

**THE LIMINAL EXPERIENCE: A STUDY OF SELECTED WORKS OF
AARONS AND LEE**

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DECLARATION

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

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that “The Liminal Experience: A Study of Selected Works of Aarons and Lee” written by C. Lalrinzuala has been written under my supervision.

He has fulfilled all the required norms laid down within the M.Phil. regulations of Mizoram University. The dissertation is the result of his own investigation. Neither the dissertation as a whole nor part of it was ever submitted by any other University for any research degree.

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In his *Rites of Passage* (1906), Van Gennep coined the term liminality exploring and developing the concept in the context of rituals in small-scale society. He defined 'rites of passage' as "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age" (qtd. in Turner *The Forest* 94). Gennep shows that all the rites of transition are marked by three phases which are separation, margin (or limen), and aggregation. The first phase or 'separation' consist of a symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from a set of cultural condition (a state) or from an earlier fixed point in the social structure. In the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual subject or the 'passenger' is ambiguous as this is a realm or space that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. The passage becomes consummated in the third phase. Lloyd Warner considered 'rite of passage' as:

The movement of a man through his lifetime, from a fixed placental placement within his mother's womb to his death and ultimate fixed point of his tombstone and final containment in his grave as a dead organism – punctuated by a number of critical moments of transition which all societies ritualize and publicly mark with suitable observances to impress the significance of the individual and the group on living members of the community. These are the important times of birth, puberty, marriage, and death. (303)

Liminality, or threshold crossing, becomes the core in the pioneering work of Victor Turner from his time as an anthropologist in Africa during the 1950s and 1960s. He extended his theorising to western performance studies and theatre.

Turner, after fieldwork in Africa, came across Arnold van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* and made him realise that it made sense of his own findings. Van Gennep, from Australian aborigine data, produced a schema in order to describe the dangerous life transitions or

thresholds (birth, puberty, marriage and death). His argument had its base in tribal superstition in which people saw ‘life crises’ as moments of psychic or spiritual (i.e. “magico-religious”) danger as evil spirits or ancestors might interfere to harm the child or the community – “perils of an ultra-human order” (*Anthropological* 249) which require religious rites. Ritual attempted to pacify the evil forces and bring their world back to a state of equilibrium. Interested in ‘the sacred’, Van Gennep explored notions of animism and dynamism, spirits and powers to explain the purpose of such rites. He was a positivist rationalist who wished to explain ritual and religion naturalistically and socially. For issues of life and death (pregnancy, birth, beginning sexuality and marriage, death), as mentioned before he proposed a three-part schema described as separation (that is, spiritual retreat), transition (French *marge*) and incorporation (French *agrégation*). If one picture society as a house (Gennep *The Rites* 26) people need permission to enter new rooms. The threshold, or limen, became the only key to their passage or transition from one room [state] to another. For a very periodical time the person is in-between statuses and spaces. Van Gennep concludes:

Our brief examination of the ceremonies through which an individual passes on all the most important occasions of his life has now been completed....We have seen that an individual is placed in various sections of society, synchronically and in succession; in order to pass from one category to another and join individuals in other sections, he must submit, from the day of his birth to that of his death, to ceremonies whose forms often vary but whose function is similar. (189)

‘Thresholds’ are situated between states or statuses, and this has to be crossed by the individual and the community also needs to recognise the change. In *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (1969), Turner’s ‘processual’ model describes change as a dynamic process and not a static process. ‘Structure’ stands for the social and power

structure, the current status quo, the top-down authority system. However, Turner's 'anti-structure' refers to aspects beyond this, which puts pressure on structure, the bottom up struggle for change. This produces social action and cooperation which he calls 'communitas', which means all positive aspects of community and togetherness.

Communitas ...is...part of the "serious life". It tends to ignore, reverse, cut across, or occur outside of structural relationships... representing the desire for a total, unmediated relationship which nevertheless does not submerge one in the other but safeguards their uniqueness in the very act of realizing their commonness. (*Dramas* 274)

'Communitas' advocates individual freedom, while it ignores structure and promotes spontaneity. It is playful but serious, functioning as a change agent; for Turner it was 'eufunctional', making the social structure "work without too much friction" (*From Ritual* 54), and this has the potential for stability but not destruction.

Liminality can perhaps be described as a fructile chaos, a fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities...a striving after new forms and structure, a gestation process, a fetation (sic!) of modes appropriate to and anticipating postliminal experience (St. John 59-60).

Disorder and chaos that occurs during the liminal stage can be fruitful as new ideas and forms can emerge from it making it valuable. To Turner, communitas ensures that the welfare of individuals takes precedence over structure, status and authority. Ordinary people cannot have a voice and are not allowed to be involved in where structure/authority becomes a straightjacket. Social performances in contrast encourage free heart-felt participation, entertaining yet serious.

Culture is never static and the central authority has often been challenged by the social groups who remain underrepresented. This stage of liminality is characterized by ambiguity, openness and indeterminacy. One's sense of identity dissolves to some extent bringing about disorientation. It is a period of transition during which the normal limits of thought, self – understanding and behaviours are relaxed, opening the way to something new. It may be a land of recognition for some and at the same time may be a land of oblivion for others. Liminality connotes more than just in-between-ness. It is a phase that every culture as general and every living human being in particular has to go through. It is the essential need of human nature.

In an effort to deal with the 'in-between' categories of competing cultural differences, Homi K. Bhabha in his introduction to *The Location of Culture* (1994) attempts to bring into focus the 'liminal' negotiation of cultural identity across differences of race, class, gender, and cultural traditions:

It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. How are subjects formed 'in-between', or in excess of, the sum of the 'parts' of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)? How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable? (2)

In other words, Bhabha argues that ascribing of cultural identities cannot be done to pre-given, irreducible, scripted, ahistorical cultural traits that define the conventions of

ethnicity. Also, ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’ cannot be viewed as separate entities defining themselves independently. Instead, Bhabha suggests the continual interface and exchange of cultural performances in order to bring about the negotiation of cultural identity. This in turn produces a mutual and mutable recognition (or representation) of cultural difference. As Bhabha argues in the passages below, this ‘liminal’ space is a ‘hybrid’ site that witnesses the production rather than just the reflection of cultural meaning:

Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. (ibid 2)

Victor W. Turner in “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*” while explaining the concept of ‘liminality’ says, “we must regard the period of margin or ‘liminality’ as an interstructural situation.” He further says:

One may, I suppose, also talk about “a state of transition,” since J.S. Mill has, after all, written of “a state of progressive movement,” but I prefer to regard transition as a process, a becoming and in the case of *rites de passage* even a transformation— here an apt analogy would be water in progress of being heated to boiling point, or a pupa changing from grub to moth. In any case, a transition has different cultural properties from those of a state... (46-47)

Helene Cixous gives theoretical reflections on the function of the dream. According to her the threshold state that produces such moments of liminality allows people to explore, introspectively, the scope of their personal desires. Cixous describes the biblical story of

Jacob's dream ladder, an experience that occurs when Isaac sends Jacob away for deceiving their family. Cixous identifies Jacob's dream as an event made possible because of Jacob's physical travel, a necessary travel from his familiar homeland. She then goes on to say that in order for him/her to enter into a realm of liminality, of self-discovery, he/she must "Go toward foreign lands, toward the foreigner in ourselves. Traveling in the unconscious, that inner foreign country, foreign home, country of lost countries" (Cixous 69-70). Cixous says that it is necessary to be detached from oneself in order to find the foreigner in oneself.

However, the selected texts for study, portray liminality as an intimate illumination of one's known, expressed selves entwined with one's unexpressed, yet also very known, selves. The state of liminality requires a physical and spiritual space, which allows the characters to visualize himself/herself as a transparency in a previously-unknown environment. Therefore, while the self for whom they search is not foreign, the environment into which they travel is. This is not only a very conscious process, but it is one charged with illuminated epiphany and an aura of positive motivation. Both Leroy Aarons and Laura Lee capture an example of such liminality in their works, which alters the characters' perceptions of themselves and of their everyday environments.

Before delving deeper into the realm and space of liminality which the homosexuals are going through in a heterosexual society and culture, it is important to first look into the historical development of the various revolutionary movements organized and encountered by the homosexual community and how they come about their liminality.

Most historians agree that there is evidence of homosexual activity and same-sex love in every documented culture, whether such relationships were accepted or persecuted. In the United States particularly, there were attempts which were made to create advocacy groups to support the gay and lesbian relationships until after World War II, although in urban centers

like Greenwich Village and Harlem, the pre-war gay life flourished during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Gay men and women who were formerly isolated met as soldiers, war workers and other volunteers who were uprooted from their small towns and posted worldwide. Greater awareness, along with the investigation of Senator Joseph McCarthy's regarding homosexuals holding government jobs during the early 1950s, led to the first American-based political demands for fair treatment in mental health, public policy, and employment.

The Mattachine Society which was founded in 1950 by Harry Hay and Chuck Rowland can be considered to be the primary organization that acknowledges gay men as an oppressed cultural minority. Other such important homophile organizations on the West Coast are organizations like One, Inc., founded in 1952, and the first ever lesbian support network, Daughters of Bilitis, founded in 1955 by Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin. These groups offered information and outreach to thousands through various meetings and publications. Prominent sociologists and psychologists soon showed their support to these organizations. In 1951, Donald Webster Cory published his *The Homosexual in America* (1951), in which he asserted that gay men and lesbians were a legitimate minority group. Later in 1953, Dr. Evelyn Hooker won a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) to study gay men. In her groundbreaking paper which she presented in 1956, she demonstrated that gay men were as well adjusted as heterosexual men, often more so. But it was not until 1973 that the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality as an "illness" classification in its diagnostic manuals. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, gay men and lesbians were continuing to be at risk for psychiatric lockup and jail and for losing jobs or child custody as the courts and clinics defined gay love as sick, immoral and even criminal.

In 1965, with the civil rights movement winning new legislation which outlawed racial discrimination, the first gay rights demonstrations was organized in Philadelphia and

Washington DC, which was led by long-time activists Frank Kameny and Barbara Gittings. Then came a very important date, June 28, 1969 which can be considered to be the turning point for gay liberation. On this memorable day patrons of the popular Stonewall Inn in New York's Greenwich Village were fighting back against the ongoing police raids of their neighborhood bar. Stonewall is still considered a watershed moment of gay pride and has been commemorated since the 1970s with 'pride marches' held every June across the United States. Recent scholarship has called for better acknowledgement of the roles that drag performers, minorities, and transgender patrons played in the Stonewall Riots.

The gay liberation movement of the 1970s saw myriad political organizations springing up which were often at odds with one another. The lesbians who were frustrated with the male leadership of most gay liberation groups, formed their own collectives, record labels, music festivals, newspapers, bookstores, and publishing houses and called for lesbian rights in mainstream feminist groups like the National Organization for Women (NOW).

With the aim to expand the religious acceptance for religious gay men and women, the first out gay minister was ordained by the United Church of Christ in 1972 which was soon followed by other gay and lesbian church and synagogue congregations. Through the Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), formed in 1972, family members had a platform to show greater support in the gay rights movement. Later the political action exploded through the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the Human Rights Campaign, the election of openly gay and lesbian representatives like Elaine Noble and Barney Frank, and the first march on Washington for gay rights in 1979.

Through the 1980s, with the decimation of the gay male community by the AIDS epidemic, there were great demands for compassion and medical funding which further led to renewed coalitions between men and women as well as angry street theatre by groups like

AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) and Queer Nation. There were enormous marches organized on Washington which drew as many as 1 million gay rights supporters in 1987 and again in 1993.

The military expulsion of gay and lesbian soldiers came to an end with the rise of a different wing of the political rights movement, with the high-profile case of Col. Margarethe Cammermeyer publicized through a made-for-television movie, "Serving in Silence." The patriotism and service of gay men and lesbians in uniform eventually resulted in the uncomfortable compromise "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" as an alternative to decades of military witch hunts and dishonorable discharges. Finally, in the last decade of the 20th century, Ellen DeGeneres came out on national television in April 1997 in front of millions of Americans, heralding a new era of gay celebrity power and media visibility. The most vocal activists all through this time are the Celebrities, both gay and heterosexual, who called for tolerance and equal rights. The hard work done by countless organizations and individuals, helped by Internet and direct-mail campaign networking produced fruitful results. For instance, the 21st century heralded new legal gains for gay and lesbian couples. Vermont law in 2000 helped same-sex civil unions to be recognized, and Massachusetts became the first state to perform same-sex marriages in 2003. Gay Americans were finally free from criminal classification with the end of state sodomy laws. Gay marriage is now legal in the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, and Canada; however, there are still divisions in opinion worldwide regarding the recognition of gay marriage by church and state.

The first selected work for research is a book by an award winning journalist Leroy Aarons who was born on December 8, 1933 in the Bronx, New York City, New York, USA. During the 1970's political scandal, he was a national correspondent for the "Washington Post" and a founding member of the Maynard Institute for Journalism Education (MIJE). Later as an executive editor of the "Oakland Tribune" he led a team to a Pulitzer Prize.

The American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) in 1989, asked Aarons to coordinate the first ever survey of journalists who are gay and lesbian. In the 1990 convention of ASNE while presenting his speech he startled even himself by coming out to his peers. This risky, unprecedented yet courageous move inspired legions of gay journalists to come out and be open about their sexuality and harnessed in them courage to stand against the marginalization and stigmatization inflicted upon the gay community by the 'normal' people. Founding the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association (NLGJA), he began writing plays, operas and books among which the heart rending *Prayers for Bobby: A Mother Coming to Terms with the Suicide of her Gay Son* (1995) became most successful and inspired a lot of gays and lesbians all over the world.

Prayers for Bobby is based upon the story about a young man's suicide that Aarons saw in a newspaper. What particularly struck him was the mother, Mary Griffith, who tried throughout her son's adolescence to pray away his gay nature. Bobby Griffith suffered enormously from his family's lack of support and acceptance and the condemnation of his church. Even leaving home could not dispel his sense of worthlessness; at age 20, he jumped to his death from a freeway bridge. Remarkably, Mary was transformed by her loss and eventually renounced the rigid religious beliefs that had kept her from fully accepting Bobby.

The Griffith's heartbreaking story came at a personal turning point for Aarons. His *Oakland Tribune* colleagues knew him as an openly gay man, but few others in the world of journalism did not until he outed himself the following year before a convention of his peers. He became an activist, founding the [National Lesbian & Gay Journalists Association](#).

Aarons' personal transformation paralleled Mary's; after Bobby's death she had become an iconic activist for the nationwide association of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), urging parents to understand and accept their children's

homosexuality. Mary's extraordinary conversion touched many as deeply as the tale of Bobby's tragic death. It was Mary's immense love for her son that enabled her to transcend her background and perform what could only be described as acts of courage. •

Leaving journalism, Aarons began to explore the Griffith's stories in depth. His first book, [*Prayers for Bobby: A Mother's Coming to Terms with the Suicide of Her Gay Son*](#), was published in 1995. *Prayers for Bobby*, with its powerful and potentially life-saving message for parents and youth, this book was adapted for television, debuting on Lifetime TV on Jan. 24, 2009. He died on November 28, 2004 at the age of 70 leaving his life partner of 24 years, Joshua Boneh to carry on with his works.

Prayers for Bobby: A Mother Coming to Terms with the Suicide of her Gay Son (1995) is based on a true story of a mother who is torn between her loyalties to the church and moved by a tragedy which changes her life and the lives of others forever.

A gay boy by birth, Bobby Griffith was his mother's favourite son. He was the perfect all-American boy, sweet and gentle with a great heart. Growing up in a deeply religious family in Walnut Creek, California, the doctrine of Christianity was his life and breath. Struggling with an internal conflict no one knew about, in 1979, 15-year-old Bobby Griffith admitted in his journal that he was gay:

I can't ever let anyone find out I'm not straight. It would be so humiliating. My friends would hate me. They might even want to beat me up. And my family? I've overheard them. They've said they hate gays and even God hates gays, too. Gays are bad, and God sends bad people to hell. It really scares me when they talk that way, because now they are talking about me. (Aarons 181-182)

At the age of 16, Bobby attempted suicide by taking a bottle of aspirin. Frightened by the prospect of what he had done, he confided in his older brother, who promptly told their parents. Ed telling his parents about Bobby's sexuality however was not out of hatred but purely out of love and intense concern for his brother's well being.

Bobby's father, Bob, being a quiet individual accepted the news with little comment, but his mother, Mary, a religious fundamentalist, went into a panic mode. She had a perception that gay people would all go to hell, and she could not bear the thought of eternal separation from her beloved son. Although assuring him of her love, she also told him that his sexual orientation was not acceptable to her or to God. She said to Bobby:

Bobby, we can beat this. If we trust in God. Homosexuality is curable with God's help. We've seen it on television, remember? It's not a natural thing. God will help you weed it out. Healing through prayer. That's the good news, Bobby. (243)

Over the next four years, Mary tirelessly posted 'healing' Bible verses in Bobby's room, took him to counseling, and repeatedly confronted him about his 'unwillingness' to change and condemned him for the same.

In February of 1983, Bobby moved to Portland to run away from the hostile environment; most of all to avoid his mother's harsh remarks and the constant barrage of Scripture. He returned home briefly on July 25, noting sourly in his journal that he didn't appreciate having to pay for an airline ticket, "just to hear a damn sermon." (505)

Returning to Portland more depressed than ever, he confided in his diary:

I must deserve everything that happens to me. The funny thing is, I didn't realize until now how bad a person I must really be. (506)

On August 27, 1983, at the age of 20, Bobby walked to a local overpass and jumped directly into the path of an oncoming tractor trailer. He died instantly.

Prayers for Bobby by Leroy Aarons gives an insightful look as to why so many gay and lesbian teens see no option other than committing suicide to 'free' themselves from the homophobic treatments of the heterosexual society. But the story does not end with Bobby's death. It also continues with a story of redemption.

Bobby's mother, Mary, who never stopped loving her son, could not imagine her beautiful child in hell. She started keeping her own journal, writing long letters addressed to God, asking and pleading for some kind of explanation, or at the least some sign that Bobby had died in a state of grace. She read and re-read her Bible, spoke to the clergy, and finally reached a life-altering conclusion:

Mary's self discovery that her son had had nothing to repent, that he had been untainted by sin from the start, was at once a huge relief and a terrible indictment. It enabled her to believe, at last, that Bobby was not eternally damned but was instead a happy and free spirit enjoying the benefit of a blissful afterlife somewhere in the firmament. (425)

Mary was a shy and unimposing woman by nature. She had spent her life trying to fly under other people's radars and never asking for anything but normal. Now, though, her true love for her son made her struggle with the idea that there might be other children who are like Bobby out there, children who are slowly losing hope and being drained of their will to live. She began to speak at local platforms which soon turned national. On these occasions she would normally speak about the loss of her child and about how she believed Bobby's death might have been prevented if he had received more support and acceptance from his

family. Mary explains that her activism was "to right an injustice, to let gay kids know they are equal to all other human beings" (Aarons 691). She further said:

I will go wherever I can to deliver that message. I worry, 'Am I spinning my wheels? Are the kids listening? Is it getting through to them that they are okay?' Don't give up on love. That's what Bobby did. (691)

Prayers for Bobby is not so therapeutical for people who have survived hardships in life, especially since Mary so blatantly blames herself for her son's death. Entries from Bobby's journal highlighting how much he 'hates' and resents his family also tends to be hard fact for survivors to deal with, even though Aarons also shares journal entries of Bobby in which he acknowledges his deep love for his mother, father, and siblings.

It is also important to remember the fact that Mary never, in any way, encouraged Bobby to commit suicide. On his first attempt to commit suicide, she told him directly that she would "rather have a homosexual son than a dead one" (236).

Even in her moments of religious fervor, the only thing Mary prayed for is for her son's health and happiness. She never wanted or intended for Bobby to die, and she was devastated when he did. At the end of the book, the author concludes that Mary Griffith and her family have finally found peace and happiness.

Tormented over her son's death, Mary fails to find solace in her son's poignant diaries, which reveals Bobby's intense inner turmoil and his fight for the love of his mother and God. When the conventional Church fails to provide answers for her immense guilt, she reaches out to the gay community out of sheer desperation. It is from here on that Mary gradually began to make up for her 'sin' of ignorance which led her to be a role model and a major advocator for gay and lesbian youth. The address she gave the Congress of the US in

1996, 12 years after the death of Bobby establishes her as a major force in the fight for human rights.

The next selected author Laura Lee is a Metro Detroit native who divides her time equally between writing and producing ballet educational tour with her partner, who happens to be the art director of the Russian National Ballet Foundation. She has written one children's book, *A Child's Introduction to Ballet* (2007), two novels, *Angel* (2011) and *Identity Theft* (2015). In her writing, Lee brings a unique background including work as a professional mime, improvisational comic and radio announcer.

Angel (2011), one of the many great works of Laura Lee presents an extremely insightful view into the life of Paul Tobit. A 42 year old widowed minister of a mainstream denomination, the main protagonist attempts to cope with personal grief issues he had after his wife died of cancer. Since the loss of his lively, charming wife to cancer six years ago, Paul has been performing his religious duties by rote. Everything changes for him from the day he enters the church lobby and encounters a radiant, luminous being lit from behind. Referring to it as 'an angel' the being for him is breathtakingly beautiful and glowing with life, 'An angel'. Filled with a sense of awe and wonder, Paul is tempted to fall on his knees and pray. Upon regaining his focus, he realizes that he simply met a flesh-and-blood young man, named Ian. Still under the influence of his vision, Paul instantly feels an overwhelming attraction for the young man. This puzzles him more as it fills his thoughts and fires his feelings. Paul has no doubt that God has spoken to him through this vision, and that he must determine what God is calling him to do.

Gradually they were connected in some way or the other and their relationship begins to take on another level when Ian moves in with Paul. As their relationship grows so does the gossips in the Church. These gossips begin to have an impact in their relationship and the

‘inevitable’ end starts to sprout from the fertile soil of their love paving the way for their future separation. The story raises many questions and makes one think introspectively about religion, love and the mind-set of society at large.

Paul’s journey inspires his ministry but places him at odds with his church. He is forced to examine his deeply held beliefs and assumptions about himself, his community, and the nature of love.

Angel is a love story written with depth and insight. Each chapter starts with a quotation either from a theological text, the Bible, or the musings of the author. The quotes are connected with the theme of the mountain (Mount Rainier) as a sacred space. However, even though the story has nothing to do with a mountain, it symbolizes the emotional path the characters like the experience of climbing the summit of a great peak. The climb is exhilarating, the expectations are great, but the way down is often the hardest and most important part of the journey.

Written in the third person, *Angel* beautifully depicts the protagonist, Paul’s constant struggle with the beauty of life and attempts to find meaning out of it. Since his wife’s death, Paul’s inspiration and meaning has been lost. It is not until one day, upon seeing a man who enters the church, searching for an AA (Anonymous Alcoholics) meeting that Paul’s imagination is re-kindled and his life starts to see colours once again.

Having lived a predictable and monotonous life, Paul is overwhelmed by his sudden attraction and obsession with the man he meets. However, Paul struggles with his identity throughout the book: “I am not like him” (123) he thinks to himself when confronted with a gay man. Definitions of sexuality, identity, faith and love are explored deeply and intimately throughout the book.

There are certain instances within the book which are very intriguing to the readers.

Especially the lines:

“Bisexual” was the obvious (and least absurd) choice, but it didn’t feel right to him either. Paul had always associated that word with people who wanted to play around and experiment with sex. To his mind, it lacked commitment and serious intent. (125)

Angel is an exploration of faith, an exploration of the nature of love, and also highlights the difference between private and public identity. The story is packed with raw emotions, and lyrical writing and the unadulterated adoration Paul felt for Ian.

Another intriguing aspect within the book is the relationship between Mary and Stuart. Though minor incidental characters, their lives mirrored in many ways the issues gay couples face. It highlights the issue of labelling and the rights of humans in general. It also shows the difference between homosexual marriage and heterosexual marriage. Stuart, a very loyal friend of Mary is being portrayed as an unfortunate man. His love for Mary is being pushed aside even though Mary still appreciates his presence. Looking at their relationship one can say that Stuart’s situation is similar to that of the homosexual community in a society.

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

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

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

This Stonewall incident is important as it fuses two worlds creating a space characterised by chaos which Homi K. Bhabha calls the 'liminal space.' Society is situated in this liminal space as it neither fully understands the cause of the homosexuals nor fully rejects the once silenced voice of the queers. In other words, there is a hybridity of cultures which caused a liminal space marked by disintegration and chaos in the level of sexual identity and gender. The heteronormative traditional acceptance of sexual identity which was once considered to be fixed became deconstructed. Other contemporary theorist like Judith Butler came to the scene with her seminal works notably *Gender Trouble* (1990).

In her *Gender Trouble*, Butler talks about the 'performativity' of gender and says that gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on, as

one puts on clothes in the morning, that there is 'one' who is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today.

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

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

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

Gender is so pervasive that in the society today it is assumed that it is bred into the genes. From reading the theory laid down by Butler it can be established that gender is

constantly created and re-created out of human interaction, out of social life, and is the texture and order of that social life. Yet gender, like culture, is a human production that depends on everyone constantly "doing gender." And everyone "does gender" without thinking about it.

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

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

Butler recognises gender as something of an achievement. If a woman puts on a new dress and make-up, she might declare 'I feel like a woman tonight'; similarly, a man who has put on overalls and picked up a power drill might see himself in the mirror and say 'What a

man!' The fact that these expressions are not wholly meaningless shows that mostly people are at least partly aware that gender is some kind of performance.

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

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

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

In *Prayers for Bobby*, the mother, Mary Griffith, being a product of the traditional heteronormative society, indirectly drove her son, Bobby Griffith to commit suicide. She could not accept the sexuality of Bobby which fails to be in par with the traditional acceptance of sexuality. It is the society which lays down rules and conditions the minds of the people on certain attributes which certain gender should follow. A homosexual by birth,

Bobby is not able to abide by this 'rule'. Under the pressure of his mother and the society Bobby began to detest who he was. This detestation can be seen in his private diaries which he kept only to himself as it contained his deepest thoughts and details which the 'normal' people would surely reject if they ever read it. His diary being the only friend he had, there are various entries which showed his intense inner sufferings:

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

May18. Dear God: Are you there? I ask because i really don't know. Sometimes I hurt so bad, and I'm scared and alone. I wonder why you or somebody doesn't help. I'm so mad and frustrated, I seem to be at the end of the road. Why do you remain silent?

May30. Gentle springtime weather surrounds me, but a fierce unrelenting storm rages within. How much more can I take? Only time and a million tears of bitterness will tell. I guess I am slowly sinking in a vast lake of quicksand; a bottomless pool of death. I wish I could crawl under a rock and sleep for the rest of time.

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

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

Bobby had totally lost it, Ed observed. He was out of his head during the fight. Still, at the time Ed didn't view their scuffle as particularly serious. Later he would realize

that it had nothing to do with them, that the volcano inside Bobby had been bubbling to the surface. He would understand, too, that when Bobby had said, “I want to be normal like you,” he had meant, “I want to be ordinary, not some freak.” When Bobby drove his fist into the mirror he was lashing out at the freak he saw reflected there. (314-315)

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

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

Tracing the history of discourses about sex, Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* argues that in the seventeenth century it was Christianity which brought sex into the spotlight, decreeing that all desires should be transformed into discourse, in the form of the Christian confession. Desires suddenly became the priority and it acquired great importance. Throughout the Western culture, this idea of sex being the inner ‘truth’ about the self spread. This further became reinforced in the eighteenth century by carefully-worded studies, when sex became a ‘police’ matter, and also rested at the core of the newly-emergent political and economic concern about ‘population’ (Foucault *History* 20–25).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As mentioned before, Paul had never had any kind of homosexual tendencies prior to this. It was not the 'sex' or 'identity' he was born with, but now he has suddenly developed sexual urges for a man of the same gender. The socially constructed gender role he was meant to play is being deconstructed when he falls in love with a man. This can be related to

Butler's contention that it is wrong to try to relate one's identity with his/her sexual desires as the identity and the sexual desires cannot be related. In other words, Paul is performing a dual identity that originated when he first fell for a man. In the Church he executes the role of a normal heterosexual minister preaching to the people. But with Ian, he performs the role of a homosexual man intensely in love with a young man. As these two identities clash there exists disorientation because one is accepted while the other is objected to society. The minister, regarded to uphold the heteronormative norms, is initially disturbed by the uncontrollable feeling he had for Ian. He linked his feelings with his mission work and his capability to appreciate something which is aesthetically beautiful. But, he clearly knows that this feeling he had for Ian goes beyond the external, it was sexual also. Finding it hard to accept his feelings toward Ian, he undergoes a chaotic searching for an answer:

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

Here, one can see how even though Paul is not gay, he still has feelings for a guy. And later when he and Ian indulge themselves in a sexual relationship, he still maintains the fact that he is not gay. Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* states that the label 'Homosexuality' is not related to who a person is. He talks about how since the 19th century homosexuality ceased to be confined to the realm of one's behaviour and action and is linked to a person's identity. A person who indulges in a homosexual activity is now seen as a homosexual person and his/her whole identity is judged and centered on that. As this

becomes the case, there exists a fixed and clear fine line between the two polar 'identities' i.e. homosexuals and heterosexual the clash of which is bound to create chaos.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The power which thus took charge of sexuality set about contacting bodies, caressing them with its eyes, intensifying areas, electrifying surfaces, dramatizing troubled

moments. It wrapped the sexual body in its embrace. There was undoubtedly an increase in effectiveness and an extension of the domain controlled; but also a sensualization of power and a gain of pleasure. This produced a twofold effect: an impetus was given to power through its very exercise; an emotion rewarded the overseeing control and carried it further; the intensity of the confession renewed the questioner's curiosity; the pleasure discovered fed back to the power that encircled it. But so many pressing questions singularized the pleasures felt by the one who had to reply. They were fixed by a gaze, isolated and animated by the attention they received. Power operated as a mechanism of attraction; it drew out those peculiarities over which it kept watch. Pleasure spread to the power that harried it; power anchored the pleasure it uncovered. (*History* 44-45)

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

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

error servile-but that its production is thoroughly imbued with relations of power. The confession is an example of this. (60)

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

I sought to understand some of the terror and anxiety that some people suffer in “becoming gay,” the fear of losing one’s place in gender or of not knowing who one will be if one sleeps with someone of the ostensibly “same” gender. This constitutes a certain crisis in ontology experienced at the level of both sexuality and language. (Butler xi)

Foucault observes how the discourses on sexuality have increased over time. One's sexual proclivities like any other were once just a fact about oneself but now they are the key to unlocking one's character. When it comes to sexual habits earlier generations would have a different perspective and would have most probably equated with the way they thought of eating habits: no one would have thought to classify a person according to what they eat. Even today, when people are categorised as ‘vegetarian’ or ‘vegan,’ their entire character is

not necessarily tried to be understood based on his or her dietary preferences. And yet, the tone of voice, the taste in music, or the political affiliation of a person is all taken as monolithic criteria to understand that person's 'homosexuality.'

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

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

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

Knowledge is a way to define and categorize others. Instead of emancipating us from ignorance, it leads to surveillance and discipline. Occasionally, it seems to lead to more positive results. To stay with the field of sexuality, the 'discovery' that there are

men who have a 'homosexual personality' has led to disciplining and stigmatizing, but may also be said to have contributed to the creation of homosexual communities, to solidarity at the personal level, and even to collective action at the political level. Foucault is aware of this, but it is not easy to determine whether he sees such a "reverse" discourse' (his term) as an instance of successful resistance. (154)

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

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

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

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

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

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

This 'new' kind of identity clearly disturbed Bobby in *Prayers for Bobby*. The position in which Bobby was standing was very unstable and quandary as he could neither identify himself as 'straight' nor gay because of the pressure he received from his family especially his mother. He was transitioning, getting to grip with things. Because of his personal, internal processing of himself he did not fit as 'straight', he was not yet fully ready to take on a 'gay identity' because, as mentioned, of the various pressures. And also he was not 'positionable' as such by anyone. In short, he was liminal. He experienced cognitive

dissonance- as he was aware of his conflict with the heteronormative order- he cannot resolve. Religion contributes to homophobia and cognitive dissonance particularly for Bobby and also Paul in *Angel* as it is the general belief that there is a fundamental conflict existing between Christianity and homosexuality. Heterosexism and homophobia definitely contribute to and reinforce their liminal state, by preventing their transition to publicly recognised homosexual status in the society. Similarly, Paul, even though he loved Ian and had a sexual relationship with him still hesitated to identify himself as a gay man. He even said to himself, "I'm not gay, but my boyfriend is." (Lee 125) Lee continues saying that:

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

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

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

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

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

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

In Samoan, the word *fa'afafine* means "in the fashion of a woman," when such fashion is undertaken by somebody who is not a female biologically (Besnier 1994: 286). In his most innovative work, Niko Besnier in *Polynesian Gender Liminality through Time and Space*, discusses the historical construction of this particular category. That is to say, he

discusses the ways in which Europeans of the Enlightenment conceived Polynesian gender liminality according to their own perception and also through their own conceptions of gender, sexuality and morality. Besnier also remark that when the *fa'afafine* were not being mistaken for women, they were scrutinized morally because of their seemingly unnatural sexual practices (293). Ethnographers and expeditionary Europeans conceptualized the sexual lives of the *fa'afafine* as unnatural due to their homosexuality. However, as Jeanette Mageo and Johanna Schmidt noted, feminine gender practice and eventual sexual preference are not being equated by the Samoans, and also they do not necessarily categorize sexual practices as hetero- or homosexual. Classifying *fa'afafine* as homosexual, transgender, gay or third gendered, according to Besnier's argument "at best capture only one aspect of the category, at worst are completely miscontextualized' (ibid: 287).

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

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Deconstruction introduced by Jacques Derrida in his famous work *Of Grammatology* (1967) has opened endless possibilities with regards to interpretation of various works and also life in general. Derrida further put forward the concept of 'free play' in his essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." In this essay, he speaks about the philosophical "event" which occurred to the historical foundation of structure. Before this mentioned "event," man was considered to be the center of all things; so therefore man became the yardstick to every comparison made. However, after the 'event' man could no longer be considered as the center of the universe. Without this centralised reference, what the world is left with is 'free play.'

In his essay Derrida thus wrote:

[U]p until the event which I wish to mark out and define, structure—or rather the structurality of structure—although it has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by the process of giving it a center or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin. The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure—one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure—but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the free play of the structure. No doubt that by orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of the structure permits the free play of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself. ("Structure" 351-352)

Taking this concept further can lead to the possibility of an alternate view of the Holy Bible from what is the normal acceptance. Deconstruction has allowed the modern man to read the Bible from a different perspective however sacrilegious it may sound to an orthodox follower. The birth of postmodernism brought with it a free passage way for everyone to have

a wider perception into things which were deemed fixed and even taboo. In short it brought about a liminal space which shook the once thought fixed ideas and concepts.

What makes the issue of 'homosexuality' significant for the church is that some Christians have adopted a form of queer theory in the way they treat homosexual behaviour. Professing Christians who hold to this way of thinking often make the case that Scripture's emphasis is on a couple's commitment and love for one another rather than any sexual misbehaviour. Pro-homosexual Bible scholars have devised elaborate arguments and re-interpretations of Scripture in order to justify homosexual behaviour. If their claims are accepted as true, they open the door to the acceptance of a variety of other biblically 'inappropriate' forms of sexuality. Ultimately, the influence of queer theory on Christian academics, the church, and the culture in general has led to the further diversion in the relationship between God's Word and human sexuality.

Looking at the transformation gone through by religion, one thing is clear. With modernity there comes a gradual change in the outlook of the people in the sphere of religion. Following what David Lyon (2002) has said regarding religion, one can argue that religiosity was transformed radically in the Western Societies during the twentieth century as the sacred uncoupled from traditional religious institutions. Lyon implored about 'a free-floating spirituality', which people connect with their own individual ways. This transition has been caused by three processes operating from the mid-nineteenth century: secularisation, individualism and consumer capitalism (Bruce 2002). A famous sociologist, Peter Berger defines secularisation as "the process whereby sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols" (107). Secular attitude further affected such matters which were formerly regarded to be the domain of religion like marriage, divorce and sexual identity. However, various scholars debate whether the telos of secularisation marks the end of religion, or multitudinous unregulated new forms (Bailey

1998). For instance, following the revolutionary incident of the sexual revolution during the 1960s the Radical Gay Faeries spiritualised gay male sexuality and Dianic Wicca created a space for lesbian feminist witchcraft to flourish.

When it comes to Michel Foucault and religion or church, there are only but few writings of him regarding the subject. However, it is possible to have a look at an overview of his comments on religion. On religion itself, Foucault writes:

It is not that religion is delusional by nature, nor that the individual, beyond present-day religion, rediscovers his most suspect psychological origins. But religious delusion is a function of the secularization of culture: religion may be the object of delusional belief insofar as the culture of a group no longer permits the assimilation of religious or mystical beliefs in the present context of experienced. (*Mental* 81)

Here Foucault says religion can only be delusional if the wider culture no longer accepts the validity of a religious worldview. Foucault seems to accept secularization theory although for the early modern period "he refused the topography of a religious era yielding to a secular age" (Bernauer 558).

James Bernauer further says:

I would like to claim that Foucault's thought does in fact contain a philosophy of religion. In as much as his project was a history of the present, he is necessarily engaged in a religious analysis because the forms of knowledge, power and subjectivity which he saw as animating our culture are often constructed in decisive ways in argument or alliance with religious practices and concerns. (558)

The Bible is indispensable when talking about Leroy Aaron's *Prayers for Bobby* and Laura Lee's *Angel* as the Bible and the Church are very central to the lives of the

protagonists. In Aaron's *Prayers for Bobby* one can see the Bible in a different light and from different possible angles. Before Mary's 'coming out' Bible occupied a very central place in her life as everything she did she was in accordance to the 'Words of God'. However, in her quest for peace she found liberation from the clutch of ignorance on homosexuality.

Looking at the relationship between Ignorance, sin and guilt, one can see that it is with the context of the Christian doctrine that sin and guilt are dealt with. In the story, *Prayers for Bobby*, a conservative Presbyterian mother (Mary Griffith) reaches out to the gay community for support after the suicide of her homosexual son. The Christian concept of sin haunted Mary and she instilled this fear into her son, Bobby. Wishing to be liberated from the internal fear of sinning, Bobby is finally driven to his end. Mary being a staunch religious woman had the belief that "the Bible is the revealed word and as such the unquestionable authority on pious or sinful conduct" (96) so when she learns about Bobby's sexuality she told him to change his ways by praying and going to Church. As a result of this belief she ceaselessly nagged Bobby with Bible verses and sermons due to her firm belief that God will 'heal' Bobby from his 'sin'. This is the height of her ignorance. She limited her knowledge within the parameter of religion alone and was afraid to go beyond the line. After Bobby committed suicide she was devastated and unwilling to accept that Bobby went to the burning fires of Hell because of his sexuality. This drove her to seek for the ultimate truth in order for her to be at peace. During this quest there was a clash in her ideology. What she deemed right and what she began to accept as right made her uncomfortable. In short she experienced a liminal period in her life which is manifested in her constant fretting to find answers to her many questions regarding the Christian Gospel.

According to the Bible, homosexuality is definitely a sin. There are many verses in the Bible which clearly condemns homosexuality. Examples of few among many are:

Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.
(*New International Version*, Lev. 18.22)

If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads. (*New International Version*, Lev. 20.22)

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error. (*New International Version*, Rom. 1.26-28)

In *Prayers for Bobby*, the Metropolitan Community Church pastor, Larry Whitsell attempts to find a way to reconcile sexuality and religion. Mary initially referred to the Pastor's deconstruction of the concept of sin as "the devil's work".

But upon closer interaction with Whitsell, Mary's eyes were opened to the new possibilities and what she deemed sinful before crumbles. It is a general assumption that the Bible is the guide by which the Christian could measure and deal with homosexuality. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah from the Bible narrates, which the people who condemn Homosexuality like that of Mary Griffith called upon to prove that God Himself had made his judgment clear. Certainly, if God punished these two ancient cities on the ground of Homosexuality then they are no doubt fulfilling the will of God by supporting it. This led to the naming of one of the homosexual acts as "sodomy". However, the possibility of examining this cannot be ignored. Mary's interaction with Whitsell caused her to say that the Church no longer recognises many things as sinful and worthy of death. It is thus written in Genesis 19:4-13:

⁴ But before they lay down, the men of the city, even the men of Sodom, compassed the house round, both old and young, all the people from every quarter: ⁵ And they called unto Lot, and said unto him, Where are the men which came in to thee this night? bring them out unto us, that we may know them. ⁶ And Lot went out at the door unto them, and shut the door after him, ⁷ And said, I pray you, brethren, do not so wickedly. ⁸ Behold now, I have two daughters which have not known man; let me, I pray you, bring them out unto you, and do ye to them as is good in your eyes: only unto these men do nothing; for therefore came they under the shadow of my roof.

⁹ And they said, Stand back. And they said again, This one fellow came in to sojourn, and he will needs be a judge: now will we deal worse with thee, than with them. And they pressed sore upon the man, even Lot, and came near to break the door ¹⁰ But the men put forth their hand, and pulled Lot into the house to them, and shut to the door. ¹¹ And they smote the men that were at the door of the house with blindness, both small and great: so that they wearied themselves to find the door. ¹² And the men said unto Lot, Hast thou here any besides? son in law, and thy sons, and thy daughters, and whatsoever thou hast in the city, bring them out of this place: ¹³ For we will destroy this place, because the cry of them is waxen great before the face of the Lord; and the Lord hath sent us to destroy it. (*King James Version*, 19. 4-13)

Lee's *Angel* also deals with the same issue when a 'heterosexual' church minister falls in love with another man much younger than him. If a minister falling in love with a man whom he initially thought was an angel is not queer enough, that 'angel' whom he loved turning out to be an alcoholic and not having any trait of an angel takes on a higher level of rumminess. In the story, the minister Paul after meeting his 'angel' Ian began to question his job as a minister and his purpose and above all his sexuality. The 'sexuality' which he

thought to be his birth right is deconstructed by the beauty of Ian. This led to a changed notion about himself and it felt as if he was starting a new journey with a different life.

The angel or as a matter of fact homosexuality is like the mountain, beautiful and yet sublime. The ministry was supposed to a “calling.” Why did it so often feel like a job? (Lee 22)

In every possible way he attempted to justify his ‘homosexual’ love for Ian and his appreciation of his beauty in accordance to the Bible. Ian’s beauty possessed his whole being. But his sense of guilt and fear of sinning deterred his advancements to quench his physical wants:

His mind was invaded once again by the thought of his angel. It came back as a series of images. The way his hair fell onto his face. The way he moved when he walked, his head high, leading with his hips. The absolute perfection of his face. How shaking his hand made Paul feel as though all of the atoms in his body had aligned. The transcendent power of beauty. Moments of appreciating beauty. What did the Bible say about that? Most of the passages he managed to find did not have much to say about the appreciation of beauty. (Lee 23)

The many conversations Paul and Ian had between themselves through the phone brought to light the difference of ideology they had regarding the relationship between the church and homosexuality.

Religion was frequently a topic of the evening phone calls. Ian had a great curiosity about the Christianity that Paul loved so much. He seemed to want to see the good in religion, but he had been burned. The church of his youth had damned him. Paul understood that Ian had abandoned religion for his own well-being” (64).

In these conversations, even though Paul's words reflect the general view of the church on homosexuality he did not take on the extremist stance. This view of him is justifiable as he, as a minister is expected to have a certain pre-conditioned view, even though that necessarily does not have to be his opinion on it.

Ian questioned why Christians should take sex so seriously, as for him sex should have a greater purpose than just for procreation. He feels that sex should be all about giving pleasures to others which for him cannot be a bad cause compared to giving pain to others. He found it ironic that people who profess to be good Christians made the lives of the homosexuals who are also humans, miserable:

Mary was a virgin, Jesus was a virgin. Why is that so important? The world is sexual...I never understood why it's supposed to be less like animals to have sex only for procreation. I mean, isn't that exactly what animals do? They go into heat, they have sex, make new little animals and go back about their business. That's being like animals. Being like a human is having sex because it feels good. I mean, why should you have to justify giving someone pleasure? Shouldn't you have to justify giving someone pain? Like these people who go around bashing gays because they're good Christians—that's fine. That's good. But heaven forbid you give a guy an orgasm. That's evil. (64)

Through the voice of Ian one can see that the ideology relating to the Christian beliefs regarding homosexuality is not without fault. The voice of Ian clearly shows that the new generation are not simply having it instead they are searching for reasons and answers to how things are going. His voice clashed with that of the Church's which Paul somehow tried to protect but failed as he himself found reason to what Ian was talking about. Paul had no substantial answers to provide other than:

“Why is it important? Hmm...I guess because it helps to promote a stable society if people aren't so obsessed with sex. If they're not promiscuous. I think that is where it comes from.” (64)

To which Ian commented:

“Is that what Jesus was about? Promoting stable society? I thought he was a guy who questioned the Pharisees and turned over the moneychangers' tables and all that.” (65)

Paul had been so conditioned by the church and its teachings that a sudden shift in ideology is impossible for him in spite of his feelings for Ian. The root cause of the antagonistic attitude of the church toward homosexuality lies in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Bible, the incident which the church uses to justify their stance.

After her interaction with Whitsell, Mary's eyes are opened to the new possibilities and what she deemed sinful before crumbles. It has long been a general assumption that the Bible itself is the guide by which the Christian could measure and deal with homosexuality. Homosexuality is being condemned, with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah as the basis for the condemnation. Certainly, if God punished these two ancient cities on the ground of Homosexuality then they are no doubt fulfilling the will of God by supporting it. This led to the naming of one of the homosexual acts as 'sodomy'. However, there could also be various other possibilities of examining this.

D. S. Bailey in his book *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (1955) examines the Biblical story and writes:

The story does not in the least demand the assumption that the sin of Sodom was sexual, let alone homosexual. Indeed, there is no evidence to show that vice of the latter kind was prevalent there. (5)

If this view of Bailey is correct, then how it is that mankind has made this association these many centuries? To this Bailey answers:

It is clear that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was an historical event, and that it was due to natural and not supernatural causes. The tradition that a Divine judgment fell upon the cities because of their wickedness may have been nothing more than a superstitious inference from the awful character of the disaster. If it had any foundation in fact, we still know nothing of the sin for which it was believed that they had been punished; there is no reason to suppose that it was sexual, still less, that it was homosexual. (7)

This scholarly study of Bailey points out the confusion in the translation process and suggests that this has been the prime genesis of the widespread misunderstanding.

In *Prayers for Bobby*, Whitsell, who has given a modernist observation of the story Sodom and Gomorrah states:

Progressive biblical scholars interpret the sin of the cities to be inhospitality rather than sodomy. In biblical times, the refusal to grant hospitality was an extreme breach of the social contract. The art of the townspeople in threatening the angels—whether it had been rape, murder, or some other form of violence—was in this view the essential sin of Sodom, the kicker that assured God’s action. In that era, when consensual homosexuality activity did not exist as a known “condition,” rape of any

kind would have been seen as a society-threatening deviation—an abomination, the most extreme act of inhospitality.

It was not until the Christian era that the sin of Sodom became connected with homosexuality as a practice, Whitsell explained. The Roman historians Philo and Josephus, writing in the first century A.D.—a period of great moral turmoil—were responsible for linking the Sodom story (which had occurred two thousand years earlier) to some of the Dionysian excesses of the era in which they lived. This interpretation was adapted by the fathers of the Christian church, and the tradition became fixed for all time. (252-254)

Michel Foucault in the first volume of *History of Sexuality* (1978) said with regards to the birth of 'Homosexuality' as a category, "We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized ... the homosexual was now a species"(Foucault 1978: 43) Along this line, one can say that Bobby was deemed 'homosexual' even before he had a sexual relationship with another male because of the categorising which Foucault talks about. It is no longer related to behaviour alone but an identity which society forced upon and condemned as a result of the widespread of confessional system. This confession is what Foucault criticised in many of his books. In relation to this James D. Faubion in a book he edited titled *Michel Foucault: Power* (2000) writes:

This form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word "subject": subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied

to his own identity by a conscience or self- knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to.” (331)

Bobby suffered hardship just after confessing his sexual orientation first to his brother, Ed and then to his family. What was supposed to be therapeutic for Bobby turned out to be a source of his misery as his family, mostly his mother failed to accept his sexuality. This failure is mainly cause by Mary’s ignorance about the knowledge of homosexuality and her fear to move beyond the boundary of Christian beliefs in order to save her son from his misery. She forced Bobby to change and did every possible thing in order to ‘heal’ her son. This convinced Bobby to a certain extent that he was a sinner even though he himself knew that he could not be changed. With regards to this Hans Bertens says, “We obey power, are loyal to it, even to the point of policing and repressing ourselves, because it makes us feel what we are” (153)

In his diary Bobby wrote:

October 6. “Psalms 119:9-11 say a person can stay pure reading God’s words and following its rules. It’s not that easy. If we store the words in our hearts they will hold us back from sin. But that doesn’t work for me. I hold words in my heart and sin anyway” (Aarons 190)

Bobby strives to change and liberate himself from the thing that his mother, the church and society calls “sin” and “abnormal” as their church still follows the traditional power technique which James D. Faubion calls ‘pastoral power’. Bobby calls the quest ‘Operation Alter Ego.’

It is my goal to achieve a sense of pride and worth as a human being. Despite the fact that perfection will never be a possession of mine or anyone else on earth, I

believe that I have the right to discover the fact that I am a unique and special individual worthy of God's love and worthy of seeing my dreams come true. (188)

Upon the insistence of his mother, Bobby went to a psychiatrist. He was forced to walk upon the wrong path of knowledge that which condemns all kinds of 'abnormality', the kind accepted by the society and Christianity. However, the attempts made by Mary Griffith to 'heal' her son and also Bobby's attempts to purge himself from the 'evils' within him failed. For Foucault, confession has become an omnipresent aspect of people's daily lives, one no longer thinks of the power pushing them toward confession as a constraint placed upon them. On the contrary, one may think of confession as a way of finding truth, a form of liberation from the repressive powers that try to silence them.

Though Judith Butler does not rely on the Bible in her discussion on sexuality, two Bible scholars Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone have adopted biblical imagery. They argue that heterosexuality is not the biblical standard—there are an “infinite number” of possible sexualities. Hornsby and Stone relate the idea of “queerness” to chaos and heterosexuality to creation, asking, “But is chaos entirely negative? More importantly, can it be avoided entirely? Should we even attempt to avoid it entirely?” (x) They conclude that the association with chaos is actually a positive aspect of queer theory.

So, in light of Butler's and others' argument there can be no defined standard for appropriate sexual conduct. Therefore, why are homosexual behaviour, bisexual behaviour, bestiality, and others considered taboo? Once again, Butler draws on the ideas of Michel Foucault and the Panopticon, writing that people are forced to “perform” heterosexuality by the powers that be or face punishment:

It is a compulsory performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence, not to mention the transgressive pleasures produced by those very prohibitions. (Butler 314–315)

The church obviously has not been as receptive to the ideas of queer theory as the secular world. However, as with feminism, queer theory has not been without its influence on Christianity. Homosexual behaviour has been the sin issue that more and more Christians are struggling or refusing to call “sin.”

The biblical standard for sexuality goes back to Genesis:

So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. ([*New American Standard Bible*](#), Gen. 1.27)

Man in Genesis is explained as being created as “male and female.” These categories are not without purpose. God’s expectation for sex and marriage is set forth just one chapter later:

Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed. ([*New American Standard Bible*](#), Gen. 2.24-25)

God’s intention is that one man would marry one woman, and that they would share sexual intimacy only with one another. This can be vindicated from the Bible’s repeated prohibitions against adultery and fornication. Any doubt about the veracity of these verses is again reaffirmed by Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, God’s intention that marriage and sex should occur between one man and one woman is clearly stated:

But from the beginning of the creation, God “made them male and female.” “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two

shall become one flesh”; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh. (*New American Standard Bible*, [Mrk. 10.6–8](#))

Despite these and other biblical evidences, God’s standard for sex is that it should occur within the confines of a marriage, between one man and one woman. Some Christian leaders and Bible scholars have a hard time adhering to this view. So, Paul becomes justifiable. He said, “Men wrote the Bible, but they were inspired by God” (Lee 32) and the modern form of Bible has gone through a lot of editing and alterations to make it more suitable for the society.

In his book titled *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs.-Christians Debate*, Justin Lee walks readers through his own struggle with same-sex attraction. A professing Christian, Lee explains that he did not ask for or want to have a sexual attraction to other men. Spending his teenage and beginning college years celibate, he counselled with pastors and ex-gay ministries, in the hope that the feelings would dissipate. Unable to dispel his thoughts, Lee began to reinterpret the Scripture with an attempt to justify his homosexual behaviour. The latter part of his book illustrates a series of pro-homosexual arguments that challenge passages condemning homosexual behaviour as sin. Lee reveals his own postmodern view of Scripture:

Because of Paul’s teachings on grace and sin, and because of the way Jesus read and applied Scripture, I could no longer justify condemning a loving, committed, Christ-centered relationship based solely on gender. . . . The standards Jesus and Paul applied—the same standards that allowed me to put aside culture-based biblical rules about food or hair length or head coverings—didn’t just *allow* me to do the same on this issue; they *required* it. To do otherwise was being inconsistent. (205-6)

Many Christians have adopted Lee's line of thinking, saying that there is an equivalent amount of love and Christ centeredness in same-sex relationships, and decried that there is nothing special about God's design for men and women after all.

Contrary to what the Bible says about homosexuality and contrary to what he himself perceived it saying that it is "not compatible with Christian teaching" (127), Paul's life, his zeal and enthusiasm in the church changed for the better after meeting Ian. Prior to his communion with Ian, life was boring. Especially after the death of his wife, life became monotonous, had no colors and work seemed trivial to him. The day he met Ian, his angel was the day life surged back again. He started to dream again like a young teenager in love. At one point he even "pictured himself reaching out to him, touching his cheek" (16) In short, one can say that, "he brought Paul out of the clouds, back to the Earth" (59).

Paul felt a sense of mission and purpose that he had not felt for years. Watching Ian returning to worship, Paul felt truly "called." His ministry took on a new energy. The sermons were inspired and unique. Everything in life was taking on a new color, and Paul's new enthusiasm for life spilled over into everything he did, the way he spoke to people, the care he took with every meeting. He could now feel congregants' joys as deeply as he had previously felt their sorrows. People walked away from a meeting with the minister feeling revived and passed that along to each other. Attendance was growing. (80)

The conversation between Paul and Ian through the phone clearly suggests that the Church faces a liminal phase where the old and the new ideologies are colliding producing uncertain ground of doubts. The minister, Paul himself also doubted the infallibility of the Bible. He said:

I hate it when people talk about it like it's a neat little rule book for living, all clean and shiny. It's full of every side of life. Good things happen to bad people, bad things happen to good people. People are awful to each other in the Bible. They're murderous and vengeful and ugly. But sometimes they're beautiful and compassionate. It is so rich. It's the whole messy human experience. If it was just red-haired, blue eyed Jesus and pastel shepherds and the Ten Commandments, it wouldn't be so relevant. A lot of people think they are living their lives according to the Bible, and they've never read it. Every time I read it, I'm seeing it with different eyes. I read it from a different place, and it speaks to me in a different way. (57)

Just like his view and perception of the Bible, Paul also did not fail to see the fault in his angel, Ian. He knew Ian was imperfect just like the characters in the Bible but he had a beautiful soul and for him that was enough.

He was fleshing out the biography of "Ian the Angel." Every new fact was interpreted in that light. This allowed him to see a side of Ian that others often missed, for all of this was true about him: he was a chain-smoking alcoholic who used coarse language and had sex with men without ever catching their names. He was also a beautiful soul, warm and positive, compassionate and bright, an innocent who longed to be loved. (53)

In *Prayers for Bobby*, Bobby just like Ian was a homosexual but what about his heart which is supposed to be the most important yardstick to judge a person? As a person, Bobby was a guy with a kind and loving heart that everyone who knew him loved him. Even as a child Bobby "was loved and valued. He was a happy child who displayed a sunny disposition and gentle manner...a gentle spirit, almost too good and too obedient, yet endearing and lovable" (100-101). All these great and noble characters of Bobby were later overshadowed

by his sexuality and his socially acceptable positive traits were ignored. His homosexuality was placed at the center and was the only thing by which others judged him. Therefore, a constant conflict assuaged within him between what he wanted and the wants of the church and the society. Having being conditioned to accept the teachings of the Church as the truth, he failed to keep a long term relationship with anyone even if he liked them very much. He said:

If I could have one thing in this world, anything, I would have a beautiful man to love me. Just to have a pretty man hug me and gently kiss me. I daydream that one day I'll be casually strolling through a store or a park and from out of nowhere will appear this dream man and our eyes will meet and we'll live happily ever after. It's too bad I have to be such a hopeless romantic. It will never happen that way. I'm not even sure I really want it in the first place. (223-224)

The author adds:

Despite his longings, Bobby's romantic encounters were generally short and abortive. They flared intensely but burned out rapidly. He lost interest, or withdrew when the other party started getting serious. They were doomed either by Bobby's guilt or by his self-loathing, which he expressed as contempt for anyone who could be dumb enough to care for him. (224)

Bobby even went to Portland to stay with his cousin sister Jeannette with the hopes to 'better' his life and freely express his sexuality but his mother's Christian doctrine never left him. It followed him and shackled him, so tight that whenever he attempted to indulge in some 'gay activities', his guilt forbade him from going far. This aroused conflicts within him so much so that he could not bear it anymore and thereby ended his life committing suicide. From all this, it can be concluded that Bobby was killed by the ignorance of the heterosexual

community and most of all by the ignorance of his mother. She knew that it was her fault. When she first met the Metropolitan Church pastor, Larry Whitsell she said, “I did something wrong...and look what happened to my boy.” (Aarons 324)

Even when Bobby was alive and prior to his coming out to her, his mother secretly knew about Bobby’s gayness but she forced herself not to believe it. She remained willingly and consciously ignorant about the homosexuality of her son resulting in her rejection which further led to Bobby’s suicide.

Mary’s epiphany was brought about by her tireless searching for the truth; the place of her son’s soul. When she could not find the answer in her church, she turned to the Metropolitan Church, the church for homosexuals. There, with the help of the pastor, Larry Whitsell and the members of the PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) she had her “coming out” moment. In the Metropolitan Church Mary felt a quality of camaraderie in the small space, a sense of God that surprised and moved her.

In her quest for the truth Mary slowly and gradually gained the knowledge which eventually set her free from her ignorance. She felt stunned when she confronted with the alternative views of the Bible. It becomes a major revelation for her and instigated a feeling of anger and betrayal on the traditionist Church. The author thus writes:

Why then had the existence of such a view not been made known to her and her fellow parishioners? Yes, it was unacceptable to traditionists, but why suppress it? She felt cheated, felt that the church should be called to task for that. What else was out there she didn’t know about?...consider this she thought: these prophets, Moses and the rest of them quoted in the Bible, were not God, they were ordinary people who merely lived in a different time and place. (254-255)

Mary begins to deconstruct whatever she thought she knew about Homosexuality. With her new pair of eyes towards homosexuality, the Bible opens up new interpretations.

Nobody takes Deuteronomy 22:18 seriously today. No one in his right mind would condone stoning a rebellious child to death. There were other biblical admonitions honoured totally in the breach these days: that lepers were torn clothing and cry out, “Unclean, unclean!; that adultery with a neighbour’s wife be punished by death; that having intercourse with a menstruating woman be a capital offence; that no clothing of mixed fibres be worn; that bastards not be allowed in the synagogue; that a brother marry the wife of his dead sibling. So the church no longer recognized many thing as being sinful or worthy of death. Why, then, wouldn’t her son’s homosexuality be among them? True, the Bible declares the death penalty for “men lying with men.” But she could see Moses instituting such a law in the name of procreation- to get the Jewish nation to grow. If one were to examine the Bible in the context of the period in which it was written, as a document authored by human interpreting God’s will, that left room for error. How much did Moses really know about human sexuality? (255-256)

Mary’s ignorance has been lifted and she gradually found answers to the many questions she used to ask God. One night she had a dream where she saw Bobby

[B]orn with the seed of his sexuality. He was different. Not sinful or evil or sick, just different. If that was indeed the case, she had, at last, an answer to her question of why God had not healed Bobby. He had not healed Bobby because there was nothing wrong with him. (268-269)

Since then, she became an activist trying to save the parents and friends of gay people from their ignorant state so that they would not lose their child, brother and friend like she

did. She became a mother figure for all the homosexuals and in return received their gratitude for all the things she did. She touched millions of hearts with her stories and saved many parents ignorant about the homosexuality of their sons and daughters. The touching speech which she gave at the city Council Meeting boosted her reputation as a gay activist:

May I assure you, the council, and the residents of Concord, that you have nothing to fear should Concord's calendar of events include the word gay. What the people of Concord do have to fear is their lack of knowledge concerning gay and lesbian people. Because of my own lack of knowledge, I became dependent upon people in the clergy. When the clergy condemns a homosexual person to hell and eternal damnation, we the congregation echo "Amen." I deeply regret my lack of knowledge concerning gay and lesbian people. Had I allowed myself to investigate what I now see as Bible bigotry and diabolical dehumanizing slander against our fellow human beings, I would not be looking back with regret for having relinquished my ability to think and reason with other people—people I trust for truth and guidance in my life. God did not heal or cure Bobby as he, our family, and clergy believed he should. It is obvious to us now why he did not. God has never been encumbered by his child's genetically determined sexuality. God is pleased that Bobby had a kind and loving heart. In God's eyes kindness and love are what life is all about. I did not know that each time I echoed "Amen" to eternal damnation, each time I referred to Bobby as sick, perverted, and danger to our children, his self esteem and personal worth were being destroyed. Finally, his spirit broke beyond repair. He could no longer rise above the injustice of it all. Bobby ended his life at twenty.

It was not God's will that Bobby jumped over the side of a freeway overpass into the path of an eighteen-wheel truck, which killed him instantly. Bobby's death was the direct result of his parent's ignorance and fear of the word gay. An injustice has been

done not only to Bobby but to his family as well. God knows it isn't right that Bobby is not here with his loved ones. Correct education about homosexuality would have prevented this tragedy. There are no words to express the pain and emptiness remaining in our hearts. We miss Bobby's kind and gentle ways, his fun-loving spirit, his laughter. Bobby's hopes and dreams should not have been taken from him, but they were. We can't have Bobby back.

There are children like Bobby sitting in your congregations. Unknown to you, they will be listening to your 'Amen's as they silently cry out to God in their hearts. Their cries will go unnoticed for they cannot be heard above your 'Amen's. Your fear and ignorance of the word gay will soon silence their cries. Before you echo 'Amen' in your home and place of worship, think and remember. A child is listening. (Aarons 354-357)

In short, it can be said that the innovative speech made by Mary sums up the whole issue which has been dealt upon. She spoke for the queer all over the world and tried to educate the people especially the Church on the problems faced by these people they considered 'abnormal' and 'mistakes.' She did this so that the others would not fall into the same ignorant situation she once fell into.

In *Prayers for Bobby*, Bobby was too weak and too conditioned by the heteronormative belief that he did not have the strength to deconstruct it. He committed suicide when this heteronormative belief ruled over him. His mother, Mary on the other had had the opportunity to run away from this normative belief and deconstruct the Biblical statements condemning homosexuality. She got the help of pastor Whitsell. For Paul in *Angel*, it was not about committing suicide, he moved from the environment which condemned homosexuality. While he was staying in the environment he ran away from, he

knew the feelings he had for Ian was condemned by the society. However, his love for Ian was more powerful than what the society and the church beliefs in. He deconstructed the normative belief by not letting the belief dictate his life in spite of him being a minister.

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The heavy laden phrase ‘identity politics’ is used to signify a wide range of activity political in tone and theorizing mainly founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups. Identity political formations do not organize solely around belief systems, programmatic manifestos, or party affiliation; rather they typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context. The members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant oppressive characterizations and stigmatizations, with the goal of greater self-determination.

Historically speaking the second half of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of large-scale political movements including the Second Wave Feminism, Black Civil Rights in the U.S., Gay and Lesbian Liberation, and the American Indian movements, for example—based on claims about the injustices done to particular social groups. These social movements are undergirded by and foster a philosophical body of literature that takes up questions about the nature, origin and futures of the identities being defended.

Identity politics as a mode of organizing is intimately connected to the idea that some social groups are oppressed; that is, one's identity as a woman or as a Native American, makes one peculiarly vulnerable to cultural imperialism (including stereotyping, erasure, or appropriation of one's group identity), violence, exploitation, marginalization, or powerlessness (Young 1990). The oppressed and marginalized groups, rather than accepting the negative scripts offered by a dominant culture about one's own inferiority, transform one's own sense of self and community, often through raising consciousness. For example, in their germinal statement of Black feminist identity politics, the Combahee River Collective argues that:

As children we realized that we were different from boys and that we were treated different—for example, when we were told in the same breath to be quiet both for the sake of being ‘ladylike’ and to make us less objectionable in the eyes of white people. In the process of consciousness-raising, actually life-sharing, we began to recognize the commonality of our experiences and, from the sharing and growing consciousness, to build a politics that will change our lives and inevitably end our oppression. (14–15).

The scope of political movements usually described as identity politics can be very broad: the examples used in philosophical literature are predominantly of struggles within western capitalist democracies. Predictably, one can say that there cannot be any straightforward criterion which makes a political struggle into an example of identity politics; rather, the term signifies a loose collection of political projects, each undertaken by representatives of a collective with a distinctively different social location that has hitherto been neglected, erased, or suppressed.

It can be said that the conceptual struggles over identity has been most pronounced in lesbian and gay liberation movement more than anywhere else. The notion of one’s choice over sexual object defines who a person is has been profoundly challenged by the advent of queer politics. Visible early lesbian and gay activists emphasized the immutable and essential natures of their sexual identities. For some, they were a distinctively different kind of natural, with the same rights as heterosexuals (another natural kind) to find fulfillment in marriage, property ownership, and so on. While early lesbian feminists had a very different politics, basing their objection around liberation from patriarchy and the creation of separate spaces for woman-identified women, many still appealed to a more authentic, distinctively feminist self.

Retrospecting on the present state of affair has been reached regarding the various oppressions faced by the marginalized, it is important to look at the genealogy of the term 'queer'. Michel Foucault's work, especially his *History of Sexuality*, is the most widely cited progenitor of this view. He argues:

Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (43)

Although Foucault is the most often cited originator of such genealogical arguments about homosexuality, other often neglected writers contributed to the emergence of this new paradigm. In western popular culture such theories co-exist uneasily with biologically essentialist accounts of sexual identity, which look for a particular gene, brain structure, or other biological feature that is non interactive with environment and that will explain same-sex sexual desire. This raises various moral and political questions regarding the topic of 'sexual orientation'. If sexual identity is biologically caused, then it is as difficult to hold an individual morally responsible for being homosexual as it is to blame someone for being Black. Thus, it becomes appropriate for some gay activists to see biological explanations of sexuality as offering a defense against homophobic commentators who believe that gays can voluntarily change their 'immoral' desires. Indeed, much of the intuitive hostility to genealogical or social constructionist accounts of sexuality stems from the dual sense of many individuals that they could not have been other than gay, and that anything less than a radically essentialist view of sexuality will open the door to further attempts to 'cure' them of their homosexuality.

Thus, it is not the fault of Bobby in *Prayers for Bobby* that he was a homosexual, in fact he did not even ask for it. He hated being a homosexual as it did nothing good to his relationship with his family which to him was a “tightly bound circle of love and protection” and also “was the universe in which he defined himself” (51). In one of his entries in his diary specifically in the spring of 1979, near his sixteenth birthday, he wrote:

I can't ever let anyone find out that I'm not straight. It would be so humiliating. My friends would hate me. They might even want to beat me up. And my family? I've overheard them. They've said they hate gays, and even God hates gays, too. Gays are bad, and God sends bad people to hell. It really scares me when they talk that way because now they are talking about me. (57)

Despite his mother's initial insistence that homosexuality is a choice and can be 'cured' Bobby was different from inception and she knew it at the back of her head. Even Bobby himself is aware of his difference as a child.

If he felt different from the others, Bobby never showed it. “When I was little, I never gave a second thought to playing house, or playing dolls or wearing my mother's jewelry,” he reminisced in his diary. Yet, he records, “when I was young I was always very sensitive, and it didn't take much to make me cry. (51)

In *Angel*, Paul has always known himself to be a 'straight' man, having had a wife and a loving relationship with her. So, when he met Ian whom he initially mistook for an Angel he could not comprehend the feelings and passion he had for him. The sudden affection he had for another man was all new and very ambiguous. He was fascinated by this being, this male human and his fascination confused him as he had never questioned his sexuality prior to his chance meeting with the 'Angel', Ian.

He was not looking at an angel, nor was it even a woman. It was a young man. He appeared to be in his early twenties. His shoulder-length hair was dishwater brown, not spun gold. It hung forward to obscure his face. He had a slim build, not bony, but more “skinny” than “thin.” He wore a white long-sleeved T-shirt with a picture of the Pillsbury Doughboy in the center paired with tattered jeans. Paul felt a twinge of embarrassment over his mistake— human for angel, man for woman—but his fascination with the being was not diminished... An angel had walked in through the door of the church. He was simply the most beautiful work of art the minister had ever seen. Paul was captivated and terrified by the intensity of the feeling. (10-11)

Ian triggered some kind of desire in him which he could not understand. This desire did not diminish his desire for the opposite sex, rather he could still recall with joy the pleasures he experienced with his wife. But now his whole fascination was riveted to a person, a man, the same sex.

“What am I thinking? He’s a man. A man.” But he knew it was already too late. The vision had been too powerful. It would not leave him. (12)

As mentioned before, the normative understanding of the ‘sinful’ nature of ‘homosexuality’ and the societal emotional castration of homosexuals and their fear of the word ‘gay’ contributed to the reason why Paul felt so abashed and agitated with the feelings he had for Ian. Due to this, there was a constant conflict in him. He continuously tried to justify his feeling to Ian as appreciation of aesthetics but part of him knew very well that his feelings towards Ian was much more than appreciation of beauty. His desire for Ian was sexual.

He had been unable to stop the sexual fantasies and dreams. Ian was attracted to men. There was at least a chance for the two of them (though Ian was clearly out of his league). This should have thrilled Paul. Why was he upset? (31)

Eve Sedgwick said that no specific form of explanation regarding the origins of sexual preference will be enough proof against the infinitely varied strategies of homophobia (esp. 22–63). That sexual orientation takes on a metaphysical life of its own, for example, divulges of the fact that it is generally sexual behavior—not an abstract ‘identity’—that is the object of moral disapprobation. Queer politics, then, works to trouble the categories of ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian,’ as well as ‘heterosexual’, and eschews a genetic quest for the origins of homosexuality. In addition to historicizing and contextualizing sexuality, including the very idea of sexual identity, the shift to queer is also characterized by deconstructive methods. Rather than understanding sexual identities as a set of discrete and independent social types, queer theorists read to emphasize their mutual implication. For example, such thinkers love to point out that the word ‘homosexuality’ first appeared in English in 1897, and the term ‘heterosexuality’ was first used some years later (Garber 39–42). Heterosexuality came into existence as a way of understanding the nature of individuals after the homosexual has been ‘diagnosed’; homosexuality requires heterosexuality to be its opposite, despite its self-professed stand-alone essence. Queer theorists point out that the homo/hetero dichotomy, like many others in western intellectual history is without a doubt hierarchical (heterosexuality is superior, normal, and original, while homosexuality is inferior, deviant, and derivative). The task of a more radical ‘identity politics,’ on this vision, is to constantly denaturalize and deconstruct the identities in question, with a political goal of their subversion rather than their accommodation.

An exemplary conflict within the identity politics of sexuality focuses on the expansion of gay and lesbian organizing to those with other queer affiliations, especially

bisexual and transgendered activists. Skepticism about inclusion of these groups in organizational mandates, community centers, parades, and festivals has origins in more traditional understandings of identity politics that see reclaiming lesbian and/or gay identity from its corruption in a homophobic society as a task compromised by those whose identities are read as diluted, treacherous, ambiguous, or peripheral. Some lesbian feminist critiques of transgender, for example, see male-to-female transsexuals in particular as male infiltrators of women's space, individuals so intent on denying their male privilege that they will modify their bodies and attempt to pass as women to do it; bisexual women dabble in lesbian life, but flee to straight privilege when occasion demands. These arguments have been challenged in turn by writers who see them as attempts to justify purity of identity that merely replace the old exclusions with new dictatorships (Lugones 1994) and inhibit coalitional organizing against conservative foes.

Furthermore, on the topic of liminality in postcolonial literature, a lot can be analyzed on the dichotomy of the heterosexual/homosexual relation corresponding to the colonizer/colonized dichotomy. The politics between these identities have many similarities when it comes to the political relation between the colonizers and the colonized. Homosexuals and the colonized subjects have a shared experience when it comes to marginalization and castration given to them.

Heterosexuality and colonial discourse depend on what Homi Bhabha has referred to as the concept of 'fixity.' According to Bhabha, fixity is "a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition" (*Contemporary* 37). This form of knowledge based on the stereotype is placed at the very core of the epistemic regulation that enables the emergence/persistence of colonial/heterosexual discourse.

The concept of 'hybridity' occupies a central place in the postcolonial discourse. It is "celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweenness, the straddling of two cultures and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference." (Hoogvelt 158) This is particularly relevant with what Bhabha discussed regarding cultural hybridity.

Bhabha developed his concept of hybridity from literary and cultural theory in order to describe the construction of culture and identity within conditions of colonial antagonism and inequity. According to Bhabha, hybridity becomes the process with which the colonial governing authority undertakes to translate the identity of the colonised (the Other) within a singular universal framework. Bhabha contends that a new hybrid identity emerges as a result of the interweaving of elements of the coloniser and colonised challenging the validity and authenticity of any essentialist cultural identity. Hybridity is seen as an antidote to essentialism, or "the belief in invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity" (Fuss xi).

In postcolonial discourse, the notion that any culture or identity is essential or pure is highly debatable (Ashcroft et al). Bhabha, fully aware of the dangers of the concept of fixity and fetishism of identities within binary colonial thinking, argues that "all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity" (*Contemporary* 11).

Bhabha explains hybridity as such a form of liminal or in-between space, where the 'cutting edge of translation and negotiation' (*The Post-Colonial*) occurs, which he calls the third space (Rutherford 1990). This is a space intrinsically critical of essentialist positions of identity and a conceptualisation of 'original or originary culture':

For me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the ‘Third Space’, which enables other positions to emerge. (*The Third* 211)

The general implications of post-colonial narrative as liminal space can be closely tested in the analysis of the two novels that trope the figure of the homosexual and/or the colonial other as the interstitial locus where new epistemological ground emerges as a consequence of voicing of the formerly silenced object of marginality. Both Aarons’ *Prayers for Bobby* and Lee’s *Angel* explore the possibilities of a hybridity that goes beyond the impositions of the neocolonial fixity of identity in their attention to the decentering of the self. This decentering relates to the liminality of the micropolitics of the body and the transgression of technologies of sexual control as well as to the geopolitics of what Michel Foucault has called, ‘heterotopia,’ i.e. counter-sites where real spaces of the society “are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.” (*Diacritics* 24)

The sense of alienation and oppressive marginality is intensified in the lives of colonial subjects when they were being stripped of all their human rights. This anxiety is the focus of Aarons’ fiction, as the issue of self-definition at both family and personal levels is central in *Prayers for Bobby*. Documenting the story of the complex relationship between Mary Griffith and her gay son, Bobby Griffith, *Prayers for Bobby* is an examination of identity and a quest for personal freedom. For a mother who was brought up in a strict Christian family, having a gay son is something which she had never anticipated and asked for. Mary was brought up in an environment where

God and Mama merged in Mary’s mind as twin keepers of a stern domain pocked with unpredictable hazards –on earth as well as in heaven. The church told her that all of us are born with a sinful nature. Damnation is a living reality for those who do not

reconcile themselves with God. In that domain, Satan was a constant living presence. It was a struggle to stay within the narrow safety zone. Mary once dreamed of a God with a giant hand coming to get her. She hid behind a rock, to no avail. God found her. (91)

So, for her, her son, Bobby's sexual identity becomes a sin and a space of liminality emerged out of this hetero/homo dichotomy. The relationship between the mother and son clashed due to their antagonistic relationship and their failure of reconciliation. To take Gordimer's words:

Internal reasons for rebelling come out when people slough off their birth-determined identity and become something else. (147).

This antagonistic relationship between the mother and son is purely based on the religious stance of the mother, Mary. Her understanding of the Bible led her to reject her son's right to live a happy and care free life. This created an environment uninhabitable for her gay son who was seeking mere acceptance. Aarons highlights Mary's feelings towards her son with these words:

The one jarring note in Mary's life was the constant nagging worry about Bobby. Since that day more than four years earlier when he acknowledged to them that he was gay, Mary had rarely known a moment free from anxiety. The Bible repeatedly warned that homosexuality is a mortal sin; clearly gay people were doomed to perdition. If Bobby did not repent and change, there would be no reunion in heaven. (52)

In *Prayers for Bobby* as well as in *Angel*, both the protagonists, Bobby and Paul respectively struggle to transcend the social impositions that construct a feeling of

discrimination. The conflicting perspectives problematize the concepts of alterity and liminality in relation to identity. Bobby and Paul, as the central characters in the novels, are the ones that genuinely embark on a search towards a self-definition of their identity. Bobby endeavours desperately to escape from his background and enter a world not colonised by his mother's ideologies. His otherness looms large in his environment and Portland offers a potential way to transcend the fixities that frame his society. Portland further becomes the gate towards the life to which he aspires. For Paul, Ian offers a gateway towards a life which he had never ventured into. His relationship with a person who is considered the 'other' by the society introduces him to a liminal space. He decides to remove himself from the fixity offered by his church. Even though the ulterior motives of these characters in the novels are never spelled out, the relationships turn into an agonistic space where new identities struggle to emerge.

Early in his life, Bobby was reluctant and failed to identify with the world to which his mother belongs. Shortly after acknowledging his sexuality, he "drifted apart. Bobby withdrew, set up his own room, hid out in it, and brooded a lot" (63). Bobby's coming out of the closet operates as a catalyst of the process of separation—to use Van Gennep's term—from his society. This separation, which takes the form of him moving to Portland seeking for a life detested by his family, may be considered by the heterosexual community as madness. Mad because he does not want to be 'what he is'. With this regard something which is not considered normal and which is seen as the 'other' is seen as 'madness'. Interestingly, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon (Fanon 141-210) referred to madness as a colonial disease relating to a sense of alienation stemming from the experience of colonialism. It can also be said that labelling rebellious homosexuals mentally unstable is a defence mechanism to preserve the system on the part of the heterosexuals. Bobby's attempt to escape 'what he is' and Paul making the final 'choice' is, therefore, clinically conceptualized from a position

of authority as mental illness since it threatens to disturb the power/knowledge relations on which both the systems of heterosexuality and neo-colonialism are based.

From the perspective of the individual who desires to attain a new identity, madness can be arguably reinterpreted as a liminal stage following the process of separation mentioned above. As Foucault has put it:

“[T]he madman’s voyage is at once a rigorous division and an absolute Passage. In one sense, it simply develops, across a half-real, half-imaginary geography, the madman’s *liminal* position on the horizon.” (*Madness* 11)

The process of escaping fixed identities and adumbrating new ones is inextricably related to an understanding of the other as a way to transgress fixities through hybridity. The neo-colonial politics of sexuality, identity and space are disrupted by both Bobby and Paul in their separation from their original space and ensuing liminality as other in a foreign environment. Bobby moved to Portland with hopes of living a lifestyle free from condemnation and Paul left the Church where he had ministered for a long time despite the 53 percent of votes in favour of his stay. He left to start over in life, a life of freedom.

He wasn’t seeking ministerial posts or professional jobs. He wanted something else. Something that would take him away from anything he’d done before. (Lee 186)

He became a Mount Rainer tour guide job hoping that he would see his angel again and reunite with him once again even though the chance of that happening was very little.

In his last sermon on Sunday he said:

“Sometimes when you love something, you have to let it go. As hard as that may be. And I love this church, and this community, too much to stay and see it torn apart.”

Paul cleared his throat and straightened his shoulders. “That’s why I’m resigning as your minister, effective this Friday. This will be my last service in this church.” (Lee 185)

The recurrent theme of sexuality, especially in *Angel* is one of the ways in which this transgression of neo-colonial fixity is facilitated. Prior to his sexual encounter with Ian, Paul was in a constant flux of confusion and the dichotomy of hetero/homo was constantly present in him. He was reluctant to define himself as a homosexual even though he had feelings for Ian while dismissing his feelings to be non sexual:

God had given him a sign that this was someone he should notice so he could help him spiritually. Yet Paul sensed his attraction went beyond a desire to be of service. What was it?

It wasn’t sexual, he told himself. It couldn’t be sexual. He was not gay. He had to be feeling something else. Inspiration, a pure appreciation of beauty. There was nothing wrong with admiring beauty where it existed, even in a male form. God had created it. It was divine energy. The guy needed a community, a church home. There was a reason God had sent him through that door right when Paul happened to be standing there. He felt the enormity of fate in the chance meeting. He could not let the young man walk out as though nothing had happened. Somehow he had to find a way to speak to the angel again. He needed to know what these feelings were calling him to do. (12)

The current ambiguous situation of Paul could not go on; he had to settle the dichotomy by ‘choosing’ the side to which he wanted to associate himself with.

Ian and Paul had gone as far as they could as friends. They both felt the magnetic pull of an attraction that could not be denied. It was time for Paul to make a choice. His only options now were to say yes or to say no. Either choice would change things forever. If he said no, the flirtation and the hour-long phone calls would stop, and Ian would slowly but surely drift away. The idea of going on without Ian in his life was inconceivable and painful. Saying yes was even more daunting. An affair with Ian had the power to undo him. He might be risking everything he had and didn't know what he would gain. The perfect untouched dream would be replaced with an uncontrollable reality that would transform Paul's life in all kinds of messy but maybe beautiful ways. (94)

When he finally made his decision and solved the hetero/homo dichotomy within him by entering into a sexual relationship with Ian "all of the anxiety and worry were gone" (ibid: 98). Sex emerges, then, as a foil to heterosexual norms as it symbolically undermines the constraints these norms enforce, while obviously disrupting their sexual prohibitions. Their sexual intercourse also then becomes a defining moment and sex becomes the preliminary space where his new identity can take root and flourish, since it suspends the defining mechanisms he is trying to evade.

It is through an understanding of Ian's otherness that Paul ventures to create a 'new' identity and also it is through an understanding of Mary's otherness that Bobby assumes a 'new' identity, although the kind of understanding they have may vary. In so far as the relationship between Paul and Ian is concerned, the union can be interpreted as the locus where alternative identities to the ones regulated by institutionalized power/knowledge relations are likely to emerge. On the other hand Mary in *Prayers for Bobby* replicates the constraints from which Bobby is trying to break away. While Bobby endeavours to run away from his society Mary is in awe of it. In fact, Mary comes from a strongly religious

background where gendered segregation is strictly enforced and where “religion completed the circle of Mary’s neatly contoured life” (126).

Her view of religion was eclectic, quilted from a variety of sources including the Southern Baptist roots of her earliest church experiences, her mother’s fire-and-brimstone admonitions, her own later church exposure, and the ubiquitous drone of evangelists on the religious radio station she loved to listen to. She relied solely on Christian-oriented books to guide her in child raising, and read little else. (127-128)

These elements, an approximation of traditional orthodox Protestant doctrine, defined the realm within which Mary could ensure both her family’s safety and its immortality. (ibid: 129)

Clearly, Mary and Bobby, though mother and son, are worlds apart. Whereas Mary sees security in the society Bobby wants to escape the perfection of her own —and is not, therefore, engaged in any sort of transgression. Bobby anxiously struggles to find a genuinely personal identity. Therefore, one can hardly say that Bobby’s world is coterminous with that of his mother, Mary. The former is the liminal space where new identities are liable to reside; the latter becomes equated with the geographical reality of the First World countries where only the acceptable resides. He then becomes ‘strange’ to that society. Like the invisible man of Ralph Emerson, he felt invisible to the society he was living in. In one of his entries he wrote:

I am evil and wicked. I want to spit vulgarities at everyone I see. I am dirt, harmful bacteria grows inside me.... I was innocent, trusting, loving. The world has raped me till my insides are shredding and bleeding. My voice is small and unheard, unnoticed. Damned. (77)

Another thing which is clear from the above entry is that it is not his sexual orientation which changed Bobby but rather the treatment which he got from people around him and their failure to accept him. The hetero/homo dichotomy with the frustration and disorientation created by the liminal space forced him to have a rebelling attitude towards his 'mother's society'.

Mary did not make his life easier. In the space he called 'home' Mary would persistently force religion into Bobby trying to cure him with her notion of religion. She would pin Bible verses around the house targeting the 'condition' of Bobby. She builds an environment which does not accept any kind of diversion from her belief. Therefore, when Bobby tried his best but failed to 'change' in that environment, he became a stranger. Unsuitable to live in that space anymore he moves to Portland, Oregon seeking a space which could contain and accept his 'strangeness.'

Thus there was no motivation for someone like Bobby... to come forward to seek help, nor was there an institutional framework to accommodate their needs. (In 1994 there still existed no overt pastoral mission at Walnut Creek Pres specifically for gays.) On the contrary, to be branded gay in an environment where he dearly wished nothing more than acceptance would have been the ultimate humiliation- for Bobby.

And he knew that the potential for humiliation lurked in every corner of his surroundings. (Aarons 258-259)

In *Angel*, Paul was basically married to the church. Since childhood, "the church became Paul's home. The minister was his surrogate father. Christ was his mother" (62). The church then turns into a space which fails to allow any kind of change and holding back Paul from enjoying the 'other' kind of life. The church becomes the bewildering space where everything comes to a standstill. Especially after the death of his wife, Sarah, the church

provides nothing joyful and adventurous for Paul. He does his monotonous routine day after day with no diversions and recreation.

He continued to live mostly on the momentum of his habits. He got up on Tuesday morning... and drove to the church with about as much enthusiasm as someone drives to an office cubicle for a job counting widgets. He met with people about weddings and baptisms and pasted on his best ministerial smile. He sat through the meeting to plan the sermon with Emily, the music director, and Marlee, the religious education director, and let his experience carry him through. He waited for the mail in the early afternoon, a highlight of his day that inevitably disappointed... Then he went home, heated up a frozen dinner, ate it off a folding table in front of the TV, went to bed around ten, and the whole thing started again. (5)

It was after his encounter with Ian that his attitude towards life changed. Ian provides him with a liminal space making him realise that change for him is possible and that he can transcend the fixed 'realities' of life. Ian changed him beyond his understanding.

Paul felt a sense of mission and purpose that he had not felt for years. Watching Ian returning to worship, Paul felt truly "called." His ministry took on a new energy. The sermons were inspired and unique. Everything in life was taking on a new color, and Paul's new enthusiasm for life spilled over into everything he did, the way he spoke to people, the care he took with every meeting. He could now feel congregants' joys as deeply as he had previously felt their sorrows. People walked away from a meeting with the minister feeling revived and passed that along to each other. Attendance was growing... Now every new idea seemed to have promise. If a church member suggested visiting a homeless shelter or teaching an evening cooking class, Paul immediately got Julie to put a date on the calendar, get a notice in the newsletter, and

made sure it happened. Almost nothing worth trying was dropped. The sense that things were happening at the church built on itself. (80)

For Paul, the mountain, Mount Rainier becomes a space where he can be who he really wants to be and a place where he have the hope to reunite with his angel again. He wants to break away from the constraints of the society who doubted him, from the world where only heterosexuals have the last say and dictate the norms. “He was waiting for something to jump out at him, a new world and a new life” (186). While he was scouting for a new experience, the word ‘mountain’ caught his attention because for him the mountain signifies a liminal space.

The mountain is nothing but itself. It does not speak. It has no message, and yet it is the great metaphor maker. It reflects what the traveler brings to it: a getaway, quiet majesty, a challenge, security, or danger. It is all these things or none of them, and the traveler sees whichever he looks for in it. For millennia people have come to high mountains and sat at their feet or scaled their peaks, hoping to return with the answer to a question. (1)

The mountain can be interpreted, then, as a heterotopia that resists operations of surveillance and shows how urbanization, like regulated sexuality, is a space of incarceration. At the same time, it symbolically represents the freed locus of liminality where Paul utopically seeks to find an identity and a home. The relation between utopia and heterotopia has been spelled out by Foucault who refers to heterotopia as “a kind of effectively enacted utopia.” (*Diacritics* 24). He goes on to specify that the relation between utopia and heterotopia is like a mirror, thus reinforcing the conviction that identity is to be attained through the ‘othering.’ of the subject. In his own words:

From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back to myself. (*Diacritics* 24)

Therefore, Paul seeking a new space and a whole new experience shows that he has to make a change of environment in order to come in real contact with his true identity i.e. a full understanding of the 'other.'

The possible intersections and relation between Queer and Postcolonial theories has the ability for protest and affirmation contributing to hermeneutical grids. This enhances socio-political awareness, providing tools for analysing patterns of hegemony, criticising binary and other methods of identifying and excluding outsiders. It further constructively poses alternative visions for thinking about and structuring society in ways characterised by inclusivity and equality. Spurlin states:

“[P]ostcolonial studies have seriously neglected the ways in which heterosexism and homophobia have also shaped the world of hegemonic power” (Spurlin 2001: 185).

The emphasis on sexual plurality is not only important for breaking through the stagnancy of heterosexism, for challenging the politics of homophobia in epistemology and practice, but also and most importantly, for clearing the ground for critical rethinking of human sexuality. Of course, since configurations of and within sexuality are still expressed best by domination, the value of postcolonial enquiry and investigation is evident. The ideological longevity of any normalising regime (such as heteronormativity) is perpetuated as long as certain struggles (such as queer struggles) are posited as less important and deferred.

The development of medical science thus ushered in a tendency to categorise human sexuality. This categorising further enhances the hetero/homo dichotomy which is evident in the two studied works. The consolidation of the heterosexual's hegemony over the 'otherness' of homosexuals, thus creates a space of liminality or a threshold which again further enhances the gap between the two antagonistic sexualities.

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The homosexuals, the 'others' in the heterosexual society through their relentless resistance against the homophobic treatments on a personal level and also on a much larger political scale breach through cultural sexual normativity into sexual ambiguity as ways of rediscovering their full humanity. Leroy Aarons and Laura Lee through their works manage to portray a liminal situation through their characters who tried in their own way to resist the advances made by the heterosexual society surrounding them. Bobby in *Prayers for Bobby* was tackling his mother's attempts to make him 'normal'. His diary becomes the only means by which he could confide his 'true identity'. It is here that one can find the many mental struggles he went through caused by the ignorance of his family especially his mother and her fear of the word 'gay'. Paul in *Angel*, after making his final 'choice' removed himself from the environment which failed to understand his 'decision' and his love for his 'angel'.

It was official church policy not to allow an "avowed, practicing homosexual" to act as minister. He simply couldn't be both a minister and Ian's "avowed" love. (129)

Both Bobby and Paul had to go through circumstances which otherwise they would not go if they had sexual feelings which are considered 'normal'. They suffered marginalisation and prejudices because of their sexuality and their love for people of the same-sex. They were observed. In relation to Michel Foucault's concept of "observation" in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) one can see clearly that right from the moment when the society knew about Bobby and Paul's sexuality they became an object of observation. Their sexuality became a prominent aspect and the yardstick with which they were judged. In other words it became their identity. According to Foucault a person can be made and even forced to do something when they are constantly being observed. The observed become self-conscious and are more prone to changes in behaviour. Further in relation to the concept of being subjected he wrote:

A real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation... He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribed in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principal of his own subjection. (*Discipline* 202)

Being constantly observed by the society, homosexuals become more aware of their sexual identity and led them to have self-surveillance to the point where their sexual identity becomes a curse to them leading them to have guilt further leading them to drastic results like suicide. "Visibility is a trap" (Foucault *Discipline* 200) whereby they are caused to perform a gender, an identity, an identity more acceptable to the heterosexual society. Judith Butler also talks about gender performativity which is a phenomenon that is pervasive and somewhat obvious within contemporary society. Gender and sex, from Butler's perspective, can be approached in the sense of being a construction rather than an essential part of one's being. Gender is not ontological, but rather, comes to existence through actions:

Gender proves to be performative- that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is *always a doing*, though not a doing by subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed. (Butler 33)

However, performance alone cannot bring about full satisfaction for Bobby and Paul. They could not enjoy their 'true identity' even though they tried their best to blend in, and be accepted by the society. They sought for happiness and relief from their environment to places where they thought they would find it. Bobby committed suicide unable to bear his family's failure to accept him as he was; while Paul removed himself from his environment, leaving his profession as a minister by moving to Mount Rainer seeking for a re-union with his angel.

Sexual desires and identity are not related. Kurt Cobain in an interview at *Melody Maker* (founded in 1926) a British weekly pop/rock music newspaper states:

I knew I was different. I thought that I might be gay or something because I couldn't identify with any of the guys at all. None of them liked art or music, they just wanted to fight and get laid. It was many years ago but it gave me this real hatred for the average American macho male. (Cobain 1991)

This seems to be the existing scenario in the society. The heteronormative society tends to associate certain behaviour to certain sexual identity and a person is labelled according to his/her sexual desires. Gender for theorists like Butler is a human production, and humans who 'do' gender. Along the line of what Cobain had said in an interview, one can say that the conventional society has been conditioning the minds of the people so much so that there is fixity when it comes to gender roles. It is when the roles are mixed up and violated that it become 'abnormal'. With regards to this Foucault said:

...if you are not like everybody else, then you are abnormal, if you are abnormal, then you are sick. These three categories, not being like everybody else, not being normal and being sick are in fact very different but have been reduced to the same thing. (Michel 95)

Bobby's ambiguous feelings about his sexual identity resulted in his detestation as his mother and the society failed to accept him. He felt liminality on a psychological level. Mary wanted to reform his sexual desires but failed miserably. His confession changed everything. The confession is central to Foucault's understanding of the workings of power. In *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* Foucault describes how western societies have established the confession as one of the main rituals to rely on for the production of truth. He outlines how a "...continuous incitement to discourse and to truth" (*History* 58) emerged

concurrently with an ever-expanding array of confessional techniques beyond those codified by the Christian church; and how these helped to give the confession a central role in the order of civil and religious powers.

...the confession became one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth. We have singularly become a confessing society. The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relationships, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one's crimes, one's sins one's thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. One confesses in public and in private, to one's parents, one's educators, one's doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself in pleasure and in pain, things it would be impossible to tell to anyone else, the things people write books about. When it is not spontaneous or dictated by some internal imperative, the confession is wrung from a person by violence or threat...Western man has become a confessing animal. (59)

In the West “ the obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points...that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us” (60). The present society has become so accustomed to believing that the constraining power holds them back and pins them down and that it is only through confession, through the revelation of all of that is inside of them that they can finally become free.

Sex has become a “privileged theme of confession” (61), a form of confession that compels individuals to confess any and every sexual peculiarity. Its effect is to reinforce heterogeneous array of sexualities. Foucault believes that “sexual interdictions are constantly

connected with the obligation to tell the truth about oneself” (1988: 16). Through the confession of inner secrets truth becomes the means by which sex is manifested.

In *Angel* Paul had a ‘new identity’ when he ‘chose’ to walk on a different path. Through the character of Paul, the author Laura Lee deconstructs the fixed gender roles and the various fixed sexual identity constructed by the society. Paul is portrayed as standing at a cross road, a liminal space where he is able to ‘choose’ the road he wanted to walk on.

It was time for Paul to make a choice. His only options now were to say yes or to say no. Either choice would change things forever. If he said no, the flirtation and the hour-long phone calls would stop, and Ian would slowly but surely drift away. The idea of going on without Ian in his life was inconceivable and painful. Saying yes was even more daunting. An affair with Ian had the power to undo him. He might be risking everything he had and didn’t know what he would gain. The perfect untouched dream would be replaced with an uncontrollable reality that would transform Paul’s life in all kinds of messy but maybe beautiful ways. (Lee 94)

Derrida’s ‘deconstruction’ is an important tool, instrumental for the creation of a different perspective on the heteronormative religious belief. It also talks about how the church and homosexuality have always been analogous to each other as the church holds the belief that homosexuals are marring the convention of a ‘normal’ marriage.

With ‘deconstruction’ the common normative beliefs about religion and the church and also the common interpretation of the words in the Bible has been decentralised. This does not mean that Bible is being detested and ignored by the characters in the novels; on the contrary the holy Words of God is viewed with a different perception and on a different light. Prior to her ‘coming out’, the life of Bobby’s mother, Mary Griffith, was centered around the Bible and its common traditional and conventional interpretation. However, after gaining new

insight, her life took a drastic turn. She began to work tirelessly as an activist order to change the lives of all the other Bobby's and Jane's in this world.

On the same plane, Paul, even though a minister of the Church fell in love with another man knowing well what was written in the Bible about homosexuality. For him love transcends the common perception.

Ignorance, sin and guilt are the main sources from which homosexuals are suffering. Ignorance and misunderstanding of the lot of the homosexuals by the heterosexuals normally leads the homosexuals to have a depressing attitude toward life. The fear of the word 'gay' often causes the heterosexual to inculcate homophobic treatments. This lack of understanding and ignorance often cause guilt on the part of the homosexual which most often results in suicidal attempts and even the actual suicide causing the rate of suicide among the homosexuals to increase considerably. The ignorance of Mary can be deemed as the main reason why her son Bobby committed suicide. It was her failure to accept him that caused his mental agitations which debarred him to lead a happy life and eventually pushed him to commit suicide.

This chapter puts forth contexts which could be described as what Jacques Berlinerblau calls counterexegesis. It tends to "destabilize dominant conceptions of 'what the Bible says.'" (6). This context also falls in line with what George Aicheles's call to "reverse the hermeneutical flow" (198). The characters in the novels after their epiphanic moment rather than just simply reading out of the biblical text and simply following what others and even they themselves used to accept, they go against it. However, this does not mean that they are in opposition to it; they see the Bible not as strict rules of conduct as they did before. In *Prayers for Bobby*, Larry Whitsell, the minister of the Metropolitan Community Church represents this alternate view. He stands in opposition to the accepted belief that

homosexuality is a sin; he believes the high rate of homosexual suicide can be prevented by loving and accepting them.

The act of sodomy which has long been associated with the homosexual act and which has its origin from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah has also been deconstructed. It was not homosexuality with which God punished the people of Sodom and Gomorrah by destroying the city. John Boswell gives four explanations and possible reasons for the destruction of Sodom:

(1) The Sodomites were destroyed for the general wickedness which had prompted the Lord to send angels to the city to investigate in the first place; (2) the city was destroyed because the people of Sodom had tried to rape the angels; (3) the city was destroyed because the men of Sodom had tried to engage in homosexual intercourse with the angels; (4) the city was destroyed for inhospitable treatment of visitors sent from the Lord. (93)

Stating that the explanation no. 2 "is the most obvious of the four," though has been "largely ignored by biblical scholars."(93) Boswell seems to favour explanation (4) as most consistent with "modern scholarship" since 1955:

Lot was violating the custom of Sodom...by entertaining unknown guests within the city walls at night without obtaining the permission of the elders of the city. When the men of Sodom gathered around to demand that the strangers be brought out to them, "that they might know them," they meant no more than to "know" who they were, and the city was consequently destroyed not for sexual immorality, but for the sin of inhospitality to strangers. (93)

D. Sherwin Bailey also argues this point in *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (1955). The men of Sodom wanted to make sure if Lot's guests were spies or not, so they wanted to interrogate them. The sin of gang rape case was also there, however there was sign of homosexuality. So, by way of summing this up, one can say that the men were inhospitable toward Lot's guests.

Chapter 4 gives a brief explanation of what identity politics, where marginalized groups are oppressed due to their identity and culture. However, these groups do not simply accept these oppressions silently. In his essay, "Deconstructing Queer Theory," Steve Seidman makes a distinction between the mainstream lesbian and gay theory and politics and queer theory. With regards to the former, homosexuals are seen as forming an ethnic minority having their own distinctive identities, culture and political interests.

Queer theory does more than rethink categories and strategies of identity and politics:

Queer theorists argue that homosexuality should not be treated as an issue of the lives and fate of a social minority... [They] urge an epistemological shift. They propose to focus on cultural level... Specifically, their object of analysis is the hetero/homosexual opposition. This understood as a category of knowledge, a way of defining and organizing selves, desires, behaviours, and social relations. Through the articulation of this hetero/homosexual figure in texts and social practices... it contributes to producing mutually exclusive heterosexualized and homosexualized subjects and social worlds. (Seidman 150)

Queer theory shifts from viewing homosexuality as a minority figure to that of a cultural figure. This chapter further talks about the hetero/homosexual dichotomy and queer politics and cited Foucault talking about the genealogy of the term 'queer' taking his book *History of Sexuality* as the main referred work. Foucault said:

The appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and "psychic hermaphroditism" made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of "perversity"; but it also made possible the formation of a "reverse" discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or "naturalness" be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified. (*History* 101)

He further said:

Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy into a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (*History* 43)

The chapter gives a brief explanation of identity politics where certain groups in the society are marginalised on grounds of culture, race, class and gender. The hetero/homosexual dichotomy runs parallel to the dichotomy of the colonizers/colonized. Examining them along the lines of Homi Bhabha's concept of 'hybridity' both Leroy Aarons' *Prayers for Bobby* and Laura Lee's *Angel* explore the possibilities of a hybridity that goes beyond the impositions of the neocolonial fixity of identity in their attention to the decentering of the self.

This chapter also considers the possible intersections and relation between Queer and Postcolonial theories with their ability for protest and affirmation which has been useful for contributing hermeneutical grids, feeding into socio-political awareness, providing tools for analysing patterns of hegemony, criticising binary and other methods of identifying and

excluding outsiders, and constructively, posing alternative visions for thinking about and structuring society in ways characterised by inclusivity and equality. Spurlin states:

[P]ostcolonial studies have seriously neglected the ways in which heterosexism and homophobia have also shaped the world of hegemonic power (185).

Aaron and Lee in *Prayers for Bobby* and *Angel* respectively have successfully created ground for the examination of identity politics. Dexterously handling the possibilities of an alternative view of the Bible, they have successfully showcased and distinguished the relationship between sexuality and identity in examining the liminality of their characters' situations and circumstances.

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APPENDICES

<u>NAME OF CANDIDATE</u>	: C. Lalrinzuala
<u>DEGREE</u>	: M.Phil.
<u>DEPARTMENT</u>	: English
<u>TITLE OF DISSERTATION</u>	: The Liminal Experience: A Study of Selected Works of Aarons and Lee
<u>DATE OF PAYMENT OF ADMISSION</u>	: 30.07.2014
<u>(Commencement of First Semester)</u>	
<u>COMMENCEMENT OF SECOND</u>	: 01.01.2015
<u>SEMESTER/ DISSERTATION</u>	
<u>APPROVAL OF RESEARCH PROPOSAL –</u>	
1. BOS	: 15.05.2015
2. SCHOOL BOARD	: 21.05.2015
3. REGISTRATION NO. & DATE	: MZU/M. Phil./207 of 21.05.2015
4. DUE DATE OF SUBMISSION	: 30.06.2016
5. EXTENSION IF ANY	: 1.01.2016 – 30.06.2016 (For the duration of one Semester)

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Educational Qualifications:

Class	Board/University	Year of passing	Division/Grade	Percentage
X	ICSE	2005	II	55.20%
XII	MBSE	2007	I	60.20%
B.A.	Mizoram University	2010	II	51.87%
M.A.	Mizoram University	2012	II	50.38%
M.Phil.	Mizoram University	Course work completed in 2014	I 'O' Grade Awarded. 10 pt. Scale grading System, 'O' Corresponds to 7.00-10.00 pts	Corresponds to 70% in terms of Percentage conversion.

M. Phil. Regn. No. and Date: MZU/M.Phil./207 of 21.05.2015

Other relevant information:

- I) Currently working on M.Phil. dissertation entitled, “The Liminal Experience: A Study of Selected Works of Aarons and Lee” under the supervision of Dr. K.C. Lalthlamuani, Professor, Department of English, Mizoram University.

- ii) Awarded the UGC-NET Junior Research Fellowship from the date of admission on 15th June 2015.

- iii) Visited the following out-of-state libraries for the purpose of the research:
 - a. United Theological College Library (Benson Town, Bengaluru)
 - b. Jawaharlal Nehru University Library (New Mehrauli Road, New Delhi)

The study examines the liminal experiences experienced by the homosexual characters in Leroy Aaron's *Prayers for Bobby: A Mother Coming to Terms with the Suicide of her Gay Son* (1995) and Laura Lee's *Angel* (2011).

In his *Rites of Passage* (1906), Van Gennep coined the term liminality exploring and developing the concept in the context of rituals in small-scale society. Gennep emphasises that all the rites of transition are marked by three phases which are separation, margin (or limen), and aggregation. The first phase or 'separation' consist of a symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from a set of cultural condition (a state) or from an earlier fixed point in the social structure. In the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual subject or the 'passenger' is ambiguous as this is a realm or space that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. The passage becomes consummated in the third phase.

Disorder and chaos that occurs during the liminal stage can be fruitful as new ideas and forms can emerge from it making it valuable. The liminal stages also produce social action and cooperation which Turner calls 'communitas', which means all positive aspects of community and togetherness.

Communitas ...is...part of the "serious life". It tends to ignore, reverse, cut across, or occur outside of structural relationships... representing the desire for a total, unmediated relationship which nevertheless does not submerge one in the other but safeguards their uniqueness in the very act of realizing their commonness. (*Dramas* 274)

To Turner, 'communitas' ensures that the welfare of individuals takes precedence over structure, status and authority. Ordinary people cannot have a voice and are not allowed

to be involved where structure/authority becomes a straightjacket. Social performances in contrast encourage free heart-felt participation, entertaining yet serious.

Culture is never static and the central authority has often been challenged by the social groups who remain underrepresented. Liminality is characterized by ambiguity, openness and indeterminacy. One's sense of identity is dissolved bringing about disorientation. It is a period of transition during which the normal limits of thought, self – understanding and behaviours are relaxed, opening the way to something new. It may be a land of recognition for some and at the same time may be a land of oblivion for others. Liminality connotes more than just in-between-ness. It is a phase that every culture in general and every living human being in particular has to go through. It is the essential need of human nature.

In an effort to deal with the 'in-between' categories of competing cultural differences, Homi K. Bhabha in his introduction to *The Location of Culture* (1994) attempts to bring into focus the 'liminal' negotiation of cultural identity across differences of race, class, gender, and cultural traditions:

It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. How are subjects formed 'in-between', or in excess of, the sum of the 'parts' of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)? How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable? (2)

Victor W. Turner while explaining the concept of 'liminality' says, "we must regard the period of margin or 'liminality' as an interstructural situation." He further says:

One may, I suppose, also talk about "a state of transition," since J.S. Mill has, after all, written of "a state of progressive movement," but I prefer to regard transition as a process, a becoming and in the case of *rites de passage* even a transformation— here an apt analogy would be water in progress of being heated to boiling point, or a pupa changing from grub to moth. In any case, a transition has different cultural properties from those of a state... (46-47)

Helene Cixous gave theoretical reflections on the function of the dream. According to her the threshold state that produces such moments of liminality allows people to explore, introspectively, the scope of their personal desires. Cixous describes the Biblical story of Jacob's dream ladder, an experience that occurs when Isaac sends Jacob away for deceiving their family. Cixous identifies Jacob's dream as an event made possible because of Jacob's physical travel, a necessary travel from his familiar homeland. She then goes on to say that in order for him/her to enter into a realm of liminality, of self-discovery, he/she must "Go toward foreign lands, toward the foreigner in ourselves. Traveling in the unconscious, that inner foreign country, foreign home, country of lost countries" (Cixous 69-70). Cixous says that it is necessary to be detached from oneself in order to find the foreigner in oneself.

However, the selected texts for study, portray liminality as an intimate illumination of one's known, expressed selves entwined with one's unexpressed, yet also very known, selves. The state of liminality requires a physical and spiritual space, which allows the characters to visualize himself/herself as a transparency in a previously-unknown environment. Therefore, while the self for whom they search is not foreign, the environment into which they travel is.

This is not only a very conscious process, but it is one charged with illuminated epiphany and an aura of positive motivation.

The first selected work for study is a book by an award winning journalist Leroy Aarons who was born on December 8, 1933 in the Bronx, New York City, New York, USA. During the 1970's political scandal, he was a national correspondent for the "Washington Post" and a founding member of the Maynard Institute for Journalism Education (MIJE). Later as an executive editor of the "Oakland Tribune" he led a team to a Pulitzer Prize.

The American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) in 1989, asked Aarons to coordinate the first ever survey of journalists who are gay and lesbian. In the 1990 convention of ASNE while presenting his speech he startled even himself by coming out to his peers. This risky, unprecedented yet courageous move inspired legions of gay journalists to come out and be open about their sexuality and harnessed in them courage to stand against the marginalization and stigmatization inflicted upon the gay community by the 'normal' people. Founding the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association (NLGJA), he began writing plays, operas and books among which *Prayers for Bobby: A Mother Coming to Terms with the Suicide of her Gay Son* (1995) became most successful and inspired a lot of gays and lesbians all over the world.

Aarons' first book *Prayers for Bobby* was published in 1995. The story is based on a true story about a young man's suicide that Aarons saw in a newspaper. Bobby Griffith suffered enormously from his family's lack of support and acceptance and the condemnation of his church. Even leaving home could not dispel his sense of worthlessness; at age 20, he jumped to his death from a freeway bridge.

Right from an early age, Bobby knew deep down that he was not like the others and that he was not 'normal'. He knew he was never going to be the 'golden son' which he

mother always wanted him to be and therefore he could not feel secure in that ‘foreign’ identity. In short, he was in a liminal position, an in-between space of identity. He could not identify himself fully with the heterosexual identity and also could not accept himself to be a homosexual as it was detested by his family and the society.

Remarkably Bobby’s mother, Mary Griffith was transformed by her loss and eventually renounced the rigid religious beliefs that had kept her from fully accepting Bobby.

The Griffith’s heartbreaking story came at a personal turning point for Aarons. His *Oakland Tribune* colleagues knew him as an openly gay man, but few others in the world of journalism did not until he came out the following year before a convention of his peers. He became an activist, founding the National Lesbian & Gay Journalists Association.

Aarons’ personal transformation paralleled Mary’s; after Bobby’s death she became an iconic activist for PFLAG (the nationwide association of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) urging parents to understand and accept their children’s homosexuality. This extraordinary conversion touched many as deeply as the tale of Bobby’s tragic death. Mary’s immense love for her son enabled her to transcend her background and perform what could only be described as acts of courage. •

Leaving journalism, Aarons began to explore the Griffith’s stories in depth. *Prayers for Bobby*, with its powerful and potentially life-saving message for parents and youth, was adapted for television, debuting on Lifetime TV on Jan. 24, 2009. He died on November 28, 2004 at the age of 70 leaving his life partner of 24 years, Joshua Boneh to carry on with his works.

The next selected author Laura Lee is a Metro Detroit native who divides her time equally between writing and producing ballet educational tour with her partner, who happens

to be the art director of the Russian National Ballet Foundation. She has written one children's book, *A Child's Introduction to Ballet* (2007), two novels, *Angel* (2011) and *Identity Theft* (2015). In her writing, Lee brings a unique background including work as a professional mime, improvisational comic and radio announcer.

Angel, one of the many great works of Laura Lee presents an extremely insightful view into the life of Paul Tobit. A 42 year old widowed minister of a small Christian Church, the main protagonist attempts to cope with personal grief issues he had after his wife died of cancer. Since the loss of his lively, charming wife to cancer six years ago, Paul has been performing his religious duties by rote. Everything changes for him from the day he enters the church lobby and encounters a radiant, luminous being lit from behind. Referring to it as 'an angel', the being for him is breathtakingly beautiful and glowing with life. Filled with a sense of awe and wonder, Paul is tempted to fall on his knees and pray. Upon regaining his focus, he realizes that his 'angel' was a flesh-and-blood young man, named Ian. Still under the influence of his vision, Paul feels an overwhelming attraction for the young man. This puzzles him more as it fills his thoughts and fires his feelings. Paul has no doubt that God has spoken to him through this vision, and that he must determine what God is calling him to do.

Gradually becoming connected, their relationship begins to take on another level when Ian moves in with Paul. As their relationship grows, so does the gossips in the Church. These gossips begin to have an impact in their relationship and the inevitable end starts to sprout from the fertile soil of their love paving the way for their future separation. The story raises many questions about religion, love and the mind-set of society at large.

Paul's journey inspires his ministry but places him at odds with his church. He is forced to examine his deeply held beliefs and assumptions about himself, his community, and the nature of love.

Angel is a love story written with depth and insight. Each chapter starts off with a quotation either from a theological text, the bible, or the musings of the author. The connection the quotes are trying to make with the story is the theme of the mountain as a sacred space. However, even though the story itself has nothing to do with a mountain it tends to symbolize the emotional path the characters are on which is much like the experience of climbing the summit of a great peak. The climb is exhilarating, the expectations are great, but the way down is often the hardest and more important part of the journey.

The homosexuals, the 'others' in the heterosexual society through their relentless resistance against the homophobic treatments on a personal level and also on a much larger political scale, infract through cultural sexual normativity into sexual ambiguity as ways of rediscovering their full humanity. Bobby in *Prayers for Bobby* tackled his mother's attempts to make him 'normal'. His diary becomes the only means by which he could confide his 'true identity'. It is here that one can find the many mental struggles he went through caused by the ignorance of his family especially his mother and her fear of the word 'gay'. Paul in *Angel*, after making his final 'choice' removed himself from the environment which failed to understand his 'decision' and his love for his 'angel'.

It was official church policy not to allow an "avowed, practicing homosexual" to act as minister. He simply couldn't be both a minister and Ian's "avowed" love. (Lee 129)

Chapter I: Introduction

This chapter gives an introduction to the marginalization and liminality faced by the homosexuals in general. This chapter starts off with the genesis of the term 'liminality' and the incorporation of the term by various critics like Van Gennep, Victor Turner, Helene Cixous and most of all Homi Bhabha. The chapter also sketches the historical development

of the Gay Rights Movements organised in order to bring about a revolution in the heteronormative society. The inception of these revolutionary movements can be traced back to an incident which occurred at Stonewall Inn in New York's Greenwich Village. Stonewall is still considered a watershed moment of gay pride and has been commemorated since the 1970s with 'pride marches' held every June across the United States. This chapter also talks about how these movements mark the beginning of liminality in the society. This further leads to chaos and disorientation in the heteronormative society creating a new ideology regarding the term 'homosexuality' and homosexuals themselves. As Graham St. John said:

Liminality can perhaps be described as a fructile chaos, a fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities...a striving after new forms and structure, a gestation process, a fetation (sic!) of modes appropriate to and anticipating post-liminal experience (St. John 59-60).

Chapter 2: Gender and Sexual Identity

This chapter examines the characters in the selected works along the line of Judith Butler's notion of 'gender'. According to Butler "gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is *always a doing*" (Butler 33). However, performance alone cannot bring about full satisfaction for Bobby and Paul. They could not enjoy their 'true identity' even though they tried their best to blend in, and be accepted by the society. They sought for happiness and relief from their environment to places where they thought they would find it. Bobby committed suicide unable to bear his family's failure to accept him as he was; while Paul removed himself from his environment, leaving his profession as a minister by moving to Mount Rainer seeking for a re-union with his angel. This chapter further analyses how both Bobby and Paul had to go through circumstances which otherwise they would not if they had sexual feelings which are

considered ‘normal’. They suffered marginalisation and prejudices because of their sexuality and their love for people of the same-sex. They were observed. In relation to Michel Foucault’s concept of “observation” in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) one can see clearly that right from the moment when the society knew about Bobby and Paul’s sexuality they became an object of observation. Their sexuality became a prominent aspect and the yardstick with which they were judged. In other words it became their identity. According to Foucault a person can be made and even forced to do something when they are constantly being observed. The observed become self-conscious and are more prone to change in behaviour.

Chapter 3: Deconstruction of Heteronormative Belief

This chapter takes on the Derridian concept of ‘deconstruction’ to decentralise the normative beliefs about religion, the church and the customary interpretation of the Bible. This does not mean that the Bible is being ignored by the characters in the novels; on the contrary the holy Words of God is viewed with a different perception and on a different light. In Aarons’ *Prayers for Bobby*, prior to her ‘coming out’, the life of Bobby’s mother, Mary Griffith, was centered around the Bible and its common traditional and conventional interpretation. However, after gaining new insight, her life took a drastic turn. She began to work tirelessly as an activist in order to change the lives of all the other Bobbys and Janes in this world.

On the same plane in Lee’s *Angel*, Paul, even though a minister of the Church fell in love with another man knowing well what was written in the Bible about homosexuality. For him, love transcends the common perception.

Deconstructing the general understanding regarding the ‘sin’ which led to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Bible, D.S. Bailey opines:

The story (Sodom and Gomorrah) does not in the least demand the assumption that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was sexual, let alone homosexual. Indeed, there is no evidence to show that vice of the latter kind was prevalent there. (5)

Further, locating the situations faced by the protagonists can be considered within Foucault's concept of 'confession' as James D. Faubion writes:

This form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects. (331)

This chapter also puts forth contexts that Jacques Berlinerblau calls counterexegesis which tends to "destabilize dominant conceptions of 'what the Bible says'" (6). This context also falls in line with what George Aicheles' call to "reverse the hermeneutical flow" (198). The characters in the novels after their epiphanic moments rather than just reading out of the biblical text and simply following what others and even they themselves used to accept, gains new perceptions. They see the Bible not as strict rules of conduct as they did before. In *Prayers for Bobby*, Larry Whitsell, the minister of the Metropolitan Community Church, to which Bobby is affiliated represents this alternate view. He opposes the accepted belief that homosexuality is a sin; and feels that the high rate of homosexual suicide can be prevented by loving and accepting them.

Chapter 4: Identity Politics

This chapter gives a brief explanation of identity politics where certain groups in the society are marginalised on grounds of culture, race, class and gender. The hetero/homosexual dichotomy runs parallel to the dichotomy of the colonizers/colonized.

Examining them along the lines of Homi Bhabha's concept of 'hybridity' both Aarons' *Prayers for Bobby* and Lee's *Angel* explore the possibilities of a hybridity that goes beyond the impositions of the neocolonial fixity of identity in their attention to the decentering of the self.

The possible intersections and relation between Queer and Postcolonial theories has the ability for protest and affirmation contributing to hermeneutical grids. This enhances socio-political awareness, providing tools for analysing patterns of hegemony, criticising binary and other methods of identifying and excluding outsiders. It further constructively poses alternative visions for thinking about and structuring society in ways characterised by inclusivity and equality. Spurlin states:

[P]ostcolonial studies have seriously neglected the ways in which heterosexism and homophobia have also shaped the world of hegemonic power (185).

In *Prayers for Bobby* and *Angel*, both the protagonists, Bobby and Paul respectively struggle to transcend the social impositions that construct a feeling of discrimination. The conflicting perspectives problematize the concepts of alterity and liminality in relation to identity. Bobby and Paul, as the central characters in the novels, are the ones that genuinely embark on a search towards a self-definition of their identity.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This chapter sums up the issues explored in the preceding chapters. It touches upon the homophobic treatments received by the homosexual characters in the novels studied. These characters are situated on a liminal space, a space in-between the homo/heterosexual dichotomy. Their marginalized and disoriented identities as homosexuals and their identities in relation to the Christian doctrine has been analyzed.

Aarons and Lee in *Prayers for Bobby* and *Angel* respectively have successfully created ground for the examination of identity politics. Dexterously handling the possibilities of an alternative view of the Bible, they have successfully showcased and distinguished the relationship between sexuality and identity in examining the liminality of their characters' situations and circumstances. Both capture an example of such liminality in their works, which alters the characters' perceptions of themselves and of their everyday environments. These characters in their own way try to resist the advances made by the heterosexual community around them.

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