 729) This unique location of Asian-Americans between the blacks and the whites, which Dang refers to as “living as a minority within a minority” (33) presents a complex intersectionality of challenges and conflicts, of discrimination and marginalization, of exclusion and micro aggressions.

Restoried Selves was published in 2004 and foregrounds the life of seventeen gay, bisexual, lesbian, transgender and transgender and self-identified queer Asian and Pacific American authors. These stories are partly autobiographical tales and partly critical rhetoric on gender and sexual orientations. The writers of these autobiographies come from different nationalities, different classes, different

professions, different ethnicities, different age-groups, different genders, and different races and together they are hyphenated with the American identity.

In *Restoried Selves*, the challenge of compartmentalizing identities emerges as a central and pressing theme. Asian-Americans are often torn between situations where “racial and sexual identities were distinctly separated and purposely compartmentalized” (Coloma 27). The stories within the book contest such a notion. The idea that one must discard the other is rejected in favor of a communion where readers are invited to look at the connection between the two.

An important conversation that *Restoried Selves* brings in connection with race, gender and sexuality is the role of language in shaping identities. *Restoried Selves* look at how Asian-Americans are received in binary paradigm: “Straight is good.” “Gay is bad” “Out is good” “Closeted is bad” “Asian is good” “White is bad”. (Collins 15) This chapter highlights how the pervasive presentation of race, gender and sexuality in binary categories such as white/black, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual, imposes a restrictive framework for Asian-Americans. In *Restoried Selves*, linguistic constructions are tied to power dynamics and reveal how these benefit those who conform to dominant categories.

At the intersection of race, gender and sexuality is the question of representation. The politics of representation is rooted in the idea that all artistic expression is a political act. The construction of Asian-Americans in media is ensnared in a web of mis/representations. Oriental bodies often become exotic playgrounds for Western desires and gaze. David C. Lee’s ‘All-American Asian’ describes the Chinese-American scenario thus:

In the media, we’re the sexless Hop Sing from *Bonanza*—the Chinese cook with buckteeth and a caricaturized Asian accent....We’re the scrawny, queeny, effeminate guy who likes to work in clothing retail and squeal at discount tags. (76)

Restoried Selves allows the readers to confront the misrepresentations of Asian-Americans across media, literature and elsewhere. Terms such as Rice Queen and Potato Queen, in David C. Lee's "All-American Asian", for a case in point, becomes a point to examine the intersection of race and sexuality within the queer community. It is of interest to note here that sexualization and exoticization of various ethnic groups/ Asian-American bodies often disregards ethnic distinctions, indiscriminately portraying individuals with a broad stroke and erasing the nuanced diversity that characterizes Asian-American living. "Asian-American sexuality is socially shaped in ways that maintain social and political dominance for whites, particularly white men." (Chou 2)

The institutionalization of prejudice, hostility in racism and homophobia is a major thematic concern in *Restoried Selves*. Pedagogy serves as a crucial locus of conformity and peer pressure for the regulation and control of sexualities, particular of people of non-white, non-heterosexual background. Racially homogenous high schools, in particular, emerge as a site of oppression for queer Asian-Americans. Thompson writes that, "It was hard being branded a "lesbo" or "pervert" by my classmates, and being one of the few mixed-race people at my school only further complicated things." (112) Pabitra Benjamin, Chisty, Anh-Tuan Dang and others highlight similar excesses within schools.

Restoried Selves features a small number of Asian-American female writers whose autobiographies offer insight into their distinctive experiences within the realm of racialized sexualities of United States. The struggles in constructing an Asian-American identity for queer women is manifold and includes- "sexism, racism, homophobia, anything." (Benjamin, 5) As Thompson illustrates, queer Asian-American women face constant pressure to adhere to 'feminine' norms, with any deviation leading to scrutiny, criticism, or assumptions about their sexuality. Helen Zia's account challenges the assumption that non-heteronormative identities are solely an upper and middle-class phenomenon by highlighting the experiences of lesbians in blue-collar environments like Boston construction sites.

Timothy Wang's *Slant*, published in 2011, constitutes a significant contribution to the discourse surrounding Asian-American queer literature, with a focused emphasis on Chinese-American queer literature. *Slant* looks at knowledge production of queer/gay Asian/Chinese-Americans at the intersection of race and sexuality and shows how Asian/Chinese-Americans are alienated by their race and sexuality and how their intersection produces complex dynamics in their life. In course of this exploration, Wang examines an array of concomitant considerations and concerns encompassing issues such of stereotypes and representation, cultural hybridity and hegemonic normativity, white racism and heritage complex amongst others and maps these from what Walter D. Mignolo calls 'zero point epistemology'. Zero point epistemology may be understood as a location that places a privileged knowing body as occupying a detached and neutral point of observation, and from this neutral place "maps the world and its problems, classifies people, and projects what is good for them." (118) Wang shows how Asian/Chinese-American body becomes a victim of bio politics both in being gay and "non-white", both in their interaction and without. *Slant* confronts this bio-politics in different locales like educational campuses, club houses etc.

The portrayal of the Asian/Chinese-American body in Wang's work reflects a complex interplay between cultural identity, self-perception, and external perceptions. James' body in *Slant* is a significant source of tension- fraught with stereotypes, misrepresentations and misidentifications of which this study interrogates. James' racial identity as Asian-American reduces him to an object, an object either of prejudice or of interest and infatuation, both in and outside questions of sexuality. James' encounter with racism at Art Deco, and in his conversation with the Thorndike family serves to foreground what it means to be stereotyped as an Asian-American. Rosalind Chou argues that "stereotyping of people of Asian descent has mutated throughout American history, changing based on the needs and interests of whites" (3).

But it is sexuality (same-sex) and its relation to race that is of primary interest in Wang. *Slant* delves into non-traditional values, challenging conventional

acceptance among readers, particularly white conservative American and traditional Chinese/Chinese-American readers. Wang's text invites readers to delve into unconventional values through its central protagonist. These non-traditional values and activities encompass a spectrum including homosexuality, intra-racial relationships and marriage amongst others.

American educational campuses have been a major locale for same-sex narratives within American literary canvas. Wang confronts the “anti-gay attitudes prevalent on campus” (8) especially towards those with Asian background in educational institutions like MIT and let the readers understand how James and his experience are often mapped by “the hubris of Zero Point” (84).

In *Slant*, the virtual world of internet becomes a major site of study to interrogate intersecting oppressions. James's recurrent return "to the computer to find more gay materials" (10) serves as a narrative testament to the virtual possibilities for romantic and sexual connections in online platforms. Wang, however, problematizes the often-overlooked undercurrents of racial bias and discrimination that permeate these virtual spaces. In James, the text questions how gay virtual spaces becomes conduit for “white, blond-haired, blue-eyed guy” (84) standards against anything remotely Asian/Chinese.

Slant interrogates a multitude of the competitive codes and unwritten rules that govern the intricacies of gay life in the United States through James experience in club houses and elsewhere. Within the gay community, racial biases manifest through the articulation of preferences and exclusions rooted in racial distinctions, frequently cloaked under the ostensibly innocuous pretext of personal preference. James' experiences within the US gay community, particularly his interactions with Jim, vividly illustrates what it means to be an Asian/Chinese-American gay, underscoring the pervasive presence of racism within this ostensibly “inclusive” sphere.

James's Asianness, epitomized by his skin tone, hair texture, and the shape of his eyes, assumes a deeply problematic dimension against the white setting in which

he is cast. His acute preoccupation with his eyes, notably their lack of depth, as evidenced by his statement, "If I could replace my eyes by gouging them out, I would do so without hesitation" (93-94), represents a climactic moment in the narrative on what it means to be labeled and categorized.

In a situation where James has to constantly battle competing hegemonies of home culture and ethnic enclaves, for testing loyalty and allegiance, conceiving a queer possibility becomes extremely difficult.

Chapter V: Conclusion

This chapter sums up the arguments that have been presented in the earlier chapters. The primary texts that have been taken up for discussion in this study work with an emphasis on intersectional context. It argues that gender and sexuality, as categories of identity, must continually be understood in relation to other paradigms like race, nationality and ethnicity. This study demonstrates that employing a single, one-dimensional critical framework fails to capture the complexity of identity formation at the intersection of gender, race, and sexuality. The examination of the primary text elucidates the distinct intersectional dynamics experienced by different racial groups. Furthermore, it illustrates how these forms of oppression are variably expressed across different genders. These texts address issues of representation, institutional structures, and power dynamics, among other concerns. While recognizing the necessity of addressing individual biases, there is a scholarly consensus among the texts that rectifying institutional biases requires considerably greater effort and systemic intervention. These texts also foreground the capacity of language to distort identities. It also attempts to contextualize the characters' identities and experiences within a larger historical framework, emphasizing the interconnectedness between personal narratives and broader social movements. The search for history, in these texts, becomes an act to understand and engage with the present. While these texts interrogate America as an overarching exploitative and inhumane site, these are also an interrogation of the mindset and ideologies of all patriarchal, heterosexual, racial culture that exists at other places. These texts also attempt to produce alternate narratives meant to counter the representations,

discourse, and imagery in which non-white, non-hetero sexualities are mired in controversy. Many of these texts bring their own cultural material to try to seek build alternative discursivities.

However, the texts are not without their fair share of criticism. None of the texts engage with critiques concerning the welfare of adopted children in same-sex parented households, particularly in relation to contemporary public anxieties about child safety and the emergence of renewed, though often politically charged, discourses around pedophilia. While such questions may well arise within the context of heterosexual relationships, their conceptual resonance extends with equal, albeit differently inflected, significance to those embedded in homosocial relational formations. Similarly, there has been criticism against intersectionality itself. Sirma Bilge in “Intersectionality Undone: Saving Intersectionality from Liberal Intersectionality” (2013) opines that intersectionality is today used for identity ranking rather than structural analysis, an opinion that Heather Mac Donald agrees with when she claims that intersectionality is ideologically driven, non-empirical, and drives the subject to view themselves as existentially oppressed and therefore harmful to academic standards. Mac Donald, in fact, advances a critique of a worldview that, in her view, portrays Western culture as endemically racist and sexist. Similarly, Amia Srinivasan argues that intersectionality can devolve into competitive victimhood frameworks divorced from larger structures of power. Perhaps, among the more uncompromising critiques of intersectionality is that of Andrew Sullivan, who posits it in terms of classic orthodoxy—anchored in a notion of ‘original sin’—that derives its moral authority from the presumed ‘privilege’ of others.” Some of these criticisms are fair, legitimate and valid and warrant rigorous interrogation.

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