



DYNAMICS OF REPRESENTATION IN QUEER CULTURE

**(Thesis submitted to Nagaland University in partial fulfilment of
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English)**

By

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the unwavering guidance, encouragement, and support of many individuals throughout my research journey. This thesis is the culmination of years of intellectual exchange and inspiration drawn from many people, both within and beyond the Nagaland University community. First and foremost, I express my profound gratitude to Almighty God for generously bestowing upon me all the riches required for this pursuit. This thesis stands as a testament to His timely interventions at every stage of my research journey.

I am deeply grateful to my supervisor, **Prof. Nigamananda Das**, for his faith in my potential and for continually challenging me to grow intellectually throughout these three years. Prof. Das's insightful guidance, constructive feedback, and unwavering availability through calls, messages, or emails at any hour have been instrumental in shaping and refining my ideas, as well as in ensuring the timely completion of this thesis. I am grateful for the academic resources he provided, both in print and digital form, and introducing me to a wide range of academic resources and journals that have significantly enriched my research. Thank you, Sir.

I also extend my gratitude to **Dr. Yolila Sangtam**, Asst. Professor, Department of Teacher Education, Nagaland University, and **Dr. Lemtila Alinger**, Asst. Professor, Department of English, Nagaland University, for their critical insights and constructive suggestions for the improvement of my work during the pre-submission presentation.

I owe a depth of gratitude to the Department of English, Nagaland University, for granting me the UGC Non-NET Fellowship, which eased my financial burden during the course of my research. I'm also deeply grateful to all my teachers and fellow scholars of the Department of English, Nagaland University, for their valuable insights, comments, feedback, and constructive criticism on my work during the progress report presentations and pre-submission.

The final thesis is the outcome of all the critical interactions, and conversations I have received from various academicians and scholars. I express my gratitude to the non-teaching staff of the Department of English, Nagaland University, for their diligence and timely administrative support, which ensured the smooth conduct of my research.

To my parents, siblings, and grandparents, thank you for your prayers, unwavering support, and for believing and having patience with me throughout my Ph.D. journey. I would not have done this without your constant encouragement. Thank you, Apo, Azii, Apotsa, Ato, Ala, Nezo, Bodu, and Yono.

To my batchmates and friends Kelevinuo Sorhie, Kokhrono Ladu, Kechegi Khing, Thejazeno Yalie, and Tiajungla Longchar, the journey was not an easy one, but with all of you around, it has been the most rewarding and fulfilling academic experience. Thank you for your unfailing concern for my well-being in the hostel, your home-cooked meals, and your occasional visits, all of which sustained me throughout this period.

To my friends, near and far, Yakangpangthei Phom, Kutseivelu Nienu, Hiketo Wotsa, Nathaneal Ayeh, and Kuvenulu Lohe, I am deeply grateful for your love and support in moments of stress and need.

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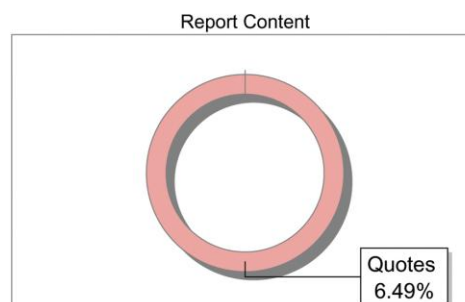
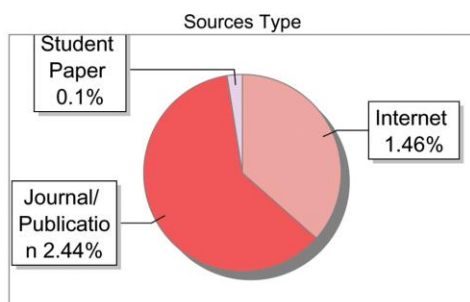
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Author Name	Semhayi Sapuh
Title	Dynamics of Representation in Queer Culture
Paper/Submission ID	4790940
Submitted by	nndas@nagalanduniversity.ac.in
Submission Date	2025-12-02 15:40:44
Total Pages, Total Words	181, 57672
Document type	Thesis

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CONTENTS

	Page No.
Declaration	i
Supervisor's Certificate	ii
Plagiarism Test Report	iii
Acknowledgement	v
Abstract	
Chapter I Introduction	1
1.1 Review of Literature	2
1.2 Objectives of the Study	5
1.3 Theoretical Framework	6
1.4 Social Relevance of the Study	6
1.5 Queering the Past: Historical Development	7
A. The Beginning of Homophile Movement	13
B. The Mattachine Society	17
C. Daughters of Bilitis	20
D. Stonewall Riots	26
Works Cited	30
Chapter II "Stress on the Closet": Reflection on Cultural and Queer Identity	
Conflicts	32
2.1 Reading of the Closet through Sedgwick's Lens in Sara Farizan's <i>If You Could Be Mine</i>	36
A. The Closet as the Oppressive Structure	36

B. Closet as Expression of Shaping Queer Identity	40
C. Closet as Metaphor of Space Beyond the Individual	42
2.2 Reading of the Closet through Jose Esteban Munoz's Spaces of	
Disidentification in Nemat Sadat's <i>The Carpet Weaver</i>	44
A. Jose Esteban Munoz's First Space	47
B. Jose Esteban Munoz's Second Space	51
C. Jose Esteban Munoz's Third Space	57
2.3 Conclusion	61
Works Cited	63
Chapter III Gender Reassignment and Reconceptualizing Sexuality	65
3.1 Reading Trans Body through C. Riley Snorton's Lens	66
A. Juliet Jacques's <i>Trans: A Memoir</i>	67
B. P. Carl's <i>Becoming a Man</i>	72
3.2 Reading Trans Body through Eli Clare's Lens	77
A. P. Carl's <i>Becoming a Man</i>	79
B. Juliet Jacques's <i>Trans: A Memoir</i>	85
3.3 Understanding Gender Dysphoria through Medial Lens in P. Carl's <i>Becoming</i>	
<i>a Man</i>	89
3.3.1 Diagnostic Elements of Gender Dysphoria	90
A. Prepubertal Stage	90
B. Pubertal and Adolescent Stage	96
3.4 Conclusion	99
Works Cited	99

Chapter IV Switch in Gender Identity	101
4.1 Reading Androgyny through June Singer’s Lens: Dualism	103
4.2 Reading Androgyny through Tracy Hargreaves’s Lens: Momentary Coexistence	114
4.3 Reading Androgyny through Lauren Godlad’s Lens: Beyond Dualism	118
4.4 Pronouns and Perceptions	125
4.5 Conclusion	132
Works Cited	133
Chapter V Reflection on Conflicting Popular Beliefs and Choice of Gender Identity	134
5.1 Postsecular Subjectivity	136
5.2 Charles Taylor’s Concept of Postsecularism in Garrad Conley’s <i>Boy Erased</i>	140
A. Closed Immanent Frame	141
B. Open Immanent Frame	145
C. Cross Pressures	148
5.3 Charles Taylor’s Concept of Postsecularism in Mohsin Zaidi’s <i>A Dutiful Boy</i>	152
A. Closed Immanent Frame	152
B. Open Immanent Frame	157
C. Cross Pressures	161
5.4 Conclusion	165
Works Cited	167
Chapter VI Conclusion	168
6.1 Cultural Variations in Queer Expressions	168
6.2 Thematic Convergences Across Queer Narratives	171

A. Therapists as Recurring Figures	171
B. Queer Support Community	173
C. Failed Heterosexual Relationships	174
D. Impossible Queer Desire	175
6.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions	176
Bibliography	182

ABSTRACT

The research attempts to study the representation of queer culture in contemporary literature within the framework of selected Indian, British, and American fiction and autobiographical writing. This research is grounded in the belief that literature reflects society and culture, and that the emerging or reemerging of queer culture in contemporary writing is a response to contemporary culture and lifestyle. Given the sensitivity of the topic, this research is strictly based on the textual evidence of the selected works and their theoretical applications. The research carries no personal reflection or relevance to the researcher's identity, culture, background, or religious affiliations in relation to any of the themes or issues addressed. This distinction is significant, given the often-politicized nature of queer and gender studies in our society and culture. Hence, the purpose of the study is to explore a new field of academic enquiry that is gaining significant space in literature and other intellectual discourses in contemporary settings. In doing so, the research not only contributes to a larger academic field but also opens up dialogues for more conversations on ongoing issues in academic, social, religious, and cultural spaces, without jeopardizing one another. The research delves into the history of queer representation, detailed in the first chapter, in order to understand the core dynamics of its evolution in contemporary discourse, especially within the literary field. Queer history, by far, is very little documented because any form of gender identity outside the dominant norm or heteronormativity has historically been considered deviant; therefore, very little information can be retrieved from past records. Where any materials are available, they are recovered through oral transmission, or through literary archives in the form of diary entries, journals, magazines, and letters. The research's engagement with queer history is specifically based on literary evidence of Classical art and literature, and the three movements that shook the world in the first half of the twentieth century: The Mattachine Society, the Daughters of Bilitis,

and the Stonewall Riots. These three movements are taken as the foundational basis for the enquiry into queer history in this research, to show how gender and identity became an academic discipline following the twentieth century. The second chapter reflects on dominant culture and emerging queer culture and examines how each culture perceives the other. The idea of what is considered normal or dominant culture has been contested with the development of many fields of enquiry in the academic sphere, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. With the emergence or re-emergence of queer culture, the notion of a single dominant and stable culture is challenged in both Western and non-Western canons. In this regard, queer culture in many literary representations is often seen negotiating as the subculture of the dominant culture. Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky terms this the act of the closet, where any form of culture outside the dominant one takes an inferior position or is seen as operating behind the closet for reasons of security and safety. The second chapter reflect these shifting cultural boundaries and the ongoing struggle for visibility, legitimacy, and larger participation within the broader social and literary discourses of the emerging culture. In addition, keeping in mind the modern scientific medical advancements, which made gender transition or gender reassignment possible, the research also delve into gender transition representation in contemporary writing. It is now apparent that individuals who feel like their mind is out of sync with their body, have the capability to alter their sexual organs in order to align their body with their internal sense of self. This aspect of gender transition is visible in many cultures, whether or not the altered body is accepted within the dominant culture. Autobiographical writings on gender transition provide a first-hand experience of gender transition in the best possible accurate detail. In queer representation, it has often been noted that stories about queer individuals are often told by people outside the queer community. The third chapter offers an explication of the trans body told by trans people themselves through their first-hand experiences

of gender transition. What it means to transition from one body to another, or one gender to another, to have lived two different genders and bodies within a single lifetime, and after math are discussed from both medical and literary viewpoints. Additionally, in queer representation, the fluidity of gender identity is not a new concept in contemporary writing. This narrative mode emerges as a way for the authors to depict the shifting and evolving dynamics of the human mind, allowing the authors to explore the characters' development and self-perception in complex and intricate ways, particularly in relation to identity and gender representation. The contemporary character's sense of self is rarely stable in queer representation, as it always remains in constant flux—shifting, or being transported from one state to another depending on the circumstance, gaze, or convenience. This theme is rooted in ancient methodologies, folk narratives, and indigenous traditions, where fluid identity frequently appeared. Contemporary writers draw on this narrative technique to portray the emerging dilemmas faced by queer characters in modern contexts, especially as questions of belonging become increasingly pronounced. The fourth chapter delves into a deeper understanding of this androgynous representation of queer characters in queer writing, to show the paradigm of fluid identity in contemporary literary expressions. Moreover, the complexity surrounding queer identity in relation to religion cannot be overlooked in queer representation. The emergence of postsecular subjectivity and its theoretical frameworks offers a valuable lens through which literary texts engaging with these intertwined issues can be studied and analyzed. Postsecular theories, which addresses questions of faith, identity, belief, and unbelief, are particularly taken into account for examining the tensions inherent in queer representation. The fifth chapter explores queer narratives that grapple with these conflicting issues between these two domains: religion and identity. The concluding chapter offers a comparative analysis of the three selected cultures in relation to the emerging queer culture. The chapter highlights the thematic

convergences and divergences across these cultural contexts by illustrating how each culture responds differently to queer identities and their representation in literary writing. This distinction is a major part of the study's findings, as every culture holds its own beliefs, values, and perspectives regarding queer identity. No single cultural viewpoint can be applied universally, nor can the acceptance or rejection of queer culture in one context be generalized to others.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The thesis *Dynamics of Representation in Queer Culture* addresses a wide spectrum of themes related to queer representation in contemporary literature, engaging with both fiction and autobiographical writing across diverse cultures. The selected texts, drawn from American, British, and Indian literature, served as an entry point to examine the evolving discourses around gender, sexuality, identity, and belongingness in both Western and non-Western contexts. While the research offers theoretical insights into the cultural logics that shape queer expression, it is important to acknowledge that the inquiry remains grounded within a literary and scholarly framework. The critical engagement of these texts through established literary theories on gender theory, queer theory, postmodernism, and postsecularism has been carried out through close reading of the selected texts and critical engagement with established theoretical perspectives, without any relevance of the researcher's personal identity, cultural background, or religious affiliations. This distinction is significant given the often-politicized nature of queer studies in our society and culture. The researcher has maintained a position as an analytical researcher, ensuring that the interpretations are shaped solely by textual and theoretical evidence rather than personal beliefs or lived experiences. The aim of this scholarly detachment is not to diminish the lived realities that inform queer narratives but to uphold academic rigor and objectivity. As such, the study stands as a critical contribution to literary discourse rather than a personal reflection or cultural commentary, while still remaining attentive to the ethical and emotional dimensions that queer literature inevitably evokes.

The primary texts that serve as an entry point for examining the evolving discourses on gender representation in queer literature include P. Carl's *Becoming a Man* (2021), Garrard Conley's *Boy Erased* (2018), Sara Farizan's *If You Could Be Mine* (2014), Jeff Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human* (2017), Juliet Jacques's *Trans: A Memoir* (2016), David Levithan's *Every Day* (2013), Nemat Sadat's *The Carpet Weaver* (2019), and Mohsin Zaidi's *A Dutiful Boy* (2021).

The texts are drawn from American, British, and Indian literary contexts: Juliet Jacques, David Levithan and Jeff Garvin to American nationality, Garrad Conley, P. Carl and Sara Farizan to British; and Nemat Sadat and Mohsin Zaidi to Indian nationality. One of the reasons for selection of such a diverse range of cultural contexts is to analyze how different societies and culture respond to emerging queer culture and their literary representations in recent years. This allows for a cross-cultural exploration of how gender and identity are articulated, contested and reimagined in contemporary discourse. This comparative nature of the study further enables an examination of both the convergences such as the shared struggles, acceptance, or rejection, and the divergences that arise due to differing cultural, religious, and political sensibilities surrounding gender and identity within contemporary literary discourse. By situating these narratives within a transnational framework, the research highlights how contemporary literature not only reflects but also shapes the shifting paradigms of identity formation and representation in a rapidly globalizing world.

1.0 Review of Literature

Nemat Sadat's *The Carpet Weaver*, widely recognized as a significant contribution to Indian literature in English, has been examined from multiple perspectives, such as gender diaspora, postcolonialism, and deconstruction of heterosexual normative discourse. Staffin Jones S M's "Deconstruction of Normative Heterosexuality Overcoming the Queertrauma – A Study on Nemat Sadat's Gay Novel *The Carpet Weaver*," focuses on the protagonist's personal struggle in search of true identity. It is studied through the lens of deconstructing heteronormativity and reconstructing alternative norms. In addition to this, Prabhjot Kaur in "The void of Homeless Generation" recontextualizes the marginalized condition of Afghani refugees in Pakistan. Her reading situates the novel within postcolonial and diasporic frameworks, critiquing developed nations for their failure to provide basic human right and amenities to Afghan refugees during political upheaval. The present research does not seek to extend existing literature; rather, it

investigates how the characters in the novel navigate their sexual identities amid socio-political disorder. It specifically examines the cultural pressures that compel queer identities to live within the confines of the closet and to assume roles that suppress their own authentic selves. To this end, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, and José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications: Colors of Queer and the Performative of Politics* theories are employed to explore the complexities of the character's development that have not yet been addressed.

Emylia Astuti, in her thesis *The Process of Garrad Conley in Achieving Self-Acceptance After Going Through Stigmatization and Discrimination as Homosexual in Boy Erased: A Memoir of Identity, Faith, and Family*, examines the author's experiences of stigmatization and discrimination shaped by societal forces. Her study employs the theories of Queer Theory, Self-Acceptance, and Stigmatization Theory to analyse Garrad Conley's *Boy Erased*. In addition to this, Sekar Yolanda Azza's work, "The Paradox Behind the Existence of Gay Conversion Therapy as Depicted in Garrad Conley's Memoir *Boy Erased*," explores the struggles of the American LGBTQ+ community and highlights the paradoxes inherent in U.S. multiculturalism. This study draws upon critical theories such as post-nationalism, homophobia, and multicultural theory to engage with the text. This research does not seek to fill gaps in areas that have already been extensively studied but engages with the unexplored terrain of post-secular theories, drawing from Charles Taylor's framework to examine post-secular subjectivity and the contradiction between faith and religion.

Jeff Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human* (2016) has previously been studied from the perspective of queer representation by Ingeborg Walseth Froyen in her thesis *Sometimes It's Not a Switch, It's a Dial: An Analysis of the Genderqueer Narrative in Symptoms of Being Human, and the Effects of Genderqueer Representation in Young Adult Literature*. Froyen's study investigates the literary representation of genderqueer identities in Garvin's work, and highlights both the positive and negative dimensions of genderqueer representation in young

adult literature. Building upon this foundation, the present research shifts the focus from representational critique to a critical interrogation of the assumptions that rigidly fix gender attributes according to assigned sex. Recognizing the fluidity and multiplicity of identity as central to understanding genderqueer subjectivities, the study draws on June Singer's explorations of androgyny and the integration of masculine and feminine traits, as well as Tracy Hargreaves's insights into the instability of gendered categories.

Andrea Long Chu's essay "The Wrong Body: Notes on Trans Phenomenology" offers a critical overview of both the transgender community and trans writing more broadly. The article extensively examines the notion of the trans body as livability and survivability, in the context of a society that often enforces normative boundaries. In this article, Chu frames the body as something that is subject and open to change and reinterpretation. Building on this theoretical foundation, the present research turns to Juliet Jacques's *Trans: A Memoir* to analyse autobiographical perspectives on transition. The study explores the trans body from both medical and literary perspectives, drawing upon the Riley C. Snorton's theory for literary analysis and the American Psychiatric Association's framework for a medical understanding. While transgender experiences have often been mediated by voices outside the trans community, this research centers a first-person account that highlights the physical, psychological, and emotional realities of transition—an area that has received limited scholarly attention.

Lisa Hoffman-Reyes's "If I Could Be Mine: Personal Power in Sara Farizan's *If You Could Be Mine*," explores the struggles of young girls living under the Islamic Sharia Law in a male-dominated society. The article examines the violence inflicted by government forces against women, particularly homosexual women and towards the transgender community. The present research is not a duplication of the already existing literature but offers a new reading of Sara Farizan's fiction *If You Could Be Mine* through the lens of gender theory. It draws upon Eve

Kosofsky Sedgwick's influential concept of the closet, a cornerstone in the field of gender and queer studies. Although Sedgwick's closet theory has been widely applied in literary criticism, it has not yet been employed in analysing Farizan's *If You Could Be Mine*. By employing this framework, this study contributes a deeper understanding of queer representation within a heteronormative context, which was previously not been unexamined.

The theme of gender ambiguity in David Levithan's *Every Day* has previously been studied by Giyasurrahman in the thesis *Gender Ambiguity as seen in David Levithan's Every Day*, which explores the role of gender and sexuality and demonstrates how the two function as distinct entities while simultaneously deconstructing normative assumptions. Queer narratives, as this study argues, extends beyond being a mere counterpoint of hetero-normative culture; it resists binaries and opens up possibilities that transcend the conventional boundaries of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Building on this premise, the present research does not simply add to existing literature but offers a fresh perspective by examining the broad spectrum of human sexuality as represented in Levithan's narrative. In particular, the present research focuses on the queer elements of gender switching, expressed through shifts in mental, language, dress, roles, and desire, approached through an androgynous lens, drawing on Tracy Hargreaves's theoretical insight and June Singer's conception of androgyny, frameworks that have not yet been applied to Levithan's *Every Day*.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the historical evolution of queer history, theory, and literature.
2. To study how popular beliefs and emerging queer community view one another.
3. To analyze the representations of the trans-body from medical and literary perspectives.
4. To explore the conceptualization of the queer bodies through androgynous perspectives.

5. To identify thematic convergences and divergences across queer writings in different cultural contexts.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

A. Queer and Trans Theory

- I. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Theory of the Closet*
- II. José Esteban Muñoz's *Third Space of Disidentification*
- III. Riley Snorton's Concept of "Necropolitical Death"
- IV. Reading Trans Body through Eli Clare's Lens

B. Theories of Androgyny

- I. Androgyny through June Singer's Lens: Dualism
- II. Androgyny through Tracy Hargreaves's Lens: Momentary Coexistence
- III. Androgyny through Lauren Goodlad's Lens: Beyond Dualism

C. Psychological and Medical Theory

- I. Gender Dysphoria through the lens of the *American Psychiatric Association*

D. Philosophical Framework

- II. Charles Taylor's *Immanent Frame*

1.4 Social Relevance of the Study

The increasing visibility of debates surrounding queer identities in contemporary politics, law, and culture highlights the urgent need of academic research. This study carries significant social implications of the ongoing discourse in literary, medical, and cultural discourses. The social relevance of this research lies in understanding the established social structures that have long governed society and the new forms that are currently emerging or reemerging across different cultural and social contexts. By highlighting the differences between dominant and emerging cultures, this research has, to some degree, brought clarity and addressed the social stigma and stereotypes embedded within the social context.

1.5 Queering the Past: Historical Development

“There would be no popular and effective lesbian and gay rights movement today without a progress of historical data-recovery, which opens up the possibility of affirming contemporary lives by looking backwards over time.” (Hall 22)

Every nation embodies a multiplicity of cultures that collectively form the foundation of its social, political, and moral consciousness. And what is often perceived as a cohesive or homogenous cultural identity is, in fact, a dynamic and contested space shaped by continuous negotiation among diverse traditions, beliefs, and practices. Culture, by its very nature, resists closure; it is never static nor complete, but always in the process of becoming (Hall 42). It absorbs influences, reconfigures meanings, and redefines values in response to changing historical and material conditions. Just as the end of one era marks the emergence of another, culture too, to some extent, transforms in tandem with the shifting sensibilities of its people. However, culture remains a site of persistent tension between the inherited and the emergent. The very coexistent of these forces complicates any attempt to arrive at a fixed or universal definition of culture. Thus, culture must be interpreted within its specific temporal, spatial, and ideological contexts, for no single framework can fully capture its plural and evolving nature.

Within this continuum of transformation, queer culture and theory occupies a particularly significant position. Far from being a contemporary invention or a passing trend, queer culture represents a long-standing countercurrent that challenges normative structures of gender, identity, and sexuality. It disrupts the boundary of what is considered acceptable or natural, compelling societies to reconsider their definitions of belonging, morality, and humanity. As such, queer culture can be interpreted as both a critique of and contribution to the broader cultural field in contemporary discourse. Queer culture, which is far from disappearing, is not new. As David M. Halperin remarks in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*:

“Homosexuality, for better or for worse, has been with us ever since” (Halperin 15). Vern L. Bullough in *Before Stonewall: Activists for Gay and Lesbian Rights and Historical Context* notes,

Same-sex relations are not new. They have existed in every culture and every time period. Occasionally, as in the Greek world, they were open and tolerated and even institutionalized, but until recently most modern historians refused to talk about subjects. (Bullough 1)

Same-sex relationships have existed across cultures and throughout history, forming an integral yet often unacknowledged aspect of human civilization. Regardless of whether they were accepted, tolerated, or condemned, they have remained a consistent aspect of human society and, for many, a way of life as recorded in some history. Their presence is evident in almost every society, culture, and historical period among “individuals who have challenged openly or simply lived abrasively toward notions of the sexual and social norm” (Hall 21). Yet, the visibility of same-sex desire and queer identity has been historically suppressed by dominant ideologies because of its deviant nature as we see in many literary expressions.

Queering the past, therefore, remains a complex and challenging endeavor, as “most homosexuals attempted to exist invisibly in society at large without making too many waves” (Bullough 1). This invisibility was not merely a personal choice but a necessary survival strategy in social contexts where deviation from heteronormative norms could result in exclusion, persecution, or death, as seen in many literary writings. This deliberate silencing of queer lives, both through societal repression and through the institutional practices of history writing, has contributed to a fragmented understanding of the past. Moreover, history as a formal discipline has represented and documented very little about the lived experiences of the queer individuals. As Gerard Koskovich rightly points out that, “historians customarily ignored

evidence of same-sex desires and nonnormative gender identities – or regarded it as inconsequential or as a sign of immoral, criminal or deviant behavior best forgotten” (Koskovich 04-2). Koskovich opined that the systematic omission of queer narratives has resulted in a distorted cultural memory, where the absence of representation has often been mistaken for the absence of existence.

In recent decades, however, queer historiography has sought to reclaim these silenced narratives and reframe historical inquiry. Scholars have turned to alternative archives through literary evidence such as letters, diaries, literature, oral histories, and artistic expressions, to uncover traces of queer life that history little has presented. By queering the archive, contemporary scholarship reclaims not only fluidity of identity and desire but history as well. From the literary evidence, we find that before the emergence of the queer movement, conversations about queerness existed largely in the margins, circulating through oral transmission and within closely knit, often concealed, communities. These networks included individuals who shared same- sex desires as well as those whose gender and sexual identities differ from the social expectations. In such pre-political contexts, we find through the evidence of some diary entries that, queerness survived through coded language, gestures, and interpersonal connections and solidarity. With regard to this, Martin Meeker in *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community* assert the fact that oral communication and informal modes of exchange were instrumental in constructing and sustaining queer networks at a time when same-sex relationships was publicly silenced or condemned (Meeker 6).

Martin Meeker further contends that the far-flung social networks such as, private residences, bars, underground parties, and the alike, gave an impetus to the organization of queer community and history prior to the emergence of queer movement. These spaces became a space of emotional intimacy and recognition, and also laid the groundwork for what would

later become organized queer activism. These sites operated as proto-archives of queer lives, where stories, experiences, and identities were shared, reimagined, and transmitted in the absence of formal documentation. It is for all these reasons that such folk interest in queer history poses a considerable challenge for scholars to trace queer history chronologically because of its “shifting meanings, forms, and interrelations of gender, same-sex desire, and homosexual acts over a longer period” (Koskovich 4). This further demonstrates that queer history, prior to its political institutionalization, was not merely hidden but dynamically constituted through lived experiences and relational exchanges. The oral dimensions of queer communication thus served as both a form of resistance and survival, which allows the queer individuals to inscribe their presence in a world that sought to erase them.

Looking backwards over centuries, traces of same-sex desires can be found in art, literature, and philosophy of Classical antiquity. However, as Donald E. Hall mentioned, “sexual paradigms during the Classical Greek era were far different” (Hall 25). The Classical world did not conceive of sexuality in the modern sense of fixed identities. It is understood within broader frameworks of beauty, virtue, desire, and power. Classical Greek civilization, in particular, developed a distinctive perspective on gender, the artistic representation of sexual beauty and behaviors. Within this context, pederastic relationships between older men and adolescent boys, though controversial in modern context, functions as socially sanctioned institutions of mentorship and desire. It is also to be understood that such relationships were not simply erotic but also pedagogical, which reinforces class hierarchies and civic ideals. In other words, it is vital to recognize that the sexual relations between two adult men or two adult women during the Classical era had much to do with social status and position in the society. As much as Classical era displays open same-sex relationships and same-sex sexual activity, it was never a threat to society. This dynamic reveal that sexual behavior in the Classical era was governed less by categories of gender than by the ethics of conduct and the performance of social roles.

This visibility of homoerotic imagery in Classical art and myth as exemplified in figures such as Achilles and Patroclus or Sappho and her lyrical invocations of female beauty suggest that same-sex desire was woven into the cultural and imaginative fabric of ancient life.

Michel Foucault, in his *History of Sexuality*, argues that the Greeks approached sexuality not as a matter of identity but as an ethical practice, a way of cultivating the self. For instance, for the Greek master, the expression of sexual desire for wife, mistress, slave, boy, and others was not at all a problem but a reflection of one's capacity for aesthetic discernment. Desire was thus situated within the domain of ethics rather than morality, and sexual activity was understood as a manifestation of personal freedom and philosophical discipline. In other words, during the Classical era, anyone could become a love-object and sexual desire had more to do with individual freedom and ethics. This Classical understanding of sexuality stands in stark contrast to the modern framework, in which desire has become moralized, and categorized into fixed identities. The later Christianization of Europe transformed the open and ethical discourse of sexuality into one governed by sin, guilt, and repression. Whereas Classical thought celebrated the body as a site of beauty and intellectual cultivation, post-Classical ideologies began to associate it with corruption and moral failure. The study of sexuality in Classical era reveals not only the historical roots of queer expression or representation but also the radical difference between ancient and modern sexual epistemologies.

Classical literature constantly invoked same-sex desires and relationships both in artistic idealization and in philosophy. In ancient Greece, intimate relationships were not only acknowledged but often idealized. The Greek playwright Sophocles, for instance, was popularly known for his association with younger men; one anecdotal tale recounts how he persuaded a young wine-seller into drinking from the cup he brought so that he could use the occasion to kiss and seduce him. Such stories, whether factual or embellished, reveal how these sorts of narratives were common within Greek culture. Some philosophical texts also

bear witness to these dynamics. Plato, for example, believed that intimate and intellectually serious relationships were most likely to develop between an older and a younger man rather than between a man and a woman (Stearns 32). Plato's literary works, such as *Symposium* are marked by pederastic conversations, blending eros with philosophical inquiry. During the Classical era, the presence of same-sex desire was not limited to male relationships. Further instance can be seen in Sappho's collection of nine books, mainly dealing with young women who expresses their sexual desire for another woman. Sappho of Lesbos offers one of the most enduring female-centered perspectives. As Donald E. Hall notes, both "the terms "Sapphic" and "Lesbian" (which derives from the name of her home island, Lesbos) have come down to us through the ages as terms for women who desire other women" (Hall 26-27). Although historical records indicate that Sappho married and had a daughter, her poetry strongly suggests intimate and possibly sexual relationships with women, which situates herself as a pivotal figure in the cultural history of female same-sex desire.

Undoubtedly, the Classical era is an era of tolerance in matters of sexual choice and sexual behavior, especially when contrasted with later periods that imposed stricter moral frameworks. As Peter N. Stearns observes, the Classical period "establishes an analytical complexity that would emerge in some other societies as well, where culture in some ways contrasted with, rather than directing enforcing, apparent practical standards" (Stearns 35). The period developed a nuanced and sometimes contradictory approach to sexuality. This complexity allowed for the coexistence of various forms of desire, which includes relationships that today would be categorized under the umbrella of homosexuality. Overall, homosexuality during the Classical age was idealized as well as frequently celebrated. Writers, poets, artists, and the like depicted homoerotic desire as an integral part of human experience in literature, arts, and public life. The cultural openness of the period enabled diverse expressions of intimacy that in a way

shape the modern understandings of sexuality and its historical development. In other words, this historical contrast provides for understanding how queer culture is positioned today.

From the rich tapestry of Classical literature where same-sex desire was openly articulated, idealized, and integrated into cultural life, the trajectory of queer representation has undergone profound transformation. While the Classical world often celebrated or at least accommodated homoerotic relationships in philosophy, art, and poetry, the contemporary period reframed these expressions through shifting moral, religious, and scientific lenses. It prompted renewed attention to the histories from which conflicting modern identities emerge. What the Classical era regarded as an ordinary dimension of human experience has become, in contemporary era, a subject of extensive academic and cultural scrutiny. Its practices are now re-evaluated through modern ethical and theoretical frameworks, which in a way reveal the extent to which perceptions of sexuality are conditioned by time, ideology, and institutional power. Thus, the evolution from Classical acceptance to modern scrutiny illuminates the deeply historical nature of sexuality.

1.5.1 The Beginning of Homophile Movement

The dominant discourse of human sexuality in contemporary politics, culture, literature and art has never followed a simple or linear trajectory. As Peter N. Stearns observes, the heightened attention to sexuality in the modern or contemporary era emerges from the “tensions that had arisen in the two centuries before 1950” (Stearns 133). These tensions are shaped by shifting moral codes, scientific development, and political regulation, created by a climate in which sexuality became a central site of social negotiation and cultural debate. On the other hand, while the Stonewall Riots of 1969 are widely acknowledged as the catalytic moment that ignited the modern queer movement and activism, it is important to note that the groundwork for this movement was laid much earlier. Organizations such as the Mattachine Society, the

Daughters of Bilitis, and ONE, Inc. had already been intervening in public life, challenging the dominant narratives and advocating for civil rights at a time when queer existence itself was criminalized or pathologized. It is visible that the efforts of these organizations carved out the earliest public platforms for queer representations. As Roberto Marin Vazques argues,

the Stonewall riots were not even the origin of modern LGBT activism – or at least not the only event that propelled such a change – because many organizations had been taking part already in the social and political spheres throughout the United States... Thus, we could not be talking about the post-Stonewall offspring without mentioning the very first national – for they were spread throughout many big cities in the US. (Vazques 4)

The rise of the queer civil rights organizations such as The Mattachine Society, the Daughters of Bilitis, and ONE, Inc. was instrumental in narrowing the social, political and cultural divide that had long marginalized queer representations. Throughout the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s, these organizations propelled queer communities into public consciousness, carving out visible and enduring spaces within a hostile social landscape, as evidenced in many literary writings. In many ways, the emergence of these organizations offered queer individuals a rare refuge, that is a place to gather, articulate their experiences, cultivate collective identity, and counter the widespread belief that homosexuality signified pathology or moral failure (Vazquez 4). As Vazquez notes, these organizations provided a crucial “safe harbor” where queer people could demonstrate that they were not, in fact, the “sick” figures society imagined (Vazquez 4). No doubt, the emergence of these organizations and their influence extend beyond physical meeting spaces. It broadened the boundaries of queer visibility and representation by producing lesbian and gay journals that had no historical precedent in the United States and many other countries. Distributed nationally, these publications addressed homosexual themes and subjects with a candor and seriousness that mainstream media refused to acknowledge. It can also be

seen that, through regular newsletters, essays, and press releases, the homophile organizations fashioned a coherent public voice for queer communities. As Boyd observes, they effectively “projected themselves as the voice and public representation of homosexuals,” at a time when queer lives were doubly silenced, by law and society (Boyd 133). Nan Alamilla Boyd further contextualizes the significance of this shift in *Wide Open Town*. She explains that,

... prior to the formation of homophile organizations, a queer-generated discourse about the meaning of homosexual subjectivity most often took place within the sanctions of homosexual subcultures. Beyond a legal discourse about homosexual crime, a scientific discourse about homosexual illness, and a religion discourse about homosexual immorality, there were few ways to talk publicly about their relationship to the state. (Boyd 134)

It is to be noted that before the rise of Homophile organizations, queer communication operated through what can be described as dual linguistic registers: a private homosexual dialect and a public dialect. These two modes of speech emerged as strategies for survival in a social environment saturated with stigma and criminalization of homosexual activities. The private dialect circulated within intimate queer spaces, such as bars, clubs, social circles, and other closed networks, where individuals could speak more freely among those who shared similar experiences. Through the oral narratives recorded which came in print much later, we find that this mode of communication relied on coded expressions, symbolic gestures and culturally specific references that functioned both as a form of recognition and as a protective shield. As Boyd notes, these “intricate symbols” and “codes” were not simply playful linguistic inventions; they were tools crafted for safety, community-building and emotional self-preservation (Boyd 135). In a society and culture where disclosure of queer identity and its representation could lead to discrimination, violence or legal repercussions, this invention vocabulary allowed queer individuals to navigate their lives while maintain a necessary degree

of anonymity. The public dialect, by contrast, was used when queer individuals had to navigate dominant heterosexual society. This more visible mode of communication required strategic restraint, self-monitoring and the careful negotiation of identity. Within the community, this distinction produced two broad categories of queer subjects: the covert and the overt. The covert are those sections of homosexual group who concealed their sexual identity in most public contexts, often out of fear of social or legal consequences. The overt, by contrast, chose to live with a greater degree of openness, challenging prevailing norms in small but significant ways. This division, to some degree, produced tension between the two groups. Overt individuals or group often resented the covert for what they say as inconsistency or lack of courage in confronting homophobia, while the covert relied on the visibility and risks taken by the overt individuals or group to push the boundaries of social acceptance.

Despite the internal differences and conflicts in approach, both groups shared a common cultural foundation anchored in marginalization, resilience and the desire for community. The shared culture, deviant from the norm, became the groundwork upon which political organizing could take place. In addition to this, the need for more unified and outward-facing efforts became increasingly pressing as they continue to seek dignity, safety, and recognition. By the early 1950s, it shifted from closed and coded communication to more organized and visible activism marking a turning point in queer political history. What had once existed primarily in private or semi-private spheres was beginning to demand a presence in public discourse. This transitional laid the foundation for the emergence of national Homophile organizations, which sought to construct a coherent identity for the queer community. It is within this historical context that the earliest national Homophile movements emerged for political and cultural transformation.

1.5.2 The Mattachine Society

The Mattachine Society stands as one of the earliest and most influential national Homophile movement organizations, emerged in 1950 when no formalized homosexual culture or recognized linguistic framework existed through which queer individual could articulate identities, desires, or political demands in modern era. The founding of the Mattachine Society signaled a deliberate effort to address the absence. The early Mattachine Society emerged as a way to understand and interpret homosexual culture rather than employ an assimilative approach to the dominant heterosexual culture and beliefs. The organization emerged from a small group of five politically conscious individuals, many of whom had backgrounds in leftist activism and intellectual work. Among them, Harry Hay played the most prominent role. Hay's vision for the Mattachine Society rested on the belief that homosexuality possessed its own history, cultural practices and potential for community formation, but that these elements had been systematically erased or suppressed by dominant heteronormative structures. He argues that queer people had long existed in every era, yet lacked a language capable of naming their experience and affirming the distinct cultural and social perspectives that queer people in response to oppression. The early Mattachine Society, therefore, adopted an approach grounded in cultural interpretation and political consciousness-raising, rather than direct integration into mainstream society. It sought to document, analyze and validate homosexual life as a legitimate cultural formation, and this materialized through its monthly publication, *Mattachine Review*, which became one of the first systematic platforms through which queer issues were openly discussed, theorized and circulated. The magazine addressed a wide range of topics, like legal struggles, psychological debates, social stigma, and personal narratives, each of which helped articulate what had previously remained unspoken or fragmented within the community.

Nan Alamilla Boyd identifies this impulse as central to the organization's founding purpose. According to her, the Mattachine Society emerged from the recognition that queer people

required more than private codes or subcultural practices; they needed political structures capable of addressing discrimination and cultural frameworks capable of generating pride and solidarity. For Boyd, the key motive behind the Mattachine Society's establishment lay in its desire to transform the isolated experiences of individual homosexuals into a coherent, politically active community. The organization's founders, likewise, believed that by articulating homosexual identity as something culturally meaningful rather than shameful or pathological, they could resist the dominant narratives that had long dictated queer representations. Thus, the Mattachine Society's significance extends far beyond its organizational structure. It represents a shift from fragmented, covert forms of communication to an organized and self-reflective movement that sought to create a language for queer existence, one that could possibly withstand political repression, challenge social stigma and nurture a shared cultural consciousness. The Mattachine Society laid the groundwork for later queer movements by demonstrating that identity, when collectively articulated, could become the basis for political engagement and cultural transformation. The key motive for the foundation of the Mattachine Society was given by Nan Alamilla Boyd:

Homosexual subcultures composed a class in themselves, and knowledge about cultural difference was the key to transforming homosexuals into a class able to articulate its own needs and fight for its own behalf. Political mobilization, then, depended on fostering the idea of the existence of a distinct homosexual minority out of which autonomous and resistant homosexual communities would emerge. (Boyd 136)

For much of queer history, queer stories were not narrated by queer people themselves. Instead, they were filtered through the perspectives of medical authorities, moralists, psychologists, or legal institutions. The Mattachine Society marked a critical rupture in this narrative pattern. The organization in many ways offered one of the first organized efforts through which queer people could reclaim authorship over their experiences, articulate their own identities, and

challenge the narratives that had been imposed upon them. This cultural intervention was most powerfully realized through the *Mattachine Review*, the Society's monthly publication. It

It was made available in printed form and later circulated through early online networks, which offered a new or transformative image for homosexual discourse. For the first time, readers encountered representations of homosexuality that were neither moralizing nor sensationalized, but grounded in lived experience, intellectual enquiry, and scientific engagement. It comprises of essays from gender rights activists who documented community struggles, scientists and doctors who challenged prevailing medical prejudices, and cultural commentators who analyzed gender, sexuality, and social norms. Such diverse contributions created a multidimensional portrait of queer life that had not previously existed in public discourse. The result had profound consequences. The ability to see their own stories, concerns, and desires in print allowed to recognize themselves as part of a broader community. This offered validation and a sense of cultural belonging. For instance, many public readers of the *Mattachine Review* who lived in fear or remained closeted found in these pages a common language and a shared identity. The *Mattachine Review* thus became not merely a magazine but a cultural anchor: a space that both reflected and actively shaped emerging queer consciousness. Throughout the 1950s, it served as the primary voice of the community and became a symbolic mouthpiece for the growing Homophile movement.

By the mid-1950s, the organization's objective gradually began to shift. What had initially been a culturally focused project centered on the experiences of homosexual men expanded into a broader political endeavor. The Mattachine Society increasingly directed its energy toward public advocacy, legal reform, and engagement with dominant social institutions. Boyd notes that this transformation was both ideological and structural; the original founders' emphasis on cultural distinctiveness gradually gave way to new priorities that sought greater public legitimacy (Boyd 137). The absence of a clear, unified political strategy, that is, "absent from

its agenda” as Boyd describes, became a point of contention and ultimately catalyzed internal reorganization (Boyd 137). Harold Call, one of its leaders of the Mattachine Society, played a decisive role in this transformation. Call believed that the Society needed to distance itself from its clandestine origins and embrace a model that could engage openly with policymakers, legal systems, and broader civic life. Under his leadership, the Mattachine Society adopted an assimilationist orientation, advocating for the integration of homosexuals into mainstream society by highlighting similarities rather than difference between hetero- and homosexual experiences. This shift did not come without controversy, as it diverged from Harry Hay’s earlier emphasis on cultivating a distinct queer culture. Nevertheless, Call’s leadership ushered in a new phase for the organization. Its campaigns emphasized equality under the law, social responsibility, and civic participation. While this assimilationist turn reduced some of the radical cultural aims of the Society’s founders, it also broadened the organization’s reach. It enabled the Mattachine Society to appeal to wider audiences, public debate, and influence emerging conversations about civil rights in a way that had previously been almost impossible.

1.5.3 Daughters of Bilitis (DOB)

Although the Mattachine Society marked a turning point in the struggle for homosexual rights, its contributions towards equal gender rights were not experienced evenly across the queer communities. A growing number of lesbian women felt that the organization’s priorities were overwhelmingly centered on the experiences of gay men only. Women who had been actively involved in early Mattachine discussions, prominent figures such as Geraldine Jackson and Marilyn Rieger, argued that leadership structures, decision-making processes, and the overall ideological tone of the Society left little room for lesbian voices to emerge or be taken seriously. Many other lesbian women also felt that, despite its stated commitment to representation of all homosexual communities, the Society reproduced the gender hierarchies of the broader society, which marginalizes lesbians with a movement that claimed to speak on their behalf. For many

lesbian activists, the ideology propounded by the Mattachine Society felt alien or unresponsive to their needs. The Mattachine Society's conversational spaces, concerns, and political strategies reflected the experiences of men according to women activists; while lesbian perspectives, shaped by different social constraint and vulnerabilities, were often overlooked or dismissed. This sense of exclusion highlighted the limitations of early Homophile movement or activism, which reveals that even within queer movements, internal gendered dynamics influenced whose voice mattered. Many women activists saw that their interests could not simply be subsumed under a generalized homosexual identity. They needed an organization that directly addressed the social, emotional, and political challenges faced specifically by women who loved women. Out of this recognition, the need for a separate lesbian organization emerges. In September 1955, eight lesbian women gathered in San Francisco to create what would become the first lesbian civil rights organization in the United States: the Daughter of Bilitis (DOB). Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon are credited as the founders of the Daughter of Bilitis, although eight women gathered and formed the organization initially, due to their sustained leadership and wider public influence. The group much like the Mattachine Society initially formed as a social alternative to bar culture. However, it quickly developed into a political and educational organization that aimed to redefine how lesbian identity was understood both within and outside queer community.

The name the Daughter of Bilitis drew inspiration from Pierre Louys' *The Songs of Bilitis*, a collection of poems which was composed as a tribute to Sappho. The choice was symbolic: it invoked a symbolic lineage of women-loving-women, embedding the organization within a poetic and historical tradition that celebrated lesbian desire. The name also invokes a protective layer of obscurity; in an era when police raids and surveillance were common, a name unfamiliar to the general public offered a degree of safety for members. Membership in the DOB was limited to women over twenty-one who identified as gay, wished to associated with

other women, and were deemed of good moral character. These limitations mirrored the legal and social restrictions of the time, and also signaled DOB's intention to present lesbian women as respectable and morally upright in order to challenge the stereotypes that had long justified discrimination. Much like the Mattachine Society's primary objective to provide security or visibility for homosexual men, the primary focus of the DOB was to create a safe environment for lesbian women.

The Daughters of Bilitis gained greater momentum within its first year, attracting women and alike who were searching for community, safety, and recognition. However, this early momentum also brought to the surface of ideological differences among its founding members. These differences were not merely personal disagreements but of deeper class-based tensions within the lesbian community. Middle-class and working-class members often had different expectations about what the organization should become, how visible it should be, and what risks were acceptable. As Emilio notes, the conflict revolved around "what direction the fledgling club should take" (Emilio 103). Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, both middle-class women, believed that the organization could and should extend beyond being a private gathering space. They envisioned DOB as a public advocacy group that could challenge widespread misconceptions about lesbianism. For women like Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, it was essential to move the conversation into the open, engage with mainstream audiences, and gradually reshape public attitudes. In other words, they believe visibility was necessary for long-term social change, though it carried risks.

On the other hand, working-class lesbian women, felt strongly that the organization should remain a discreet, private social club. They believed that their daily lives were shaped by harsher consequences and if exposed, potential loss of employment, harassment, and social stigma could threaten their safety and livelihood. From the working-class perspectives, secrecy was not simply a preference but a form of protection from losing job and security. They feared

that turning the organization public too soon would expose its members to danger and undermine the safe haven they had worked to create. These conflicting visions eventually resulted in a split. The group split in half, and four of the initial eight members dropped out of the group. Martin and Phyllis remained to work for the lesbian women, and continue to shape the DOB into a more active and outward-looking group. Martin and Phyllis's leadership during this transition period was crucial in defining what the DOB would become in the years ahead. Under the influence of the Mattachine Society, Martin and Phyll transformed the Daughter of Bilitis. As Boyd observes, the organization shifted from a secretive, culturally focused group to one "less reliant on the promotion of queer culture and more invested in entering the public sphere" (Boyd 139). This transition marked a turning point in lesbian women history and activism, as it signaled a deliberate willingness of many women to participate in broader conversations about civil rights, legal protections, and eventually social acceptance.

It is not surprising that many of its early principles and activities of DOB closely resembled those of its parent organization, that is the Mattachine Society. In fact, D'Emilio in his book *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* states

The phrasing of DOB's statement of purposes, with its call for education of the public, the adjustment of the "variant" to society, participation in research projects by professionals, and the modification of the penal code, bore an extremely close resemblance to Mattachine's language and suggests the influence of the society on DOB in its formative stages. (D'Emilio 104)

In order to gain a larger audience and to attract women into the movement or organization, Daughter of Bilitis started its own independent publication: *The Ladder*. In November 1956, Daughter of Billities issued its first issue of *The Ladder*, the first nationally distributed magazine created by and for lesbian women in the United States. This publication quickly

became one of the most important tools for shaping lesbian identity and community throughout the 1950s. *The Ladder* was made accessible both in print and, in its later years, as digital copies. The digital copies were mailed not only to the lesbian women across the United States but also to women abroad. Copies were also mailed to professionals outside the United States such as the lawyers, psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, and the alike who the DOB hoped would rethink prevailing assumptions about issues surrounding gender and identity. It is very apparent that DOB's publication was not only to support women within the community but also to influence the intellectual and legal frameworks that shaped public opinion. No doubt, the organization received attention from all walks of life, but this came with risks, threats, and warnings. Despite these challenges, the publication remained steadfast in its mission. Throughout the 1950s, *The Ladder* worked "to help lesbians adjust to society in all its social, civic and economic implications" by offering educational content on the psychological and sociological dimensions of homosexuality (Boyd 139).

Although the Daughter of Bilitis comprises of members who were activists, however, the contents of *The Ladder* was never a political journal with political agendas. The editorials meticulously scrutinized the contents of the journal before its final publication to refrain from political advocacy. The magazine foregrounded literature, personal reflection, creative expression, and historical essays. As D'Emilio mentions, much of its content consisted of "poetry, fiction, history, and biography" (D'Emilio 104). The journal open up space to many women to articulate that part of experiences society ignored or suppressed. The *Ladder* eventually became the voice for many women throughout the 1950s. For many readers who felt isolated, or uncertain about their identities, the magazine offered a sense of belonging. In fact, many women turned to *The Ladder* seeking answers about themselves, their relationships, and their place in the world. The steady appearance of homosexual women whether through journals, magazines, and newsletters marked a decisive shift in the politics of visibility. These

forms of publication did more than simply articulate information; they actively pushed what Boyd calls “homosexual subjectivity into the public sphere” (Boyd 139). What started with no ideological intention to create community spaces and share personal narratives soon transformed into a broader cultural intervention. Without intending to, these early organizations entered “state-regulated dialogue about homosexuality,” allowing the medical establishment, legal system, and the academic community to reevaluate queer representation and identities in ways that had long ignored and suppressed (Boyd 139).

The Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) grew rapidly and both became a subject of discussion through the 1950s and early 1960, among various professionals, particularly psychiatrists, psychologists, and medical researchers, who had historically pathologized queer identities. It is to be noted that, visibility, however, did not translate into acceptance. The growing presence of queer voices continues to provoke strong resistance from conservative groups, law enforcement, and religious institutions. We also see that hostility, discrimination, and attempts to silence these communities intensified as queer organizations gained momentum. However, the efforts played by these two organizations reshape the conversation around homosexuality from one of moral panic to one grounded in social reality, psychological complexity, and civic responsibility. This widening dialogue laid the groundwork for a more assertive phase of queer movement and activism. No doubt, the role played by early organizations culminated to the development of the Stonewall Riots of June 28, 1969, one of the most memorable movements in queer history. The Stonewall Riots was the result of more than a decade of organizational efforts. The riots signaled a decisive break from earlier, assimilationist approaches and launched a new era of activism that would transform queer politics in the United States and across the world.

1.5.4 Stonewall Riots

Many scholars argue that the commemoration of the Stonewall Riots in the United States of America stands as a symbolic and political anchor for the modern queer movement. For thinkers such as Roberto Marin Vazquez, the historical significance of Stonewall lies not only in the event itself but in the visibility, it produced: the participant's refusal to hide their identities "a lack of concealment and, therefore, ... far-reaching social implications along the United States," a shift that he believes strongly shaped the trajectory of the Homophile Movement (Vazquez 4). However, as outlined in the previous sections, this interpretation overshadowed the extensive groundwork laid by earlier homophile organizations, particularly the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis. It is important to note that long before the events at the Stonewall Inn, these groups had been actively engaged in the political, social, and intellectual debate necessary to challenge heteronormative structures.

Vern L. Bullough's historical analysis supports this argument. He argues that the Stonewall Riots of June 28, 1969 cannot be understood as an isolated eruption of the Homophile Movement in cultural history. Bullough places Stonewall within a longer genealogy of queer resistance shaped by decades of homophile activism and the controversies those activists generated among "scientists, psychiatrists, clergy, moralists of every stripe, and, not least, the general public" (Bullough 13). According to Vern L. Bullough, these earlier organizations played a crucial role in understanding the sexual variance and laid the intellectual framework that eventually made a more confrontational movement possible. He also notes that the riots themselves "barely penetrated the consciousness of the public, gay, and straight alike," further suggesting that Stonewall's transformative event is, in part, a retrospective construction shaped by later generations (Bullough 13).

It is for this reason that the question whether the Stonewall Riots should be considered the first homophile movement is still a matter of argument and discussion. The question persists because Stonewall represents both a symbolic pivot and a historical simplification: it condenses

a web of pre-existing struggles into one narrative. But what makes the Stonewall Riots stand out is the social and political impact they had on the people. The movement steered a huge momentum in the queer rights movement. The riots galvanized a newly emboldened generation of queer activists who were no longer satisfied with quiet assimilationist strategies. The movement expanded rapidly, new organizations emerged, and queer rights discourse entered mainstream political debate with unprecedented force. Whether or not Stonewall was the first movement, its commemorations became a unifying ritual that helped solidify a collective queer identity and propelled the movement into a new visible phase. Roberto Marin Vazquez notes:

Of all the struggle the LGBTQ community has gone through, the Stonewall Riots has become the most memorable incidents in the history of American gay culture, and it has called the attention of many other countries such as Spain, in which the Pride week is celebrated in its capital city, Madrid, during the last week of June. (Vazquez 8)

While the homosexual population in the United States had been steadily expanding throughout the mid-twentieth century, the growth became increasingly visible with the establishment of homophile organizations in major metropolitan centers. Cities such as New York—home to the Stonewall Inn, one of the most well-known gathering spaces for gay men, lesbians, and gender-nonconforming people—saw the emergence of increasingly organized queer communities. These networks fostered a cultural environment in which queer people could meet, organize, and articulate demands for their rights. Yet this rising visibility also provoked intense public backlash. As queer life moved from the private sphere into semi-public urban spaces such as open bars, halls, and coffeehouses, opposition from conservative sectors of society grew with equal force. Many religious organizations, local politicians, and anti-homophile groups saw the expansion of emerging queer culture as a moral and social threat. This compelled the law-enforcement agencies to intensify surveillance, harassment, and target raids on establishments known to be frequented by homosexual individuals. For instance,

police raids on bars and hotels became a common routine, which was justified under the guise of enforcing liquor regulations, but often functioning as mechanisms of intimidation and control.

Tiffany Renee Nelson argues that the escalating tension between a homosexual population and anti-homophile public played a crucial role in the events leading up to June 28, 1969. According to Nelson, the growing popularity of queer spaces and the sense of community they fostered provoked the police to raid the Stonewall Inn that particular night (Nelson 3). The police raid was a broader pattern of law-enforcement aggression aimed at containing the visibility and mobility of queer people in urban environments. However, what unfolded inside and outside the Stonewall Inn defied the police expectations. Contrary to the long-held belief that queer individuals at the Inn would comply without resistance, the raid triggered an eruption of anger against the law-enforcers. Homosexual men and women present at the Inn, many of whom had endured humiliation at the hands of the police, refused to obey orders and transformed a moment of oppression into one collective defiance. What began as a routine raid instantly turned into open confrontation. In an article, "A Movement on the Verge: The Spark of Stonewall," Tiffany Renee Nelson documents this turning point in vivid detail, describing how the refusal to submit to police control served as the catalyst for a broader cultural and political awakening:

The officers combated homosexual protestors using nightsticks and clubs, but the protestors did not give in. Instead, the "queens" and mobs of tourists that had joined them fought the police. Police gave up on arresting anybody and focused on clearing the area, however, the feat was not done easily. (Nelson 12)

The Stonewall Inn witnessed massive clashes between queer protestors and the police, and the increasing number of protestors gathered to resist the ongoing harassment. Some scholars

argued that these demonstrations created an atmosphere of urgency and collective awakening among all sections of queer community that would eventually come together under the more unified banner of what now came to be known as the LGBTQ community. The momentum of the movement quickly crossed national borders, with Europe becoming a crucial site of political response. For instance, in United Kingdom (UK), the formation of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in the late 1970 signaled the beginning of a new era of queer activism. Inspired directly by the events of Stonewall, the GLF sought not only to organize public demonstrations but also to challenge embedded structures of homophobia in law, psychiatry, and everyday life. Throughout the 1970s, the GLF brought about visibility in queer lives that had not occurred on such a scale before. GLF's activism marked one of the earliest transnational echoes of Stonewall's influence.

The commemoration of the Stonewall Riots on June 28, became symbolic turning point in queer history. Homosexuality, long subjected to medicalization, criminalization, and condemnation, increasingly came to open public debate and discussions. As new consciousness took shape, it paved the way for the development of intellectual discourse in politics, law, culture, religion, art, and literature that sought to analyze and theorize gender and identity. It can be agreed that the decades following Stonewall proved pivotal for scholars committed to examining histories, cultures, and social realities of queer community in general. This intellectual shift also aligned with broader changes occurring in the humanities, particularly the rise of poststructuralist thought, which questioned fixed categories. As academic disciplines began to interrogate systems of power, language, and identity, scholars of gender studies found new theoretical frameworks through which to articulate the complexities of queer life. Thus, the latter half of the twentieth century witnessed not only political mobilization but also the birth of a robust academic field. Scholarship on homosexual studies, gender studies, the systemic study of queer histories, and the creation of educational programs shift to gender

issues directly out of the cultural and political space opened by the Mattachine Society, the Daughters of Bilitis, and the Stonewall Riots. These movements laid the intellectual foundations for the study of gender and sexuality as a vital of inquiry.

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CHAPTER II

“STRESS ON THE CLOSET”: REFLECTION ON CULTURAL AND QUEER IDENTITY CONFLICTS

The emergence of the “closet” as a conceptual and lived condition within queer history can be traced to the cultural, legal, and medical discourses of the late nineteenth century (Sedgwick 71). During this period, homosexuality increasingly became the subject of public scrutiny, institutional regulation, and moral panic. As same-sex desire became more visible, particularly in western countries, it provoked both the rise of early homosexual identity formations and the intensification of homophobic responses. While the nineteenth and twentieth centuries marked the gradual organization of gay and lesbian cultures, it also marked a significant escalation in the mechanisms of social control aimed at policing non-normative sexualities. Despite significant developments in sexuality studies within both the sciences and the humanities, the concept of gender has remained theoretically unstable and historically contingent. Understandings of sexuality, far from being finalized or universally accepted, continue to be contested terrain shaped by cultural anxieties and epistemic shifts. As George Chauncey argues, the emergence of closet is closely linked to a confluence of discursive and institutional forces: the criminalization of homosexual behavior, the suppression of queer sociability, and the pervasive cultural imperative to internalize shame and silence. These conditions, Chauncey contends, were instrumental in relegating homosexual individuals to the margins of public life, where their visibility became not only stigmatized but also legally and socially untenable (Chauncey 5).

The dominant cultural narrative of the time constructed homosexuality as a condition that was at once pathological, immoral, and criminal. This perception was reinforced by legal sanctions and medical discourses that classified same-sex desire as a psychiatric disorder, subjecting

queer individuals to forms of surveillance, correction, and violence. Many scholars and gender theorists have argued that, the medicalization of homosexuality constituted one of the most potent anti-homosexual apparatuses in modern history. This render queer subjectivity invisible, and erasure. This assumption is resisted by queer individuals, affirming the legitimacy of their bodies, desires, and lived experiences despite prevailing narratives of deviance. The tension between imposed invisibility and internal affirmation, underscores the paradoxical function of the closet. While it offered a necessary strategy for survival under conditions of repression, it also reinforced the notion that homosexuality was something to be concealed. The birth of the closet, therefore, is not merely a spatial metaphor, but a historically contingent structure of feeling, resistance and epistemic violence. Its birth signals not only the suppression of queer subjectivities but also the enduring instability and contestation of normative constructions of gender and sexuality.

Gender theorist and activist George Chauncey in his seminal work *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, underscores the retrospective construction of this metaphor. While the closet has become a dominant metaphor in contemporary queer theory, its historical use as a descriptive term is far from recent than commonly assumed. Chauncey's intervention draws attention to the risk of anachronism when contemporary theoretical categories are imposed upon the past without critical reflection. According to Chauncey, the absence of the term closet in the diaries, letters, literature, and political discourse of early twentieth-century does not negate the reality of social repression or concealment. The modes of self-understanding and community formation among queer individuals during the era when the term closet was absent were embedded in different linguistic, cultural, and spatial frameworks. In this light, the closet functions less as a timeless existential condition and more as a historically contingent formation, one that gains particular

cultural tag during the rise of identity-based queer liberation politics in the 1960s and beyond (Chauncey 7). Chauncey notes,

Given the ubiquity of the term today and how central the metaphor of the closet is to the ways we think about gay history before the 1960s, it is bracing—and instructive to note that it was never used by gay people themselves before then. Nowhere does it appear before the 1960s in the records of the gay movement or in the novels, diaries, or letters of gay men and lesbians. The fact that many gay people in the past did not speak of or conceive of themselves as living in a closet does not preclude us from using the term retrospectively as an analytic category. (Chauncey 6)

This recognition opens the door to interrogating the epistemological assumptions embedded within contemporary queer theory itself. The centrality of the closet in queer discourse began with the publication of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's influential *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) that universalizes the experience of concealment as a defining condition of queer life. Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky's influential work *Epistemology of the Closet* offers a foundational theoretical expansion of the term within queer discourse. Although the "closet" existed in the English lexicon long before its application to sexuality—as a physical space of storge or personal seclusion, often associated with prayer or privacy—it was not until the publication of Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* that it acquired its now-common metaphorical weight within the context of gay and lesbian identity. Sedgwick's 1990 text marks a critical moment in this shift, wherein she defines the closet as a primary structure through which the regulation, concealment, and expression of queer desire are enacted within a heteronormative society.

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick notes that the term "closet" was not originally used by homosexual individuals themselves to describe their experiences of seclusion or their negotiation of hidden or dual identity. She argues that the metaphor of the closet emerged as a

way to conceptualize the systemic pressures that compel queer individuals to regulate their visibility in response to social expectations. According to Sedgwick, the closet is not merely a space of concealment but a constitutive element of queer existence in a heterosexist culture—what Sedgwick famously calls “the defining structure for gay oppression” (Sedgwick 71). The metaphor captures the historical convergence of legal, medical, and cultural discourses that pathologized homosexuality, rendering concealment not just a personal choice but a condition of survival.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*, further challenges the simplified binary of “in” and “out” that dominates public discourse on queer visibility. She argues that the decision of the queer individuals to remain in the closet, or to selectively disclose one’s identity, is rarely a matter of personal denial, but rather an adaptive response to structural violence. As Sedgwick explains, the closet is inhabited by individuals who, in order to retain employment, legal protections, physical safety, or social acceptance, may “deliberately choose to remain in or to reenter the closet in some or all segments of their life” (Sedgwick 68). This framework foregrounds the notion of coming out as a singular, liberatory event and instead presents queer identity as fragmented across various social contexts—public and private, professional and intimate. Sedgwick thus redefines the closet as a socio-political space shaped by necessity, not pathology. For many queer individuals, she writes, the closet functions as a protective mechanism, especially for individuals “who wanted a job, custody or visiting rights, insurance, protection from violence, from “therapy,” from distorting stereotype, from insulting scrutiny, from simple truth, from forcible interpretation of their bodily product, could deliberately choose to remain in or to reenter the closet in some or all segments of their life” (Sedgwick 68). In this multidimensional view, the metaphor of the closet is neither wholly oppressive nor wholly protective, but a complex terrain navigated under conditions of systemic constraint.

The conceptual emergence of the closet provides a critical framework for analyzing how power operates through the regulation of queer knowledge and visibility. It is not merely to investigate a site of oppression but also offers a critical lens through which to interrogate the epistemological boundaries of sexuality itself. It allows critical thinkers to trace how identity is shaped by both disclosure and silence, by visibility and erasure, and by the continuous negotiation between social legibility and personal survival. The theoretical articulation of the closet, beginning with the works of George Chauncey and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, remains foundational to queer theory and literature. It offers a critical methodology for understanding not only the conditions of queer life but also the cultural logics that sustain heterosexual dominance.

2.1 Reading of the “Closet” through Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s Lens in Sara Farizan’s *If You Could Be Mine*

A. Closet as Oppressive Structure

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) offers a foundational theoretical framework for understanding how queer visibility, concealment, and identity formation operate within cultural systems. Central to her intervention is the claim that “the closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century” (Sedgwick 71). Far from being a mere metaphor for secrecy, the closet, in Sedgwick’s formulation, functions as an epistemological structure, one that governs the production, circulation, and suppression of knowledge about queer identity within heteronormative culture. In Sedgwick’s lens, the closet operates as a mechanism through which queer existence is simultaneously made legible and illegible, visible and invisible—producing conditions under which survival may necessitate concealment, and safety is always proportional.

Sedgwick's theory provides a critical tool for understanding this complex interplay between visibility, and concealment of queer identity in Sara Farizan's *If You Could Be Mine*. In the Iranian setting of Farizan's novel, where the same-sex relationships are both socially taboo and legally punished, the closet functions not only as a metaphor for concealment but as a mechanism through which queer lives are silenced, and policed. This structural function is illustrated in Sahar's earliest encounter with such regulation. At the age of six, Sahar confesses to her mother of her love for Nasrin and wish to marry her, who lives a few houses down from their apartment. Her mother immediately warned her "not to talk about wanting to marry Nasrin" as it is *haraam*, a sin, in their culture (Farizan 2). Through Sedgwick's lens, this moment exemplifies the operation of the closet as a cultural apparatus that governs the production, oppression, and suppression of knowledge about queer desire. By forbidding Sahar, her mother acts as an agent of the heteronormative order, drawing a clear boundary between what may be spoken and what must remain unacknowledged. This prohibition is formative in Sahar, embedding within her an understanding that safety, acceptance, and familial harmony depend upon the concealment of her true desire. Through Sedgwick's lens, this act of silencing creates a state in which queer identity is not only both present and erased, but queer individuals are oppressed and suppressed. Sahar's love for Nasrin is thus forced into a realm of invisibility, that is sustained only in secrecy.

Throughout the novel, this motif recurs in various forms, revealing how the closet is not a static enclosure of queer identity but an oppressive mechanism and situational negotiation. For Sahar, moments of disclosure are continually weighed against the risks of legal punishment, social ostracism, and familial shame. As Sahar admits, "We're always so careful, and being that way is exhausting," the closet here is not a mere metaphor, but a lived reality that dictates the boundaries of expression and belonging (Farizan 14). This remark captures the continual self-awareness that life of a queer individual demands. In Sedgwick's lens, this moment exemplifies

the power of the closet, which is not a voluntary restraint but an imposed vigilance of physical and psychological oppression. Sahar's later confession, "I don't want to live a secret life. I just want to be like everyone else and have a home with the person I love," extends this oppression of living under the closet (Farizan 31). Here Sahar's longing to be home underscores how the closet not only hides desire and forced queer individuals into shadowed and secondary modes of life, but criminalized their feelings and existence.

Another instance that further exemplifies Sedgwick's concept of closet as an oppressive structure is the portrayal of Sahar and Nasrin's relationship which renders the closet's constraints increasingly oppressive. Within the context of the novel, where homosexuality is criminalized yet gender reassignment is officially sanctioned, Sahar's desire for legitimacy leads her to contemplate a life-altering choice, that is, transitioning her gender to marry Nasrin legally. While gender transitioning is, for many, an authentic expression of identity, who feel trapped in a wrong body, in Sahar's case, it is not about aligning her physical body with an internal sense of self, but about negotiating a way out of the structural bind the closet imposes. Her decision reflects the complexity of agency under oppressive structure of the closet: while Sahar cannot dismantle the cultural and legal prohibitions of homosexuality in Iran, she sought to reconfigure herself in order to carve out a sanctioned space for it. Viewed through Sedgwick's lens, Sahar's journey's maps the psychic and political geography of life in the closet: the daily negotiations of safety and desire, the impossible balance between invisibility and exposure, and the extreme lengths to which individuals may go to bridge the gap between their inner lives and their socially permissible identities. The novel thus shows that Sedgwick's metaphor of the closet as an oppressive structure is not a mere abstract representation of queer life.

Sara Farizan's *If You Could Be Mine* offers another instance of the oppressive consequences of this system. In another scene, Sahar recalls the execution of two unnamed homosexual men in

Mashdad, hanged for their choice of sexuality outside the heteronormativity. Farizan also depict minor characters who are threatened, abused, or socially isolated, if not killed, for their sexual orientation. Within this repressive environment, Ali, Sahar's childhood friend, cousin, and confidant, emerges as the novel's only sustained example of queer resilience. As a gay man living in Tehran, Ali refuses to be entirely subsumed by the closet's constraints. He seeks ways to exist being true to himself and build a sense of community, even within the hostile environment that surrounds him. Sahar describes Ali as someone whose life "lives mostly in the dark" (Farizan 87). Ali is the only character who tries to redefine closet, the defining structure of gay oppression, as Sedgwick puts it, and it is where he finds himself double oppressed by the system: the first is the stress of living in the closet, and the second is trying to redefine closet by living authentically. Towards the end of the novel, we find Ali beaten for openly living as a homosexual man in Tehran. As Sahar comments, Ali's face "looks like it has bits of smashed pomegranate all over. His lip is bleeding, and he has a swollen eye" (Farizan 185). Viewing through Sedgwick's lens, Ali challenges the defining structure of gay oppression by partially redefining the closet. This defiance, however, brings a second a layer of oppression, what many gender theorists called a double oppression: first, the oppressive structure of living within the closet, and second, the risks incurred by attempting to challenge its terms. The costs of this resistance become brutally clear toward the novel's end, when Ali is subjected to a violent assault. Sahar observes that his "face looks like it has bits of smashed pomegranate all over. His lip is bleeding, and he has a swollen eye" (Farizan 185). This description is followed by her grim reflection:

I haven't asked who has beaten him like this, but whoever it was they know about Ali. They know what he does, where he does it, who his friends are, which coffee shops are notorious, and when he will be there. They know who he is. He has signed off on his own death sentence. There is no place in Tehran for Ali any longer. (Farizan 190-191)

Ali and many other queer character's fates encapsulate the intricate paradox of the closet that Sedgwick identifies: the closet both as a site of refuge and oppression. For Sahar, the closet functions as both a shield and a cage, which offers temporary safety while systematically eroding her sense of individual autonomy. Ali's trajectory, by contrast, embodies a more openly defiant approach to the same oppressive structure. However, Ali's fate at the novel's end underscores the double bind oppression Sedgwick identifies: living in the closet demands self-denial, but attempting to step outside can invite double oppression.

B. Closet as Expression of Shaping Queer Identity

In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick resists the reductive notion that closetedness equates to the complete silencing of queer voices. Her theory of closet reconceptualizes the closet not merely as a space of concealment but as a dynamic site where queer identity is continually negotiated. As Sedgwick observes, "'closetedness' is not just about what is left unsaid; it is about how silence itself acts as a form of expression" (Sedgwick 3). This conception reframes the closet as an active and formative process that shapes how queer individuals perceive themselves and relate to others. Sara Farizan's *If You Could Be Mine* offers a vivid literary presentation of this formulation. Set in contemporary Iran, where state and cultural laws strictly regulate sexual and gender identities, the novel portrays a queer community that is largely invisible to the heteronormative public sphere yet deeply expressive within its own boundaries. As Sedgwick's proposes, the dominant culture enforces and regulates the silences of queer voices; however, such enforced muteness does not extinguish queer desire, but rather, it transforms the alternative modes through which desire and identity are communicated.

This is most clearly embodied in the characters of Sahar and Ali, who the latter being a member of the hidden queer community. Through Ali, Sahar gains access to this network—a space

where concealment does not preclude recognition. Within this subculture, silence becomes legible; it functions as a coded act through which identity is shared without the need for explicit disclosure. Sedgwick's conception of the closet as an expressive formation finds resonance here, as secrecy coexists with a profound sense of belonging. A particularly striking example occurs when members of the community mobilize to help Sahar pursue gender transition procedures in an effort to prevent Nasrin's marriage to Reza. Although the plan ultimately fails under the weight of entrenched heteronormative authority, it shows the extent to which the closet can also be a site of solidarity and strategic agency, and rather than a space of silence alone.

Characters such as Katayoun, Jamshid, and Behrooz further illustrate the complexity of Sedgwick's framework, in which the closet functions as both a socially enforced constraint and a site of alternative expression. Each of these characters bears the scars of familial rejection and social ostracism, having been cast out from their familial, cultural, and religious communities that once shaped their belonging. Yet Farizan's portrayal complicates the assumption that their lives are defined solely by the dominant culture. Within this concealed queer community, these characters find safety, affirmation, and avenues for self-expression. In this sense, Katayoun, Jamshid, and Behrooz are not passive victims of enforced silence but active participants in a shared discourse. Their interactions within the hidden space embody Sedgwick's notion of the closet as a continual site of negotiation, where identity is shaped in relation to others despite of the constraints imposed by heteronormativity. By presenting these characters as integral members of a concealed yet vibrant network, Farizan reinforces Sedgwick's proposition that the closet is neither wholly defined by silence nor wholly determined by external oppression. Sahar's reflection about this shared space of community encapsulates the essence of this dynamic:

I feel their acceptance, and it feels good. It's nice to belong somewhere. It feels good to have this kind of support from a group that understands what it means to be different. It's unusual in our culture, but it exists. Nasrin and I have a chance (Farizan 106).

C. Closet as the Metaphor of Space Beyond the Individual

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theorization of the closet is grounded in the recognition that the metaphor is inherently double-edged: it operates both as a refuge from persecution and as a prison of enforced silence. While it may offer temporary protection against social hostility, it also imposes a regime of self-concealment that shapes the very condition of queer existence. In this sense, the closet is never merely a private matter of individual choice; it is a structural and cultural mechanism, sustained by collective social imperatives, that regulates visibility and constrains the circulation of sexual knowledge. Sedgwick explicitly situates the closet as a socially embedded feature of cultural life, insisting that "every encounter with a queer person involves, however briefly, an encounter with the closet" (Sedgwick 67). This framing reveals that the closet extends beyond the personal struggles of queer subject, implicating heterosexual society in its creation, maintenance, and enforcement.

Sara Farizan's *If You Could Be Mine* vividly illustrates this structural dimension through the character Sahar, whose earliest memories of desire are mediated by the regulatory apparatus of family and culture. At the age of six, Sahar confesses to her mother that she wants to marry Nasrin, a neighbor and childhood friend. Her mother warned her "not to talk about wanting to marry Nasrin" because it is *haraam*, a sin, within their culture (Farizan 2). Sahar's mother becomes both protector and enforcer: shielding her daughter from potential legal repercussions while simultaneously conditioning her to suppress her desires. Sedgwick's metaphor of the double-edged sword finds a clear parallel here. The same protective silence that shields Sahar from social hostility also cements her long-term entrapment within the closet. Sahar's

internalization of her mother's caution marks the beginning of a patterned negotiation between visibility and erasure—an ongoing process in which love and protection are inseparable from control and suppression.

This structural regulation becomes even more apparent in the trajectory of Sahar and Nasrin's relationship. For many years, the Sahar and Nasrin share a romantic bond in secrecy, carefully navigating the boundaries of public visibility in order to preserve both their safety and their intimacy. However, when Nasrin attains what her family deems the appropriate age for marriage, the heteronormative order asserts itself through an arranged marriage to Reza, a socially respectable doctor. At this moment, the closet ceases to operate merely as a self-imposed strategy of concealment and instead reveals itself as a social apparatus, one in which family, religion, and state jointly dictate the permissible boundaries of desire. The decision to marry Nasrin off is not simply a personal choice made by her parent. It is the enactment of a broader institutional script that reinforces heterosexual marriage as the only legitimate form of relational life. In this context, Sahar and Nasrin's agency over their own relationship is systematically stripped away, thus showing how the closet functions less an individual psychological condition and more as a cultural mechanism embedded within power structures. The failure of Sahar and Nasrin's relationship thus exemplifies Sedgwick's claim that the closet cannot be understood as a purely private matter, however it is produced, maintained, and policed by larger social and institutional forces. This dynamic further highlights the futility of individual resistance in isolation, as even the most careful preservation of secrecy cannot withstand the coercive force of heteronormative structures that intervene to reorient lives toward sanctioned norms.

Parveen, a transgender woman, provides another example of how the closet operates as a shared structural phenomenon rather than purely individual. Employed at a bank—a space marked by rigid professional codes—Parveen is aware of the precarious balance between personal

authenticity and social survival. She acknowledges this reality clearly: “I’m proud of who I am, but I don’t announce it to everyone I meet,” a statement that shows her survival strategy shaped less by individual preference than by the cultural and economic imperatives of her environment (Farizan 71). Parveen’s discretion ensures her job security and personal safety in a culture where queer visibility is not only socially stigmatized but can also carry legal consequences. The very necessity of Parveen’s discretion underscores Sedgwick’s theorization of the closet: while it offers protection, it also enforces a regime of containment that curtails autonomy and constrains self-expression. In Parveen’s case, concealment becomes an embodied practice of withholding her full identity from public recognition, illustrating how the closet functions as an externalized mechanism of governance. Farizan’s depiction of Parveen within the intersection of gender regulation, social-legal risk, and workplace discipline demonstrates that the closet is not reducible to an internal or voluntary choice; however, it emerges as a structural and cultural mechanism, sustained by collective social imperatives (Sedgwick 67).

2.2 Reading of the Closet through José Esteban Muñoz’s Lens in Nemat Sadat’s *The Carpet Weaver*

The dominant narrative of the queer closet, as articulated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, operates within a rigid binary: to be “in” the closet is to inhabit secrecy, whereas to be “out” is equated with liberation and authenticity (Sedgwick 14). However, Sedgwick also emphasizes that the closet is not merely a private enclosure; it is a pervasive social structure that organizes knowledge and power around sexuality, which shape every social relation regardless of whether disclosure has taken place. As articulated by Sedgwick, the closet is less a singular site of concealment. José Esteban Muñoz’s theory on the third space of disidentification extends Sedgwick’s conceptualization of the closet. Drawing on Sedgwick’s formulation, José Esteban Muñoz identifies three interrelated spaces through which queer subjectivity is formed. The first is an intimate space and often localized space—such as the home or small community—where

every day embodied practices and affective life take place. This is a space where memory and embodied experience are preserved, what Muñoz defined “utopian traces” (Muñoz 14). Muñoz’s second space is a more formalized and institutionalized public space, encompassing bureaucratic structures, organizations, and institutional sites. Within this space, individuals are governed by a set of dominant norms, often losing some of the utopian potential cultivated in the first space. The third space, which is central to José Esteban Muñoz’s intervention, emerges at the intersection of the first two. Here, elements of intimate, utopian possibility coexist and interact with the demands and constraints of institutional structures, producing a new mode of subjectivity—what Muñoz terms disidentification, where the queer-making subject appears under the closet. In this third space, queer subjectivity neither wholly assimilates into the norms of either the first or second space, nor wholly rejects them. Rather, they inhabit a position that “work on and against” the first two spaces, transforming them from within—a stance that Kosofsky recognizes it as a form of being “in the closet,” yet not defined by its constraints (Muñoz 11). As José Esteban Muñoz writes:

Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification and assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counter identification, utopianism), this “working on and against” is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance. (Muñoz 11)

José Esteban Muñoz’s conception of the third space of queer disidentification does not eliminate the contradictory elements embedded within ideology. The third space of disidentification approaches these contradictions as sites of potential transformation. As José

Esteban Muñoz observes: “Disidentification does not dispel those ideological contradictory elements; rather, like a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest it with new life” (Muñoz 12). The third space is thus not a selective process of retaining only the agreeable aspects of an identity, nor an attempt to strip it of its political dimensions. Instead, it entails reworking these complex energies while retaining the contradictory dimensions of identity, acknowledging and incorporating the inevitable influences that shape such encounters (Muñoz 12). In this sense, José Esteban Muñoz third space functions as a hermeneutical performance, a deliberate act of interpretation and meaning-making, through which marginalized subjects engage with cultural texts, symbols, and practices produced within systems of power that exclude or misrepresent them. This process involves the “decoding” the ideology embedded in mass culture, elite cultural forms, or any other representational field, from the vantage point of a subject disempowered within that hierarchy (Muñoz 25). The minority subject, therefore, reads not as the intended subject, but as an outsider navigating codes that were never designed for their recognition or empowerment. Disidentification of the third space thus becomes an interpretive act that enables disempowered subjects to carve out space for agency and visibility within representational systems that otherwise seek to marginalize or erase them (Muñoz 27).

José Esteban Muñoz’s theorization of the third space of queer disidentification offers a critical tool for examining the narrative and thematic structures in Nemat Sadat’s *The Carpet Weaver*. The novel depicts queer subjectivities emerging within complex sociocultural contexts, situated at the intersection of what Muñoz terms the first and second spaces. José Esteban Muñoz’s conceptualization of the third space resists the binary of assimilation and rejection; instead, it foregrounds a mode of negotiation in which queer subject inhabit, navigate, and reconfigure both spaces without fully conforming to or abandoning either. In Nemat Sadat’s *The Carpet Weaver*, the protagonist Kanishka’s queer identity develops against the backdrop of a

conservative Afghan society shaped by political unrest, where the possibility of open expression is constrained by the threat of violence and exile. This process resonates with Muñoz's notion of "work on and against" the dominant systems, resisting the limitations of the first two spaces while simultaneously reshaping them from within—a stance which Kosofsky recognizes it as a form of being "in the closet," yet not defined by its constraints (Muñoz 11). Through the lens of José Esteban Muñoz's theorization of spatiality, the works of Nemat Sadat can thus be reinterpreted as acts of decoding and reimagining the cultural narratives imposed that attempt to regulate queer existence.

A. José Esteban Muñoz's First Space

“We live in such a cruel world. I can't imagine a single person on this Earth worth loving more than you and Maadar” (Sadat 204).

José Esteban Muñoz's concept of the *first space*, which refers to an intimate space and localized domain—often embodied within the home or close-knit community—where everyday practice of care, memory, and emotional sustenance cultivated finds vivid representation in Nemat Sadat's *The Carpet Weaver*. In this novel, the *first space* is embodied in protagonist Kanishka's family, whose love and loyalty create a refuge from the hostility of Afghan society. Kanishka's own words capture the emotional intensity of this space: “We live in such a cruel world. I can't imagine a single person on this Earth worth loving more than you and Maadar” (Sadat 204). Kanishka's familial unit—consisting of Baba, Maadar, and his sister Benafsha—embodies what Muñoz describes as a “small and emotional” space, where intimacy and affective ties create a refuge against a hostile world for Kanishka (Muñoz 14). Their life together, rooted in love, respect, and quiet acts of sacrifice, demonstrates how such spaces operate as sanctuaries. Within the broader context of a society that marginalizes Kanishka's emerging queer identity, this *first space* (family structure) functions as a protective enclave in which Kanishka finds a

sense of belonging and worth that public space denied to him. Their domestic life of the *first space* is built on a foundation of mutual care and quiet resilience: gestures as simple as shared meals, words of encouragement, or the silent endurance of hardship accumulate to form a buffer against the hostility outside their home. One poignant example of this dynamic lie in their relationship to labor together, particularly the work of carpet weaving. While carpet weaving is often stigmatized within Afghan society as a menial and low-status occupation, Kanishka does not internalize that contempt. Instead, he takes pride in assisting his father at the loom, seeing the act of carpet weaving not merely as economic necessity but as a form of familial devotion. Moreover, Baba's unwavering commitment to this labor enduring long hours of physical strain to ensure his family's survival embodies what Muñoz calls the *first space* the "embodied practices of love" that sustain such intimate spaces (Muñoz 12). The repetitive motions of threading carpets thus become more than mechanical tasks; they are acts of care, investments in the family's stability and dignity.

However, this intimate space is not untouched by conflict; the emergence of Kanishka's queer identity tested the attachment of the family's unit. Although Baba and Maadar cannot accept Kanishka's attraction to Maihan, they make a conscious effort to protect him from public scrutiny and condemnation. This protective instinct becomes evident when Maihan's mother, Shameem, begins to question the closeness of the boys' relationship. In response, Maadar intervenes, insisting— "There is an important difference between one who prefers playing with the same gender and someone who is attracted to the same sex" (Sadat 163). This statement functions as more than mere denial; it operates as a strategic act of concealment, which enables the family to maintain its public respectability while safeguarding Kanishka from the potential devastating consequences of exposure. Maadar's framing of Kanishka's intimacy with Maihan as innocent companionship not only protects Kanishka from the cultural violence that criminalizes and pathologizes queer existence, yet this compromise is itself a testament to their

strength of their familial bond. Despite their internal disapproval, Baba and Maadar cannot envision losing the ties that have provided them with emotional sustenance amidst differences. This reinforces Muñoz's concept of the *first space* as a site of survival forged through affective labor and protective intimacy. This space does not erase conflict but absorbs it. The family's willingness to shield Kanishka even while grappling with their own discomfort demonstrates how *first spaces* operate not as idealized havens but as dynamic, sometimes fraught, where love becomes a form of quiet resistance against cultural erasure.

Among all the family members, Benafsha most clearly embodies Muñoz's notion of the *first space* as a site of enduring affection. After Baba's death, as the family faces displacement and uncertainty on their journey to America at Haftballa, Benafsha becomes Kanishka's source of strength and connection with Maadar. While Maadar's protective denial sustain Kanishka from being shamed by the Afghans of his queer identity, it is Benafsha who carries this intimate space forward during moments of rupture between Maadar and Knaishka. When Benafsha notices and realizes Kanishka's struggle to reconcile his queer identity with the dominant culture, and later found Kanishka not being able to forget Maihan, still gazing at a photo of himself with Maihan taken in Afghanistan, she reacts with quiet concern rather than outrage:

A cautious silence ensued, before Benafsha said, 'I just ask that you be careful. It's not safe for you to be carrying a photo of you sitting on another boy's lap and kissing his face while wrapping your arms around him... You know I always want the best for you.'" (Sadat 203)

Benafsha's response reflects the survivalist strategies often employed by queer individuals and their allies in hostile environments like Afghanistan. Her plea is not merely about concealing a photograph; it is about safeguarding Kanishka's life and, by extension, preserving the familial bond they continue to share. In this sense, Benafsha embodies Muñoz describes as the "holder"

of the first space—a figure who protects the emotional sanctuary the family has built while negotiating the oppressive demands of the external world (Muñoz 15). Beyond her protective role, Benafsha also serves as a bridge between Maadar and Kanishka during moments of intense familial conflict, particularly when Maadar struggles to accept her son's emerging queer identity. Viewing through José Esteban Muñoz's theoretical lens, Benafsha becomes the central figure sustaining the first space, connecting and holding the family together throughout the course of the novel (Muñoz 15). Unlike her parents, she tries to understand her brother's emerging identity and works to create possibilities for acceptance, even though his life choices starkly contrast with the dominant cultural and religious beliefs they have internalized. This mediating role is most evident after the family's arrival in America. Despite being in a supposedly liberating environment, Kanishka remains unable to reunite with Maihan and feels alienated within his new setting. Convinced that Maadar will never truly accept his queerness, he decides to leave America without informing her, in search of a new life where he can embrace his true self. It is at this moment Benafsha who intervenes, striving to bring Maadar and Kanishka into a mutual understanding. Although Maadar ultimately fails to fully comprehend her son's sexuality, her willingness to forgive—despite cultural prohibitions—and Benafsha's unwavering commitment to family exemplify Muñoz's conception of the *first space*: an intimate and affective realm sustained through acts of care and negotiation, even in the face of irreconcilable difference.

Another scene that further illustrates José Esteban Muñoz's conception of the *first space* is revealed through Kanishka's own inner conflict. Although he recognizes his queer identity from an early age, he remains unable to share this truth with his parents, despite the deep love and affection that defines their relationship. His silence underscores the tension at the heart of the *first space*, it is a space of intimacy, but also of unspoken limits. Kanishka fears that articulating his love for Maihan would shatter the shared bond that has sustained his family, a

fear encapsulated in his poignant reflection: “I wanted to go home and tell Maadar and Baba that Maihan and I loved each other. But even if they knew a lot about forbidden love, about standing up their beliefs, they would never understand my feelings—or me” (Sadat 63). This monologue lays bare the paradox of the *first space* in an Afghan cultural context: while it shelters affection and nurtures belonging, it simultaneously enforces silence around identities deemed unacceptable by prevailing norms. Afghan’s socio-cultural context, governed by patriarchal codes of honor and strict interpretation of morality renders queer not merely taboo but dangerous. Within such a society, a son’s admission of same-sex love could destroy a family’s reputation, kinship ties, and incite violence. Kanishka’s hesitation is not simply personal fear but a reflection of the oppressive structures that infiltrate even the most intimate spaces.

Through José Esteban Muñoz’s framework, Kanishka’s silence in *The Carpet Weaver* reveals how the *first space* is sustained by acts of care that sometimes involve withholding one’s full self rather than full self-expression. His decision to remain silent about his queer identity becomes, paradoxically, an act of love: he sacrifices his desire to preserve the space he shares with Maadar and Baba. Kanishka’s silence is an active choice to shield Maadar and Baba from a truth that might fracture the harmony they share. Moreover, the contrast between Kanishka’s unspoken truth and the visible affection of other family members, particularly Benafsha, highlights the complex dynamics of the *first space*. While Benafsha expresses her love through open gestures, comforting and defending him in subtle ways, Kanishka’s contribution to maintaining the space is his silence, a silent endurance that ensures the family’s emotional core remains intact. The portrayal of Kanishka’s family in Nemat Sadat’s *The Carpet Weaver*, truly embodies Muñoz’ idea of the *first space* as a site of affection, refuge, and care.

B. José Esteban Muñoz’s Second space

While José Esteban Muñoz's *first space* is a realm of intimacy and affective ties, his *second space* marks a significant shift. It is a public, institutionalized domain of social norms, ideologies, and regulatory structures that discipline bodies and identities into conformity and order according to their structures. This space is where heteronormativity, patriarchy, religious belief, and cultural authority consolidate their power, sometimes intruding into private lives to dictate how intimacy, sexuality, and kinship should be organized. In Nemat Sadat's *The Carpet Weaver*, Baba emerges as the primary embodiment of this *second space*, functioning as both its enforcer and representative. As the patriarch of the family, he is not merely a father but an agent of the cultural and institutional forces that shape Afghan society—a society where heterosexual marriage is considered the only legitimate form of adult life and where reproduction ensures the continuation of family honor and legacy. Baba's insistence on Kanishka's adherence to heteronormative expectations reflects Muñoz's claim that the *second space* operates by naturalizing dominant ideologies as unquestionable truths. One instance that reflects this is, Baba persistently pressures his son to pursue women, marry, and perpetuate the family line, not only as personal duties but as moral imperatives essential to preserving family honor. His words to Kanishka encapsulate this worldview:

Put your energy into making girls desire you. You're young now, and there are so many pretty girls you could seduce. Of course, some day soon you'll need to think of marriage. A wife will make you happy; you will feel fulfilled. And then I can rest in peace knowing that there's someone to care for you when your maadar and I are gone. So go on—do your duty. It'll be far better than mopping around. (Sadat 73).

This passage reveals the ideological weight behind Baba's paternal advice. His views on heterosexual marriage as both a duty and a source of fulfillment echoes the dominant discourse of Afghan society, where marriage secures not just emotional companionship but also social respectability and lineage continuity. Through this lens, Baba functions as what Muñoz

describe as a guardian of the second space. From theoretical perspectives, this insistence becomes a form of symbolic violence—an erasure of Kanishka’s queer subjectivity under the guise of familial care. This conflation of love, duty, and legacy illustrates how the *second space* operates not through coercion alone but through affective manipulation: love for the family becomes a tool to enforce compliance. Kanishka’s queerness, which exists quietly in the *first space*, is rendered invisible, and silenced by the hegemonic force of the *second space*. Nonetheless, Baba’s words reveal the deep interconnection between patriarchy and heteronormativity in Afghan culture. The expectation that Kanishka will “make girls desire [him]” situates heterosexuality not as a private orientation but as a performative—one that proves his masculinity and secures the family’s social standing (Sadat 73). In this sense, Baba’s character illustrates Muñoz’s argument that the *second space* is not neutral but invested in reproducing dominant power structures. It is a space where personal identity is subordinated to collective ideals, and deviation from these ideals threatens not only the individual but the very stability of the family and community.

Another episode that shows Baba’s persistent enforcement of heteronormative and masculine ideals upon Kanishka occurs when Kanishka mentions that he is going out with Lamba Melatyar, a girl whom Baba assumed to be his girlfriend. When Maadar cautions Kanishka to return home early, Baba immediately dismisses her concern, encouraging his son to take his time and enjoy the rest of the evening. Baba’s reassurance—“Don’t rush coming home”—reveals his belief that Kanishka’s association with female friends affirms his masculinity and aligns with the kind of “real man” Baba envisions him to be (Sadat 77). Baba’s remarks implicitly affirms that sexual relationships with women authenticate his son’s manhood, echoing what José Esteban Muñoz theorizes as the *second space*: the formalized, institutional realm where normative expectations are enacted and policed. Baba’s attitude reflects a societal script in which heterosexuality is celebrated as the only legitimate mode of being. This

particular scene exposes how the *second space* operates through familial figures who embody and perpetuate societal ideologies. Baba is presented not merely a father figure, but someone who functions as a conduit of heteronormative and patriarchal authority that links male worth to heterosexual performance. The weight of this demand is palpable in Kanishka's monologue: "I knew that I had to satisfy Baba, to keep the heat off my back, by having sex with a girl" (Sadat 77). Here, Sadat reveals that Kanishka's sexual agency is not his own but is subsumed under the pressure to validate himself in his father's eyes.

The pressure to perform heterosexual masculinity is further intensified by Baba's explicit disapproval of Maihan, Kanishka's closest friend and, unbeknownst to Baba, his secret lover. Baba's discomfort is evident in his remark—"I know he's your friend... and has been for a long time. I know your Maadar and Banafsha missed seeing him during the winter months. But he makes me uncomfortable"—demonstrates the *second space* disciplinary force (Sadat 104). This moment is significant not because of anything Maihan has explicitly done, but because of what his presence might signify—a disruption of the heteronormative order Baba is determined to maintain. Maihan's mere existence within Kanishka's intimate world threatens to destabilize the policed boundaries of the family's respectability. His remark carries more than implicit warning, but to strengthen Kanishka on the line with the heterosexual ideals he valorizes, as seen earlier in his encouragement of Kanishka's association with Lamba. Viewing through José Esteban Muñoz's conception of the *second space*, this moment reveals how regulation operates through anticipatory control. Baba's "discomfort" signals a preemptive move to exclude queerness before it has the chance to surface (Sadat 104). The *second space* here operates as an arena of erasing possibilities for queer connection under the guise of preserving family honor.

Moreover, Baba's authority extends beyond domestic control; he also embodies the conduit for the religious institution that underpin the *second space*. As Kanishka observes, his father closes

his shop every Friday and on religious holidays, despite there being no legal compulsion to do so. This act signifies a performative gesture of adherence to communal norms, aligning with the broader ideological structures that regulate both faith and family. Through Baba, Nemat Sadat presents a figure who internalizes and enforces the imperatives of heteronormativity and religion, echoing José Esteban Muñoz's assertion that the *second space* is "the site where dominant public culture claims its universality" (Muñoz 17). Baba's religiosity and heteronormativity do not separate in isolation; they enforce one another. His public display of piety validates his private enforcement of patriarchal and heteronormative norms. Baba's character becomes emblematic of the *second space*'s disciplinary force—a figure enforcing not just rules but also a cultural agent reproducing the ideological structures. However, for Kanishka, this *second space* is suffocating. His father's relentless demands transform home from a site of unconditional love into an arena of cultural surveillance, eroding the *first space*. Kanishka's silence in response to Baba's expectations is an attempt to navigate the collision between his internal truth and external world's demands. This dynamic exposes the tension between José Esteban Muñoz's *first* and *second* spaces in Kanishka's life. While the *first space*—the private realm of affection represented by Benafsha—offers a fleeting comfort, it is continually threatened by the regulatory power of the *second space* that Baba upholds. In other words, the latter seeks to assimilate or erase queerness, leaving those who cannot conform to exist in perpetual negotiation between love for their family and fidelity to themselves. The dissonance between these spaces generates Kanishka's internal conflict: he longs to confess his love for Maihan but remains trapped within a structure that renders such disclosure unthinkable. Baba's presence thus becomes emblematic of the *second space*'s ability to extend not only their public identities but also their innermost desires.

Kanishka's grandfather, Zaki jaan, and his mother further emerge as pivotal enforcers of the *second space*. Both characters operate as custodians of religious and cultural orthodoxy,

ensuring that the private sphere of the family reflects and reproduces the broader societal imperatives of conformity. From the novel's outset, Zaki jaan's announcement during Kanishka's sixteenth birthday serves as a forewarning of the ideological battleground the protagonist must navigate: "'THE ONE THING I know is that Allah never forgives sodomy... It's immoral, impure, unpardonable and wretched'" (Sadat 3). Zaki jaan's utterance situates Kanishka's emerging queer identity not only within a pre-emptive discourse of condemnation, but it also presents José Esteban Muñoz's *second space* as an institutional structure that pre-emptively condemns deviation. On the other hand, Maadar's role complements and reinforces this mechanism of control. Evidence in the novel that exemplifies this is her repeated insistence that Kanishka must marry a woman and produce children. This scene is best expressed in the following lines: "She cupped her right hand under my chin and mouthed a fervent prayer. She kissed me on the cheek and said, 'I can't wait to celebrate your wedding to a nice woman. I want lots of grandchildren'" (Sadat 226). Viewing it through José Esteban Muñoz's lens, Maadar operates under the guise of familial love and continuity. This ideological enforcement reaches its apex when Kanishka discloses his emerging queer identity. His mother's immediate response reflects not only entails her inability to accept Kanishka, but fear of losing religious identity:

This is not being a good Muslim. Only those who marry a woman and procreate children and follow the way of Prophet Muhammad are deemed real men in the eyes of Allah...This is against Islam. You'll go to hell for this. (Sadat 284)

By positioning Kanishka's queerness as both a personal failing and a spiritual threat, Maadar reinforces the *second space's* claim to universality, foreclosing the possibility of alternative ways of being. Adding to this, even when aware of Kanishka's queer identity, Maadar's refusal to relinquish these expectations reveals about her character as the keeper of José Esteban Muñoz's conception of the *second space*. This is reflected in the following lines: "She groaned.

‘I’ve heard enough. One day, you’ll have children, and then you will understand. You’re the only hope now to carry on your Baba’s name’ (Sadat 165). Her insistence ties Kanishka’s worth to patriarchal lineage, ensuring that heteronormativity and religious norms persist across generations. Through Zaki jaan’s religious absolutism and Maadar’s conflation of love with cultural production, Nemat Sadat illustrates how the *second space* functions as a site of enforced conformity sustained by institutionalized ideologies and cultural traditions. In José Esteban Muñoz’s terms, the *second space*, which represents the dominant social space where normative structures, such as religious law, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, are naturalized and reproduced. In such organization, Zaki jaan embodies the unyielding authority of religious doctrine, and Maadar inextricably bound to cultural imperatives.

C. José Esteban Muñoz’s Third Space of Disidentification

José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of the *third space* emerges at the intersection of two opposing realms: the *first space*, that is, the private, intimate space of utopian possibility and the *second space*, that is, the institutional space of normative constraints. Within this space, elements of hope, and intimacy interact with societal pressures to produce a new mode of subjectivity. Muñoz terms this space as “the *third space of disidentification*”—a space through which queer subjects emerge under the closet to navigate dominant ideologies (Muñoz 11). This *third space* allows individuals to resist full assimilation into normative structures without wholly rejecting the other two spaces. Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky has similarly described such a position as “being in the closet,” but not wholly defined by its limitations (Kosofsky 71). The lives of Kanishka and Maihan exemplify occupying Muñoz’s conception of the *third space*. On one hand, Kanishka awakens to the sounds of vendors setting up stalls, surrounded by the bustle of a traditional Afghan neighborhood. On the other, Maihan begins his mornings amid the comfort of modern affluence, with servants brewing coffee in a serene garden. Despite their vastly

different socio-economic circumstances, both characters share a profound struggle with identity that propels them towards what Muñoz calls the *third space of disidentification*.

For both Kanishka and Maihan, America represents as a powerful symbol of liberation—a space where they imagine the possibility of living openly, free from the restrictions imposed by their homeland’s heteronormative and religious restraints. Maihan and Kanishka’s relationship unfolds within the deeply restrictive landscape of Afghan society, where homosexuality is not only taboo but criminalized. In this context, the West, particularly America, becomes more than a geographical destination; it represents a symbolic site of liberation from Afghanistan’s cultural and religious constraints. Maihan promises to Kanishka encapsulates this imagined escape: “I’m telling you, in America everything will be different for us...I promise you that once we both end up in the West, I will spend the rest of my life with you” (Sadat 147). His promise constructs America as the *third space* of queer futurity, an arena in which their queer desires can be lived rather than suppressed. Throughout the novel, this imagined geography as the *third space* of liberation recurs as a recurring motif in their private conversations, which sustains their relationship against the hostility surrounding them. When Maihan reassures Kanishka, “Remember, we have a life in America ahead of us,” America operates as a utopian elsewhere—a disidentification space detached from the familial, cultural, and religious restrictions of Afghanistan (Sadat 153). This vision of the West as an emancipatory site is deeply entangled with the colonial history of queer representation, raising critical questions about the origin of their sense of self. Is there yearning for freedom rooted in an intrinsic, self-determined queer identity, or is it shaped by Western ideals of sexual liberation that stand in contrast to their own cultural milieu? Nemat Sadat deliberately leaves this tension unresolved, refusing to offer a singular answer and instead exposing the layered complexity of queer subjectivity in postcolonial contexts.

However, this utopian vision of America that once sustained Kanishka ultimately collapses upon his arrival. The long-imagined land of freedom, once imbued with the promise of love and self-fulfillment, proves unable to deliver on its idealized potential. Although Kanishka no longer lives under the threat of “death and starvation,” the reality he encounters in the United States brings with it a different, less visible form of uncertainty: “Now the worries that engulfed me lay in that vast uncharted life I had left to live” (Sadat 266). The greatest rupture comes when Kanishka learns that Maihan, the person who once embodied his dream of queer futurity, is now engaged to Lamba, rejecting their shared dream. Maihan’s rejection of their shared vision underscores the fragility of utopian projections when confronted with enduring cultural and religious attachments. Despite living in the United States, a space that ostensibly offers the freedom they longed for, Maihan tethered to the cultural and religious values of his homeland: “Look, maybe we’re no longer in Afghanistan, but we can’t ignore our culture. Even listening to you makes me nervous” (Sadat 274). His words reveal how deeply ingrained systems of belief and identity persist, even when geographical displacement suggests the possibility of transformation. Maihan retreats into what Muñoz might identify as the *second space* of cultural conformity, where institutional and cultural ideologies are internalized and reproduced. His inability or unwillingness to inhabit the *third space of disidentification* highlights the limits of migration as a liberatory act.

This moment illustrates that Muñoz’s conception of the *third space of disidentification* is neither inevitable nor universally achievable; while some may navigate hybrid identities that resist oppressive systems, others remain constrained by inherited cultural structures. Maihan’s failure highlights the enduring weight of these structures, which further shows that the movement across borders cannot easily dismantle the psychic, emotional, and ideological frameworks formed within them. For Kanishka, this realization marks the collapse of not only his romantic ideal but also the very notion of America as a sanctuary of queer liberation. The shattering of

this dream is poignantly captured in his reflection: “I had always surrendered my soul to Maihan and felt for now that he was unworthy of me. This was my moment to reclaim the dignity I felt had been robbed from me” (Sadat 291). Here, Kanishka’s act of reclaiming dignity becomes a moment of self-redefinition, which further suggests that liberation, if possible, must come from within rather than being reliant on external geographies or relationships. Through this act, Sadat also complicates the narrative of the West as a guaranteed site of queer emancipation. The novel refuses to romanticize migration as a clean break from cultural oppression, and shows how displacement can produce new forms of alienation while leaving older systems of power intact.

Kanishka, in contrast to Maihan, ultimately embodies Muñoz’s conception of the *third space*—a space of disidentification where the subject refuses to be fully assimilated into either the intimate sanctuary of the *first space* or the regulatory confines of the *second space*. His journey is marked by a willingness to break with both the intimate space of family and love, and the inherited cultural and religious values of his homeland. The pivotal moment that crystalizes this transformation occurs in Haftballa prison, where Kanishka kills of a prison guard in order to secure his freedom. This act becomes not merely an act of survival but a symbolic act of rejecting the structures that have sought to govern his existence:

Killing a goon had satisfied a sense of justice. These men had robbed every person here of their humanity. But I wondered if Tor Gul’s insatiable bloodlust and somehow fuelled my own hunger for retribution. Blood spurted out as my knife went back and forth, his body jerking and twitching until her stiffened and stilled, his face frozen into a grimace of shock. Days shy of my twentieth birthday, I had killed for the first—and, I prayed, the last—time in my life. (Sadat 228)

While brutal, this act represents a profound act of self-determination. By taking control of his immediate fate, Kanishka symbolically disassociates from the *first space* of intimate refuge that once defined him, as well as from the *second space* of cultural conformity that constrained him. By the novel's conclusion, this becomes even more apparent. While Maihan retreats to the familiar structures of culture and religion, Kanishka continues his pursuit of a self beyond these confines. His reflection captures this shift: "As Afghanistan's future remained plague in doubt, and my life in California had come to a hopeful end, I was poised to turn the tide of misfortune and work destiny in my favour" (Sadat 294). His departure from America, far from a return to a fixed notion of self, signifies an ongoing quest for identity beyond the national borders, cultural inheritance, and even romantic attachments. In this way, the life of Kanishka embodies Muñoz's *third space of disidentification*—a refusal to conform entirely to any singular space, instead carving out a transformative existence in-between. Kanishka's journey suggests that queer survival in postcolonial contexts must involve an active reconfiguration of the self that resists closure. Nemat Sadat's portrayal of Kanishka's evolution reframes *third space of disidentification* not as a purely utopian gesture but as a hard-won, further challenging the reader to consider what it means to carve out a life in the shadow of inherited trauma and ongoing precarity.

2.3 Conclusion

Although, this study does not take the form of a direct comparative analysis between Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's and José Esteban Muñoz's theorization of the closet, it nevertheless shows key points of convergence and divergence in their application to the narratives of Sara Farizan's *If You Could Be Mine* and Nemat Sadat's *The Carpet Weaver*. Both Sedgwick and Muñoz conceptualize dominant culture as an oppressive structure that disciplines, regulates and constrains non-heteronormative identities. This is evident as seen in the textual analyses, where the closet operates as a pervasive force in Sara Farizan's *If You Could Be Mine*, and

where spaces of conformity and disidentification shape the lives of characters in Nemat Sadat's *The Carpet Weaver*. The study finds that the closet, rather than being merely a private experience of secrecy, is structurally produced by dominant ideologies. For instance, the cultural and political refusal to recognize sexualities outside heteronormativity as legitimate that creates the very necessary conditions for the closet's existence. In turn, the study also finds that, this oppressive structure paradoxically contributes to the formation of queer identity itself, as queer subjectivities emerge in response to their exclusion from dominant culture. Thus, the study discovers that the closet is not only a site of repression but also the generative ground from which queer identities articulate themselves in opposition to cultural erasure.

The study also identifies several key differences between Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's and José Esteban Muñoz's theoretical approaches to the closet. Sedgwick's theoretical application finds emphasizes on the silences, concealments, and forms of oppression imposed on queer individuals by dominant culture. Sedgwick focuses on how the closet operates as a mechanism of epistemological control, thereby producing psychological, social, and emotional strain for those forced to navigate its boundaries. In contrast, José Esteban Muñoz's theoretical application extends beyond the dynamics of silence and repression. While Muñoz acknowledges the oppressive force of dominant culture, he emphasizes the strategy of the third space of disidentification, which is not a complete abandonment of dominant norms, but the reworking of those norms to carve out new spaces of existence. For José Esteban Muñoz, the *second space* exemplifies the internalization of cultural oppression, yet beyond this lies the *third space*, where queer subjects transform dominant structures into alternatives sites of belonging and futurity. What unites both theorists and its application in queer narratives is their recognition of the closet as an oppressive structure that defines the condition of queer life. Sedgwick illuminates the ways in which queer individuals are constrained and disciplined

within this structure, while Muñoz highlights the potential to move beyond it through creative and affective practices of disidentification.

The study finally finds that there is no singular or universal path for navigating queer existence within a heteronormative regime. Queer lives are shaped by a spectrum of strategies, each negotiated under the pressures of cultural, social, and political constraint. Sara Farizan's *If You Could Be Mine* illustrates this complexity by presenting two divergent modes of survival: on the one hand, the careful strategy of invisibility that prioritizes safety and concealment, and on the other, the riskier pursuit of authenticity through partial openness. Both strategies emerge from the same structural forces of heteronormativity, yet yielding different outcomes. Similarly, Nemat Sadat's *The Carpet Weaver* demonstrates that queer survival cannot be reduced to a single solution such as familial intimacy, migration to the West, or assimilation into cultural norms. Each of these spaces offers temporary shelter or possibility, but each is also marked by its own limits and contradiction. Family may provide protection but not full acceptance; migration may offer geographical distance from persecution but not freedom from inherited cultural structures; and assimilation into dominant norms may promise safety but only at the cost of erasing one's queer self. Taken all these together, the study finds that queer narratives emphasizes that queer existence in postcolonial and heteronormative contexts is plural, and fragile.

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CHAPTER III

GENDER REASSIGNMENT AND RECONCEPTUALIZING SEXUALITY

There are those who celebrate the fact of being born into this world just as they are, and there are those who must wait for forty, fifty years, or even longer to become who they truly are. And then, there are those who never get to celebrate the life they are born into. There are those who are welcomed into the world the moment they are born, and there are also those who are never welcomed at all. Some people's existence is celebrated even before birth, as seen in ultrasound pictures displayed through medical procedures, while others never experience such recognition. There are those who feel comfortable with their assigned body or sexuality, and there are those who do not. Some cultures celebrate and accept body transitions, while others do not, and view this as a profound disruption to the social order. Some people live one life, with a single sexuality and identity, while others live two distinct lives—experiencing two different bodies, sexualities, and identities. P. Carl's *Becoming a Man*, and Juliet Jacques's *Trans: A Memoir* is all about these and much more. P. Carl and Juliet Jacques's narratives explores all these experiences and more; it is the story of a trans person who lived two distinct lives within one lifetime.

P. Carl's *Becoming a Man* is an autobiographical novel based on the author's personal experience of transitioning from a woman to a man. The novel recounts the author's journey to become the person—that is, the man—he always knew himself to be. It is also an anthropological exploration of a trans-community like P. Carl himself, who has lived a double life and double consciousness before fully realizing his true identity. Born with the name Polly, P. Carl lived for fifty long years and then ten months as a girl, a white Midwestern woman, and a devoted wife, building a career and a life, all while waiting to fully realize himself. The novel recounts his transition, adapting to a new body, overcoming challenges, and becoming a better person in an American political landscape that misunderstands transgender bodies. The

narrative offers deep insights into the psychological toll of living in a body that does not align with one's true identity. Through candid accounts of joy, pain, loss, and love, the novel paints a vivid picture of what it means to seek authenticity in a world that frequently denies it.

3.1 Reading Trans Body through C. Riley Snorton's Lens

C. Riley Snorton's *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* marks a significant intervention in trans theoretical discourse. The book offers a rigorous and critical account of how trans identity has been historically constituted through overlapping structures of power, knowledge, racial violence, institutional knowledge, and systematic erasure. Rather than presenting a celebratory or linear narrative of trans progression and visibility, as often found in mainstream accounts, Snorton directs attention to the conditions under which transness becomes legible. For him, trans identity does not emerge in isolation or through self-realization alone; it is formed within, and often in response to, conditions of invisibility, social violence, and symbolic death. Snorton critiques the dominant frameworks that narrate trans experience as a journey from repression to authenticity, from marginality to inclusion. In contrast, he uncovers the deeper and structural forces that shape trans life through precarity, surveillance, and exclusion.

Central to Snorton's critique is the adaptation of Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics—the power of the state, institutions, and dominant cultures to determine who may live and who must die. Snorton's theoretical intervention, which might be described as trans necropolitics, expands this idea to consider how trans lives are often lived in close proximity to both symbolic and literal death. His reading of necropolitics foregrounds not only the threat of violence faced by trans individuals, but also about the ways in which trans people are erased from history, denied recognition, or only acknowledged after death. For Snorton, the very foundation of necropolitics is not just a condition that trans people endure; it is constitutive of how gender

itself is constructed. The very category of trans identity is shaped through a continuous negotiation between life and death, visibility and erasure, subjecthood and disappearance (Snorton 44-46).

Alongside this framework of necropolitics, Snorton introduces the related and vital concept of symbolic death. This is a mode of disappearance that does not involve physical death, but rather the systematic denial of recognition, agency, and presence. Symbolic death refers to the structural conditions under which trans people are only seen through distorted lenses—misrecognition, sensationalism, or silence. It is the kind of death enacted when trans individuals are misgendered, omitted from historical records, or remembered only through narratives of tragedy or pathology (Snorton 75). Snorton identifies multiple sites where symbolic death is enacted. One such mechanism is *misrecognition*—the persistent denial of a trans person’s gender identity, whether through language, documentation, or social practice. Another is *selective representation*, in which trans lives become legible only within constrained narrative frames, such as victimhood, or trauma. Symbolic death is also embedded in the *archive*, which often omits gender-nonconforming figures entirely (Snorton 81-85). What Snorton ultimately reveals through the concept of symbolic death is that recognition and inclusion are not inherently liberatory. They carry their own forms of violence. Legal recognition, medical transition, or media representation can all produce symbolic death in the lives of trans individuals. Snorton’s concept of symbolic death, then, is not confined to the past or to isolated acts of violence—it is a pervasive structure that continues to shape how trans lives are known, or not known, in the present.

A. Juliet Jacques’s *Trans: A Memoir*

Juliet Jacques’s *Trans: A Memoir* is an intimate and politically charged narrative of gender transition that resists the linear and medicalized scripts that often frame it as a medicalized

journey from one fixed identity to another. Rather than presenting transition as a straightforward journey from one gender to another, Jacques frames transition experience as a complex negotiation between death and rebirth, visibility and erasure, and disintegration and integration of the self, marked by isolation, and intense psychological fragmentation. Early in the memoir, Jacques describes her progressive alienation from daily life and eventual psychological collapse as she approaches the decision of transition. As Juliet Jacques puts it: “The truth was that I just didn’t want to be seen anymore. Not like this. Not by anyone. I had to stop being Juliet for a while and just survive” (Jacques 198). Jacques’s desire to vanish, to cease being intelligible in a normative frame, becomes a recurring motif in her writing, which further suggests that gender transition, far from a triumphant survival, begins in obliteration. Her confession through the act of writing makes clear that coming out as a trans is not a singular moment of truth but a slow death of the self. This metaphorical death is subtly documented in moments of her resignation from her job, her retreat from public life, and the alienation she experiences even among queer circles. For Juliet Jacques, transition is not a rebirth but a passage through what C. Riley Snorton calls a “necropolitical condition,” that is, a mode of life structured by proximity to death.

C. Riley Snorton’s concept of “trans necropolitics,” drawn from his foundational work *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, underscores Jacques’s experience of how her trans life is entwined with death (Snorton 6). Although Snorton wrote primarily through a Black trans lens, the notion that trans subjects are frequently pushed into death worlds resonates with Jacques’s account of transition. Snorton argues that transness is historically constructed in proximity to death, what he calls a “necropolitical death condition” (Snorton 6). Snorton asserts that trans subject inhabits death worlds—spaces that is structured by the premature and symbolic death of those whose gender and racial identities fall outside of normative legibility. He writes: “The figure of the trans person is always already dead; either erased from historical

record or imagined as the result of fatal misalignment of body and identity” (Snorton 6). Snorton’s analysis foregrounds the racialized history of gender and death, mapping how trans figures have historically been rendered invisible or already dead. Jacques’s experience exemplifies that whiteness and middle-class privilege do not immunize trans subjects from necropolitics logic. While Jacques, as a white British trans woman, is not situated within the racialized histories that Snorton articulates, her account resonates with this broader logic of symbolic death. These death-worlds are not metaphoric alone; they are lived through isolation, scrutiny, and social disappearance. Jacques narrates her descent into invisibility, not only as a personal psychological episode, but as a structurally imposed response to the impossibility of living authentically within a transphobic society.

One of the earliest expressions that signals Snorton’s concept of symbolic death in Jacques’s narrative is during Jacques’s transition, which demanded a very narrow and rigid idea of what it means to be trans. This expectation came from the Gender Identity Clinic at Charing Cross Hospital, where she was required to present a specific and simplified narrative of trans identity in order to access hormone therapy and surgery. Juliet Jacques writes, “I said I’d always known I was a girl, that I hated my body, that I wanted to be a woman, nothing more. It wasn’t true—but the truth would have delayed everything” (Jacques 157). What the medical system enforced on Jacques is not a series of medical procedures, according to Jacques, but a model of identity that erased complexity and contradiction. This echoes C. Riley Snorton’s concept of trans necropolitics—the idea that trans lives must often pass through systems that symbolically erase or suppress them in order to become intelligible. For instance, the psychiatric ward became a space of constraint, where parts of her identity had to be silenced in exchange for care.

Another incident that echoes Snorton’s theoretical concept of symbolic social death is when Jacques had to leave her journalist job. Jacques finds her job that demands of her identity under scrutiny and unable to perform the coherence demanded by public life. As she writes, “I

couldn't cope with the endless performances... pretending to be confident, pretending to be coherent. I felt like a ghost at my desk, going through the motions." (Jacques 190). The journalism job, which demands visibility, ironically, becomes a death-world for Jacques, in Snorton's terms: a space in which her trans subjectivity was rendered unintelligible and unsustainable. Snorton writes that trans life is often "figured as always already dead," not only in literal terms but through the symbolic death of agency, authenticity, and narrative coherence (Snorton 6). Jacques's experience illustrates this: her presence at work is spectral, where her trans identity be erased under the pressure of social legibility. Ironically, the newsroom, which is supposed to be a site of articulation, becomes a space where she must hide or dissimulate her trans identity. Jacques's eventual departure from journalism job marks a key moment in the memoir, which shows how transition is not a linear path toward actualization, but a process of navigating death-worlds and finding new terms for survival, even if it takes away a part of her life.

Snorton's theoretical concept of symbolic social death is also evident when Jacques experience a sense of isolation and misrecognition even within the trans community. As Juliet Jacques narrates: "Most people in the room were sympathetic, but they don't know what to say to me. Some asked complicated questions about feminism and theory; some just stared or looked away" (Jacques 190). This becomes evident that her trans embodiment is not received as a lived reality but as a point of theoretical abstraction. Here, Jacques is rendered as an object of intellectual curiosity rather than being emotionally held even within the trans community. This symbolic distancing resonates with Snorton's assertion that trans subject inhabits death worlds, that is, a social space structured by a failure to accommodate trans existence outside normative frames. Jacques's later statement, "I had to stop being for a while and just survive," highlights the psychic exhaustion that follows invisibility and insignificance. The failure of the trans or queer community to accommodate Jacques as their own provides an extension of the broader

necropolitics logic Snorton identifies, that is, a logic that positions trans lives in perpetual negotiation with symbolic death.

Juliet Jacques's *Trans: A Memoir* echoes what gender theorist C. Riley Snorton calls the "trans necropolitics subject"—a subject that becomes illegible within dominant social orders and thus experiences a kind of erasure (Snorton 6). As Snorton asserts "transition is often imagined through the grammar of loss" finds direct expression in Jacques's memoir (Snorton 77). Jacques's gender transition is repeatedly framed as a series of losses, disappearances, and metaphorical death. Loss of employment, social life, trust, and mental stability finds repeated expressions in the memoir. Jacques's withdrawal from job, moments of isolation, suicidal ideation, and living in a body that no longer feels tenable reflects Snorton's conception of trans necropolitics. These are not simply narrative digressions but symptoms of a larger condition of social death. Jacques describes her life as avoiding from all social events and retreating from her public as a journalist: "I stopped replying to emails, avoided invitations to parties, dodged calls from friends. Even leaving the flat felt impossible. I didn't want to explain myself. I didn't want to exist in the world I'd known" (Jacques 194). Through the lens of trans theory, Jacques's pre-transition period and her withdrawal from social life can be interpreted from trans theory of social death, a condition wherein the trans person is denied the ability to exist intelligibly.

The repeated imagery of withdrawal, invisibility, and negation in Jacques's memoir constructs a narrative in which trans becoming is not framed as triumph or rebirth, but as a slow, and symbolic death. By centering experiences of alienation within medical institutions, queer communities, and public life, Jacques resists dominant narratives that position transition as a linear emergence into a fully realized identity. Jacques presents transition as a prolonged and painful confrontation with structural violence, wherein psychic and social death precede, and often persist into, physical transition. Her withdrawal from journalism, her detachment from queer spaces, and her desire to become unseen are reflections of the necropolitical conditions

under which trans lives are managed, and rendered uninhabitable. As C. Riley Snorton's theory of trans necropolitics reveals, trans subjects frequently inhabit "death worlds," shaped by histories and systems that preclude livability unless they submit to certain regulatory norms (Snorton 6). Jacques's gender transition thus exemplifies a cycle of life and death, where becoming is inseparable from erasure, and visibility often invites psychic dissolution. Jacques's memoir reframes transition not merely as a personal journey, but a passage through social death toward precarious life, a life that is continually negotiated under structures of surveillance, and misrecognition.

B. P. Carl's *Becoming a Man*

"Be prepared to lose everything" (Carl 15).

C. Riley Snorton's theorization of trans necropolitics and symbolic death in *Black on Both Sides* (2017) provides a theoretical framework to analyze Carl's narrative not simply as an account of gender transition but as a text haunted by life-or-death stakes embedded in visibility, recognition, and embodiment. Snorton argues that the trans body is always entangled in regimes of death, where existence is marked by the constant threat of violence, and erasure. For Snorton, transness is constituted within a necropolitical framework: one in which life is sustained only through proximity to symbolic or literal death. While Snorton primarily situates his argument within the context of Black trans in general are shaped by political structures that determine which bodies are livable and which are not. P. Carl's *Becoming a Man* is structured within such logics of symbolic death. From the fear of returning to a childhood home that no longer recognizes him, to the affective severing of his past life, Carl articulates transition as a series of deaths: deaths of relationship, social legibility, bodily coherence, and even futurity. The novel does not simply recount the physical transformations or the social passage from

womanhood to manhood. Carl exposes the necropolitical conditions under which trans life is made possible.

One of the early and recurring incidents in *Becoming a Man* that strikingly evokes Snorton's theory of trans necropolitics and symbolic death is Carl's visceral fear of returning home after transitioning. His statement, "When I think about going home, I know I am already dead," exemplifies a fear of rejection for his gender transition (Carl 22). Snorton's theorization of necropolitics which does not only manifest through state's power to kill, but also through the socio-symbolic processes that renders trans lives subject to denial or invisible are especially evident here. In Carl's case, home becomes a necropolitical site, where the social order demands he conform to the role once assigned to Polly. Carl's awareness that his father will never accept either his queerness or his transition reflects Snorton's concept of symbolic death within familial space. He further recalls how, after coming out as gay before transitioning, his father stopped talking to him. This silence is not just emotional distance but it functions as a form of social death. Even after transitioning, Carl remains haunted by this same fear of rejection: "I am terrified that going home will be the landslide that will upend this forward motion toward me, toward my cliché of an 'I' that has no idea how to incorporate all the knowing of that schoolgirl who used to be me" (Carl 32). This unresolved fear underscores what Snorton describes as the enduring violence of symbolic death—a violence that continues to linger even when the threat of physical harm is no longer present. Within familial terrain, Carl is symbolically killed twice: first, through his father's silence and later through the lingering fear that no amount of honesty will restore a relationship premised on normative gender norms.

Another recurring scene in *Becoming a Man* that symbolizes Snorton's concept of symbolic death is Carl's ongoing compulsion to validate his identity in everyday interactions. Early in the novel, Carl recounts the moment at the airport: "I had no idea the trouble this name would cause the world...I must convince the customs agent that this is me" (Carl 6). This moment

reveals how trans people need to justify their existence in systems that renders trans identities as deviations from the norm. Snorton's notion of symbolic death is directly relevant here, as Carl is not physically harmed but is instead symbolically erased, and that he is made to prove, repeatedly, that he has a right to occupy space as himself. The name "Carl," then, is not a simple identifier but a political battleground, one that subjects him to institutional doubt. This further reflects how society refuses to accept transness in social landscape. The imperative need to "convince" people about his trans identity reflects what Snorton calls a necropolitical script: one that does not kill the subject outright, but continually denies their reality (Carl 6).

The symbolic internalization of death is further elaborated in Carl's reflections about his mental illness: "Mental illness is when knowing tackles not-knowing to the ground. Sometimes you need medication to not know things for stretches of time so you can keep getting out of bed" (Carl 134). Carl's reflection captures the paradox of awareness under necropolitical pressure: the trans subject knows too much—about rejection, erasure, and misrecognition—and must suppress that knowing in order to function. Moreover, Carl's reliance on medication becomes a means to manage the affective weight of symbolic death, allowing for continued survival under conditions that deny the subject's full personhood. Within Snorton's lens, Carl emerges as a transnecropolitical subject forced to inhabit a space of contradiction and paradox—the necessity of confronting the realities of paradox of social rejection and symbolic violence, while simultaneously being compelled to disavow that very awareness in order to be legible, and alive. For the trans subject, "knowing" here is not empowering, but it becomes a source of psychic exhaustion rather than liberation (Carl 134). In this sense, knowledge itself becomes a symbolic death, echoing Snorton's theory wherein transition is governed by necropolitical scripts—a repetitive social choreography that erases the trans subject while simultaneously demanding their performance of normative legibility (Snorton 8).

Within Riley C. Snorton's theoretical framework of trans necropolitics, the psychiatric institution further functions as a symbolic death for the trans subject. This is strikingly evident in P. Carl's reflection:

At its worst, the purpose of a psyche ward is to normalize you back into a community that is anything but. Its purpose is not to heal you, but to make you sick so that you can function alongside the lies of a country steeped in them, so you can function alongside the lies you are forced to tell about yourself. (Carl 137)

Here, Carl unmasks the psychiatric institution as a disciplinary apparatus that enforces symbolic death. The ward attempts to re-integrate Carl's trans subject into a social order, where he must disguise his trans subject in order to become legible in a social order. Carl's healing becomes synonymous with conformity, and survival is predicated on complicity with a regime that requires self-erasure. Snorton's analysis of symbolic death as a product of structural power finds resonance here. Trans subject, under necropolitical pressure, are not always killed outright, but they are made to perform life within structures that negate them. Likewise, Carl's experience within the psychiatric institution is contingent on performing a kind of false coherence, a compliance that is not about health but about returning to a society that refuses to reflect back his transness with dignity. Within Snorton's lens, the psychiatric ward is a place where the performance of gender and mental health becomes doubly policed: one must pretend to be well, and one must pretend to be socially coherent. This coerced performance is itself a form of symbolic death, where the subject lives but not as themselves.

C. Riley Snorton's theory of trans necropolitics is indispensable in understanding the political weight of Carl's disillusionment. Snorton's definition of trans necropolitics, which not only has the power to kill but also has the power to expose certain bodies to slow death, symbolic erasure from culture and history, further finds resonance in *Becoming a Man*. Carl's critique exposes

not only the institutions but also exposes the failure of the liberal ideologies to accommodate trans existence within the American society. The most searing reflections of this is reflected late in the text: “The shock of living through this time is feeling all the ways that people do not change, do now want you to change, and do not want the very thing they have pledged since their earliest school days, right hand over their hear: “liberty and justice for all” (Carl 215). Here, Carl particularly critiques the gap between the national ideals and lived reality—particularly for trans individuals. Carl points to a fundamental contradiction in American civic culture: from childhood, people are taught to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, which promises “liberty and justice for all,” yet in practice, this promise is withheld from those who do not conform to dominant norms of gender, race, and identity. Through Snorton’s lens, we see that these slogans are hollow for the trans community, bearing a witness to symbolic death.

Toward the end of the novel, P. Carl’s reflection on the aftermath of his transition further reveals another layer of symbolic death, this time not from institutional authorities or familial, but from within the very trans community. His observation “many of the people closest to me turned away, betrayed by a transition they took personally,” reveals how symbolic death can manifest not only through external systems of power, but within the affective space that are presumed to be safe (Carl 9). This moment complicates any assumption that community necessarily guarantees solidarity. Through Snorton’s lens, this moment shows how symbolic death is not limited to state-sanctioned violent acts, but it can also emerge within closed-structures as familial. Carl is not symbolically killed by the state or his family, but by the disavowal from individuals who, perhaps paradoxically, are themselves part of progressive or queer-affirming spaces. Symbolic death here takes the form of being mourned while still alive.

P. Carl’s *Becoming a Man* does not conclude with triumph or tragic finality, but rather with an urgent and open-ended plea: that to survive together, we must rethink not only how we gender bodies, but how we hold space for one another in all our contradictions. The novel ends in a

state of profound irresolution, but insistently hopeful. This conclusion affirms C. Riley Snorton's theorization of transnecropolitics and symbolic death, defined as the systemic erasure, invalidation, or disposability of trans lives, which need not be inevitable. While much of the trans memoir and novel recounts the painful reality of being subjected to necropolitical pressures, P. Carl refuses the normalization of this violence. Instead, he gestures toward a world still in formation, one that can be reimagined through alternate modes of cultural production, kinship, and pedagogy. The prevention symbolic death, Carl suggests, is not solely a matter of individual affirmation, but of collective transformation. At the heart of his message is the belief that symbolic death is not simply inflicted by systems, but can be prevented through reimaginings of identity, race, and culture. As he poignantly declares, "we need to be raising humans, not boys or girls, that the problem is gender itself" (Carl 80).

3.2 Rereading Trans Body through Eli Clare's Lens

Eli Clare's *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* offer a profound theoretical understanding of how trans body can be studied in literary expressions. Clare does not view the trans body as an autonomous entity undergoing change in isolation, but embedded within a deeply relational and historical site, shaped by community, culture, and language. This rethinking of the trans body stands in direct contrast to dominant narratives that frame transition as a journey toward self-realization. Clare's theory is based on the foundation that the trans body is not just a container of individual identity, but as a living archive of history, culture, displacement, and collective survival. Central to Clare's theorization is the idea that the trans body is never singular. He writes, "The body as a home, but only if it is understood that bodies are never singular, but rather haunted, strengthened, underscored by countless other bodies" (Clare 11). The trans body becomes a locus where memory and community converge, and not simply about shedding the past, but learning to carry it differently. Clare foregrounds that gender transition is not a clean break from an old self, but a continual negotiation with history

of what was and the possibilities of what can be. He offers a theory of the trans body as an unfinished and an emergent space shaped by rupture and reclamation.

In *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* Clare further destabilizes the dominant cultural belief of the trans body as an autonomous and self-made entity. He asserts that trans body is an amalgamation of “place community and culture burrow deep” into the bones, and is shaped and sustained by the material conditions of community and belonging (Clare 11). In other words, the trans body is a threshold between the individual and the collective, between past and futurity. Within Clare’s framework, the trans body is constituted by histories, familial, and communal ties. Clare’s theory turns to a broader understanding that views trans embodiment not as an endpoint, but as an ongoing relation, marked by negotiation, and contradiction. He further repositioned the trans body as an unfinished site, built through grief and hope, rupture and reconstruction.

On treating the trans body as a simultaneously wounded and reclaiming site, Clare offers a new theoretical conception of gender transition not as acts of disavowal or abandonment, but as ongoing negotiations with the self, the world, and the histories inscribed in the body. His theoretical framework treats the trans body as a space of contradiction, where wounds coexist with agency and where becoming is rooted in relationality rather than isolation. This theoretical conception finds resonance in trans narratives such as P. Carl’s *Becoming a Man*, and Juliet Jacques’s *Trans: A Memoir*, which portray gender transition not merely as personal transformation but as a continual process of becoming at home in the body through reclaiming memory, community, and self-recognition.

A. P. Carl’s *Becoming a Man*

“I am a work in progress, always doubling as different selves in different spaces, still learning how to navigate the multiple truths this body inhabits” (Carl 15).

In *Becoming a Man*, P. Carl questions if gender transition is not about relearning and reliving life, then what is it truly about? For him, gender transition is more than just a change of gender, a name, or even an identity—it is a complete reimagining and rearranging of life. It demands a reevaluation of one's place within the family, friendships, society, and all the bond that tie people together. As P. Carl puts it, transition involves relearning and reliving how to navigate the multiple truths a body inhabits, including the ever-evolving relationships formed around it. P. Carl's experience of gender transition shows that while transitioning is a deeply personal or individual's choices, it is also about adjusting to and understanding the new social landscape. Ultimately, in a broader sense, transition is not merely an individual's choice, however it becomes a rational process that invites, and sometimes compels to confront to the normative life choices.

In *Becoming a Man*, Carl's transition involves more than adopting to a new gender, name, or identity—it is about navigating the complex social realities of life. Beyond adjusting to his new self, Carl must also learn to exist within a community that may not fully understand or accept his transformation. Transition becomes a shared process, reshaping not only the individual undergoing through it but also everyone sharing spaces. As Eli Clare puts it, while physical transitioning can be a personal choice and journey, it does not occur in isolation. Clare's assertion about the trans body, "The body as a home, but only if it is understood that place and community and culture burrow deep into our bones" invites a reading of Carl's transition as an upheaval of familial and cultural rootedness (Clare 11). The tension Carl experiences when returning home after initial transition underscores Clare's theoretical conception of the trans body: that the gender transition process is not solely about self-discovery, but about seeking acceptance from a world that often clings to gender binaries. Carl's fear of returning home reflects the potential disruption of established structures within the family and possibility of altering the dynamics of those relationships. It is not just anxiety about being seen differently,

but about how cultural and familial bonds are etched into the body. Carl's gender transition, like Clare's theorizes, is not a linear journey toward a stable identity, but an upheaval of the body's embeddedness in collective life that demands relearning and reliving life. P. Carl writes,

I am terrified that going home will be the landslide that will upend this forward motion toward me, toward my cliché of an "I" that has no idea how to incorporate all the knowing of that schoolgirl who used to be me...What is possible for my relationships in this transition? If I'm not my mom's Polly Precious, what can we be to each other? If I'm not the daughter ready to step in and care for my parents in their old age, what kind of son can I be? (Carl 32)

Transition is not merely about adopting a new identity; it entails learning a new language, navigating a new body, and letting go of the old self. For P. Carl, a man who once lived as a daughter, this process involved not only acquiring the language of manhood but also shedding the remnants of womanhood. Although his sense of manhood was always present, even when the world saw him as a daughter, he had to symbolically kill the woman, Polly, who had once inhabited his body. This transformation is not just about creating an entirely new self, but rather about uncovering and affirming what had long existed beneath the surface. It is about breathing life into a self-long known, giving voice to an identity that speaks the language of manhood, and fully emerging into it. However, this emergence requires Carl to confront the grief and losses involved in relinquishing his former self, even if it means letting go of Polly entirely. In the light of Eli Clare's theory, this narrative reflects how the trans body is not a singular or isolated entity but a complex site marked by memory, language, culture, and loss. As Clare asserts, "the body as home" is only possible when we understand that identity is haunted and sustained by countless other bodies and histories (Clare 11). Carl's journey embodies this conception—his transition is not a linear shedding of one identity for another, but a layered of negotiation between past and present, rupture and reclamation. Polly's presence is etched into

the architecture of Carl's becoming, making his manhood both a product of survival and a testament to the shared, haunted nature of the trans body. As Carl writes,

Transition for a time is like pushing Polly off the top of a mountain. I have to burn down the house of Polly so that Carl can come out. It is an origin story, a state of creation, an unearthing of the him who has spent his whole life locked up, shape-lifting, sticking his head out periodically, but mostly living in a fight-or-flight state, just trying to survive. Polly was my friend and protector, but I wasn't her and she wasn't me. (Carl 132-133)

Building on this complex negotiation between past and present, Carl's greatest anxiety after transition stems from his inability to fully lose or forget Polly—a woman who profoundly shaped his journey and identity. Her presence feels so deeply entwined with his own sense of self that the idea of forgetting her seems inconceivable. This tension echoes Eli Clare's conception of the trans body as one that is "haunted, strengthened, underscored by countless other bodies" (Clare 11). For Carl, forgetting Polly is not simply an act of moving forward but would constitute a betrayal—not only to her but of himself and the person he has become through her. This internal conflict is poignantly expressed in his reflection: "I cannot forget. I can't run from Polly—what kind of man would I be then?" (Carl 146). Polly is not merely a discarded self but a formative presence whose guidance and resilience enabled Carl's survival and eventual transformation. To forget her would be to erase the very struggle that made his emergence into manhood possible. This moral and emotional dilemma reveals how, for many transgender individuals, the process of physical transition can be accompanied by feelings of guilt, grief, and a perceived sense of dishonesty toward the self that once was. In Clare's theory, the body as home is not built through erasure but through layering of memory, community, and embodied experience. Carl's transition journey illustrates Clare's theoretical insight: transition is not about abandoning one's past but about holding space for its presence within a

reconstituted self. The real challenge lies in reconciling the past with the present—embracing a new identity while honoring the relationships, and histories that continue to inhibit the body. It is a path marked not by finality but by continual negotiation, where the most human act is not to forget, but to carry forward.

Carl's refusal to let fully go of Polly reflects the haunting experience of post-transition that many trans individuals face, as theorized by Eli Clare. Clare's conception of the trans body as "community and culture burrow deep into our bones" resonates with Carl's lingering connection to his former self (Clare 11). His life encapsulates the dual pain of transitioning—the pain of living in a misaligned identity prior to transitioning, and the pain of mourning and parting with the former identity after transition. Carl's journey to self-discovery is marked by repeated, sometimes failed attempts to understand who he is, both before and after transition. This suggests that identity is not something that is created or manufactured in isolation, as Clare theorizes, but is constantly negotiated through one's relationship with their environment, culture, and community. In Carl's narrative, the past is not discarded; rather, it continually resurfaces to inform and shape his present. This recurring interplay of past and present reveals that identity is formed not through discrete, isolated moments, but through a process of coexistence, reconciliation, and layering. The past serves not only as a reminder of what once was but also as a catalyst, compelling the present to confront and integrate its history while moving toward transformation. Through this lens, P. Carl emphasizes that transitioning demands layers of resilience, reconciliation, and a mutual understanding of past and present. P. Carl illustrates this dynamic vividly when he writes:

Transitioning and trying to leave womanhood behind split open my skin in an entirely different way than living as a woman did. When trying to escape Polly, she refused to be let go of like the strong woman she was. I'm finding the entirety of my entrails of my insides and trying to stuff them back in this body. Perhaps we must yank out our

own innards and stitch ourselves back together, to transition together and acknowledge all the ways that we are forced to double. (Carl 159)

P. Carl writes that transition requires “the coordination of the head, body, and heart,” a harmony that he recognizes intellectually but struggles to embody both before and after his transition (Carl 175). This internal dissonance becomes particularly apparent a trip with his friend Lee, where travelling as a man among other men exposes the fragility and vulnerability of his masculinity. Carl finds himself unable to blend in or keep pace with the other men, prompting the reemergence of his past self. In that moment, he longs for a female companion—someone like Polly—who will not only understand the intricacies of masculinity but also shares in the burden of its performance. Rather than trying to embrace his new trans identity, Carl turns to Polly, his former self, as a source of comfort, guidance, and emotional strength. This dependence highlights the ongoing dialogue between his past and present selves, revealing transition as a process not of complete erasure but of ongoing negotiation. In Eli Clare’s theoretical terms, Carl’s body is not one restored to some original or idealized state, but one continually rewritten and reconstituted through memory, contradiction, and community. Clare’s contention: “the body is our home, but only if it is understood that bodies are never singular” resonates with Carl’s narratives (Clare 11). Carl’s transition emerges as a layered process marked by a continuous cycle of confusion, loss, and uncertainty (Carl 178). He reclaims his body by denying its history, but by writing into it, by speaking from it, and allowing it space to remember and to forget. Carl’s embodiment becomes a living archive—an unstable entity, yet powerful home for past, present, and the possibility of transformation.

The gender binary that structures relational dynamics between men and women also asserts itself within Carl and Lynette’s marriage. Even after months of attempting to heal in the wake of Carl’s transition, their shared reality becomes increasingly fraught with unresolved tensions. Carl struggles to fulfill the role of a first-time husband while still navigating his new identity,

whereas Lynette finds herself emotionally distanced, unable to articulate her shifting feelings. Carl reflects that transition requires “long-term support, and a careful relationship to truth,” yet Lynette perceives him not only as estranged from gender familiarity, but also from their marriage itself (Carl 190). Their relationship, marked by silences, begins to unravel, especially when Lynette is diagnosed with cancer. Despite Carl’s transformation, the transition fails to deliver the perceived truth or happiness they sought. Eli Clare’s assertion that the trans body is one that can be “stolen, fed lies and poison, torn away from us” finds resonance in Carl’s transitioning (Clare 12). They failed to understand the raw and the lingering pain that is lurking beneath Carl’s transition. Both Carl and Lynette, for different reasons, longs for Polly—whom they have “killed off” in the pursuit of their truth and resolution (Carl 182). Reflecting on this complexity, Carl asks:

Who teaches us to hold multiple truths side by side? Is this the primary work of parents or teachers or coaches? I never learned this skill, until now, transitions like dreams forcing us into places with no warning or preparation. I am learning to sort truths and make decisions that aren’t clear or obvious but live in gradations of nuanced emotion. This is the hardest work of my life, the most difficult part of a marriage. My body feels so many things and my brain is slow to comprehend. I had always thought that my brain was the quickest and most efficient part of me, but I have learned that it’s my body that knows everything first. (Carl 194)

While Carl’s transition is marked by contradiction, grief, and loss, it ultimately becomes a transformative process through which he learns to relive and relearn to live life. As Clare suggests, the reclaimed (trans) body is never “pure of whole,” but a site of continuous becoming, Carl’s experience shows how embodiment becomes a way of inhabiting the world anew, shaped by memory, trauma, and relationality. His transition from one gendered existence to another enriches his understanding of human experiences, having lived in two different

bodies, genders, and identities. His transition has allowed him to understand the experiences of women deeply than most men, while also knowing what it truly feels like to be a man. This duality enables him to comprehend the gendered restrictions women faces within male-dominated spaces but also to become aware of the privileges conferred upon him as a man. Transition, for Carl, exposes the gender disparities that had previously remained obscured, and offered him a deeper understanding of the structural spaces of exclusions and emotional misunderstandings that can exist across the gender divide. Experiencing life from both perspectives inspires in Carl to pursue a more compassionate and equitable path, and to be more human than ever. It has also taught him that transition journey is not solely about gender and identity—it is more about trying to find a path toward becoming a better person. It is less about becoming male, and more about discovering how to live life with integrity and ethically (Carl 17).

B: Juliet Jacques's *Trans: A Memoir*

Eli Clare's *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* present a radically embodied framework for understanding trans identities, which posits that trans bodies are not isolated entities but deeply entangled in histories, communities, and collective memories. Clare's theory challenges the normative conceptualization of the body as singular, autonomous, and self-contained. He reimagines the trans body as "never singular, but rather haunted, strengthened, underscored by countless other bodies" (Clare 11). This implies that trans bodies or identities are never static nor individually constituted, but it emerges through a dialectic of memory, culture, and relationality. Clare emphasizes that the trans body becomes a site where "community and culture burrow deep into our bones," and shows how social belonging, familial history, and cultural context saturate the trans experience. Clare's theoretical framework of gender transition is not merely a linear process of changing gendered embodiment but a cyclical and negotiation between past and present selves. Clare's concept of

trans body posit that it is a site of memory and community, where loss, reclamation, and continuity coexist.

Eli Clare's theoretical framework resonates deeply in Juliet Jacques' *Trans: A Memoir*, where every detail of Jacques's transition journey within the confines of British culture, familial, and public perception finds resonance. From the outset, Jacques resists framing her gender transition as a private act of self-assertion, and shows how her body and identity are shaped by wider cultural structures. Jacques's writing too is haunted not only by gendered memories but also by the weight of social legibility, community, and familial expectations. Jacques's confession, "My writing was deadlocked, too... My transgender short stories had felt too 'underground'" speaks about the difficulty of expressing trans narratives in a culture that marginalizes trans identities and bodies (Jacques 141). Her writing is "deadlocked" in the sense that it is not only an individual voice, but a collective voice, that is interrupted and shaped by a history of erasure and non-recognition (Jacques 141). Clare's assertion on trans bodies as interrupted by "countless other bodies" becomes evident in Jacques's transition within a social context that had never made room for trans body (Clare 11).

Furthermore, Jacques's account of familial alienation echoes Clare's assertion that culture and community are inscribed into the very fabric of trans embodiment. She writes:

So I was 'out' in nearly every walk of my life. It felt *awful*, and just made me more worried about what my parents would think if I told them. I didn't want to say I was "transgender", though—it would raise more questions than it answered. I couldn't help thinking that they'd write it off as another 'phase', and I had enough on my plate as it was. (Jacques 73)

Here, Jacques's reluctance is not borne out of internal doubt but out of an awareness that coming out not be received with welcoming hearts and minds both publicly and within the

family. We see that Jacques's body, like Clare theorizes, is not her own body in the real sense, but an amalgam of "community and culture burrow deep into our bones" (Clare 11). Jacques's trans body can be reinterpreted, and misunderstood by the expectations of others. Jacques's reflections on her relationship with her grandmothers further illustrates this. She explains, "We decided not to tell either of my grandmothers, both in their nineties... it seemed easier to remain 'male' whenever we met. The important thing was that we loved each other — I'd already accepted that this journey wouldn't be as simple as moving from A to B" (Jacques 136). This act of selective disclosure shows Jacques's trans bodies is a collective embodiment of culture, memory, and familial expectations. Her trans body is haunted by the bodies and voices of others: family, friends, and cultural history that leaves little or no space for trans narratives. Jacques's trans body exemplifies Clare's vision of the trans body that contains not only of the self but the echoes of culture, community, and history.

Eli Clare's further assertion of the trans body as that is not only haunted by what is left behind, but by a complex and ongoing attachment to that which preceded change finds resonance in Jacques's narrative. Clare articulates that the trans bodies "implies not only loss, but as sense of allegiance and connection—however ambivalent—to the place left behind, an attitude of mourning rather than of good radiance" (Clare 35). The idea of looking at the trans body as an ambivalent continuity of history and culture resonates powerfully throughout Juliet Jacques's *Trans: A Memoir*. Even as she undergoes medical, physical, and social transition, the ties of her past identity remain unsettled, particularly in relation to those who knew her before. "Nobody had refused to use my new name," she recounts, "but everyone was struggling to adapt, and the longer I'd known someone, the harder they found it" (Jacques 138). Eli Clare's insistence on trans body as never singular, but that carries with it the temporal and relational weight of other bodies, voices, and relationships becomes evident. For Jacques, her history refuses erasure, even after the transition is completed in legal or medical terms. Her trans body,

as Clare suggests, is never wholly complete without the retaining traces of history, culture, and community.

In one of the scenes, Jacques confesses the paradox of having gender transitioned:

I was happier in my body now, but hadn't I been a different person before I'd announce my transition and started living as Juliet—not just in and body but also spirit? Part of me missed the male person I'd created, even if it had just been a survival tactic. Suddenly, I was feeling that division just as sharply as before I came out, and transition had done strange things to my sense of lived time. I felt both pubertal and prematurely aged, as if I'd existed twice. (Jacques 198-99)

Although Jacques acknowledges her new transitioned body, she does not disavow the self she inhabited prior to transition. This echoes Clare's concept of trans bodies that are never isolated or purely new. They are haunted by the selves that preceded them. Jacques does not fully celebrate the disappearance of her old self; she mourns him, and the old self (history) continues to resurface in the process of moving forward. As Clare theorizes by Eli Clare, transition is as much about remembering and carrying as it also about becoming. History is not completely discarded but folded into the present—shaping it, haunting it, and to some extent, making it whole. This sense of disorientation persists in Jacques's later reflections: "I forced myself to resume some of my usual activities...but the world outside seemed determined to make it difficult to find any sort of normality" (Jacques 221). This reflection further highlights the fact that, even if the internal world becomes legible to herself, the external world may not fully understand the embodiment of trans bodies. The trans bodies are shaped by what persists, and what resurfaces. Jacques's transition embodies a deeply Clarean notion of transition, one that is shaped by embodied memory of communal and personal histories.

3.3 Understanding Gender Dysphoria through Medical Lens in P. Carl's *Becoming a Man*

American Psychiatric Association defines gender dysphoria as “the distress that may accompany the incongruence between one’s experienced or expressed gender and one’s assigned gender” (DMS 512). This condition arises when an individual experiences a profound disconnection between their assigned gender at birth—typically based on observable physical characteristics—and their internal sense of gender identity. According to the diagnostic features outlined by the American Psychiatric Association, individuals with gender dysphoria often experience a persistent and intense mismatch between the gender they were assigned at birth (referred to as *birth-assigned gender*) and the gender they experience or express (DMS 514). The resulting distress as emphasized by the American Psychiatric Association is not solely about identifying with a gender opposite to one’s birth-assigned gender. It also involves identifying as an intermediate or alternative gender that does not conform to binary norms. This distress manifest in various psychological, emotional, and social challenges, as individuals grapple with societal expectations and personal identity.

A 2016 report by the National Centre for Transgender Equality reveals a striking reality: around 40 percent of Americans experiencing gender dysphoria have attempted suicide at least once. Compounding this concern, a study by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs indicates that the suicide rate among veterans is 22 percent higher than that of the general population. These alarming statistics underscore the harsh truth that many individuals with gender dysphoria in American society struggle to envision a livable future (DMS 42-43). The diagnostic features outlined in the study reveal that the constant struggle to conceal one’s true identity—whether at the workplace, at home, or in the professional lives—further exacerbates the distress experienced by individuals with gender dysphoria. Despite these grim realities, research underscores the critical importance of fostering safe and supportive spaces for individuals with gender dysphoria.

3.3.1 Diagnostic Elements of Gender Dysphoria

A. Prepubertal Stage

“I am born to the name Polly, but I never feel like her... My head and my body were at odds”

(Carl 5-10).

According to the American Psychiatric Association, gender dysphoria manifests differently across age groups. Among prepubertal individuals assigned female at birth, children experiencing gender dysphoria often express a persistent feeling or conviction that they are male and express discomfort with being identified as a girl. Some children even assert that they will grow up to be a man. At this stage, they typically prefer boys’ clothing and hairstyles, may be perceived by others as boys, and may request to be addressed by a boy’s name. These frequently exhibit notable gender nonconformity in their role-playing, dreams, gendered-type play and toy preferences, mannerisms, and peer relationships. Activities such as contact-sports, rough-and-tumble play, and traditional games associated with boys as playmates are commonly favored, along with boys as their playmates. Conversely, they show little interest in stereotypical feminine toys like dolls and feminine activities. Moreover, some children even express a desire to avoid developing female physical characteristics, including breasts or menstruation (DMS 514).

Prepubertal individuals assigned male at birth who experience gender dysphoria often exhibit that they are female and have a strong sense of conviction that “they will grow up to be a woman” (DMS 514). As noted by the American Psychiatric Association, these individuals assigned male at birth may show a strong dislike for being perceived as boys and prefer to dress in girl’s clothing or they even improvise clothing from available materials like “towels, aprons, and scarves for long hair or skirts” (DMS 514). These children frequently engage in gender nonconforming behavior, particularly in their social interactions, associations, toys preferences, styles, and mannerisms. They are drawn to stereotypical feminine activities, such

as “playing house; drawing feminine pictures’ watching television or videos of favorite female characters” (DMS 514). Their preferred toys include “stereotypical female-type dolls (e.g., Barbie),” and shows minimal interest in “stereotypical masculine toys (e.g., trucks)” (DMS 514). Additionally, many of these children express discomfort with their male anatomy, that “they wish to be removed, or that they have, or wish to have, a vagina” (DMS 514). Given these feelings behavioral changes, the American Psychiatric Association emphasizes the importance of providing supportive care and adopting a non-invasive approach to address gender dysphoria among prepubertal children. The primary focus is to safeguard the child’s psychological health and well-being. The American Psychiatric Association advises against surgical interventions at prepubertal stage and highlights research indicating that conducted over 80% of cases of gender dysphoria among prepubertal children are resolve naturally before adolescent without medical interventions. Offering emotional and psychological support, as well as creating a safe space where children can explore their own gender identity may help alleviate their distress and develop healthy mental growth. Crucially, parental involvement plays a vital role in effectively addressing gender dysphoria at this prepubertal age (DMS 515).

The photographic presentation of Polly’s childhood offers a vivid depiction of her early prepubertal stage of gender dysphoria. Photographs of Polly holding a toy gun, wearing cowboy boots and a cowboy hat, or Polly dressed in her brother’s T-shirt highlight some of the diagnostic features of gender dysphoria at prepubertal stage. Moreover, her joy at receiving stereotypical male-associated toys instead of dolls, her preference for male playmates over female peers, and tendency to spend most of her play time with boys further underscore her early experiences of gender nonconformity. Polly’s gender dysphoria at prepubertal stage is also evident in her visible frustration and protest upon receiving a giant doll during Christmas, her mimicry of her brothers and cousins during a photoshoot by baring her body, and her deliberate decision to wear her brother Tim’s tee-shirt over her dress. These behaviors reflect

her early sense of discomfort with her assigned gender and a mismatch between her perceived gender identity and biological sex. All of these together illustrate Polly's prepubertal gender dysphoria. These experiences vividly represent Polly's early struggle with her identity and provide insight into the manifestations of gender dysphoria during childhood.

After age four, my body split. I lived two distinct lives. I aspired to everything my brothers had—little plastic green army men and tanks, short hair, little bow ties for dress up, Boy Scout uniforms, a bike with a crossbar, freedom to cannonball off the diving board in swim trunks. But I lived as my mother's daughter... My two selves walked side by side. I couldn't escape being her daughter. (Carl 27)

The photographic presentation of Carl's childhood, much like painting and other forms of art, serves as a profound sketch of Polly's early prepubertal stage of gender dysphoria. These images to a certain extent reveal truths that Polly, at the time, was unable to articulate or convey to those around her. When Polly's younger self could not express the discomfort she felt, the photographs became the voice she could not find it. P. Carl emphasizes that photographs are far more than mere visual aids; they are complex representations that embody arguments, context, forms, signs, and structure. Rather than being passive, as one might assume, photographs are dynamic and constantly redefined through the acts of remembering and interpretation. Within the context of the novel, photographic representation transcends its conventional role as images, memories, or tools for entertainment. They serve as embodiments of truth, offering access to deeper, personal meaning and understandings of life. The photographic images of Polly's childhood stand as a testament to her unique experiences and struggles with identity, which captured the diagnostic features of gender dysphoria that shaped her prepubertal stage in ways words could not.

3.3.1. Photographic Presentation of Polly's Childhood

“I did not grow up as my mother’s son, even if I felt like her son. There is verifiable truth to that in the many pictures of my life as her daughter. But what about what was never visible, what my body knew but no one could see?” (Carl 77).

P. Carl lives and writes in an era where virtual reality permeates every aspect of his daily lives—from his writing and other online activities to news broadcasts and advertisements. Growing up in a time when digital space was beginning to emerge as a powerful tool taking over the world, digital world stands as a testament to many of his long-forgotten truth and memories, preserved in the form of photographs. These photographs, which not only document reality but also shape how we perceive and relate to time, identity, and truth, have helped Carl in his pursuit of inner understanding. To photograph is to capture people or things as they truly are—revealing what they can never see themselves and preserving moments that can never be relived. For Carl, these images provide a tangible connection to the past, allowing him to revisit, reinterpret, and reconnect with his childhood he had once forgotten. Symbolically, these photographs act as a reservoir of the collective unconscious, holding both truths and forgotten moments in his ongoing pursuit of inner understanding. His childhood photographs, in particular, serve as a bridge between the past with the present, enabling him to comprehend his personal truth more deeply.

Photographic images of Carl’s childhood go beyond simply viewing: they invite reflection and inquiry. Each photographic presentation poses questions: What story does it talk about his life? What does it represent? How does it shape his understanding of his inner truth, and to what end? Through Carl’s detailed presentation of his childhood photographs, he not only evokes the emotions tied to the past but also highlights how different he was as a child. These images allow him to return to pivotal moments, navigating his pursuit of inner truth while offering a more nuanced understanding of both himself and the world around him. By drawing attention to specific childhood photographs—images of him dressed in men’s clothes, his dislike for

girls' toys, and his preference for associating with his brothers over his sisters—Carl invites us to think, question, and engage with him in his ongoing exploration of personal identity and inner truth.

A Photograph of Polly (the girl) taken on May 10, 1669, captures a pivotal moment in Carl's early life. In the image, Polly (a woman) is photographed modelling with the gifts she received for her third birthday—“a toy gun, cowboy boots, spurs, and a cowboy hat”—items that subtly reveal Polly was already living as a boy (Carl 35). In the photograph, Polly appears ecstatic, filled with pure joy at receiving gifts that resonates deeply with her sense of self. Notably, this is the only photograph in which Polly is visibly content with the presents from her parents, perhaps because it was the only time she received what she had desired for. This photograph holds profound significance, as it not only preserves a fleeting moment of happiness but also symbolically represents Polly's early process of merging into her true self and identity.

Through this photograph, Carl presents a visual narrative of identity formation, illustrating how, at a very young age, Polly's desire to align her outward expression with her inner truth was already taking shape. Carl invites us to reflect on the deeper longing of the child—the authentic self—in conflict with the constraints of biological sex and the cultural norms. Furthermore, it hints at the internal conflict that would later intensify as she struggled to reconcile her true identity with external expectations and assigned roles. To put it in other words, the excitement captured in the photograph goes beyond the material nature of the gifts. Rather, it reflects the profound satisfaction of having a desire fulfilled, even if it is momentary. P. Carl thus presents a powerful image of how, from an early age, uninfluenced by external forces, Polly's identity is not shaped by external expectations but by the deep, often unspoken need for recognition and authenticity.

A Photograph of Polly (the girl) taken on Christmas Eve, 1969: Polly's discontentment with her Christmas gifts is evident in a photograph taken on Christmas Eve, 1969. In the image, she is shown blushing with anger while holding a giant doll. This moment stands in stark contrast to an earlier photograph that captured her joy and contentment. Carl reflects on how Polly had initially been filled with happiness at receiving a Christmas present, only for that excitement to vanish upon discovering it was a giant doll—a gift that only clashed with her desire and identity. This photograph reminds Carl of Polly's internal conflicts with the outside world, highlighting how even simple moments, such as receiving gifts, could evoke a profound emotional response tied to her identity. The contrast between the two photographs—the joy of receiving masculine gifts on her third birthday and the discontentment of receiving a doll on Christmas Eve—powerfully illustrates the tension between Polly's inner self and the external world. Through this photograph, Carl posits the fact that more than the material gifts, Polly's

A Photograph of Polly (the girl) taken on Easter Sunday, 1971, captures a pivotal moment in Carl's early life. In this image, Polly, then five years old, stands alongside her brothers—Tim, eight, and Christian, two and a half. Posted on a web browser and shared on Facebook, this photograph is the only one in which Polly's expression is described as a blend of “part smile and part protest” (Carl 64). This image shows Polly attempting to mirror her brothers, standing with her fists raised—her fists noticeably higher than her brothers. In this photograph, Polly does not appear as her mother's only daughter but rather as one of three sons, suggesting an early identification with masculinity. The image not only captures a moment of Polly's childhood shared with her brothers but also symbolically predates Polly's eventual transition into a different body, one that would more fully align with her true sense of self as the years unfold. This photograph becomes a glimpse into Polly's personal truth, a truth that would evolve and reveal itself more clearly over the next forty-five years. What Carl is trying to convey is that his childhood photographs are much more than a visual record of childhood; it

serves as an early testament of his differences and unspoken identity. As P. Carl puts it: “There is verifiable truth to that in the many pictures of my life... But what about what was never visible, what my body knew but no one could see?” (Carl 77).

The photographic presentation of Carl’s childhood, much like painting and other forms of art, offers a sketch of his early world, and speak about truths to a certain extent that Carl was unable to express or prove to those around him. When the old self cannot speak for itself, these photographic images become the voice that Carl could not find it. Through his engagement with these images, Carl reinterprets and reinvents them within the context of the time they were captured. For instance, Carl’s photographic images revealing much about his identity, experiences, and his association. Photographs are at best not merely visual aids; they are complex representations that embody arguments, context, forms, signs, and structure—all of which reflect our understanding of reality. They are not passive, as one might assume, but rather they are dynamic, constantly redefined through the act of remembering and interpretation. Within the context of the novel, photographic representation transcends beyond images, memories, or tools for entertainment. They serve as embodiments of truth, offering access to a deeper meaning and understanding of life. It carries a layer of meaning—not as objective truths, but as personal truths.

B: Pubertal and Adolescent Stage

“I know I’m a boy. Everybody sees a girl. Nothing I say can convince anyone otherwise.

Nobody can see me. I am invisible” (Carl 36).

According to the American Psychiatric Association, symptoms of gender diaspora during puberty emerge during the transition period from childhood to adolescent period, typically between the ages 9 and 13 for those assigned female assigned at birth, and between 11 and 14 for those assigned male at birth. According to the American Psychiatric Association, during

this stage for both male and female, secondary sex characteristics are not fully developed in either group, so these individuals may not explicitly express their dislike for them. Nevertheless, they often experience considerably anxiety about the imminent physical changes (DMS 514). In adolescents and adults with gender dysphoria, they express a strong desire to rid of their primary or secondary sex characteristics, or express a strong desire to acquire some primary or secondary characteristics of another gender. To varying degrees, older adolescents and adults with gender dysphoria express “may adopt a behavior, clothing, mannerisms” that align with their experienced gender (DMS 514). Some adolescents and adults feel a deep and persistent desire to live as a different gender and be treated accordingly. This reflects an effort to create a sense of personal authenticity and find social acceptance in a way that best suits their identity.

As noted by the American Psychiatric Association, puberty often brings significant distress for adolescents experiencing gender dysphoria, prompting efforts to hide the physical changes occurring in the bodies. In men’s case, the growth of facial and body hair may cause discomfort, while the development of breast and menstruation in women may cause them distress. Women associated with this feature of gender dysphoria often opt for loose clothing to conceal their developing body. These behavioral changes reflect a deep discomfort with the assigned gender, as they struggle with the visible traits that contradict their internal sense of identity. In many cases, adolescents, without proper medical guidelines, resort to using drugs on their own to suppress their physical growth and development. These include drugs like gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH) agonists, which prevents the production of gonadal steroids, and spironolactone, which blocks the growth of gonadal hormones. The availability of these drugs raises concerns about health risks consequences among young adults and adolescents. In environment where gender diversity is more accepted, many adolescents express their desire for gender transition, seeking clinical evaluations and treatment, including hormone therapy

and gender-affirming surgery. The American Psychiatric Association declared gender dysphoria as a serious mental threat to adolescents and children as in many cases it leads to suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and suicides (DMS 515).

Polly's entry into pubertal stage is a tumultuous period, marked by significant bodily discomfort as her secondary sex characteristics begin to develop, clashing violently with her deeply rooted male identity. She feels an intense desire to rid herself of these traits and replace them with characteristics associated with a male body. The onset of this physical development in her body triggers considerable anxiety and unease, as the perception she always had about herself as male becomes increasingly out of sync with her developing female body. This disconnection is further exacerbated by the reactions of those around her, who begin to see and treat her more as female than male, intensifying her identity struggles. In response, Polly adopts behaviors Polly adopting into men's behaviorism and mannerism to get aligned with her personalities. She tries to keep her hair short, wears only men's clothing, maintains her physique like her brothers, and tries to suppress the feminine qualities of her voice. Puberty becomes a defining moment for Polly, forcing her to confront who she truly is and who she wants to become as her physical development and internal identity come into sharp conflict. These experiences highlight the diagnostic features of gender dysphoria, vividly reflected in Polly's reflection:

My heads and my body were at odds. I had been scrutinizing masculinity my whole life, trying to perfectly replicate it in my gestures and clothes and physique. I stayed very trim, wore only men's clothes, studied the latest short-hair styles, tried to keep the tenor of my voice low, and always played the roles that I thought men played. (Carl 10)

3.4 Conclusion

Drawing upon Eli Clare and C. Riley Snorton's theoretical conception of trans body, the study finds that gender transition not as a linear movement toward a stable identity, but as a recursive negotiation between past and present, the self and community. It is not solely about creating an entirely new self but about reconciling past and present selves. Past identities and histories do not disappear but coexist and continues to haunt the present. Moreover, the study also finds that gender transition does not guarantee belonging in social and cultural landscape, but exposes the limits of it. The breakdown of Carl and Lynette's marriage in P. Carl's *Becoming a Man* and Jacques's sense of lost after transition in Juliet Jacques's *Trans: A Memoir* reflects how familial and relational structures lack the capacity to accommodate the complexity of gender transition. As gender theorist, Chiara Pellegrini puts it, the main transition is not from male to female, or from female to male, but from believer in gender binary (Pellegrini 8). The study further finds that gender transition is not an act of self-discovery but a relational and communal process. Transitioning from one gender to another involves family, community, and relational dynamics beyond the extends of self. Lastly, the study finds that postmodern trans narratives reject linear mode of transformation and storytelling. It shows that transition is not a journey from falsehood to truth, but a cyclical movement through mourning, memory, and reconstruction.

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CHAPTER IV

SWITCH IN GENDER IDENTITY

The concept of gender fluidity or the switch between gender identities, as represented in ancient myths and archetypal symbols, often depicting the coexistence of both masculine and feminine traits within a single entity, is reemerging as a salient theme in contemporary discourse. These early representations, found in mythologies from diverse cultures such as the androgynous deities of Hinduism, the dual-gendered figures in Greek mythology, and the two-spirit identities in many indigenous traditions, underscore a historical precedent for the existence and recognition of non-binary gender expressions. The resurgence of this paradigm—wherein individuals no longer seemed to confine to the rigid binary categories of male and female, instead embodying traits associated with both genders and experience fluidity in their gender expression can be seen as a response to a range of personal, emotional, or contextual needs in contemporary discourse. In contemporary society, particularly within Western contexts, there has been a noticeable resurgence of interest in these paradigms, reflecting broader cultural shifts toward individual autonomy in matters of sexual identity. This resurgence is observable in various aspects of contemporary life, including mannerisms, habits, belief, systems, personal life choices, and language.

The reconceptualization of gender identity and fluidity is evident not only in contemporary sociocultural practices but is also increasingly reflected in contemporary literature. In other words, this paradigm shift is not confined to lived realities alone but it is also gaining significant representation in contemporary literature. Authors such as David Levithan and Jeff Garvin engage with these themes in their discourse by portraying the lived realities of individuals who navigate gender fluidity within a predominantly binary gender world. Rather than aiming to disrupt the binary world of male and female, their narratives seek to explore the complexities

of existing within a system and belief that often resists or denies the legitimacy of non-binary existence. David Levithan's *Every Day* exemplifies this literary engagement through its protagonist, A—a genderless consciousness who inhabits a different body and a different personality every day. These embodiments range across the gender spectrum—sometimes male, sometimes female, and sometimes embodying both—but all of which falling outside the conventional binary. A has no fixed identity, gender, race, or even social background, and their existence is continuously shaped by the physical, emotional, and situational realities of the individuals they temporarily inhabit. David Levithan presents fluid identity through a speculative lens without engaging A directly with the outside world, using character A's disembodied as a metaphor for the non-fixed, performative nature of selfhood. Notably, A's lack of consistent interaction with social world and external communities distances the narrative from real-world consequences of gender conformity, thereby situating the narrative in philosophical term. Nevertheless, through the character of A, David Levithan explores the fluid nature of identity, the constraints imposed by societal norms, and the essential human need for connection and recognition beyond categories, and identities each person carries. The book overall suggest that humanity is not defined by external markers individual carry, but by shared emotional depth and consciousness.

Jeff Garvin similarly engages with the concept of gender switch or gender fluidity in his novel *Symptoms of Being Human*, though his approach offers a more grounded and realistic portrayal by directly centering the lived experience of a genderfluid protagonist within a contemporary, real-world context. In contrast to David Levithan's *Every Day* where the protagonist A functions as an abstract genderfluid, genderless consciousness shifting between various gendered bodies, Garvin's protagonist, Riley Cavanaugh, is a fully embodied teenager navigating the tangible challenges of gender nonconformity. Riley's identity is not abstracted from social reality unlike Levithan's protagonist, but is deeply situated within the tangible

pressures of high school life, family dynamics, political scrutiny, and broader societal expectations for conformity. Jeff Garvin deliberately withhold Riley's assigned sex at birth and specific gender identity. This narrative choice heightens the character's vulnerability, as Riley's faces bullying, and the ever-present fear of being exposed in a society that demands gender legibility. In response to these pressures, Riley creates an anonymous blog titled 'Symptoms of Being Human,' which serves both as a cathartic space for self-expression and a platform to connect with others experiencing similar struggles. Through the character Riley, Garvin explores the constant negotiation of identity in a society that expects clarity, conformity, and legibility. The recurring question—"Am I a boy, or a girl?"—functions as a central motif throughout the novel, underscoring not only Riley's internal tension but also challenging readers to confront their own discomfort with gender ambiguity (Garvin 1). At the heart of David Levithan's *Every Day*, and Jeff Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human* lies a profound inquiry into the nature of androgynous gender identity, gender switch, gender fluidity, and psychological integration. Both the novels offer a complex understanding of how identity—particularly gender identity—can be understood not as a fixed or innate, but as a dynamic, often shifting, and psychologically layered.

4.1 Reading Androgyny through June Singer Lens: Dualism

"The first thing you're going to want to know about me is: Am I a boy, am I a girl?"

(Garvin 1)

The concept of androgyny, both historically and theoretically, resists stable or fixed categorization. Rather than functioning as a fixed identity, it emerges as a fluid, dynamic mode of being—one that continuously evolves in relation to time, space, and context. While androgyny is often associated with contemporary discourses on gender and identity, androgyny is far from modern invention. Its origin can be traced to ancient metaphysical and mythological

frameworks that conceived of existence in terms of wholeness and unity—of both male and female characteristics—rather than division. Within such cosmologies, androgyny was not just merely a blending of masculine and feminine traits, but a fundamental expression of cosmic balance (Singer 20-22). June Singer, drawing from Jungian psychology, situates the origins of androgyny in a primordial state, suggesting that human existence began in the state of wholeness wherein male and female elements coexisted as a singular, undivided entity (Singer 21). This primordial form is symbolically represented as “the One which contains the Two; namely, the male (Andro) and the female (Gyne)” (Singer 22). In this schema, the binary opposites of masculinity and femininity were not in conflict but were harmoniously conjoined, forming a complete and integrated self.

June Singer’s philosophical framework on androgyny is deeply intertwined with psychological theories of self-integration, particularly those influenced by Jungian thought. Within this context, androgyny is contextualized as a harmonious synthesis of gendered attributes—where the traditionally “masculine” and “feminine” traits coexist within a single individual as part of a unified psychological whole (Singer 22). June Singer defines it as “a specific way of joining the ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ aspects of a single human being” (Singer 22). Rather than privileging one set of traits over the other, this integration resists reductive gender binaries and instead symbolizes inner balance and completeness. Thus, Androgyny in oldest form, is not a social deviation from norms or a contemporary challenge to gender binaries, but a metaphysical ideal that reflects the longing for integration completeness. Furthermore, it stands as a symbolic longing to the original wholeness from which human have been separated, and a desire to reconcile the oppositional forces that structure not only identity but the broader human experience. In other words, androgyny, in its oldest form, transcends the sociocultural, and stands as a profound philosophical metaphor for unity, completeness, and one—suggesting human condition that is marked by an ongoing search for reconstitution of a divided self.

In Jeff Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human*, Riley is referred to by their classmates as an "androgynous chick-dude," emphasizing the presence of both male and female characteristics (Garvin 130). This term simultaneously acknowledges coexistence of masculine and feminine traits in Riley's characters, while also highlighting a fluid and dynamic identity that exists beyond traditional boundaries. Furthermore, Riley is at times referred to as "it," indicating the difficulty others have in categorizing Riley within the traditional gender binary as either male or female, or to any assigned gender identity (Garvin 12). In both instances, these labels collectively suggest the dual presence of masculine and feminine traits in Riley's characters. Speculation regarding Riley's gender identity by other characters in the novel is pervasive; however, Jeff Garvin deliberately provides no clear indication of the gender Riley was assigned at birth. Instead, Jeff Garvin carefully blends elements of both masculinity and femininity, and shows the coexistence of these two traits without allowing one to overpower the other. Further supporting this depiction is Riley's choice of an anonymous blogging name, "Alix", a gender-neutral pseudonym that reflects their non-binary identity (Garvin 235). Riley's blog reinforces the idea that dualism is essential in navigating a society mediated by societal expectations and norms. The blog itself becomes a vital platform through which Riley asserts that dualism—the recognition and integration of both masculine and feminine aspects—is essential for navigating a society mediated by normative structures. Through this anonymous platform, Riley is able to articulate the authentic experiences of androgynous life in a digital space, free from the fear of exposure or retribution that dominates their experiences in the real world. Both the choice of the pseudonym "Alix" and the content of Riley's blog post function as acts of acknowledgement of their androgyny—that is, the coexistence of masculine and feminine traits—and reinforce the ongoing process of self-definition beyond societal binaries.

Further supporting this argument in the novel is a statement made by Riley's mother about their gender identity:

She looks at me. “I guess you’re somewhere in the no-man’s-land between.” My heart contracts as though it’s being squeezed. I’ve always thought my mom was clueless about me—but what she just said so...true. I wonder if she knows more than I think she does. Before I can say anything, she goes on. “Riley, this...thing that you are going through. You can tell me about it. All right? You can just tell me. Sometime.” (Garvin 233)

These passages encapsulate the essence of Riley’s androgynous character. The metaphor of “no-man’s-land” evokes an image of a space that is neither fully one side nor the other, certainly a place of uncertainty and ambiguity (Garvin 233). Riley’s mother uses this metaphor to locate her child’s gender identity in a similar in-between space, one that falls outside the binary distinctions of male and female: androgyny. This metaphor suggests not only the in-betweenness of Riley’s gender identity and existence, but also the potential vulnerability and isolation associated living beyond socially sanctioned categories of male and female. But however, Riley’s mother is trying to express through her remark, the metaphor of “no-man’s-land” does not portray Riley’s position as one of weak. Rather, it portrays Riley’s identity as one that possesses the strength of both masculine and feminine traits, characteristics associated with androgynous individual (Garvin 233). Furthermore, Riley’s mother’s statement which reinforces that Riley’s gender identity does not align strictly with either masculinity or femininity, but instead embodies a blending of both, acknowledges, however tentative, gestures toward an emerging acceptance of Riley’s non-binary experience. Rather than framing Riley’s identity as something that must resolve into one side of the binary or the other, the mother identifies their existence as situated between, and recognizing a dynamic interplay of gendered characteristics.

The conversation between Riley and their mother in Jeff Garvin’s *Symptoms of Being Human* further reveals several implications about the conception of androgyny, particularly within the

context of familial relationships. It highlights the partial recognition of the child's non-binary identity by a parent, the mother's hesitant willingness to understand beyond gender binaries, and the broader generational difficulties in understanding the evolving perceptions of identity beyond gender binary within family. Their conversation suggests that, even if the mother does not understand or have the language for Riley's gender identity, she intuitively understands that Riley does not fit into traditional male or female categories (Garvin 233). This shows a growing, if incomplete, awareness of Riley's experience and signals an initial step toward broader acceptance. The mother's phrasing—"Riley, this...thing that you are going through. You can tell me about it. All right? You can just tell me. Sometime."—also shows a hesitant openness to listening and understanding of their identity (Garvin 233). Moreover, despite her struggle to find appropriate language, her willingness to create space for dialogue demonstrates an important foundation for understanding emerging identities among younger generation. The exchange between mother and child thus shows how androgynous discourse can emerge within family dynamics with proper interactions. By illustrating the complex negotiation of identity and understanding between generations, the novel portrays the slow but meaningful shifts that can occur within personal relationships as society grapples with expanding notions of gender.

June Singer's theoretical foundation on androgyny that is based on the foundation that the true androgyne is not simply a blending of male and female traits, nor a flattening of difference into sameness. But rather it represents a conscious and intentional acceptance of the interplay between the masculine and feminine dimensions of the individual psyche by an individual. According to Singer, these aspects are not at odds or in conflict, but exist in a deep, reciprocal relationship—each one a necessary complement to the other. Masculine and feminine traits, therefore, are not opposites to be reconciled or resolved through dominance or denial, but through integration and mutual respect. June Singer illustrates this interdependence through a striking biological metaphor: just as the active, questing sperm is fulfilled in its union with the

receptive, generative ovum, so too do the masculine and feminine energies only through mutual engagement. In her view, the masculine finds its full meaning and expression only in relation to the feminine, and vice versa, and neither principle is complete without the other. June Singer explains,

The androgyne consciously accepts the interplay of the masculine and feminine aspects of the individual psyche. One is the complement of the other, in the same sense that the active, probing sperm is the complement of the waiting, yielding ovum. (Singer 34)

June Singer's theoretical framework on androgyny offers an important insight on interpreting Riley's own reflections on their gender identity: "most people wake up, and they know who they are. Like you know you're a woman. You feel that way, you feel like one. It makes sense to you...sometimes I feel like I'm a girl. And sometimes I feel like I'm a boy" (Garvin 252). Riley's own experience of switching between feelings of being a girl and a boy reflects not only a confusion or conflict, but also an internal acknowledgement of both masculine and feminine dimensions coexisting within them. According to Singer's theory, Riley's gender identity is not something fractured or incomplete; instead, it represents an integrative self-awareness and acknowledgement where both aspects of masculine and feminine are allowed to exist within and without the need for dominion, suppression, or resolution into a singular, and fixed identity. This phrase "sometimes I feel like I'm a girl. And sometimes I feel like I'm a boy," according to June's theory, reflects the conscious acknowledgement of the coexistence of both masculine and feminine dimensions within them (Garvin 252). Riley's sense of self-awareness embodies June Singer's vision of androgyny as a harmonious interplay that the true androgyny embraces both sides of the psyche as necessary and complementary, rather than viewing them as opposing forces to be reconciled.

Riley's heightened self-awareness is further reflected in the choice of clothing colors of as reflected in the statement: "my wardrobe has all the color of a week-old bruise" (Garvin 318). Their wardrobe consists a broad spectrum of colors—black, blue, green, yellow, purple, among others—which, when examined metaphorically, represent the integration of both masculine and feminine qualities within the self. The colors are not neatly separated nor hierarchically ordered. Instead, they blend into one another, each contributing to the full expression of the whole self. This phenomenon closely aligns with June Singer's conceptualizing of androgyny, which posits that the masculine and feminine dimensions of the psyche should be not be reconciled through dominance, suppression, or homogenization, but through conscious integration and mutual respect. Similarly, Riley's conscious engagement with the societal constructs of gender—particularly those pertaining to color attribution—demonstrates a critical awareness of how colors have historically been associated with both genders. However, Riley does not perceive masculinity and femininity as opposing factors, but as coexisting factors, each necessary for the complete articulation of the self. Riley's wardrobe and the choices of color in June Singer's concept of androgyny thus becomes a material manifestation of an integrated psyche, wherein masculine and feminine coexist in mutual respect and interdependence.

Furthermore, the coexistence of both masculine and feminine traits is not only confined solely to Riley's character, but other characters as well as Riley began curating their androgynous identity within virtual community. Riley's posts resonate deeply with people like them—those unable to express their feelings and who feel confined within themselves. Riley's blog posts and their interactions with people like them on internet highlight that androgynous identity is not an isolated phenomenon but a shared experience, affirmed through connections with others who articulate similar internal experience. Riley reflects, "Knowing that I have my blog community—even though it's anonymous and online—makes me feel like I belong, like I have

a purpose, and that gives me confidence as I walk through the halls” (Garvin 137). This illustrates the psychological impact of this communal validation and shows that many others, like Riley, experience the coexistence of masculine and feminine within themselves. The sense of belonging Riley experiences arises from external validation to aligning with his inner experience echoes June Singer’s model of androgynous wholeness: accepting inside and out. This validation also functions as a contemporary manifestation of Carl Jung’s concept of *temenos*—a symbolic, sacred space where the psyche feels secure enough to bring unconscious material into consciousness and initiate individuation through relationality, and shared meaning-making (Jung 47). Within this virtual *temenos*, Riley’s blog post and anonymous readers act as projection of the collective unconscious, mirroring their inner world and facilitating the integration of all their gender identity. The blog thus serves not only as an expressive outlet but as a psychological crucible in which Riley’s androgynous self is cultivated, affirmed, and transformed. In this space of dialogue and relationality, the androgynous self, that is the coexistence of masculine and feminine, does not merely survive—it emerges with coherence, wholeness, visibility, and shared experience. Riley reflects: “I’m oddly touched that some random stranger wrote to me. The idea that my writing actually helped someone else makes me want to do more—so I decide to take yell0wbedwetter’s advice. I open a new post and start to write” (Garvin 57).

Another brief yet significant scene early in Jeff Garvin’s *Symptoms of Being Human* functions as a microcosm of the novel’s larger exploration of androgynous identity. Riley recounts,

I choose a desk in the center of the room, drop my bag next to it, and slide into the chair. It’s new; there’s hardly any graffiti at all, only the word “penis” etched in one corner. Briefly, I consider inscribing “vagina” on the opposite side, just to balance it out. (Garvin 7)

When Riley notices the word “penis” etched into a desk, he considers inscribing “vagina” on the opposite side to “balance it out,” illustrating their attempts to harmonize male and female traits even in something as mundane as school furniture (Garvin 7). This impulse to “balance” graffiti is not about affirming femininity as a counter to masculinity and vice versa, but about how these binary categories must exist as one and together at all (Garvin 7). It reflects Riley’s internal choice of identity, and reveals psychological awareness of the cultural weight assigned to binary sex categories, and the need to address their imbalance even in mundane space. The scene again echoes June Singer’s theory of androgyny, which views androgyny not as a rejection or separation of gender, but as the integration of both within the psyche and outside. Riley’s impulse to symbolically “balance” the graffiti reflects integrative gesture—one that seeks equilibrium. The act of considering both “penis” and “vagina” as complementary rather than oppositional symbols embody Singer’s notion of androgyny: a harmonization that acknowledges both masculine and feminine energies without privileging either (Garvin 7).

David Levithan’s *Every Day* reimagines June Singer’s theoretical framework, wherein a protagonist whose very existence destabilizes the binary structure of gender, identity, and embodiment. The central character, known only as “A,” wakes up each morning in a different body, across the full spectrum of sex, gender, race, and physical ability (Levithan 342). This physical condition is neither explained nor medicalized, but Levithan uses the concept of androgyny to craft a narrative that places androgyny as a fusion of both masculinity and femininity. Singer’s model of androgyny, which emphasizes the conscious mixing of both masculine and feminine dimensions within a single body finds resonance in Levithan’s *Every Day*. Singer’s theoretical framework, which is based on the definition of true androgyny as “the One which contains the Two” offers a compelling framework to analyze Levithan’s protagonist A. In *Every Day*, David Levithan does not merely portray A as a shift between genders, but one that embodies the possibility of co-holding both masculine and feminine elements without

contradiction. Each day A's embodiment provides new challenges and contexts, but A consistently exhibits both stereotypically masculine and feminine traits. A also demonstrates emotional intelligence, empathy, and vulnerability, as well as independence, assertiveness, and clarity—traits and qualities that are historically gendered, but as one in A's embodiment. This constancy amid flux creates a narrative space to explore the psychic dimensions of gender, particularly as theorized by June Singer in *Androgyny: Toward a New Theory of Sexuality*.

This psychic dualism of Singer's theoretical framework is best seen in A's relationships and engagement with other characters, where the interplay of both the masculine and feminine of psychic minds finds its most vivid enactment. One such instance occurs when A inhabits the body of Nathan, a devout Christian teenage boy. When Nathan's body grants A the appearance of cisgender masculinity, which comes with unspoken social permissions: the authority of voice, the cultural assumption of emotional stoicism, and the license to perform dominance, A's psyche self, shaped by an intimate understanding of both masculinity and feminine energies actively resists fallen into the pattern of performative masculinity expected of Nathan's outward form. A instead of replicating the codes of male assertiveness or religious rigidity attributed to the body Nathan inhabits, A subverts those expectations. In his interactions, A speaks gently, listens attentively, and avoids imposing himself on others. This resistance to completely blend into masculinity echoes the manifestation of Singer's notion that androgynous individuals does not collapse into the gender identity presented by their appearance, but rather exists as "the One which contains the Two" (Singer 22). Here androgyny is presented as a consciousness capable of holding space for both the assertive and the receptive, the rational and the emotional, without privileging one over the other.

The scene where Nathan's parents and religious leaders tries to interpret A's psyche through Nathan's consciousness as being possessed by demons yet highlight another aspect of June Singer's model of androgynous element in the novel. Nathan's parents and church leaders

represent the forces of dogmas, insisting on the presence of good versus evil, male versus female, the saved versus the possessed. A's presence, however, transcends such polarities. When they interpret A's memories of inhabiting another consciousness as evidence of demonic possession, A does not retaliate with masculine defensiveness, but processes the moment with empathy and resilience. Nathan's calm refusal to engage in confrontation with them exemplifies Singer's ideal of androgyny as a state where the masculine and feminine exist in harmony. As Singer writes, the true androgyny "is not simply a blending of male and female traits" but represents "a conscious and intentional acceptance of the interplay" of those traits (Singer 22). Thus, A's experience as Nathan is a lived instance of Singer's theory in action: a moment in which the psyche refuses to be confined by the gender of the body and instead expresses a mode of being where integration between internal masculine and feminine traits dictate behavior. This capacity to navigate gendered expectation without becoming consumed by it marks A as a figure of psychic androgyny, a being whose identity is neither fractured by embodiment nor neutralized by it, but expanded.

Another particular scene which exemplifies Singer's concept of androgyny unfolds on Day 6002 of A's life, when they awaken in the body of a girl named Megan Powell. Megan is portrayed as a quiet, somewhat introverted teenage girl with a relatively uneventful life, and A's task for the day is simple go to school, and maintain Megan's routine. As A moves through Megan's school day, they become viscerally aware of how others perceive and treat them, not because of who they are internally, but because of the body they inhabit. A is catcalled and commented on its appearance by the boys in the school as she walks down the hallway. These encounters are not new in A's vast experience, but what distinguishes this day is A's internal reflection on the changing social permissions attached to gender. A comment, "The way people look at me when I'm a girl is not the same as when I'm a boy. The expectations shift. The permissions are different" (Levithan 109). At this moment, A does not conform to the

submissiveness expected of the female-presenting body or correct by asserting masculine control. A navigates Megan's world with thoughtful intention, choosing neither to resist nor erase the femininity of the body they inhabit, but to honor it without sacrificing their psychic awareness. This scene functions as a precise manifestation of June Singer's theory on androgyny, which understands the androgynous psyche not as genderless, but as a conscious integration of masculine and feminine traits or energies. Singer's concept of the One that contains the Two is enacted not through psychological dualism but through A's psychological capacity to interpret and integrate experience from multiple gendered perspectives.

4.2 Reading Androgyny through Tracy Hargreaves Lens: Momentary Coexistence

"I am a drifter, and as lonely as that can be, it is also remarkably freeing" (Levithan 8).

Tracy Hargreaves, in her book *Androgyny in Modern Literature*, offers a nuanced reading of androgyny that moves away from fixed gender identities and instead emphasizes its fleeting and transitional nature. Hargreaves observes that "the masculine and feminine momentarily coexist," suggesting that androgyny is not a stable or permanent condition but one that emerges temporarily, often in response to particular contexts or gazes (Hargreaves 32). One of her key contributions is her insistence on the momentariness of androgyny. Tracy Hargreaves describes it as "a fleeting figure without content, a spectre caught in a passing glance," emphasizing its ephemeral and performative nature (Hargreaves 32). In Hargreaves' definition, androgyny becomes a performative rupture—an identity that does not persist in a stable or coherent form, but instead appears and vanishes, often dependent on the gaze or perceptions of others. Hargreaves problematizes the notion of a "middle ground" between binary genders, arguing that such thinking still reinforces the binary it claims to dissolve. In quoting Kate Bornstein, Tracy Hargreaves writes:

Androgyny assumes that there's male stuff on one side of a specific tantrum, and female stuff on another side of that spectrum. And somewhere in the middle of this straight line, there's an ideal blend of 'male' and 'female'. However, by saying there's a 'middle', androgyny really keeps the opposites in place. By saying that we have a 'male side' and a 'female side', we blind ourselves to all the beautiful shades of identity of which we are capable. (Hargreaves 123)

Tracy Hargreaves' theorization of androgyny as a fleeting and performative condition offer a compelling framework for analyzing David Levithan's protagonist, A. Hargreaves' argument that androgyny should not only be understood as a stable blending of masculine and feminine characteristics but rather as a transient identity that appears momentarily and in response to contextual conditions aligns closely with Levithan's portrayal of the protagonist, A. Hargreaves' statement, "the masculine and feminine momentarily coexist," describing androgyny as "a fleeting figure without content, a spectre caught in a passing glance" (Hargreaves 32). This conception of androgyny echoes A's character, whose daily embodies in a different body each day, both within the narrative and in the eyes of the readers. A's identity exemplifies Hargreaves' conception of androgyny, which is not a fixed essence but as an ongoing, ephemeral performance shaped by context, memory, and relational perception. From the very first page, A introduces the instability of their identity: "I wake up. Immediately I have to figure out who I am" (Levithan 1). This daily ritual of self-recognition foregrounds the performative nature of identity as theorized by Hargreaves. A does not possess a body of their own, nor do they maintain a consistent gender identity; instead, each day they inhabit a new person, adapting new social roles, family dynamics, and physical appearances. A's existence underscores the temporal nature of identity and emphasizes how gender can be reconstructed based on external variables. The narratives forces both A and the reader to confront the artificiality of binary gender constructs, as A's selfhood is continuously redefined in relation

to the bodies they temporarily occupy. This temporality is not only physical but psychological, as A reveals, “Yesterday I was a girl in a town I’d guess to be two hours away. The day before, I was a boy... I am already forgetting their details. I have to, else I will never know who I really am” (Levithan 3).

Here, David Levithan illustrates the cognitive dissonance that results from constantly shifting gendered embodiments. A must selectively forget the gendered and corporeal details of their past hosts to preserve a semblance of their own identity, which is unmoored from any one physical form. This mirrors Hargreaves’ concept of androgyny as a “rupture” in coherent identity; A is a figure whose gender identity exists only in fleeting moments, performed in the space between memory and bodily experience (Hargreaves 32). Unlike traditional characters anchored by gendered expectations, A is defined by an absence of permanence, stability, and definitive gender identification. This momentary coexistence of A’s existence in both male and female traits is exemplified through the various bodies A inhabits, such as Nathan, Justin, Margaret Weiss, Roger Wilson, and Megan Powell. In each of these embodiments, A adopts a different personality, gender identity, and life circumstance. However, there is a recurring phenomenon: A immerses themselves fully into each new identity without entirely understanding how they do it. This ability to adapt fluidly reflects Hargreaves’ assertion that androgyny is a performance conditioned by the context and gaze of others. The fleeting embodiment in each new host body becomes a mechanism through which androgyny is enacted—not as a fixed trait, but as a liminal, performative state. A’s reflections on memory support this reading. In one passage, A confesses:

Normal people don’t have to decide what’s worth remembering. You are given a hierarchy, recurring characters, the help of repetition, of anticipation, the firm hold of a long history. But I have to decide the importance of each and every memory. I only remember a handful of people, and in order to do that, I have to hold tight, because the

only repetition available — the only way I am going to see them again — is if I conjure them in my mind. (Levithan 60)

This statement not only emphasizes A's existential impermanence but also highlights the relational construction of their identity. With no consistent physical self to return to, A must build identity through mental acts of remembrance, and these memories are often of emotional or relational significance rather than gendered embodiment. The erasure of physical and gendered continuity but the momentary existence of both gender in A suggest that, identity is sometimes forged through affective ties, choice, and moral engagement, rather than through biological or social role. Levithan uses the character of Rhiannon to further interrogate the cultural legibility of A's androgyny. Rhiannon struggles to comprehend A's fluid identity. Her reactions range from fascination to discomfort, particularly when A appears in two genders and presentation. This oscillation in her perception reflects Hargreaves' assertion that androgyny is often defined "in response to particular context or gaze" (Hargreaves 32). Rhiannon's gaze attempts to impose stability on A's identity, seeking markers of gender that can render A comprehensible within normative frameworks. However, A resists this stabilization. They insist, "I am not a boy. I am not a girl. I am not a he or a she or an it. I am me" (Levithan 197). This resistance confronts Rhiannon and the readers with the inadequacy of binary pronouns and categories in representing complex, lived identities.

The momentary existence of androgynous identity in *Every Day* is performative and responsive, shaped by the relational dynamics between A and those around them. The narrative does not provide a definitive account of who A is, because A's identity is always in flux, appearing differently depending on the body they occupy and the social context they enter. Levithan thus positions androgyny as both a liberating and alienating force: liberating in its rejection of binary constraints, but alienating in its social illegibility. The first-person narration further intensifies this performative aspect. The reader experiences A's consciousness directly,

untethered from the physical markers that traditionally signal gender in literature. The first-person voice offers a continuous interiority that contrasts starkly with the discontinuity of A's physical embodiments. This narrative strategy reinforces Hargreaves' idea that androgyny operates in the interstices of both appearance and subjectivity. A's selfhood is coherent only on the level of consciousness and memory, not on the level of bodily representation. Through this techniques Levithan not only enacts but also performs androgyny as a literary device, inviting reader to inhabit a space of suspended gender and to question the linguistic and cultural frameworks that define identity.

Through the character of A, David Levithan explores the instability and contextual nature of gender, memory, and selfhood. A's constantly shifting embodiments and relationally constructed identity mirror Hargreaves' assertion that androgyny is not a stable fusion of masculine and feminine traits, but a transient presence, dependent upon the gaze and contingent upon context. David Levithan's portrayal of androgynous characters like A provides not only a narrative of radical inclusivity but also contributes to a broader theoretical discourse on the constructedness and impermanence of gendered subjectivity. By refusing to anchor A's identity to any specific gendered or bodily form, Levithan constructs a protagonist who reclaims agency through multiplicity and difference. A's character presents a mode of recognition that transcends appearances—a recognition rooted in consciousness, connection, and the ethical imperative to understand others as they are, not what we expect them to be.

4.3 Reading Androgyny through Lauren Goodlad's Lens: Beyond Dualism

“I got to know Riley not as a “boy” character or a “girl” character or a “transgender” character, but as a human being.” (Garvin 334)

A recent theoretical development has shifted away from the model of balanced dualism toward a more radical interrogation of gender itself. Contemporary scholars argue that androgyny need

not involve the reconciliation of two oppositional forces, but may instead imply the transcendence or even erasure of gender categories altogether. Lauren Goodlad offers such a perspective, asserting that androgyny is “not the prescribed mixture of masculinity and femininity but the entire absence of gender” (Goodlad 221). In Lauren Goodlad’s view, true androgyny does not seek to harmonize male and female traits but rather to dismantle the relevance of gender distinctions in determining identity. This approach reframes androgyny as a form of genderlessness—an identity space in which one’s autonomy and personhood are decoupled from the expectations and limitations imposed by the gender binary. When juxtaposed with June Singer’s integrative model, which emphasizes the internal reconciliation of gendered opposites, Goodlad’s deconstructive perspective broadens the theoretical landscape. Nonetheless, their contribution towards theoretical landscape in literary cannon reflects a broader shift in cultural and academic discourse, where identity is increasingly understood in terms of fluidity, multiplicity, and resistance to normative categorization. As such, androgyny functions not only as a model of inner balance, but also as a critique of the systems that define and confine gender.

The nature of transitional body that the character might possess is never explicitly disclosed, reinforcing the idea that the androgynous character must exist and operate beyond the so conventional norms of male and female identity. In Jeff Garvin’s *Symptoms of Being Human*, the protagonist Riley never discloses their gender identity in their interactions and engagement with other characters. Despite facing constant threats and hostility—from peers at school and anonymous attacks on the internet—Riley steadfastly refuses to reveal their gender identity. This deliberate withholding resists societal pressure for categorization, maintaining the character’s liminal position beyond the binary. Similarly in David Levithan’s *Every Day*, the protagonist A moves from one body to another, experiencing life through the minds and psyche of others, yet never revealing their own identity. A’s consciousness transcends gender,

rendering the question of being male or female irrelevant. A navigate countless lives without ever settling into a single, defined self. This fluidity destabilizes fixed notions of selfhood and resists the compulsion to define or label identity. Both Riley and A, as literary embodiments of androgyny, reflect a purposeful resistance to the gaze that seeks to define, categorize, and ultimately fix identity within rigid social frameworks. Their refusal to disclose is not a failure of character development but rather a narrative choice that aligns with the androgynous characteristics features—dualism, beyond dualism, outside, and beyond gender binary. In Jeff Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human*, Riley's anonymity serves as a protective mechanism, but it also becomes a statement of autonomy. Their identity exists on their own terms, not for public consumption or validation. Similarly, in David Levithan's *Every Day*, A's experience in different bodies each day dissolves not only the boundaries of gender but also race, class, and ability. This constant switching undermines the very foundation of stable identity, suggesting that the self is not rooted in the body but in consciousness itself.

Lauren Goodlad's exploration of androgyny as a complete dissolution of gender identity is particularly pertinent in analyzing Jeff Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human*. In Goodlad's theoretical framework, she defines androgyny as not about reconciling male and female into a harmonious whole but about disrupting the binary altogether and moving beyond binary. It is a mode of being that destabilizes the foundational oppositions—man/woman, male/female, self/other—that upholds traditional notions of subjectivity. In Jeff Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human*, Riley's failure to blend in with the people around them exemplifies this disruption. Riley reflects:

Bec shrugs. "Well, you made some waves." A wide grin splits her face. "People are talking about you behind your back." Great. Not only have I failed to blend in, but I'm *making waves*. I swallow hard. "What are they saying?" ... Bec shrugs. "One person may have referred to you as 'that androgynous chick-due.'" (Garvin 130)

Riley's gender identity, which resists classification within the binary frameworks of male/female, and man/woman, disrupts and challenges the normative structures of the society they inhabit. This disruption aligns with Lauren Goodlad's theoretical conception of androgyny—not as a reconciliation of binary oppositions, as June Singer proposes, but as a mode of being that destabilizes fixed categories and undermines traditional gender dichotomies. Riley's expression of sexual and gender identity is described as “*making waves*” among their peers and classmates, illustrating how non-binary identities provoke discomfort and resistance within a system that privileges normativity (Garvin 130). This response reveals that androgynous identity is not merely situated within between male and female, but rather exists beyond such dualisms—outside the bound of categorization and normative constructions. The remark “people are talking about you behind your back” highlights how androgynous identity exists outside and beyond gender binary, while “making waves” echoes Goodlad's conception of androgyny as a force that challenge and destabilizes socially constructed norms (Garvin 130). Riley's resistance to fixing their identity opens a space where new narratives of selfhood can emerge—narratives that are inclusive of multiplicity and fluidity. The absence of a definitive gender or sexual revelation in Riley's story exemplifies what Lauren Goodlad describes as a dissolution of fixed identity and sexual difference within androgynous identity.

Another significant and the recent theoretical development in conceptualizing radical gender fluidity is articulated by gender theorist, Carolyn G. Heilbrun, in her influential work *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*. Heilbrun challenges and resists the traditional impulse to define androgyny in fixed or essentialist terms, arguing instead for a conceptualization that resists rigid categorization. She asserts that “if a definition is at all possible it is a definition by negation or cancellation” (Heilbrun xi). This statement underscores the paradox inherent in androgyny: it is best understood not through what it is, but rather by acknowledging what it

refuses to be. From a theoretical standpoint, Heilbrun's perspective aligns with broader ideas within gender theory, particularly those advanced by poststructuralist thinkers such as Judith Butler, who argue that gender is not a stable or inherent identity but a series of performative acts shaped by social expectations. Carolyn G. Heilbrun's conception of androgyny is not a mere blending of masculine and feminine traits but a critique of the very notion that these categories must not exist at all. She posits that androgyny does not function as a middle ground between male and female; rather, it serves as a way of rejecting the entire binary system that divides individuals into two opposing factors. By leaving androgyny undefined, Heilbrun opens up possibilities for more flexible, creative, and open understandings of identity that do not rely on traditional gender norms.

Carolyn G. Heilbrun's theoretical framework finds resonance in Jeff Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human*, wherein the protagonist, Riley, navigates the complexities of existing within a binary-gendered society. At Park Hills, Riley attempts "to blend in, to find" their place, but this pursuit only results in frustration and alienation (Garvin 19). Riley's desire to "blend in" should not be interpreted as a wish to become either male or female, but to exist without scrutiny or judgement. The transition from Immaculate Heart to Park Hills does not alleviate the struggle; instead, Riley continues to face speculation about their gender from peers and classmates. Reflecting on their experiences of bullying due to their gender-neutral identity, Riley laments, "trying to escape from a place where I was harassed and bullied on daily basis," because of their genderless pronoun at educational and social space does not help them (Garvin 12). Carolyn G. Heilbrun's theoretical conception of androgyny becomes particularly relevant in this context. Riley's challenges underscore the limitations of language to adequately define or express a non-binary identity within a rigidly binary world. This linguistic inadequacy—the inability to encapsulate genderlessness within conventional frameworks—contributes to the bullying and social isolation. Heilbrun's notion of androgyny, which resists fixed definition

aligns with Riley's refusal to conform to binary expectations, thereby embodying an androgynous characterized by openness, fluidity, and resistance to categorization. Riley's internal conflict regarding social interaction is poignantly expressed in their reflection: "Stupid, stupid. I'm so desperate to make a friend that the second I get comfortable with someone, what do I do?... Ugh! It was the wrong thing, the wrong energy to send out in that moment" (Garvin 11).

Lauren Goodlad's theorization of androgyny as the complete absence of gender, rather than a blend of masculine and feminine traits, offer a critical lens through which to examine David Levithan's *Every Day*. In her analysis, Goodlad asserts that androgyny is "not the prescribed mixture of masculinity and femininity but the entire absence of gender" (Goodlad 221). This perspective reframes androgyny not as a harmonization of the binary but as a dismantling of gendered categories altogether. Such a view aligns seamlessly with the character A, the novel's protagonist, who exemplifies genderlessness not through ambiguity or hybridity, but through the total disassociation of identity from any gender classification. From the outset, A's experience of identity is marked by disembodiment and detachment from gender. Each day, A awakens in a different body—sometimes male, sometimes female, sometimes neither within conventional classifications—and must navigate life from that perspective. As A explains, "I wake up. Immediately I have to figure out who I am" (Levithan 1). This process is not about discovering one's internal sense of self, but rather determining the identity of the host body and the expectations that come with it. Importantly, A does not internalize or adopt the gender identity of the body they inhabit. Instead, they maintain a stable internal consciousness that is independent of these gendered expectations. This detachment exemplifies Goodlad's claim that true androgyny dismantles the significance of gender distinctions in determining identity. A's personhood does not fluctuate with gender; rather, it remains constant, even as the world around them insists on binary frameworks.

David Levithan furthers this conceptualization by constructing A's voice as consistent and ungendered throughout the narrative. The first-person narration never reveals gendered markers that would allow the reader to place A within the male/female binary. This narrative technique reinforces Goodlad's theory by refusing to attribute meaning or coherence to gender in shaping A's consciousness. Indeed, A themselves articulates this resistance to binary categorization: "I am not a boy. I am not a girl. I am not a he or a she or an it. I am me" (Levithan 197). This statement or declaration serves as a personal assertion against the epistemological authority of gender in defining human identity. A's emphasis on their individuality—"I am me"—underscores the irrelevance of gender to their core sense of self. In this way, Levithan crafts a narrative that validates the legitimacy of a gender-free subjectivity (Levithan 197). This is further explicated in A's relationship with Rhiannon. In the novel, Rhiannon struggles to reconcile her affection for A with the changing gender presentations A adopts each day. Her discomfort and confusion highlight the societal difficulty of accepting a gender-free individual as a legitimate subject of love. When A inhabits bodies that deviate from heteronormative expectations—those that are perceived as male, female, queer, or radically other—Rhiannon's gaze vacillates, often seeking stability and clarity. However, A resists this imposed coherence: "What is it about the body that you need to see in order to accept me?"—implicitly questioning the necessity of gender conformity in validating live and personhood (Levithan 234).

By presenting a protagonist whose subjectivity exists outside the gender binary, Levithan does not merely depict androgyny—he redefines it. A's fluidity is not a spectrum between masculinity and femininity but a rejection of the relevance of that spectrum altogether. They are in Goodlad's terms, an absence of gender—a subject formed through consciousness, ethical intentionality, and affective engagement, rather than physicality or social codification. The bodies A inhabits—Nathan, Margaret Weiss, Roger Wilson, Megan Powell, and countless

others—serve as narrative vessels that underscore the mutability of gender. These characters span a wide array of identities, yet A’s voice remains unchanged. Each embodiment becomes a performance dictated by context rather than internal transformation. A does not become more masculine in a male body or feminine in a female body; they remain A. Levithan’s representation thus highlights the constructedness of gender roles and challenges the cultural compulsion to categorize.

Through the character of A, David Levithan dramatizes the possibility of a life lived beyond gender—one in which personhood is not constrained by the visual and linguistic markers society has long deemed essential. A exists as a radical subject whose authenticity derives not from their ability to reflect their persistent rejection of the binary altogether. By deconstructing the relationship between body, gender, and self, *Every Day* invites readers into a reimagined ontology—one in which androgyny is not about combining but erasing, not about compromise but about freedom. Levithan’s novel, then, is not just a story of love and identity, but a manifesto for a post-gender future where individuals are valued for not fitting into categories but for transcending them altogether.

4.4 Pronouns and Perceptions

Emma A Renström contends that “the grammatical gender language structure can bias perception and cognition” (Renström et al. 477). Renström is of the view that grammatically gendered languages often impose social roles and assumptions about individuals, which reinforce and perpetuate stereotypes. Although exceptions to this generalization exist—such as languages that feature more flexible or neutral gender classifications—the majority of languages continue to rely heavily on gendered structures to define societal roles. The use of generic pronouns like “he” or “she,” can shape cognitive processes by fostering preconceived notions regarding an individual’s identity, attributes, and capabilities. Renström contends that

these linguistic patterns often lead to implicit gender bias, wherein masculinity is typically aligned with male identities and femininity with female identities. In response to these linguistic and cognitive biases, gender-fair language reforms have emerged as a means to promote greater equity and inclusion. Notably, languages like Finnish and Turkish—which lack grammatical gender in both nouns and pronouns—illustrate this model where gender is not grammatically encoded. In these contexts, occupational terms and social roles are often used in gender-neutral ways to enhance the visibility of all gender identities without privileging one over the other, or inviting gender stereotypes. The adoption of these gender-neutral pronouns and inclusive naming practices in traditionally gendered languages (such as the introduction of “they” in English or “iel” in French) illustrates the growing recognition of the performative and constructed nature of gender (Renström et al. 477). These linguistic interventions show that these are not merely semantic shifts but are ideologically significant, as they confront the embedded structures that normalize binary gender thinking. Renström and other linguists suggest that the relationship between language, cognition, and gender identity are deeply interwoven. By recognizing the biases inherent in grammatical gender structures and supporting inclusive language reforms, societies can begin to dismantle the linguistic foundations of gender inequality and better accommodate the complexities of contemporary gender identities (Renström et al. 477).

As Renström further argue, pronouns function not merely as basic grammatical elements, but as critical referents through which gender identity is both communicated and interpreted. In both literary representation and everyday discourse, pronouns play a central role in shaping perceptions of self and others, serving as linguistic markers that influence social recognition. Renström, Lindqvist and Gustafsson Sendén emphasize the relational nature of pronouns, noting that their usage has direct implications for person perception, particularly in signaling or inferring the gender identity of the referent. As they observe, “pronouns have also become

a way for individuals themselves to signal their gender identity” (Renström et al. 2). This dual function—of both indicating and constructing gender—underscores the pronoun’s significance in both language and sociocultural identity formation. In the context of contemporary gender discourse, the relationship between pronoun usage and gender perception has grown increasingly complex. The growing visibility of nonbinary and gender-diverse identities has prompted the emergence of neo-genders and neo-pronouns in both literary and social spheres. These developments have exposed the limitations of traditional binary pronouns which are insufficient for representing individuals whose identities do not conform to binary categories as historically conceived. In response, the singular “they” has gained prominence as a widely accepted gender-neutral pronoun, valued for its inclusivity and its capacity to encompass diverse identities without imposing binary constraints.

Authors such as David Levithan and Jeff Garvin strategically employ gender-neutral and nontraditional pronouns in their literary works to challenge readers’ assumption about fixed gender categories and to engage with characters in ways that resist essentialist readings and interpretations. As gender diversity becomes increasingly visible and identities evolve beyond the traditional binary of man/woman or male/female, the use of genderless pronouns and language in literature has become more prominent in literary presentations. In the context of contemporary neo-gendering and the emergence of neo-pronouns, both Levithan and Garvin present characters whose identities transcend binary classifications, portraying individuals who may embody characteristics of both genders or who remain undefined altogether. These characters are often left intentionally ambiguous, with no definitive gender markers, reflecting the fluid and dynamic nature of modern gender experiences. Frequently, such characters are described using generic or neutral terms and are situated in narratives that highlight both internal and external uncertainty regarding their gender identities, leaving both readers as well as other characters uncertain of who they are.

This deliberate ambiguity aligns with the broader linguistic shift advocated by scholars such as Megumi Tanabe, Lily Tun, Nasim Vaseiezadeh, and Imge Dongan, who argue that the adoption of genderless pronouns disrupts the persistence of androcentric language and promotes inclusivity. In genderless linguistic systems, third person pronouns do not vary by gender, thereby avoiding the reinforcement of gender stereotypes and enhancing equitable representation across social, artistic, and literary domains (Tanabe et al. 3). David Levithan and Jeff Garvin's narrative practices reflect this ethos, aiming not to normalize gender-neutral pronouns but to construct characters as fully realized individuals, independent of the sociocultural baggage traditionally associated with gender. By doing so, their fictional works challenge gender and raised-based biases and strive to cultivate a more inclusive literary landscape.

Jeff Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human* provides a compelling literary embodiment of Renström's theoretical framework. The novel that centers on Riley Cavanaugh, a gender-fluid teenager whose pronouns are intentionally withheld throughout the narrative. This narrative strategy resists the normative expectations of gendered language and forces readers to confront their own interpretive frameworks. As Renström suggests, the use of gendered pronouns often triggers cognitive assumptions that align character perception with socially constructed gender norms. Jeff Garvin refuses to categorize Riley using any gender pronouns in order not to the disrupts the cognitive processes and allow readers to engage with Riley as a fully realized individual and human, rather than as a representative of a binary category. Riley's first-person narration omits any gendered language or pronoun that would signal to readers whether Riley is male or female. Garvin's linguistic omission is not merely stylistic but ideologically significant. It echoes the gender-neutral linguistic models Renström and others highlights as progressive and inclusive, such as the use of "they" in English or "iel" in French. Jeff Garvin's refusal to assign Riley a particular pronoun resists the normative expectation that individuals

conform to binary categories of male or female. Instead, the novel creates a space that aligns with Renström's broader call for inclusive language reforms that confront the embedded structures of linguistic bias.

Further resistance to grammatical gender is seen in Riley's blog, where they write anonymously about living with gender fluidity: "My name is Alix. And the first thing you're going to want to know about me is: Am I a boy, or am I a girl?" (Garvin 27). Riley's anonymous blog within the novel serves as a site of gender-neutral self-articulation. Much like the grammatical structure of Finnish and Turkish, the blog operates without imposing gendered assumptions, which allows Riley to articulate their experiences without being constrained by pronouns that would reinforce a binary gender identity. This narrative feature reinforces Renström's claim that inclusive language practices are instrumental in dismantling the linguistic foundations of gender inequality and facilitating more accurate and equitable perceptions of identity. The blog operates as a form of resistance against the dominant discourses Riley encounters offline—in school, and within their conservative political family, where the demand for gender legibility is constant and often hostile. In contrast, the blog offers a liminal, borderless space where identity can be explored and affirmed without fear of retribution or misrecognition. This subversion of traditional gender pronoun and language aligns with Renström's argument that language is a foundational mechanism through which social roles and stereotypes are reinforced. By constructing a fictional environment in which communication and selfhood are possible without reliance on gendered pronoun, Jeff Garvin actualizes Renström's theoretical proposition: that altering linguistic frameworks can radically shift perception and dismantling the cognitive and cultural structures that normalize binary gender thinking. Jeff Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human* exposes and resists the cognitive biases that arise from gendered grammatical structures. Through its use of pronoun omission and its depiction of nonbinary

identity, the novel not only critiques the limitations of conventional language but also models the possibilities of a more inclusive and perceptually nuanced linguistic practice.

A parallel critique of gender pronoun and perception bias can also be found in David Levithan's *Every Day*. The novel centers on the character A, a consciousness that inhabits a different body each day, regardless of gender, race, or physical ability. David Levithan intentionally avoids using gendered pronouns for A, opting instead for the singular "they". From a linguistic and cognitive perspective, the novel disrupts normative gendered perception through its consistent avoidance of gendered pronouns in reference to A, echoing Emma A. Renström's theory that "grammatical gender language structure can bias perception and cognition" (Renström et al. 477). According to Renström, gendered pronoun reinforces and perpetuates societal roles, traits, and behaviors. Levithan's narrative enacts a deliberate resistance to this bias through the neutralization of gendered language in the portrayal of A's identity. Throughout the novel, Levithan avoids attributing gendered pronouns or descriptors to A, relying instead on the singular "they" and other circumlocutions. This linguistic strategy compels the readers to engage with A not through the culturally ingrained shorthand of "he" or "she," but through A's consciousness, choices, and emotional landscape, but most importantly as human. For instance, when A describes their daily experience—"I wake up. Immediately, I have to figure out who I am"—the narration resists gendered classification, instead foregrounding the instability and multiplicity of embodiment (Levithan 1). This challenges what Renström identifies as a cognitive reflex: the tendency to associate gender with specific traits, roles, or appearances. By refusing to stabilize A's identity through language, David Levithan compels the reader to confront and dismantle the assumption that coherent personhood must be anchored in gender binary identification.

In *Every Day*, David Levithan further explores this tension when A falls in love with Rhiannon, a girl who struggles to reconcile her attraction to someone whose external form changes daily.

Rhiannon's difficulty in relating to A underscores the powerful hold that gendered pronoun and perception exercises on cognition. Her recurring question about who really A is, and inability to understand A, exposes a linguistic as well as psychological reliance on pronoun and fixed gender identity to make sense of intimacy and connection. This reflects Renström's assertion that gender pronoun not only reflect but shape our social and cognitive expectations of others. The reader, like Rhianon, is continually asked to resist categorization and instead engage with A as a human—emphasizing a shift from surface-level perception (rooted in gender assumptions) to ethical recognition based on character and relational depth. This consistent avoidance of gendered language in A's narrative functions as an ideological intervention to disrupts the reader's expectations and makes space for imagining gender beyond the binary. David Levithan's *Every Day* exemplifies Renström's contention that gender pronoun or language are not a neutral conduit for meaning but a structuring force that shapes cognition and social reality. By denying readers the comfort of gender pronoun in relation to A, the novel resists normative frameworks of gender perception. It insists on a model of identity that is affective, ethical, and relational rather than rooted in external signifiers. David Levithan contributes to the broader sense of dismantling gender pronoun and linguistic biases and expanding the representational possibilities of nonbinary and fluid identities in contemporary literature.

Authors like Jeff Garvin and David Levithan, who adopt gender-neutral or nontraditional pronouns challenge the readers to reconsider fixed categories of gender and to engage with characters rather than their identity in ways that resist essentialist readings. They showed how gender pronouns shape not only how gender is expressed but also how it is cognitively processed and socially negotiated. Their continuous and growing emphasis on doing away with gender pronoun reflects a broader effort to dismantle linguistic biases and to encourage more nuanced, and equitable understandings of gender in both language and thought. Both Levithan

and Garvin constructs a narrative around a gender-fluid protagonist whose identity remains linguistically unmarked by gendered pronouns. Their works illustrate that gender pronoun cannot be adequately captured within the confines of binary grammatical structures; however, characters can be adequately presented without gender pronoun, thereby erasing gender biases and preconceived notion about gender identity. By presenting such characters who exist beyond the traditional male/female dichotomy and by resisting conventional pronoun usage, Garvin and Levithan's works not only reflect the evolving discourse around gender but also participate in its transformation.

4.4 Conclusion

Both David Levithan and Jeff Garvin articulate gender identity as a fluid and multifaceted construct that resists fixed definition. These articulations reflect and expand upon contemporary theoretical understandings of gender as not merely a binary system or even a stable continuum, but as a dynamic, contextually responsive, and sometimes entirely absent category. Rather than reinforcing the conventional view of gender as either biologically or socially essentialist, both authors foreground characters whose experiences suggest that gender may sometimes be a harmonious blend of masculine and feminine traits, sometimes a momentary coexistence of such traits, and at other times an identity that exists entirely outside the binary framework. Their work exemplifies an evolving literary engagement with post-binary gender identity. David Levithan provides a striking representation of gender as something that can be entirely decoupled from the self. Jeff Garvin, by contrast, presents a protagonist who inhibits gender fluidity in a more situated and personal way. However, both their work explores the violence—both symbolic and physical—that can result from living outside the normative gender frameworks. Whether it is A's complete transcendence of gender as a category, or Riley's deeply felt but fluctuating relationship to gendered identity, both narratives refuse the fixity of gender as a defining feature of personhood. Their characters

illuminate the multiplicity of gendered experience: sometimes a blend, sometimes a momentary existence, and sometimes an absence. They contribute to a broader theoretical and cultural shift toward recognizing the legitimacy of nonbinary, fluid, and genderless identities, insisting on a more expansive, inclusive, and empathetic understanding of what it means to be human.

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CHAPTER V

REFLECTION ON CONFLICTING POPULAR BELIEFS AND CHOICE OF GENDER IDENTITY

The emergence of postsecularism as a theoretical lens has become a critical tool for examining the interplay between religion and secularism in contemporary literature. Contrary to the traditional secularization concept which posits the inevitable decline of religious authority in the face of modernity, postsecularism acknowledges the enduring presence and reconfiguration of religious belief in both public and private life. Rather than viewing religion as a vestige of a pre-modern past, postsecularism recognizes it as an active force that continues to shape cultural, and ethical dimensions of contemporary society. This shift allows literature to function as a dynamic site where secular, religious, and ethical discourses intersect and contest each other. Contemporary narratives often become arenas in which theological motifs and moral dilemmas are reimagined in light of pluralistic worldviews. Postsecularism invites literary critics and scholars to reconsider how fiction engages with question of faith, transcendence, and ethical responsibility not as an endorsement of religious dogmas, but as a serious interrogation of belief in a disenchanted world. In doing so, postsecular literary criticism reveals how narrative art mediates the ongoing debate between secular and religious frameworks.

Postsecular fiction exhibits several defining characteristics, top among them being spiritual uncertainty and a profound yearning for meaning of life. These narratives often grapple with existential questions of spiritual uncertainty that lie beyond the scope of institutional religion. Postsecular literature frequently stages moments of doubt, dislocation, and introspection rather than affirming absolute truths. Contemporary novels such as Garrad Conley's *Boy Erased*, and Mohsin Zaidi's *A Dutiful Boy* illustrate the depth of postsecular engagement in

autobiographical fiction. Both texts explore the tension between their faith and emerging queer identity, focusing how spiritual longing persists even when institutional religion seem indifferent towards their choice of sexuality or identity. These narratives do not simply reject faith, but they navigate the complexities of belief within marginalized experiences, suggesting that religious discourse remains integral in the formation of postsecular subjectivity. In *Boy Erased*, Conley recounts his time in a Christian conversion therapy program, where religious ideology collides with the complexities of sexuality and personal truth. However, even in the face of psychological violence and doctrinal rigidity, the novel does not dismiss the spiritual dimension altogether; instead, it probes how belief and doubt co-exist—a quintessential postsecular subjectivity. The memoir is suffused with moments of internal contradiction, grief, and longing that point to a complex postsecular sensibility: one in which religion continues to shape the horizon of meaning, even when its doctrinal claims are untenable. A similar dynamic unfolds in Mohsin Zaidi's *A Dutiful Boy*, which portrays a young Muslim man's journey toward self-acceptance in a cultural and religious context that renders his sexuality unspeakable. Like Conley, Zaidi does not simply abandon faith but engages in a painful yet profound rethinking of it—revealing a postsecular spirituality that is deeply personal. Zaidi does not approach religion as an oppressive structure, but as one that can be a source of meaning making in secular world. His postsecular queer subjectivity is marked by ambivalence—by a desire to reconcile religious identity with sexual identity without capitulating to either secularism or religious entity. In John A. McClure's words:

This body of fiction can be called “postsecular,” for several reasons: because the stories it tells trace the turn of secular-minded characters back toward the religious; because its ontological signature is a religiously inflected disruption of secular constructions of the real; and because its ideological signature is the rearticulation of a dramatically “weakened” religiosity with secular, progressive values and projects. (McClure 3)

Conley and Zaidi's narratives resonate deeply with postsecular theory as propounded by Charles Taylor and Jürgen Habermas among others. In the sense that these narratives reveal how religion continues to inhabit the modern subject, not always as a system of belief, but as a language of value, loss, and longing. Faith, in this context, is not recuperated in a nostalgic or dogmatic sense, but is refigured through the lived realities of trauma, exile, and the pursuit of ethical selfhood. Postsecular queer authors like Garrad Conley and Mohsin Zaidi continues to challenge secularists assumption that secularism alone offers an adequate framework for understanding contemporary reality and identity. Through their narrative complexity of their works, they show the postsecular condition not as one of resolution or doctrinal certainty, but as an ongoing negotiation marked by tension, ambiguity, and spiritual introspection. Both narratives present the core features of postsecular literature, that is, the endurance of religious ideology in ostensibly secular contexts, and the refusal to resolve faith into either full affirmation or total negation.

5.1 Postsecular Subjectivity

The idea of postsecularism has emerged as a critical framework in recent decades for analyzing the continued presence and transformation of religious and spiritual thought within modern secular societies. It emerged as a critical response to the limitations of secularization theory, particularly its assumption that the advancement of modernity necessarily entails the decline of religious belief and practice. Rather than interpreting secularization as the complete decline of religion, postsecularism acknowledges the complex ways in which spiritual and religious discourse persist, evolve, and intersect with secular life. In the realm of literature, this perspective allows for the exploration of how contemporary texts register, interrogate, and reconfigure the dynamics of belief, doubt, and moral inquiry. Key theorists such as Charles Taylor and Jürgen Habermas have provided influential paradigms for understanding postsecular subjectivity, both of which highlighting the different aspects of how individuals

and societies negotiate the coexistence of the secular and the spiritual. Postsecularism, according to these writers, refers to a mode of selfhood that is shaped by the coexistence and negotiation between religious and secular worldviews, rather than strict adherence to one or the other. Postsecular subjectivity represents a form of subjectivity that is not wholly disenchanted nor bound by doctrinal religiosity; rather it is characterized by an ambivalent yet sustained engagement with questions of meaning, transcendence, and ethical responsibility in a world where belief is no longer taken for granted.

Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, published in 2007, is foundational to understanding this concept. In his book, Taylor redefines the postsecular world not as the absence of religion, but as a context in which belief in God is no longer axiomatic but one option among many. He introduces two key concepts in his work to explain the postsecular subjectivity: "*immanent frame*" and "*cross pressures*" (Taylor 543, 299). The "*immanent frame*" refers to a worldview in which meaning, order, and significance are understood within the bounds of natural or empirical reality (Taylor 543). It frames human experience in terms of what can be observed and explained without reference to transcendence or metaphysical forces. Within this frame religious belief does not disappear but is repositioned among others, and existing alongside secular explanations of life and morality. Taylor argues that modern individuals live within what he calls the "*immanent frame*," a conceptual space where interpretations of life and meaning are derived from this-worldly perspectives rather than from a transcendent source. However, even within this frame, individuals often remain attuned to a "sense of something more,"—a longing that points to the persistence of religious or spiritual dimensions within a secular context (Taylor 543). It is this tension between immanence and transcendence that postsecular subjectivity takes shape: the subject may operate within a secular order while simultaneously being moved by a residual or reconfigured sense of the sacred.

“Cross pressures,” another key concept of postsecular subjectivity Taylor proposes, describe the condition of individuals who experience simultaneous pulls toward belief and unbelief (Taylor 299-302). It captures the tension between the yearning for transcendence and the dominance of the immanent frame. In such a landscape, people find themselves caught between competing impulses: the spiritual desire for meaning beyond material life and the rationalist, secular orientation of modern society. This fosters a sense of instability, where belief becomes a matter of personal struggle and existential negotiation. In Taylor’s terms: “We are all cross-pressured, at least those of us whose imaginations are alive, whose moral intuitions haven’t been ground down. We feel the pull of transcendence and the pressures of immanence, and cannot but feel the force of both” (Taylor 727). Taylor’s concept of the immanent frame and cross pressures emphasize that the modern condition is not one of pure secularity but of constant negotiation. While immanent frame sets the structural boundary of modern thought, cross pressures describe the lived experience of navigating those boundaries. Taylor’s concept of immanent frame and cross-pressures provide a postsecularist concept for interpreting how queer literature reflects and refracts the ongoing tension between the secular and the religious.

This conceptual formulation is further developed by Jürgen Habermas, who conceptualizes the postsecularism not as a regression into religious orthodoxy, but as a dialogical condition in which both religious and secular must learn to coexist through mutual translation and understanding. In his essay, *Notes on a Post-Secular Society*, published in 2008, Habermas contends the idea that modern democratic societies should remain open to the truth content of religious traditions, even if they are interpreted within a secular context. Far from endorsing a simple return to religious authority, Habermas reconfigures the relationship between religion and reason, proposing a normative framework in which religious and secular discourses must coexist within the public sphere. Contrary to the secularization assumption, which proposes religion’s gradual disappearance with modernization, Habermas argues that religion remains

relevant even in secular world. His postsecularism calls for a dialectical reconfiguration of public discourse, wherein the secular and the religious are not adversaries but interlocutors. From Charles Taylor and Jürgen Habermas's perspectives, postsecular subjectivity is marked by a reflexive capacity to hold both religious belief as well as secular rationality. It is best understood that postsecular subjectivity is not reducible to a vague form of spirituality, nor it is synonymous with religious syncretism. Rather, it signals a critical and historically situated engagement with religious discourse that neither idealizes the past nor completely breaks from it. In other words, postsecular subjectivity acknowledges the lasting influence of theological narratives even as it is reinterpreted or contested. As such, the postsecular subject is often caught between competing authorities but one that continually negotiates their position across these axes. Their conception suggests a new arrangement of ethical, political, and existential life, where secular and religious sensibilities are in productive tension.

In literary representation, postsecular subjectivity in queer fictions often emerges through processes of conflict, ambivalence, and transformation. Such narratives frequently center on characters shaped by rigid religious traditions who subsequently undergo personal crises of faith, yet do not always arrive at a complete renunciation of religion or religious ideology. Instead, these characters often reconfigure inherited spiritual concepts such as grace, redemption, and transcendence within new ethical, existential, or humanistic frameworks. This continuous negotiation between belief and unbelief is dramatized through characters' interior struggles, moral dilemmas, and spiritual searching. Literary texts engaging with postsecular queer themes further resist the reductive binary of religion versus secularism, choosing instead to explore moral complexity by drawing from both spiritual and rational sources. These works are often characterized by a deliberate ambiguity between belief and doubt, a persistent strong spiritual yearning untethered from institutional affiliation, and an ongoing moral inquiry in the absence of absolute authority. Within such texts, irony and sincerity also frequently coexist to

show how faith and doubt are not mutually exclusive but rather constitute the lived tension at the heart of contemporary subjectivity.

In *Partial Faiths: Post Secular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*, John A. McClure offers a nuanced understanding of how contemporary literature engages with postsecular themes in ways that depart from traditional theological structures. He argues that postsecular fiction “do not ascribe ‘transcendence authority’ to an omnipotent divinity or proffer a set of ostensibly divine pronouncement...and they do not invite the religious subject to define himself in any unqualified way... They suggest instead that the extraordinary does not speak in the totalizing language of dogmatic theology” (McClure 16-17). McClure’s assertion highlights a critical shift in the literary imagination—from viewing religion as a fixed metaphysical system to understanding it as grappling with the complexities of human experience. It reflects a cultural landscape where traditional religious authority has weakened, but the longing for transcendence and spiritual meaning persists. McClure’s intervention is particularly vital in situating postsecularism not as a regression into religious orthodoxy, but as a reconfiguration of the spiritual imagination. Indeed, many contemporary works of fiction—ranging from the magical realism of Toni Morrison to the speculative narratives of Garrad Conley and Mohsin Zaidi—enact what McClure calls partial faiths: incomplete, non-totalizing gestures toward the sacred that coexist with secular critique. These texts evoke the divine not to affirm orthodoxy, but to question its absence, and to consider what it means to live ethically in a world perceived as spiritually fractured. Postsecular queer fiction, as such, does not abandon the religious, however, it calls into question of meaning-making in an era marked by pluralism, skepticism, and moral uncertainty. McClure’s theoretical frameworks provide greater understanding of the genre of emerging trends in literary research.

5.2 Charles Taylor Concept of Postsecularism in Garrad Conley’s *Boy Erased*

A. Closed Immanent Frame

In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor articulates the concept of the “*immanent frame*” to describe the epistemic conditions that structure modern Western secular societies. According to Taylor, the immanent frame is the cultural, intellectual, and social context in which human experience is interpreted through naturalistic and within worldly context, without reference to any transcendence reality. It is through this “constructed social space” where meaning, and value are grounded within the bounds of reason and individual self-understanding, rather than derived from a divine or metaphysical source (Taylor 543). According to Taylor: “We live in a constructed social space that frames our lives entirely within a natural or immanent order” (Taylor 543). But this does not necessarily eliminate belief in the divine, however, a change in the nature of belief itself: faith becomes a subject to personal choice. In other words, immanent frame is not explicitly atheist, but it functions in a way that does not require reference to the divine. According to Taylor, there are two types of immanent frame: *closed immanent frame*, and *open immanent frame*. Within *closed immanent frame*, the world is understood as self-sufficient, and meaning is contained within a fixed, transcendental order and belief. *Open immanent frame* stands in contrast with *closed immanent frame*, as it allows for the possibility of spiritual meaning beyond immanent life. Taylor emphasizes that the immanent frame does not function merely as a negative space left by the retreat of religion; rather, it focuses on how it shapes the modern moral order. Belief and unbelief become equally available and contestable options in a disenchanted world. Taylor’s immanent frame becomes a critical analytic tool for examining how each individuals navigate existential questions in a disenchanted world, and for understanding the cultural persistence of spiritual longing in literature, philosophy, and contemporary life.

Garrad Conley’s *Boy Erased* stages a conflict of *open immanent frame* and *closed immanent frame*. Garrad’s father serves as a literary and ideological figure that embodies what Charles

Taylor terms the *closed immanent frame*—a worldview in which meaning is contained within a fixed, transcendental order and belief. As a Baptist minister, Garrad’s father is portrayed as deeply invested in a rigid theological system that resists complexity, ambiguity, and emotional openness. His religious identity and views are not presented as fluid or that can be personally negotiated, but as stable and absolute, premised on the authority of scripture and the institutional church. Garrad’s father’s fixed moral structures operates as a *closed immanent frame*, within which any deviation—particularly Garrad’s queerness—is understood not as a legitimate difference, but as a moral aberration requiring spiritual correction. One key instance in the novel that illustrates this occurs when Garrad discloses his sexual orientation. His father’s immediate reaction is to send Garrad to the Love in Action (LIA) program, a conversion therapy that seeks to restore conformity with a religious ideal. This response reveals Garrad’s father’s theological convictions and his inability to imagine a form of faith that could accommodate alternative sexual subjectivities. It signals an allegiance to a worldview in which spiritual truth must be externally imposed and morally regulated, rather than discovered through lived experience. Garrad’s father’s ideology substantiate Taylor’s definition of the *closed immanent frame* as one that “offers no openings to the transcendence beyond” and secures meaning through “the sense of a cosmic order” (Taylor 549).

Moreover, the father’s limited emotional vocabulary and reliance on religious platitudes further reveal the affective contours of the *closed immanent frame*. He often refrains from expressing personal doubt or emotional nuance, instead relying on doctrinal phrases and moral injunctions to interpret his son’s experiences. In one scene, when dropping Garrad off at the conversion center, his farewell is marked by a brief blessing. This reinforces a vision of faith that is not dialogical or open to reinterpretation, but structured through ritualistic authority and emotional detachment. Even toward the end of the novel, when Garrad tries to distance himself from the Love in Action (LIA) program and embrace a more complex understanding of identity and

belief, his father remains unable to move beyond his theological commitments. Though he expresses love for his son, he maintains the belief that homosexuality is a sin—a position that encapsulates the residual inflexibility of the *closed frame*. His failure to understand Garrad's identity is predicated on a continued commitment to religious orthodoxy, which further highlight the limitation of the *closed immanent frame* in reconciling with lived experience. Garrad's father's role in the novel functions as a caricature of the *closed immanent frame*—a figure who reflects the strong upholding a monolithic religious worldview within a pluralistic and postsecular context.

Further illustrating this *closed immanent frame* in the novel is the projection of the Love in Action (LIA), a queer conversion therapy program. Within the context of the novel, LIA forbids all the possibility of transcendence or spiritual ambiguity is foreclosed by an all-encompassing moral regime that dictates what counts as salvation. It is a program governed by a rigid dichotomy between purity and deviance, and it requires total submission to its Christian theological and behavioral codes. This structure mirrors Taylor's vision of a *closed immanent frame* that "rejects any possibility of transcendence and insists on a human order that must be disciplined and purified from within" (Taylor 542). In the novels, participants registered under this program are subjected to a range of programs—from brief two-week evaluations to year-long residencies—ostensibly to "create distance from unhealthy influences" (Conley 22). Such distance is not just physical but epistemological: it entails a complete cut-off from the cultural and affective attachments that might otherwise nourish complexity or doubt. This includes rejection of secular media, cell phones, and participants are required to abandon everything except the Bible and the program's handbook. Secular literature like *Harry Potter* or classical music are also prohibited, deemed by LIA leaders as dangerous seductions of the soul. Conley recounts how his instructor at LIA, John Smith, would often declare: "You can't be gay and be a Christian. You have to choose one" (Conley 18). This framing brings spiritual identity to a

binary logic and forecloses the possibility of reconciling queerness with belief in Christian context. In Taylorian terms, this exemplifies the authoritarian closure beyond the transcendence. Love in Action reproduces the logic of a Taylor's concept of *closed immanent frame* by bringing spiritual life to behavioral conformity and moral discipline. As Charles Taylor marked, the *closed immanent frame* is marked by "a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing" (Taylor 18).

What emerges is a spiritual logic that equates salvation with total withdrawal from the outside world. For instance, former patients who now serve as staff at LIA underscore this recursive structure—choosing to remain inside the facility rather than integrate into secular society. Garrad's enrollment into this program is to make his sexuality (queerness) straight, free from external influences. Taylor argues that the closed immanent frame thrives on such enclosures, where belief is protected from other secular and social settings (Taylor 556). This theological determinism is evident in Conley's own internalization of guilt around his queer desire. As Garrad reflects: "LIA lingo had already taken up permanent residence in my thoughts, and I had no room for the habitual comforts that usually quieted my mind and made the world seem like a normal place" (Conley 83). In another scene, he confesses that he had "allowed secular influences" to lead him away from Christian teachings, and recounts how his earliest same-sex attractions were entangled with his love of literature: "*Sideways Stories from Wayside School*: first gay crush; *To Kill a Mockingbird*: first gay porn search; *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; first gay kiss" (Conley 82). Secular literature becomes a site of both desire and deviance within the closed immanent frame, marking Conley as impure. Within this *closed immanent frame*, there is no room for ambiguity and integration of other factors. Love in Action program represents not as an open toward spiritual encounter but a totalizing moral enclosure—what Charles Taylor mentioned closed immanent frame.

B. Open Immanent Frame

While the Love in Action program and Garrad's father operates firmly within what Charles Taylor defines as a *closed immanent frame*, the novel, on the other side, reveals Garrad's emotional complexity and spiritual ambivalence toward this structure. Charles Taylor calls this an *open immanent frame*, wherein the possibility of transcendence is not foreclosed and leaves room for contestability while being aware of its belief. In this framework, belief is no longer the default; it is one possibility among others. In *Boy Erased*, despite the LIA program's rigid boundaries and moral certainties, Garrad's narrative retrospection articulates an inner voice that subtly resists its totalizing logic. His emotional response to the program reflects the existential inadequacy of the *closed immanent frame*: "Certainly not cured, but no longer filled with the sins I'd kept secret for so long. Yet rather than feeling relieved, I felt—what, exactly? My guilt and fear had all but disappeared in only a matter of days, replaced by what I could only describe as Nothing" (Conley 137). Garrad's reflection upon the absence of guilt does not reflect moral liberation but rather an emotional void—the psychological cost of submitting to a closed structure. Charles Taylor's concept of the *closed immanent frame*, which refers to a worldview in which transcendence is sealed off, and all meaning is generated from within a self-enclosed moral universe. In this context, Garrad's experience of "Nothing" reflects the vacuum left by compliance.

As Charles Taylor articulates, the *open immanent frame* allows the possibility of transcendence not through institutional or doctrinal authority, but through personal, lived experience. Garrad, rather than rejecting faith entirely, he gestures toward a more expansive and emotionally authentic spirituality. His ambivalence toward Love in Action (LIA) program does not signify an outright rejection of faith, but as a search for meaning that cannot be contained within closed immanent frame. As Charles Taylor further elaborates, the *open immanent frame* is characterized by recognition and awareness that, even in a disenchanted world, the possibility

of transcendence persists through individual experience rather than imposed belief system. Garrad's gradual disengagement from the program's coercive structure and his movement toward a more self-determined form of spiritual inquiry exemplifies this conceptual framework. His confession: "I didn't know what I believed. I only knew that I had to believe in something else, something kinder, something that didn't make me disappear," epitomizes this transition (Conley 209). Garrad's resistance can be read as a shift toward what Charles Taylor calls an *open immanent frame*, wherein transcendence is sought not through institutional mechanisms but through an authentic and personal spiritual engagement.

This conception of the *open immanent frame* becomes especially resonant in moments where, as Taylor notes, "people feel a lack, a sense that something is missing, even if they can't say what it is—a yearning for something more" (Taylor 6). In *Boy Erased*, this yearning embodied in Conley's search for a form of belief that does not demand rigid conformity but instead allows for ambiguity, self-integrity, and emotional truth. The Love in Action (LIA) program seeks to correct Garrad's queer desire or identity by reinstituting the authority of a closed transcendence frame, one grounded in external dogma and institutional doctrine. Initially, Garrad struggles to fully comprehend the mechanisms of this structure and the ways in which it attempts to erase his subjectivity. However, this dissonance does not culminate in a rejection of faith or a return to atheism. Rather, it initiates a reconfiguration of belief—one that relocates spirituality within the self and aligns with Taylor's postsecular vision of an *open immanent frame*. Garrad reflects: "Maybe we were meant to be cured. Maybe we were meant to find new ways of living with ourselves, new prayers, new ways of being holy" (Conley 218). This reflection underscores a move away from externally imposed salvation toward a lived, evolving spiritual possibility. Belief or faith, in this framework, is neither abolished nor unquestioned; it is reimagined as an internal, dynamic, and personal experience of meaning-making.

Another pivotal moment in *Boy Erased* occurs when Conley is asked to complete a “Forgiveness Exercise,” which requires him to list the individual “responsible for your sinful condition,” prompting him to consider writing his father’s name (Conley 176). Conley’s refusal: “I stared at the blank space... If I wrote his name down, I would be lying,” is an ethically charged act that signals not a rejection of forgiveness or spiritual practice per se, but a resistance to a ritual that distorts emotional and moral truth (Conley 177). This moment illustrates Taylor’s concept of the open immanent frame, wherein the sacred is not externally imposed but “sought and sense” through personal experience and ethical reflection (Taylor 768). Conely, rather than submitting to a *closed immanent frame*, he enacts a spiritual that values sincerity and emotional fidelity. This spiritual openness is further exemplified in his longing for a more compassionate and authentic form of belief: “I didn’t know what I believed. I only knew that I had to believe in something else, something kinder, something that didn’t make me disappear” (Conley 209). Such uncertainty does not signal a loss of spirituality, but rather the emergence of a form of belief grounded in personal conscience and lived experience. Conely’s evolving spiritual subjectivity thus exemplifies the postsecular condition, where belief is no longer passively inherited but actively reimagined as an intimate, morally responsive engagement with the world.

While the Love in Action (LIA) program enforces a closed immanent frame—one that demands submission to a rigid and institutionalized form of religious truth—Conely’s ambivalent response to this structure reveals a shift toward an open immanent frame. His queerness does not negate the possibility of religious belief but reorients it as a matter of personal choice rather than imposed doctrine. Within this framework, faith, in *Boy Erased* becomes an individualized and ethically informed engagement rather than a fixed orthodoxy. The novel affirms a postsecular queer narrative, in the sense that, Garrad’s queer identity does not survive in spite of religion, but through a reimagined belief system rooted in personal integrity, narrative

healing, and the refusal to disappear or abandon spiritual meaning. Garrad Conley's *Boy Erased* resists binary opposition: it neither collapses into a closed religious worldview nor wholly embraces disenchanted secularism. It bears witness to the ambivalence, fragility, and ongoing negotiation of belief in the postsecular condition. Garrad's spiritual journey thus exemplifies the affective texture of living in an *open immanent frame*—one in which the divine is not absent or rejected but rather diffused, questioned, and continually reimagined through the lens of lived experience.

C. Cross Pressures

“God has no time for anyone but a plain dealer. Speak your mind, and speak it clearly. “There is no neutral...No gray area. No in-betweens”” (Conley 36).

Charles Taylor introduces the theoretical concept of *cross pressures* in *A Secular Age* to describe the existential and intellectual tensions experienced by individuals caught between competing impulses: the disenchantment of a purely secular worldview and a lingering or resurgent yearning for transcendence (Taylor 299-302). Modern individuals often find themselves pulled in opposing directions—between belief and doubt, faith and skepticism—resulting in a deeply felt instability of meaning. Even those committed to secular or scientific worldviews may, in moments of existential crisis, find themselves drawn toward religious or spiritual questions (Taylor 594). Taylor observes that “people are often tempted by unbelief, and yet they feel the pull of a longing for something more, something beyond” (Taylor 302).

In Taylor words:

People feel the draw of narratives of closed immanence, of a world without transcendence; and yet the disengaged, disenchanted world seems at times desperately flat, empty, meaningless. The malaise of immanence grows... We feel the cross pressure between the draw of transcendence and the drive to close it off. (Taylor 303)

This concept is central to postsecular subjectivity, where individuals experience belief not as certainty but as struggle—a continuous negotiation between the desire for transcendence and the rationalist dominance of the immanent frame. Contemporary literature, particularly postsecular queer fiction, often captures these *cross pressures* by portraying characters caught in the tension between secular norms and spiritual longings. Garrad Conley’s *Boy Erased* offers a striking example. The novel illustrates a subjectivity fractured by these very forces, where belief, identity, and desire become battlegrounds of inner conflict. As Taylor puts it: “We are all cross-pressured, at least those of us whose imaginations are alive, whose moral intuitions haven’t been ground down. We feel the pull of transcendence and the pressures of immanence, and cannot but feel the force of both” (Taylor 727).

One of the clearest expressions of cross pressures in *Boy Erased* emerges when Conley is confronted with stark binary options: “Both sides seemed to suggest that same efficient solution: cut ties. Either abandon what you’ve known your entire life and your family, or abandon what you’re learning about life and new ideas” (Conley 165). This symbolizes the existential strain that Charles Taylor identifies as *cross pressures* in a postsecular age. These pressures arise from the modern subject’s embeddedness in a world where multiple and conflicting worldviews compete for allegiance. In Garrad’s case, these pressures manifest through the polarizing demands of two seemingly irreconcilable value systems: the conservative evangelical worldview he was raised in (represented in *closed immanent frame*), and the emergent secular knowledge and experience of his queer identity (represented in *open immanent frame*). This binary, which Garrad is pressured to resolve reflects the modern condition of belief that Taylor describes as *cross pressures*. In earlier epochs, belief was embedded in a shared metaphysical order, where one worldview was largely uncontested and inherited. In contrast, the modern self, inhabits a landscape in which belief and unbelief challenge one another, not only intellectually but existentially. Conley’s crisis is not merely one

of ambivalent toward theological or personal identity, but of ontological conflict—where the meaning of life, love, and belonging is caught between mutually exclusive narratives.

Garrad's state underscores the emotional and relational cost of these *cross pressures*. The phrase "cut ties" implies that belief or identity cannot be negotiated without sacrifice (Conley 165). Garrad bears witness to the painful process of navigating in-between spaces. His refusal to choose either family or complete suppression of his queerness indicates the impossibility of resolution that defines postsecular subjectivity. In Taylor's terms, this is the space where the modern believer exists: always haunted by other possibilities, never fully at rest in one worldview. Moreover, the idea that both sides demand the same thing reflects the ideological rigidity of both religious and secular individualism. As the cross pressured subject does not fit easily and must therefore construct a way of living that refuses total submission, Garrad's awareness of all these fails him to accommodate either side of the complexity. His skepticism exemplifies the postsecular individuals who are not liberated from belief, but caught in a condition where belief is constantly challenged, and reconstructed. The impossibility of wholly aligning with either pole—religious or secular—is central to Garrad's condition. As Taylor argues, modern belief is always subject to *cross pressures*, shaped by the awareness of alternative. Garrad is torn between pursuing his queer identity and preserving the religious belief that forms the foundation of his familial and moral identity. This tension is not merely cognitive but deeply affective, shaped by the simultaneous pull of spiritual longing and self-awareness. Even as Garrad begins to question the dogmas of his upbringing, he cannot extricate himself from the spiritual uphold. His internalized religiosity persists in his daily life through habitual prayers. Phrases such as "*Lord, make me pure,*" "*Please-help-me-to-be-pure*" and "*Make me pure*" recur throughout the novel (Conley 9, 220, 221). Taylor notes that even in secular contexts, individuals often feel "haunted" by the sacred, unable to fully suppress the longing for divine assurance (Taylor 728, 729). Garrad's prayers are both a resistance to and a

reproduction of the norms that constrain him. These practices are not simply remnants of a past self but ongoing negotiations within open immanent frame.

The complexity of *cross pressures* is further embodied during Garrad's medical examination. When Garrad undergoes hormonal testing, he is suddenly reminded of the Eucharist—the taste of bread on his tongue symbolizing the Body of Christ, and the grape juice symbolizing the Blood (Conley 260). This recollection intertwines a scientific procedure with the sacred imagery of Christian ritual. Charles Taylor's concept of the “nova effect”—a proliferation of spiritual and moral options in the modern age—helps elucidate how Garrad's body becomes a site where cross pressures are both enacted and felt (Taylor 299). The religious and secular do not cancel each other out, but they coexist and compete in the interpretive frame of the subject. In this moment, Garrad is neither fully within the domain of science nor wholly returned to faith, but he experiences what Taylor calls cross pressures from both sides. This overlapping is further complicated by Garrad's brief but significant friendship with Caleb, whose exposure to art and intellectual openness challenges the rigidity of Garrad's faith. When Caleb questions about the existence of God, Garrad feels the need to defend his God, and even considers correcting Caleb—“within that delirious second I considered trying to convert Caleb... My mother wouldn't have to tick any more boxes” (Conley 309). We see the persistence of evangelical frameworks even within Garrad's confusion state about his identity and belief. Garrad's impulse to correct and convert Caleb, even in a moment of sexual and emotional wakening, underscores the deep embedding of religious logic within his moral and emotional imagination. The scene underscores how competing logics—the evangelical imperative and queer desire—collide without resolution.

The memoir's complexity of *cross pressures* is best reflected in Conley's reflection: “After nineteen years with God's voice buzzing around in my head twenty-four hours a day, how am I supposed to walk around without His constant assurance?” (Conley 223). Region has not

simply been a belief system but a totalizing structure of affect, identity, and reality. Garrad's eventual distancing from the Love in Action (LIA) program does not lead to a rejection of faith but a rearticulation of it—a move toward a more open, less doctrinaire spiritual posture. His journey illustrates the emotional and intellectual labor of living with cross pressures, where neither belief nor unbelief can offer complete resolution. Garrad's journey exemplifies what Charles Taylor says about modern men, who must navigate between a closed world that no longer satisfies and an open one that offers no certainties (Taylor 543-544).

5.3 Charles Taylor's Concept of Postsecularism Mohsin Zaidi's *A Dutiful Boy*

A. Closed Immanent Frame

“Before, I was two people. Now I was one but living in two worlds...It was like passing each other on adjacent escalators, moving in opposing directions” (Zaidi 218).

Charles Taylor introduces the concept of the immanent frame to describe the modern condition in which belief and meaning are increasingly understood within worldly structure. While this frame can be open to transcendence, allowing individuals to search for meaning beyond secular or material boundaries, it can also manifest in a closed structure: rigid, absolute, and impermeable to alternate ways of being (Taylor 542-543). The *closed immanent frame* is marked by certainty and moral enclosure, leaving little space for ambiguity, doubt, or the integration of divergent identities. Mohsin Zaidi's *A Dutiful Boy* provides a compelling narrative of what it means to grow up within such a frame. His early life in a devout Muslim household, shaped by strict religious education and powerful communal expectations, illustrates a world where belief is not a matter of individual reflection but a totalizing structure that encompasses law, identity, and affect. Zaidi's portrayal of his family, religious tradition, and community reflects the contours of Taylor's *closed immanent frame*—a worldview where

all meaning is fixed, where difference is pathologized, and where sexuality, in particular, is seen as incompatible with spiritual longing.

From the opening pages of *A Dutiful Boy*, Zaidi positions Islam not simply as a set of theological doctrines, but as a total cultural, and moral universe—a structure that governs identity, time, language, and even deviation. As he writes early in the narratives:

To me, Shia Islam was not just a religion. It was not simply a set of rules. And it was not a belief. Like other religions it was an all-encompassing world, into which I was born. With its own history, its own calendar, its own food, clothes, tradition, books, maths, laws and even its own deviants. (Zaidi 6)

This statement encapsulates the depth of immersion within the religious frame. Islam, within the context of this novel, is not optional or external; it is ontological, shaping the very coordinates of reality. The detailed enumeration of its domain—calendar, laws, mathematics, and even the designation of “deviants”—illustrates how the frame functions as a total cultural imaginary that organizes time, knowledge, and moral order (Zaidi 6). Most importantly, this framing of Islam resists a liberal, compartmentalized view of religion as private or purely spiritual. It functions as a totalizing regime of truth in the Foucauldian sense—producing subjectivity through discourse, discipline, and expectation. The *closed immanent frame*, in Taylor’s terms, is often sustained by such tightly bound communities where religious and cultural values are continuously reinforced through rituals, familial duties, and social surveillance. Zaidi’s recounting of his early Quranic education offers a prime example of this: “eight years after starting Quran classes at the age of seven, I had finally finished reading the holy book and could not stop the daily post-school ritual. I could now read ancient Arabic fluently” (Zaidi 51). This moment indicates the ritual discipline that naturalizes the closed structure by habituating the subject to its rhythms.

Within this closed moral cosmos, the emergence of Zaidi's queer desire represents not only Zaidi's personal identity crisis but the closed immanent rupture. The closed immanent frame, as Taylor's explains, leaves little or no space for negotiation or ambiguity. Zaidi's internal turmoil reflects precisely this tension. He confesses, "I couldn't bring myself to use the word 'gay' when talking to Allah or his messengers. My thoughts were desperate and incoherent" (Zaidi 53). This inability to even name his sexuality reveals how deeply incompatible queerness is within this closed structure. His desire has no place in the moral vocabulary he has inherited; it is neither legible nor expressible within the confines of his religious worldview. In fact, Zaidi's emerging queer desire and identity is framed as a divinely imposed test, a spiritual trail to be overcome through denial and submission. Zaidi writes,

To Muslims, life is a test and your behaviour determines whether you go to heaven or hell. Some are tested by poverty, others by having too much. Some by the sudden death of their children, or illness. Some by temptation. Sinful lust was my test. It was a blessing really, preferable to other possibilities. All I had to do was refrain from thought or action that defied the teachings of the Quran, and take positive steps in the opposite direction. (Zaidi 53)

This framing transforms his identity into a moral problem to be solved within the closed structure, and not a legitimate expression of selfhood. Within this context, his queerness is not only discouraged, but is theologized as temptation, evidence of spiritual weakness, and a threat to the cosmic order. Within such a closed immanent frame, Zaidi's agency is limited. His most desperate act of offering to sacrifice his entry into Oxford admission in exchange for divine deliverance from his emerging sexuality exemplifies the extent to which his subjectivity has been determined within this closed structure: "I also asked Allah, daily, to take away my place at Oxford in exchange for a cure of my homosexuality" (Zaidi 78). Zaidi's prayer, thus,

articulates a closed structure as one that leaves no conceptual space outside itself, a world where belief is inherited and not questioned, where deviation from it is morally unintelligible.

Mohsin Zaidi presents his father as a perfect caricature of the closed immanent frame, embodying the deeply entrenched religious, cultural, and moral codes that govern Zaidi's early life. Characters enclosed within this structure are immune to pluralistic worldview, and all meaning, morality, and identity are contained within a self-sufficient moral order. Zaidi's father is presented as someone who does not merely participate in this framework, but someone who upholds and performs it through his rigid adherence to religious discipline and emotional restraint. Zaidi characterizes his father as "a devout, proud and reserved man," whose seriousness and moral rectitude are inseparable from his identity as a Muslim patriarch: "He laugh openly with his sons, his wife and some of his friends, but to the rest of the world, he was a serious Muslim father and husband. Concepts such as respect and honour were fundamental to him" (Zaidi 193). He is depicted not as cruel or authoritarian, however, his power lies in his quiet enforcement of moral laws and certainties. Unlike Zaidi's mother, who struggles more emotionally with her son's sexuality, the father responds with stoic detachment reinforcing the moral immobility of the closed frame. During the whole turmoil of Zaidi's sexuality conversation, he neither engages in dialogue nor offers reconciliation. His silence becomes a form of judgement, an absence that speaks to the impossibility of bridging the gulf between Zaidi's queerness and the family's moral universe. During the course of the novel, Zaidi's father becomes not just a participant in the closed immanent frame but a caricature of inner logic as well: emotionally reserved, publicly respectable, and morally immovable. His character represents how religious orthodoxy, and cultural and religious conformity converge into a totalizing structure that leaves no conceptual or emotional room for alternative forms of life. As Zaidi seeks to escape this closed structure and discover a new

ethical horizon, his father stands as a fixed point—a symbol of everything that must be left behind to imagine queerness as possible.

On the other side, Zaidi's mother emerges as a powerful emotional force within the family, yet one deeply shaped by the uncompromising logic of the closed immanent frame. Her worldview structured by religious ethos, and cultural codes renders her unable to accept her son's queerness. Drawing upon Charles Taylor's theory of the *closed immanent frame*, where meaning is structured entirely within inherited moral order, Zaidi's mother may be read as a caricature of this closure, who is emotionally expressive but epistemically and morally confined (Taylor 539). Zaidi's earliest recollections of his mother portray her as the emotional and moral nucleus of the family, whose love is inextricably tied to religious fidelity. He writes:

In the solar system of my family, my mum was the sun yet I couldn't feel her warmth because her light did not reach me, could not reach me. My sexuality offended her deeply and so, by extension, did I... She was meant to protect her son from the monsters but she had turned me into one instead (Zaidi 221-222).

Zaidi's mother, though central and luminous in the moral world of the family, she cannot offer warmth to a son whose very being violates the integrity of the moral order she believes in. Her rejection is not rooted in hatred but in a tragic loyalty to a framework that cannot accommodate queer existence. Within the Taylorian concept of *closed immanent frame*, Zaidi's mother represents this structure at its most intense, who is unable to imagine other alternatives. Her perception of morality remains static and inherited, not subject to re-evaluation in light of lived experience. Even toward the end of the novel, when Zaidi has begun to form a new life outside the constraints of his upbringing, his mother remains unmoved by the possibility of reconciliation between religion and identity. As she declares, "I love my son but I was raised to believe this is wrong. I know none of you are Muslim but I think your religious might say

similar things, and if they don't, then our culture does, doesn't it?" (Zaidi 233). This passage exemplifies the tenacity of the closed frame, which persists even in the face of emotional suffering and social transformation. Zaidi's mother, then, does not simply reflect the closed frame, however, she personifies its affective and moral structure. Her inability to reconcile love for her son with acceptance of his identity illustrates Taylor's claim that, within the closed frame, belief is not merely a matter of doctrine but of existential coherence: the world must make sense according to inherited terms, or risk becoming unlivable (Taylor 549). Zaidi's mother, much like his father, serves as a caricature of the closed immanent frame, foreclosing empathy in favour of inherited certainty.

B. Open Immanent Frame

While secularization does not eliminate belief, it also alters its structure, in the sense that, belief becomes one possibility among many, and is no longer the default. Within this landscape, Charles Taylor introduces the concept of the *open immanent frame*, which leaves room for experiences and intuitions that point beyond the purely material. The *open immanent frame* is a site of possibility, ambiguity, and spiritual searching in a disenchanted world. Mohsin Zaidi's *A Dutiful Boy* offers a compelling illustration of how the open immanent frame emerges through queer postsecular subjectivity. While the earlier sections are marked by the constraints of a closed immanent frame—rooted in religious orthodoxy, family expectation, and cultural silence—Zaidi's education at Oxford and his movement to secular Western spaces initiate a process of existential expansion. These moments do not abandon faith or tradition entirely, but rather, reconfigure belief within a pluralistic and self-reflexive context. Zaidi's experience thus illustrates Charles Taylor's insight that "our age is very far from settling into a comfortable unbelief. The secular world is haunted by its own closures" (Taylor 727). The elements of closed immanent frame in Zaidi's *A Dutiful Boy* shall be traced showing how Zaidi's education, migration, and self-articulation foster a new terrain for meaning and selfhood.

Zaidi's entrance into Oxford University marks a pivotal turning point in *A Dutiful Boy*, symbolizing a departure not only from the geographic and social confines of his working-class Muslim upbringing, but from deeply closed moral and epistemic world that had previously structured his sense of self and possibility. Prior to his departure, Zaidi's identity, as discussed, had been shaped by rigid binaries—Muslim or gay, dutiful son or deviant outsider—with no room for negotiation or ambivalence. Within this space, belief is not just normative—it is unquestioned, embedded in the very fabric of identity and community. Oxford, by contrast, offers a radically epistemic landscape. While initially overwhelmed by this new setting, it gradually emerges as a space of cultural, intellectual, and ethical expansion. Zaidi writes: “At Oxford I was bowled over by new ideas and experiences... I seemed like a gregarious and intellectually curious young man, hungry to see what this unfamiliar environment could offer” (Zaidi 111). This is more than a moment of cultural shock or academic awakening; it signals a structural shift in the condition of belief and identity. In Taylorian terms, Oxford initiates Zaidi's movement from a closed to an open immanent frame—a condition where religious and moral authority is no longer absolute but subject to reflection, critique, and reconfiguration. The open frame does not necessitate disbelief; rather, it introduces a fragility and contingency to belief, forcing the subject to engage it as a matter of personal conviction rather than inherited certainty (Taylor 543).

Oxford is not just a place of elite academic training but a cultural and imaginative frontier, where previously unthinkable forms of life are encountered and questioned. It functions as what Taylor calls an open immanent frame, a space where divergent worldviews coexist and unsettle one another. And for Zaidi, it becomes a cultural and imaginative frontier, where he is confronted not only with new ideas but with new modes of being—queer lives, liberal secularism, racialized privilege, and critical reflexivity. These encounters do not lead to a rejection of Islam or his cultural roots, but they begin to destabilize the absoluteness of the

moral framework or open immanent structure in which he was raised. In fact, Zaidi continues to cling to Islam, not out of obligation but in search of comfort and meaning: “I clung to Islam in my search for relief” (Zaidi 83). This signals a postsecular subjectivity, where belief is not simply discarded but reformulated in the wake of exposure to pluralism. Zaidi’s entry into Oxford, in this sense, does not function merely as a social mobility or cultural capital, but as a spiritual and ethical provocation. It opens up what Taylor refers to as “the sense that there is something more” (Taylor 726). Oxford becomes a liminal space—a threshold through which Zaidi begins to question not only the external authorities that once governed him but also his own internalized assumptions.

Geographic displacement in *A Dutiful Boy* is not simply a narrative of physical relocation but a profound reconfiguration of Zaidi’s moral, emotional, and ontological landscape. His movements—from his East London home to Oxford, then to Amsterdam, and later to the United States—function as pivotal narrative and symbolic acts that enable a transformation of the self. These movements correspond to Charles Taylor’s theorization of how spatial structures shape the conditions of belief. In Taylor’s framework, the *closed immanent frame* is often buttressed by spatial enclosures: tight-knit families, religious communities, and cultural institutions that resist heterogeneity and reinforce a single dominant worldview. In such enclosed spaces, belief and identity are often presented as singular, absolute, and non-negotiable. Zaidi’s early life is marked by this kind of spatial closure. The home, the mosque, and the South Asian Muslim community in East London are portrayed as sites of cultural density and moral certainty, a space where deviation, especially issues surrounding sexuality, is unthinkable. Within these enclosures, he is presented as the dutiful son, the devout Muslim, and the complaint child. The initial rupture occurs when Zaidi returns to Oxford for his second year. Significantly, his motivation is not framed in terms of intellectual ambition but ethical and emotional escape:

Returning to Oxford for my second year was about escaping my parents, rather than realizing academic ambition; this felt very clear. I was very far away from them now I wasn't sure I'd ever make it back. The path behind me was light years away and the one in front uncharted. (Zaidi 134)

The above passage signifies more than a moment of physical separation; it marks a transition from an enclosed moral world to an emergent and open space. The metaphor of the “uncharted” path reflects an orientation toward an unknown, the refusal of prescribed identities, and the tentative shaping of selfhood through movement (Zaidi 134). This movement illustrates the opening of the open immanent frame, where belief is no longer inherited or enforces but becomes something the subject must negotiate in light of new experiences and inner demands. The spatial metaphor extends into a moral horizon, where the “light years away” evokes both temporal and emotional distance from the past, as well as a rupture in the narrative logic of Zaidi's earlier life. This uncharted path is not simply a break from religion or family but a movement into the ethical unknown. Zaidi's later travel to Amsterdam and his move to the United States continue this trajectory. When he writes, “As I sped through the Eurotunnel, en route to Amsterdam to start the third year of my four-year course, I felt myself undergoing a transformation. I was twenty, no longer a teenager, and in Holland, there would be no more lies,” he is not merely referencing geographic relocation (Zaidi 164). Instead, this movement signals a threshold moment, a rite of passage into a new regime of experimentation and exploration. The insistence on “no more lies” does not indicate a simplistic coming-out narrative or a complete disavowal of his religious background. It articulates a deeper reorientation that resonates with Taylor's description of postsecular individuals who, even while disenchanted, remain haunted by the pull of deeper meaning or authenticity. (Taylor 727). Geographic location, in this context, becomes a liminal space where Zaidi sheds the compulsive duplicity demanded by the earlier closed immanent frame. It is within this openness that he

begins to articulate a more coherent and livable subjectivity. Zaidi's later contemplation of relocating to the United States underscores this:

The US exams were hard work but success would provide an escape route to a full life in a country a long way away from my family, far enough away that I might never have to tell my dad. I was twenty-three years old and still thinking about running away from home. (Zaidi 193)

C. Cross Pressures

“For gays, I was too Muslim. For Muslims, I was too gay. For whites, I was too brown, and for my family, I was too white” (Zaidi 221).

Charles Taylor introduces the theoretical concept of *cross pressures* in *A Secular Age* to describe the existential and intellectual tensions experienced by individuals caught between competing impulses: the disenchantment of a purely secular worldview and a lingering or resurgent yearning for transcendence (Taylor 299-302). Modern individuals often find themselves pulled in opposing directions—between belief and doubt, faith and skepticism—resulting in a deeply felt instability of meaning. Even those committed to secular or scientific worldviews may, in moments of existential crisis, find themselves drawn toward religious or spiritual questions (Taylor 594). Taylor observes that “people are often tempted by unbelief, and yet they feel the pull of a longing for something more, something beyond” (Taylor 302). In Taylor words:

People feel the draw of narratives of closed immanence, of a world without transcendence; and yet the disengaged, disenchanted world seems at times desperately flat, empty, meaningless. The malaise of immanence grows... We feel the cross pressure between the draw of transcendence and the drive to close it off. (Taylor 303)

This concept is central to postsecular subjectivity, where individuals experience belief not as certainty but as struggle—a continuous negotiation between the desire for transcendence and the rationalist dominance of the immanent frame. As Taylor puts it: “We are all cross-pressured, at least those of us whose imaginations are alive, whose moral intuitions haven’t been ground down. We feel the pull of transcendence and the pressures of immanence, and cannot but feel the force of both” (Taylor 727). Contemporary literature, particularly postsecular queer fiction, often captures these *cross pressures* by portraying characters caught in the tension between secular norms and spiritual longings. In *A Dutiful Boy*, Mohsin Zaidi’s memoir of growing up queer in a devout Muslim household in East London, we witness a deeply personal account of what Charles Taylor theorizes as *cross pressures*—the inner and outer tensions faced by modern individuals living in a postsecular world where belief, unbelief, identity, and tradition no longer hold in neat harmony. According to Taylor, cross pressures emerge from the modern immanent frame—a worldview structured around reason and personal authenticity—yet still haunted by “the sense of something more” (Taylor 543-545). Zaidi’s memoir provides a compelling narrative for examining this dynamic, where religious devotion and sexual identity pull against one another, never allowing Zaidi to rest fully in either.

From the outset, Zaidi’s identity is shaped by the all-encompassing nature of religion: “Islam wasn’t just something we did; it was who we were” (Zaidi 17). This echoes Taylor’s concept of closed immanent structure, where the self is embedded in a moral order presumed to be universal and unquestionable. But Zaidi’s emerging awareness of his queerness introduces a rupture—a voice of dissonance that makes him question this inherited structure. When he first experiences same-sex desire, he writes, “I begged Allah to take it away. I promised I’d be good. I thought maybe I was being tested” (Zaidi 40). Taylor argues that *cross pressures* are not simply about choosing between faith and secularity but about the unease of belief, when belief is no longer unchallenged, but neither is disbelief a resting place (Taylor 595). Zaidi’s existence

embodies this unease. For instance, even when he distances himself from religion to survive emotionally and socially, he is haunted by a spiritual longing. He reflects, “I decided to start talking to God again... I sat on the floor, with my head to the ground... and finding them inside me, I also found some hope” (Zaidi 253). This reflection reveals a deeply postsecular condition. Zaidi cannot simply cast-off belief as illusion, nor can he fully inhabit it given its rejection of his queerness. The novel shows this impossibility of resolution. His journey is not a clean arc from repression to liberation but a constant negotiation. His yearning for integration, for a synthesis of religious, familial, sexual selves, and all the structures around him does not allow him to rest fully. In real sense, Zaidi is not just navigating rejection; he is caught between competing tensions. He is, in Taylor’s concept, pressed from both sides, by the longing to be accepted and the imperative to be true to himself.

One of the most striking articulations of Charles Taylor’s concept of cross pressures in *A Dutiful Boy* occurs when Zaidi reflects on the emotional aftermath of abandoning prayer:

Now that I was no longer praying five times a day I caught myself crying at odd moments, dazed by the feeling that something was missing. I longed for the peace and stability that my faith had once brought me but I couldn’t find it here. I’d programmed myself to hate the person I was. It felt like the only way to let go of the hate was to let go of the faith I had tied to. (Zaidi 139)

This statement captures a kind of existential bifurcation, central to *cross pressures*, where belief is no longer sustained by communal structures, yet it endures as a private resonance. Zaidi’s refusal to disavow either aspect, that is, his queerness or his spiritual yearning is seen in this articulation. His religious upbringing had rendered his queerness illegible within moral framework he had been taught. Consequently, self-acceptance necessitated the painful abandonment of the very practices that once grounded him. Taylor’s notion of cross pressures, where belief is both

impossible to sustain and impossible to forget, helps illuminate the affective complexity of Zaidi's struggle. His longing for peace that prayer once offered coexists with his awareness that such peace was predicated on self-hatred. The result is not a clean transition from religion to secularity, but a fractured postsecular subjectivity marked by grief, ambivalence, and the absence of reconciliation. As the novel unfolds, Zaidi's effort to reconcile his Islamic faith with his emerging queer identity becomes a central theme. The novel shows Zaidi's repeated attempts to eradicate his same-sex desire through religious devotion: "Between prayers, I secretly researched cures for homosexuality" (Zaidi 112). These efforts are shaped by the longing for divine intervention: "God wasn't listening to me. I might never be cured," (Zaidi 106) and "I'd said some 11,000 prayers and I couldn't do it any more. I walked out of the shrine, realising there was nothing left for me in there" (Zaidi 128). This indicates not a sign of disbelief but an expression of Taylor's conception of cross-pressured faith.

As clearly evident, the emotional and spiritual fragmentation experienced by Zaidi shows a state of being caught between incompatible moral and existential demands in a secular age. His anguish arises not only from his queer identity and desire but from the impossibility of fully inhabiting either of the moral frameworks that define his life. In one of the scenes, he reflects:

My sadness came from a lack of any interest in my work, from the absence of a love life and what such a love life would do to my family. It was about the necessary distance I placed between me and anybody who might become a friend. Not even praying offered any respite. I raised my head, but stayed seated on my prayer mat. God wasn't listening to me. I might never be cured. (Zaidi 106)

This moment captures the intensity of his emotional and spiritual isolation, as both his faith and his longing for love appear mutually exclusive and unresolvable. Zaidi's disappointment in the silence of God reflects not atheistic rejection but a deeply felt sense of abandonment—a

central marker of Taylor's notion of cross pressure, where belief is not dismissed but wounded, and where transcendence remains desirable even when elusive. Nevertheless, the pull of the divine never disappears entirely from Zaidi's existence. By the end of the novel, Zaidi confesses: "I decided to start talking to God again. I didn't use a prayer mat. I'd all but forgotten the religious rituals. But I sat on the floor, with my head to the ground. Although I hadn't used them in years, the Arabic prayers were still there, and finding them inside me, I also found some hope" (Zaidi 253). This return to a private, stripped-down purification form of communication with God suggests a shift from institutional religiosity to a personalized spirituality that does not demand purification or conformity as evident in closed immanent structure. This embodies the very tension that Taylor describes in the postsecular condition: the desire for immanence and transcendence, the refusal to choose between belief and doubt, between secular self-affirmation and religious surrender. Zaidi does not resolve this contradiction but lives within it, thereby, illustrating how queer Muslim subjectivity becomes crucible for negotiating the cross pressures of faith, family, desire, and selfhood.

5.4 Conclusion

In both the memoir, Garrad Conley's *Boy Erased* and Mohsin Zaidi's *A Dutiful Boy*, religion is depicted as a rigid and non-negotiable system that is fundamentally incompatible with the protagonists' emerging queer identities. The experience of navigating this incompatibility is marked by longing, doubt, and moral dissonance, particularly when attempts are made to revise or reinterpret the inherited structures of faith. This emotional and spiritual turbulence resonates with Charles Taylor concept of postsecular conditions, in which individuals remain open to transcendence, even as belief is as John McClure stated: "qualified, wounded, or radically reconfigured" (McClure 5). Both memoirs exemplify the condition of partial faith, a state where belief is neither wholly embraced nor entirely rejected. Neither Garrad nor Zaidi fully renounces religion, but neither can wholly conform to its traditional expectations, when those

expectations stand in direct opposition to their sexual identities. Through the lived experience of Garrad and Mohsin as queer individuals, the chapter demonstrates that spiritual longing and doctrinal skepticism coexist in tension, rather than solution. The narratives of Conley and Zaidi thus illustrate that queer identity and religious faith are exclusive that often exist in painful contradictions. Their stories do not culminate in a neat reconciliation of these opposing forces, but rather offer a nuanced portrayal of postsecular subjectivity, wherein belief is not abandoned but reimagined as a personal choice. Both memoirs, then, articulate postsecular condition in which belief is neither wholly present nor wholly absent, but rather entangled with personal history, cultural expectations, and the emotional demands of survival. Faith, for these characters, is not explicitly abandoned, but it is decentered from its traditional authority and reoriented through subjective interpretation and lived contradiction. The chapter further demonstrates that, while the tension between religion and queer identity remains unresolved, the sociocultural contexts in which this tension unfolds significantly shapes the protagonists' experiences of disclosure. In *Boy Erased*, Garrad's early decision to come out to his parents reveals a cultural environment that, despite its religious conservatism, offers comparatively greater space for articulating queer identity. Although Garrad faces the trauma of conversion therapy, his ability to name and confront his sexuality at a young age suggests a degree of cultural leniency and structural openness within American society. In contrast, Mohsin Zaidi's experience in *A Dutiful Boy* is marked by prolonged silence and self-censorship, driven by fear of familial rejection and cultural shame rooted in the expectations of British-Pakistani and Islamic traditions. Zaidi's inability to articulate his identity until much later in life reflects the heavier burden imposed by a collectivist culture where family honour supersedes individual autonomy. This contrast underscores the role of cultural context in shaping the queer subject's possibilities for expression and acceptance. While neither narrative idealizes its sociopolitical environment, the memoirs collectively suggest that American cultural frameworks may provide

relatively greater possibilities of queer self-assertion that those found in more rigidly traditional or communal settings. Ultimately, the chapter illustrate the interplay between faith, sexuality, and culture cannot be examined in isolation, but must be understood through their embeddedness in national, familial. And ideological structures that either constrain or enable queer becoming.

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CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

6.0 Cultural Variations in Queer Expressions

The representation of queer identity in literature is profoundly shaped by the cultural, religious, and social contexts within which such identities are expressed and negotiated. One of the key findings that emerges from a comparative analysis of this study is the relative openness or resistance that character's encounter when disclosing their sexual identity to familial and social structures. With regard to American culture and literature, there is a discernible pattern of early self-recognition and eventual disclosure to their familial or other peer group about their identity, although this is accompanied by tensions and complexity, followed by some degree of reconciliation. This aspect finds sharp contrasts with other queer narratives from other cultures, where queer characters from other countries often experience intense fear, tension, repression, and punitive backlash for their identities. In American queer writings of the selected texts, like those expressed in Garrad Conley's *Boy Erased*, Garrad recounts coming out to his parents at a young age. Although Garrad's parents initially respond with deep disapproval, to the extent of enrolling him in a conversion therapy program, they do not sever their emotional bond with him. Over time, while they continue to struggle to fully embrace his sexuality or identity within the constraints of their faith and religion, they maintain their role as loving parents. This portrayal, though far from idealized, reflects an evolving discourse in American society where familial acceptance, though fraught, is at least a possibility as compared to other countries across cultures. This finds resonance in other American queer writers, such as Jeff Garvin, Juliet Jacques, and P. Carl's writings, where the plot of the story follows similar pattern of recognition and reconciliation. The study finds that the emotional complexity of such a response in American setting shows a cultural shift toward

partial reconciliation or acceptance, where queer individuals are not necessarily disowned, even if their identity remains contested within this framework, which is not seen other queer narratives.

This dynamic is less visible in other countries queer narratives (Indian writings) such as in Nemat Sadat's *The Carpet Weaver*, set in 1970s Kabul, and Mohsin Zaidi's *A Dutiful Boy*, which explores the experiences of a queer Muslim in Britain, or even in Sara Farizan's *If You Could Be Mine*. In Sadat's narrative, the protagonist Kanishka's queerness is not just socially stigmatized but violently policed. His coming out leads to institutional punishment and social ostracization. Similarly, Zaidi's narrative reflects the inner turmoil growing up gay in a conservative Indian household, where silence and concealment become survival mechanisms. The contrast between these texts and cultures (American and Indian) highlights the different cultural norms and also differing degrees of agency available to queer individuals across cultures and contexts. Ultimately, the study finds that American queer narratives often incorporate themes of therapeutic dialogue, healing, and the potential for acceptance or the transformation of familial ties. In contrast, queer narratives from other countries like India, more often highlight experiences of excommunication or social abandonment. The study finds that this cultural variance in literary representation underscores that while American culture, though not free from homophobia, offers a more discursive space for queer individuals to assert and negotiate their identities, which many other cultures continue to maintain rigid heteronormative structures. Having stated that, cultural context remains a vital lens through which to interpret the dynamics of queer representation in contemporary global literature.

Another key point of divergence across the cultures under study lies in the degree of social reception of gender-affirming surgery. The study finds that in the American culture or queer narratives, though not devoid of transphobia, to some degree offers and provides institutional support for gender transitions more than any other cultures and countries. As depicted in the

American queer narrative of P. Carl's *Becoming a Man*, Carl's transition from woman to man is depicted as a personal and psychological complex process, yet is one that unfolds within a relatively supportive social environment. Despite moments of internal struggle and public vulnerability, Carl, to some varying degree, is surrounded by a circle of friends, colleagues, and family members who affirm his identity and offer assistance through his medical and emotional transition. In contrast, the study finds that characters from other non-Western cultural contexts face significantly greater barriers. For instance, in Nemat Sadat's *The Carpet Weaver*, Kanishka contemplates undergoing gender reassignment surgery, but the narrative reveals that such a decision is not grounded in their cultural context. Therefore, he aspires to migrate to America for his physical transformation, which suggests that gender transition, in his cultural context, is not just socially stigmatized but also practically inaccessible. Similarly, in Sara Farizan's *If You Could Be Mine*, Nasrin contemplates undergoing gender-affirming surgery not as an expression of authentic identity, but as a strategic compromise to be with her female lover in a conservative Iranian society that criminalizes homosexuality but permits gender transition. Both cases highlight how gender-affirming procedures in non-Western cultures are at odd with cultural opposition more than Western cultures, but are often imagined as possible within American medical and social structures.

This recurring representation of America as a liberatory space for queer and trans individual also appears in other narratives. For instance, in *A Dutiful Boy*, Mohsin Zaidi's character Nasim dreams of relocating to the America to live freely, away from the religious and familial expectations that bind him in his British-Muslim cultural landscape. Kanishka, in Nemat Sadat's *The Carpet Weaver*, too, views America as a promised land where his dream could be fully realized without fear or shame. The study finds that these characters' longing to migrate to the United State of America

shows the cultural differences, where America is seen as a space of possibility, while other cultures are perceived as dangerous to queer life. The study further reveals that while American queer writing shows coming out or gender transition as a complex phenomenon but socially negotiable, non-Western queer writings show an even more difficult reality. The study reveals the cultural variations in the selected queer writings across three different countries, by highlighting how each culture responds to queer identities differently, through varying attitudes, degrees of acceptance, and forms of resistance that shape both the lived experiences and narrative representations of queer individuals.

6.1 Thematic Convergences Across Queer Narratives

While the study shows cultural variations in terms of acceptance and rejection from both familial and societal institutions across different geographical regions, religions, cultures, and beliefs, certain thematic structures find resonance in queer characters' approaches across cultures. The study finds that, despite the imposition of different cultural norms against the queer individuals, queer expressions such as how society deals with them, how they seek support within their own community, their rebellion against societal structures, and the eventual cultural response of rejection find convergence in queer narratives across different countries and cultural contexts. The study finds that while the social, political, cultural and religious structures towards queer expression vary, the emotional, psychological, and existential struggles faced by the queer individuals finds similar expression. Whether these queer individuals are situated in the conservative religious set-up of the American society, the patriarchal landscape of Indian culture, or the socio-political complexities of Britian culture, the study finds that queer individuals encounter similar cycles of marginalization, identity negotiation, resistance, and rejection. The convergence of these themes across diverse queer narratives highlights the shared struggle of queer

experience and global relevance of queer literary expression as a site for both resistance and resilience.

A. Therapists as Recurring Figures

One of the common recurring themes we find in this study is the presence and role of the therapist or psychological professionals in queer narratives, who are often employed as mechanisms to either correct, guide, or strengthen queer individuals from deviation. This motif transcends geographical and cultural boundaries and emerges consistently across diverse queer literary texts. We find this expression in Juliet Jacques's *Trans: A Memoir*, Jeff Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human*, Garrad Conley's *Boy Erased*, and P. Carl's *Becoming a Man*. Juliet Jacques details her engagement with psychological professional as a gatekeeping process required to access gender-affirming healthcare in the U.K. The presence of therapists here is complex—while they offer support, they also function as institutional gatekeepers whose approval is necessary for bodily autonomy. In Jeff Garvin's narrative, the protagonist Riley consult a therapist to navigate gender fluidity, identity confusion, and societal bullying. The therapist, in this context, is a safe figure, whose presence offers aid in self-understanding. Conversely, Garrad Conley's narrative features a therapist figure who takes on a more coercive role. In his narrative, therapy is depicted as a site of enforced conversion, which operates within a religious institution and aims to correct Conley's homosexuality. In P. Carl's narrative, the therapist's role is less coercive and remains central to the protagonist's navigation of identity and trauma. Carl's therapist helps him confront internalized fears, and understand the emotional toll of living a closeted life.

These narratives demonstrate that while the role of therapists varies, ranging from oppressive figures to empowering agents of self-recognition, what remains consistent is their narrative importance. The study finds that these figures act as intermediaries between the queer self and

society, mediating culture, familial, and psychological pressures. Their recurrence across cultures and texts underscores the universal need for queer individuals to seek spaces, where their identities are spoken, examined, and affirmed. The study also find that their narrative recurrence is not incidental but strategically structured, which reveals the significant role therapy plays in the psychological mapping of queer identity across global queer writings. Whether they are positioned as adversaries within systems of conversion therapy, as seen in Garrad Conley's *Boy Erased*, or supporting allies as an agent of self-discovery, as portrayed in Juliet Jacques's *Trans: A Memoir* Jeff Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human*, the study finds that the therapists reflect the sociopolitical context in which these narratives unfold and provides a lens through which the internal conflicts of queer individuals are externalized and negotiated.

B. Queer Support Community

Another notable recurrence that emerges across the selected queer narratives is the reliance or formation on queer support communities, especially in the context where societal structures and institutions fail to affirm their queer identities. This pattern recurs across culturally diverse texts, such as Sara Farizan's *If You Could be Mine*, Jeff Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human*, and Nemat Sadat's *The Carpet Weaver*, where queer characters find a safe haven within networks of like-minded individuals. For instance, Riley in Jeff Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human*, a gender-fluid teenager struggle to articulate their identity within the confines of a conservative family. Riley's eventual connection with an online queer support group becomes a lifeline. The digital space function as a site of belonging where identity is not only understood but celebrated. This digital community becomes a space of validation, where Riley's identity is recognized and affirmed. Similarly, in Sara Farizan's *If You Could be Mine*, Sahar, a young Iranian girl in love with her friend Nasrin, faces the oppressive cultural barriers of a society that criminalizes same-sex love.

With no familial support, Sahar turns to clandestine queer network, aware of their cultural and religious constraints, and find temporary respite through underground queer community beneath the surface of the society. This community does not offer her a complete solution but provides a space where her desires are spoken aloud, her suffering shared and addressed. In Nemat Sadat's *The Carpet Weaver*, Kanishka, while abandoned by his family, friends, community, and brutalized by both society and state, finds brief respite within a circle of queer individuals. Though fragmented and precarious, these encounters provide him with the affirmation and solidarity that mainstream society denies of their queer existence.

The convergence of these narratives suggests that when queer individuals are marginalized by dominant heteronormative structures, they turn toward alternative communities that speak the common language of affirmation of their identity. These support networks, whether digital, underground, or personal, serve as essential sources of cultural and emotional sustenance for the queer individuals. The study finds the difficulties of queer individual to exist within heteronormative community, prompting a reliance on alternate support systems composed of individuals who shares common lived experiences. The research further identifies a broader sociocultural implication, where queer and heterosexual communities function as distinct cultural spheres, shaped by divergent norms, values, and different modes of identity expression. These two communities engage in different cultural languages, beliefs, and social landscape, sustained by frameworks that resist the integration or reconciliation of queer identities within the mainstream societal structures. The study concludes that this dichotomy between queer and heteronormative communities is not only a recurring narrative pattern but also a reflection of real-world tensions that remain unresolved in contemporary cultural contexts.

C. Failed Relationships

Another significant narrative convergence that this study identifies is the consistent pattern of resistance or revolt against heteronormativity. The study finds that most queer characters initially attempt to conform to heteronormative relationships or marriage, however, these efforts are often marked by failure and emotional breakdowns. A similar pattern emerges in their same-sex relationships. For instance, in Garrad Conley's *Boy Erased*, Conley's heterosexual relationship with Chloe represents neither genuine conformity to expected norms nor a source of personal fulfilment. Likewise, his same-sex relationship fails to bring happiness, ultimately collapsing under the weight of his concealed identity. Similarly, in David Levithan's *Every Day*, the gender-fluid protagonist's relationship with Rhiannon cannot be sustained within the confines of normative gender binaries, nor can A's identity be neatly situated within the category of non-binary. Toward the end of the novel, A failed in both relationships.

Moreover, in Mohsin Zaidi's *A Dutiful Boy*, Zaidi's attempted relationship with Layla represents a socially sanctioned pathway that ultimately proves untenable. Caught between the demands of cultural conformity and the pursuit of authentic selfhood, Zaidi is unable to anchor his identity within societal expectations or to wholly embrace his queerness. Consequently, both his heterosexual and homosexual relationships culminate in failure, which reflects the broader conflict between personal desire and cultural obligation. The most pronounced expression emerges in trans narratives such as in P. Carl's *Becoming a Man*, and Juliet Jacques's *Trans: A Memoir*. In both of these texts, the protagonists' attempts to maintain heterosexual relationships within their assigned genders which leads to gender transition. The act of gender transition in both narratives emerges as a radical break from these structures. The study finds that such narratives of revolt do not merely reject heteronormativity but subvert patriarchal norms and gendered expectations that underpin it. The recurrence of failed heterosexual relationships in queer literature underscores the

incompatibility of queer identities with heterosexual scripts. The study affirms that failed relationship in heterosexual relationship and marriage is a universal element of queer narratives across geographical locations and cultures.

D. Impossible Queer Desire

A significant finding of this study is the consistent portrayal of queer desire as impossible or untenable within heteronormative societies. Across the selected texts, ranging from fictional to autobiographical narratives, this impossibility emerges as a recurring theme, revealing how queer desire and longing is rendered incompatible with the dominant cultural frameworks. This expression is prevalent in diverse cultural settings in the works of Sara Farizan's *If You Could Be Mine*, Jeff Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human*, Juliet Jacques's *Trans: A Memoir*, Garrad Conley's *Boy Erased*, Mohsin Zaidi's *A Dutiful Boy*, David Levithan's *Every Day*, and Nemat Sadat's *The Carpet Weaver*.

In each of these narratives, protagonists experience their queer desire as incompatible with their familial expectations, religious teachings, and cultural ideologies. The study finds that their queer desire frequently outweighs personal choice of sexuality, identity, and belief. This impossibility becomes more pronounced in trans narratives such as Juliet Jacques's *Trans: A Memoir* and P. Carl's *Becoming a Man*, where the characters, even after undergoing gender transition, find it unable to accommodate within the mainstream culture or to redefine their identities. These trans narratives show that aligning one's gender through transition does not necessarily transform the underlying cultural scripts. The study finds that gender transition does not guarantee societal acceptance but rather exposes the inherent limits of gender and sexuality. The physical alignment of the body with gender identity, therefore, does not ensure cultural acceptance, recognition or inclusion within the heteronormative framework.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study has offered a critical study of queer representation through fiction and autobiographical memoirs, drawing upon gender theory, queer theory, cultural theory, postsecular theory, and postmodern theory, it remains limited in scope with regard to the broader spectrum of queer cultural expression, particularly in visual and media representations. The research primarily engaged with textual forms, emphasizing the written word as a site of identity construction. However, in the contemporary cultural landscape, mediated forms of queer self-representation, through film, television, and digital media, have become increasingly influential in shaping public perceptions and discourses surrounding queer lives. Further research could expand the inquiry by integrating media theory and visual culture studies to explore how queer subjectivities are performed, contested, and circulated across different cultures and platforms. In particular, works such as Jeff Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human*, which rely heavily on digital story-telling and online anonymity, and Juliet Jacques's *Trans: A Memoir*, which engages media politics of story-telling, would benefit from a multimodal analysis. Such an approach could investigate the interplay between literary narrative and digital interfaces, or between embodied identity and performative aesthetics, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of queer identity as it operates in and beyond the written text. By moving beyond the literary into the digital interrogation, future studies may uncover new dynamics of queer representation that remain unexplored within the current framework.

Another limitation of this thesis is the exclusion of a comparative study of Garrad Conley's *Boy Erased*, which was adapted into a film in 2018. While the literary analysis of the thesis with gender theory, and postsecular theories provides an introspective study on sexuality, identity, and religion in postsecular world, the present research has not accounted how these elements are articulated in

screen and cinematic language. Incorporating adaptation studies into the analysis would offer a more comprehensive understanding how queer experiences are represented, mediated, and received across different cultural forms. A comparative approach would enable an interrogation of what elements are preserved, altered, or even omitted in the transition from page and word to visual narrative, and how such shifts impact the politics of representation and audience reception. Moreover, the inclusion of film theory, media theory, and adaptation studies in future research would significantly enrich the current framework by expanding the inquiry beyond textual representation. Such interdisciplinary engagement would allow for a critical exploration of how queer identity is constructed, performed, and negotiated across multiple mediums—literature, cinema, and digital platforms. It would also address the growing importance of visual and mediated forms of queer storytelling in contemporary culture. By bridging the disciplinary divide between literary analysis and media studies, future research could offer a more holistic and culturally attuned understanding of queer representation in the 21st century.

Building upon the need for interdisciplinary expansion, further research could also benefit from incorporating perspectives from Disability Studies to explore the representation of queer identities through the lens of embodiment, and difference. Contemporary scientific and theoretical discourses have made attempt to pathologize queer subjectivities by framing them in terms of hormonal or bodily dysfunctions. While such biomedical narratives risk reinforcing reductive and essentialist views, Disability Studies would provide a critical counterpoint by emphasizing the social construction of difference and the politics of normalization. This approach will enable scholars to interrogate how queer bodies, much like disabled bodies, are subjected to regimes of regulation, medicalization, and marginalization within dominant cultural discourses. Incorporating Disability Theory into queer literary and cultural analysis, particularly in Trans-life-writing texts,

such as Juliet Jacques's *Trans: A Memoir* or P. Carl's *Becoming a Man*, will offer insights into how neurodivergence, trauma, and gender dysphoria intersect with queer identity. Moreover, this line of inquiry would invite rethinking of queer embodiment, whether it is a deviation from normative health or gender standards, or queer identity a legitimate one. By foregrounding this intersection of queerness and disability, future research could provide a critical and clearer understanding of its representation.

In addition to Media, Adaptation, and Disability Studies, further research can be done from a deeper engagement with Trauma Theory or Study to further delve into the psychological dimensions of queer representation. While the current research touches on personal emotional, familial and societal rejection, it does not systematically explore how trauma, arising from marginalization, repression, and expectations, shapes the queer subjectivity. Further research into this approach would provide an expanded reading of psychic wounds of the queer individuals. Further integration of Trauma Studies with Queer Theory would provide clearer picture of how collective and intergenerational trauma circulates within queer communities, especially those from diasporic contexts, or those texts dealing with queer individuals raised within strict religious and cultural frameworks. This lens would particularly be applicable to texts such as Mohsin Zaidi's *A Dutiful Boy*, Sara Farizan's *If You Could be Mine*, and Garrad Conley's *Boy Erased*, all of which depict characters navigating intersecting forms of psychological and cultural injury. Adopting this interdisciplinary framework would contribute to a richer and more intersectional understanding of queer life narratives. This incorporation into further study would deepen the scope of the current research and open pathways for dialogue between literary criticism, psychology, and trauma theory.

Further research could also be meaningfully extended through the lens of feminist queer perspectives. While the current research has highlighted certain aspects of queer women's representation in queer writing, particularly in Juliet Jacques's *Trans: A Memoir*, a more sustained theoretical engagement with Feminist Queer Theory remains an open avenue for future inquiry. The present research has primarily approached Jacques's narrative from a medicalized or medical point of view, with focus on women body transition and psychological dimension of gender transition. However, future research could move beyond this clinical understanding to interrogate how broader sociocultural forces, including heteronormativity, patriarchy, and gendered power structures influence the formation of queer women subjectivity. Employing theoretical frameworks developed by key feminist and queer theorists such as Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky, and Gayle Rubin would provide deeper insights into how patriarchal structures, cultural norms, and heterosexuality surrounding femininity shape queer women and trans narratives. By incorporating these feminist queer frameworks in future research, it would provide a better understanding of queer femininity, and traditional understanding of queer women with that of the emerging of queer women discourses.

Another significant limitation of the current research lies in its analysis of Nemat Sadat's novel *The Carpet Weaver*, which relies exclusively on gender theory propounded by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, on the concept of the "closet". While this theoretical framework offers insights into the idea of repression, disclosure, and silencing of queer identity, the present study does not engage with emerging theoretical frameworks such as Queer Ecology. Future research could explore *The Carpet Weaver* through a queer ecological lens, which integrates queer theory with ecological and environmental studies. This approach would examine how heteronormativity is sustained not only through social institutions but also through spatial, environmental, and bodily ecologies. The

novel's depiction of 1970s Kabul as a socially toxic environment for queer existence presents a fertile ground for studying how geography, space and culture coalesce to produce ecologies that pathologizes queer desire. Incorporating a queer ecological perspective would significantly expand the interdisciplinary scope of literary studies, throwing lights on how environmental metaphors, and spatial boundaries intersect with sexuality and cultural norms.

Given the sensitivity and complexity surrounding the topic of queer representation in literary texts and lived experience, this research is firmly situated within the interpretive frameworks of the authors whose works are examined from their own socio-political and historical context in which these selected texts were produced. It does not seek to offer a universal or definitive account of queer identity, nor does it claim authority over the diverse and evolving manifestations of queerness globally. The analysis is bounded by the selected texts and the methodological lenses employed. While this study provides critical insight into the narrative dynamics and representational strategies within the texts, it remains acutely aware that queer subjectivities are not static, they continue to shift in response to cultural, technological, and political changes. The increasing visibility of queer voices across digital, visual, and transnational media platforms represents a vast and important dimension of queer cultural production that lies beyond the scope of the present inquiry. Future studies may extend these conversations by addressing how contemporary queer identities are mediated and reshaped through these emerging modalities.

The present research recognizes that queer studies is a dynamic, evolving marked by continuous shifts in how queer identities are constructed, experienced, and represented across both public and private spheres. As such, no single scholarly endeavor can encompass the full complexity of queer life or the diverse strategies through which it is narrated. The present research positions itself as a critical intervention within this broader and ongoing academic discourse, offering one interpretive

lens among many rather than a comprehensive or conclusive account. Its finding should be viewed as provisional to a larger fluid conversation about queer representation in contemporary literature. Future research may build upon this foundation by exploring emergent queer narratives not only within literary texts but also in non-literary domains such as digital media, performance art, and community-based storytelling. Additionally, incorporating ethnographic or autoethnography methodologies could foreground lived queer experiences more directly.

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