

Subverting the “Heterosexual Matrix”: Gender, Sexuality and Empowerment in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*

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Abstract: *Throughout history, the relegation of certain nations, people, minds, and minority groups has been perceived as necessary by those in power in order to secure dominance. This dominance has created many subjugated groups positioned at the margin of their respective societies. In *Angels in America*, Tony Kushner engages himself in a project of resistance to long-standing gender stereotypes and exposes the allocations of power those stereotypes legitimate. Battling against normative heterosexuality, which retains its centrality in the American canon, Kushner explicitly foregrounds the daily tribulations of many gay characters attempting to make sense of the world in the mid 1980’s. In his play, Kushner seeks to place gay men at the center of American history by acknowledging the pivotal role they had in the construction of “a national subject, polity, literature and theatre”¹. Significantly, gay men are depicted as figures who establish identities that disempower the heterosexual hegemony and those who propagate it. This paper seeks to show how Kushner subverts the “heterosexual matrix” by suggesting a discourse that aims at blurring the dominant heteronormative sexual boundaries that perceive heterosexuality as the “norm” and homosexuality as its opposite. The present study also seeks to articulate Kushner’s adoption of Brechtian tenets as an attempt to induce social awareness of gay male oppression and provoke the audience to adopt counter oppressive stances.*

Keywords: *Brecht, empowerment, gender, heteronormativity, regulatory ideals, sexuality*

Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* portrays the daily life tribulations of five gay men, two of them affected with AIDS. The play exposes the multifarious political, social and emotional repercussions of AIDS on homosexuals amidst the oppression perpetuated by the heterosexual hegemony. In the Reagan administration’s early years, many gay men were infected with AIDS. While the medical community has long considered AIDS as a result of Human Immunodeficiency Virus, many opponents to Regan’s conservative capitalistic political agenda accused him of propagating the epidemic by not providing research funding for the disease.

The proliferation of AIDS exacerbated the oppression of gay men through an association of homosexuality with disease. Notably, Susan Sontag assumes that AIDS can be a source of oppression to gay men as it exposes them to harassment and persecution (Sontag 113). This has led to the presumption that gays were “risk groups” who can threaten the American social fabric and its national safety. Accordingly, many religious zealots targeted gay men and considered AIDS as a divine retribution against them. Reverend Fred Phelps of the Westboro Baptist Church, for instance, revised an advertisement for insecticide and deployed a violent slogan stating: “AIDS: Kills Fags Dead”². Not only does this slogan compare gay men to vermin, suggesting that both need to be exterminated, but also encourages violence against homosexuals and especially those with AIDS.

Reverend Phelps stands as a prototype of the prevailing heterosexual hegemony that demonized gay men for their perceived perpetuation of AIDS. In his play, Kushner attempts to disempower this hegemony by isolating gender from sexuality and disrupting the sex/gender binary. This disruption enhances the disconnection between gender and sex. Gender becomes, therefore, an isolated construct that is unrelated to sex. In “*Imitation and Gender Insubordination*”, Judith Butler uses the concept of drag to critique gender. She argues that drag is not a “putting on of a gender that belongs properly to some other group... [since] there is no ‘proper’ gender” (312). In this respect, Butler clarifies that gender is a way of “doing” and not “being”. Seeking to destabilize heterosexuality, the latter inverts and displaces the ways by which gender and sexuality are enmeshed.

Like Judith Butler, Kushner seeks to destabilize the preconceived inherent relationship between gender and sex. This present study seeks to articulate how Kushner endeavors to subvert “the heterosexual matrix”³ by empowering characters that oppose heteronormativity and disempowering those who conform to it. It also attempts to show how Kushner deploys identifiable Brechtian techniques so as to divorce the audience from the identification with the characters on stage and induce them to inveigh against all the sedimented homophobic social constructs castigated on homosexuals.

I. Empowering Characters who Oppose Heteronormativity

The emergence of queer theory has become a necessary part for "scrutinizing and celebrating sexual desires and erotic practices that question and reach beyond the bounds of normative heterosexuality" (Cooper 17). With regards to this vision, it is interesting to note that queer theorists have always sought to establish an identifiable homosexual discourse aside from the heterosexual hegemony present in society. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick discusses the binary present in contemporary society that views heterosexuality as the "norm" and homosexuality as its opposite - the "abnormal". In the opposition of natural versus unnatural, natural is considered to be adhering to the norms of society and unnatural is thought to be the repudiation of those same norms. To her, although not all these oppositions are the direct result of normative duality, they cannot be upheld without its omnipresence (27). In the same line of thought, Judith Butler argues that the "heterosexual matrix" naturalizes a certain set of "bodies, genders, and desires" and denaturalizes, on the other hand, the bodies, genders, and desires that deviate from the norm (1999:194).

In *Angels in America*, Kushner subverts "the heterosexual matrix" by empowering characters like Prior and Belize who challenge the validity and consistency of the heteronormative discourse. In one of his interview, Kushner assumes: "I feel very proud that *Angels* is identified as a gay play. I want it to be thought of as being part of gay culture, and I certainly want people to think of me as a gay writer" (Fisher 7). By maintaining this discourse, Kushner seeks to empower gay community by suggesting a discourse that aims at blurring sexual boundaries as well as normative binary oppositions such as heterosexual/homosexual.

In this respect, Kushner places the "uncloseted" gay characters at the very center of his play. Unlike characters like Joe or Roy Cohn, Kushner bestows power on Prior and Belize and depicts them as the play's voices of reason and resistance. Even though affected with AIDS, Prior is depicted as the symbol of resistance to heterosexual norms on stage. The latter is presented as an openly gay character who perceives his homosexuality as a blessing. He uses his sexual identity as a tactic for personal investiture of power, strength and the subversion of fear and shame. Halfway through Act One in *Millennium Approaches*, Prior assertively acknowledges: "I'm a homosexual" (Kushner 38). He clearly performs that particular homosexual act as a piece of expository information that confirms his subversion of heteronormative social constructs. In the last moments of *Millennium Approaches*, the Angel's wings beat hard upon Prior's ceiling. Being terrified, Prior chants to himself: "I am a gay man and I am used to pressure, to trouble, I am tough and strong" (*Angels* 123). He reveals his homosexuality as an attribute that calms him and grants him strength precisely because of the hatred and homophobia that gay men have had endured for so long.

Another character that Kushner stages to subvert the "heterosexual matrix" is Belize. Belize, a former drag queen and Roy Cohn's nurse is depicted as the most effeminate character and the play's voice of reason. The playwright empowers Belize by depicting him as a character who displays comfort with his homosexuality and who is able to cope with the vituperative barrage of insults from Roy. Although Belize must behave professionally while at hospital, his professional behavior does not limit him from using manifold "feminine performatives". His former drag queen persona is eminently insinuated in his conversations with every character in the play.

While being comfortable with his femininity, Belize deploys "feminine performatives" in many conversations with Prior. In one such instance, Belize receives a telephone call from his best friend while working at the hospital:

Prior: I am drenched in spooj.

Belize: Spooj?

Prior: Cum. Jiz. Ejaculate. I've had a wet dream.

Belize: Well about time. Miss Thing has been abstemious. She has stored up beaucoup de spooj.

Prior: It was a woman.

Belize: You turning straight on me?

Prior: Not a conventional woman

Belize: Grace Jones?(Kushner 153).

In this dialogue, Belize refers to Prior as "Miss Thing" and subsequently proceeds with the use of the female personal pronoun "she". The use of a female pronoun in this instance suggests that this scene was conceptualized as a sort of "girl talk" as the two men have a detailed sexual conversation over the phone. By using a female pronoun, Belize attributes female traits to Prior, and Prior does not abjure that. The conversation proceeds to Belize's questioning of Prior's sexuality, to which Prior responds that his wet dream was not over any "conventional woman", to which Belize's reaction is "Grace Jones ?" Revealingly, Grace Jones, a former model and disco artist, is notorious for her androgynous traits with her short, buzzed haircut and deep masculine voice. Kushner, therefore, deploys Belize's "feminine performatives" and Grace Jones's image as dramatic tools to subvert the "heterosexual matrix" propagated in heteronormative societies in general and in America in particular.

After the funeral of a former drag queen that has died of Aids, Belize enthusiastically relishes in the description of the celebration that occurred before the start of that scene. Kushner describes Prior's appearance as "strange, but not too strange" to differentiate his vestment from the defiantly bright and beautiful clothing" that Belize is wearing. Belize's "defiant clothing" is evocative of his homage to the loss of a drag queen, one whom he considers "one of the Great Glitter Queens" (Kushner 167). While Prior believes the funeral was "tacky", Belize considers it "divine" and equates it with a flamboyant drag show as opposed to the normal mournful ritual. The word "divine", indeed, also suggests that the death of a drag queen is a celestial event. In this sense, Belize goes on to acknowledge that the drag queen "couldn't be buried like a civilian", suggesting that the drag queen is not only divine, but special as well (Angels 167). In this scene, Kushner affiliates the drag queen funeral with uniqueness and sanctity. By doing so, Kushner seeks to elevate the position of the drag queen and transcend it to a superhuman position.

One can also clearly assume that through the character of Belize, Kushner seeks to dismantle some binaries like man/woman and heterosexual/ homosexual to "highlight the inherent instability of the terms, as well as enabling an analysis of the culturally and historically specific ways in which the terms and the relation between them have developed, and the effects they have produced" (Sullivan 5). It is worth mentioning that when studying of the historical and cultural meanings attached to binary categories and identities, queer theorists always appear to refuse a naturalized ontology in which the binaries are simply viewed as reflective of a set of "normal" conditions existing in the world. Quite the contrary, they tend to emphasize that persons "do not fit into these categories in a consistent way" (Turner 34). In this light, Judith Butler considers gender as a sort of construction that is shaped by many social and cultural conventions. The latter takes the discussion even further by arguing that the different gender roles are just roles acted out. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler views the performance of gender as a signifier, suggesting that gender is a cultural construction created in defiance of established norms for standard male and female behavior. Gender, according to her, is "an ongoing discursive practice...open to intervention and resignification" (Butler 33).

The playwright deploys Belize as an example of performativity to disrupt the sex/gender binary. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler uses the drag as an example of performativity because in drag the impression of a primary constitutive gender identity is parodied. In this context, Butler writes: "in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself as well as its contingency" (175). That is to say, while imitating gender, drag exposes the constructedness of the gender itself and brings to light the idea that gender is not self-evident and that it can be performed "differently". Butler also points out: "just as bodily surfaces are enacted as the natural, so the surfaces can become the site of dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative statuses of the natural itself" (186). In other words, the apparent "core" of the gender identity is revealed as an effect of repeated acts. Butler thinks that drag and other kinds of performative acts help in shaking up the mechanisms within the artificial gender system.

In order to challenge normative structures and their constitutive discourses, Kushner places a queer character like Belize at the center of his dramatic work. Because of the risk of identity classifications, the playwright depicts the former drag queen as someone beyond any descriptive category, who is in incessant formation. His acts, gestures, dialogues and speeches do not only dismantle all regulatory ideals maintained by normative mentalities but also call into question the conventional comprehension of sexual identity. In this vein, Butler notes that there is no need to precisely predict how queer will keep challenging normative structure and discourses. Quite the contrary, she proposes that the way in which queer understands that the consequences of its interventions are not singular and consequently unexpected in advance, makes the queer so effectual (1993: 226-230). In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler assumes:

If the term "queer" is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and future imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes, and perhaps also yielded in favor of terms that do that political work more effectively (228).

Arguably, Kushner uses Belize's ambiguity as a source of his mobilization. Many of his "feminine performatives" are placed as distinguishable series of practices that have the potential to subvert the "heterosexual matrix" and challenge the set of identities and discourses embraced by heteronormative societies.

II. Disempowering Characters who Conform to Heteronormativity

In his *Angels in America*, Kushner subverts the "heterosexual matrix" by disempowering the characters that conform to heteronormativity. By doing so, Kushner highlights the very idea that being assuredly homosexual and confident in one's identity serves one better than shame and remaining in the closet. Revealingly, Roy Cohn, one of the major characters in the play who denies his homosexuality and his AIDS diagnosis, dies a painful death at the end. Moreover, Joe, who is married to a woman despite his being conscious of his homosexuality, exits the play with no clear direction. Unlike Prior and Belize, Roy and Joe do not act as revolutionaries against gay oppression. They believe that they need to bolster a heterosexual façade to maintain

power and dominance. They, revealingly, equate heterosexuality with societal power and prefer to perpetuate heteronormative ideals.

Unlike Prior or Belize, Roy and Joe remain closeted because they are not comfortable with the potential loss of power emanating from the full disclosure of their homosexuality. Therefore, they find solace in the exhibition of exaggerated "masculine performatives" that reflect their overt discomfort with their own sexuality and their need to abide by heteronormative regulatory ideals. Notably, one can clearly deduce how Kushner's use of "the closet" serves to create a conspicuous discrepancy that separates the openly gay characters from the closeted ones. In her book entitled *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick examines the implications of the closet and assumes that it is "the defining structure of gay oppression in this century" (Sedgwick 71). She considers the closet as an oppressive social construct for it separates heterosexuals from homosexuals, thereby marginalizing homosexuals. To her, the closet participates in the construction of the dominant heterosexual hegemony and creates a binary in which heterosexuality exists in contrast to homosexuality.

By examining the power struggles between homosexuals and heterosexuals, Sedgwick acknowledges that the rigid separation between the two categorizations springs from homophobia:

I argue that the historically shifting, and precisely the arbitrary and self-contradictory, nature of the way homosexuality (along with its predecessor terms) has been defined in relation of the rest of the male homosocial spectrum has been an exceedingly potent and embattled locus of power over the entire range of male bonds, and perhaps especially over those that define themselves, not as homosexual, but as against the homosexual (Sedgwick 185).

Sedgwick's contention suggests that an intense homophobia characterizes relationships between heterosexual and homosexual men. Male heterosexuality then is defined only against "the rest of the male homosocial spectrum" and practices (185). Accordingly, heterosexual men separate themselves from homosexuals by distinguishing their "masculine performatives" from the "feminine performatives" that are supposedly adopted by gay men.

One cannot fail to notice how Roy perceives his homosexuality as a liability to the image of power that he has created for himself. He believes that being gay makes him inferior and weak, stating to his doctor that "homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot get a puissant antidiscrimination bill through City Council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout" (Kushner 51). Significantly enough, Roy is apprehensive about the categorization of his sexual identity as "homosexual" because of the debilitating connotations with which he perceives society endows gay men with. Intrinsically, Roy attempts to maintain a power struggle with AIDS that is impairing his body, while extrinsically; he fears the disclosure of his homosexuality and finds comfort in being in the closet. Hence, Roy has recourse to many racist and homophobic comments while conversing with Belize. This adduces the latter's need to bolster a façade of power so as not to give the impression about his physical and psychological vulnerability.

Roy absolutely refuses to openly accept his sexuality, claiming that he is "a heterosexual man...who fucks around with guys" (Kushner 52). To him, "homosexual" signifies men who have been discriminated by heterosexuals and crushed by demeaning appellations like "effeminate faggots" or "limp -wristed". Hence, Roy prefers to adopt any signifier except for "homosexual" in order to maintain a façade of power. He abjures his identification with any signifier that might generate an erasure of the presumed "clout" he has solidified all along his professional career. In the same line of thought, Butler ascertains in "Contagious Word: Paranoia and Homosexuality in the Military" (1997)

The words, "I am homosexual", do not merely describe; they are figured as performing what they describe, not only in the sense that they constitute the speaker as a homosexual, but that they constitute the speech as homosexual conduct...coming out and acting out are part of the cultural and political meaning of what it is to be homosexual ("Word" 107).

All along the two parts of the play, Roy seems to renounce any association with anything referred to as "homosexual" and even avoids speaking the sentence, "I am a homosexual". Speaking this, according to Butler, would lead to the performance of an actual homosexual act, which Roy refuses to be associated with, considering his willingness to maintain a façade of power and domination at all times and costs. Ultimately, Roy's refusal to subvert the "heterosexual matrix" by openly assuming his sexuality will lead to his own downfall, as he is the only character in the play that dies wrested of all he ever cared about. By dramatically disempowering Roy, Kushner highlights his contention that those who choose to conform to heteronormative regulatory ideals and closet their homosexuality, will sooner or later participate in their own demise. In this token, Kushner corroborates: "I think it's morally incumbent on gay people to tell the world they're gay because we need to have a presence in the world." He goes on to acknowledge that "being in the closet is personally disempowering [gays] and not something that anybody really ought to do" (Vorlicky 24).

III. Subverting "Regulatory Ideals" through Epic Staging

In *Angels in America*, Kushner uses several tenets from Bertolt Brecht's epic staging so as to distance the audience from the characters on stage. This distancing, allows the audience to scrutinize the condition of a group of homosexuals in the midst of a crisis in order to better examine the social homophobic invectives perpetuated against them. By creating a distancing effect between the audience and the play, Kushner induces the spectators to assume a counter oppressive stance against the oppressive heteronormative social constructs on gay people. He, analogously, deploys the distancing effect to invite the audience to reflect upon how the hegemonic structure seeks to impose some "regulatory ideals"⁴ that participate in constructing the subject according to the heteronormative model.

For more than 2000 years, Aristotle propounded the fundamental principles of dramaturgy. To him, tragedy must essentially have a certain magnitude and purge the emotions of pity and fear by leaving a cathartic event on the audience. This discernment of tragedy was questioned by Brecht who advocated a "non-Aristotelian" theatre that rejects principles like catharsis, empathy and imitation in favor of "VerfremdungseffektEffekt" or "Alienation Effect". The latter defines "Alienation Effect" as the action of "stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about them" (Brooker 191). Interestingly, Brecht demanded a theater of critical thoughtfulness, which he called "Epic" that lays emphasis on the theatricality of the play itself. Influenced by Brecht's dictum, Kushner employs a miscellany of techniques such as stage trickery, the adoption of knotted episodes, the rapid scene changes, the use theatrical illusions and the actor's direct address to the audience.

In his play, Kushner has recourse to some "special effects" also referred to as stage trickery to make the audience aware that they are watching a play. It is important to point out that this theatrical device is not Brechtian in nature; however, the effect of stage trickery is that it distances the play from the audience to provoke their critical reflection. In this light, Kushner acknowledges the importance of making the audience aware of the stage trickery when he indicates a note about the staging:

The play benefits from a pared down style of presentation, with minimal scenery and scene shifts done rapidly (no blackouts!), employing the cast as a stagehands- which makes for an actor-driven event, as this must be. The moments of magic – the appearance and disappearance of Mr. Lies and the ghosts, the Book hallucination, and the ending – are to be fully realized as bits of wonderful theatrical illusion – which means it's OK if the wire show, and maybe it's good that they do, but the magic should at the same time be thoroughly amazing (Kushner 12).

By purporting that it is "OK if the wires show", Kushner intends to distance the audience by making them aware that they are watching a play. He, therefore, attempts to dissuade any feeling of empathy or identification with the characters on stage. In his play, Kushner does not adopt a subtle and naturalistic technique of staging, but rather uses a grandiose and complex staging to entice the spectator to think critically about the issues and circumstances exposed on stage.

Another technique deployed by Kushner to create the alienation effect is his use of many knotted scenes, set off against each other, in order to generate critical detachment within spectators. In this respect, Brecht considers that the episodes of a play should show their knots. He corroborates that epic theater should stress an arrangement of incidents in which "the individual episodes have to be knotted together in such a way that the knots are easily noticed" (Brecht 201). To him, the episodes of the play must not succeed one another indistinguishably but must give the opportunity to spectators to interpose their judgment. He goes on to acknowledge that the parts of the story have to be carefully set off one against the other by giving each its own structure as a play within the initial play (Brecht 201). In *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, for instance, Brecht employs the technique of two interspliced narratives by abruptly interrupting the Grusha story and counter posing it with the Azdak story to show that these episodes are linked not by necessity but by design.

Remarkably, Kushner utilizes many knotted scenes set off one against the other so as to induce critical thinking within spectators. The most pertinent example of these knotted episodes is the one occurring between Louis and Prior, and Harper and Joe, describing the demise of both couples:

Prior: I'm dying! You stupid fuck! Do you know what that is! Love! Do you know what love means? We lived together four-and-a-half years, you animal, you idiot.

Louis: I have to find some way to save myself.

Joe: Who are these men? I never understood it. Now I know.

Harper: What?

Joe: It's me.

Prior: GET OUT OF MY ROOM!

Joe: I'm the man with the knives.

Harper: You are?

Prior: If I could get up now, I'd kill you. I would. Go away. Go away or I'll scream (Kushner 85-86)

The above-mentioned lines seemingly describe a heterosexual and homosexual couples boisterously responding to each other. Despite the fact that they are two separate conversations set off one against the other, one can clearly observe how the lines respond to each other. These knotted scenes are meant to divert the attention of the spectators so that they cannot completely identify with one couple, be it heterosexual or homosexual. In this sense, Kushner invites the spectators to scrutinize the similarities and differences between the two couples as both relationships exacerbate. Essentially, he seeks to demonstrate that both couples are in legitimate partnerships and highlight to the spectators that a homosexual relationship is as natural and intelligible as a heterosexual one. By doing this, Kushner seeks to dismantle the regulatory ideals that legitimize heterosexual relationships and delegitimize homosexual ones.

Significantly enough, not only does the knotted scene above-mentioned expose the issues surrounding homosexual couples, it also invites the spectators to experience life from a marginalized gay perspective. It is noteworthy that the heterosexual regulatory ideal has always sought to denaturalize homosexuality and reduce it to specific sexual acts centered on anal sex. Hence, a sexuality that does not have reproduction as its end cannot be considered natural according to heteronormative discourse. Even more so, sex that does not have reproduction as its goal is considered to be pleasure-focused and animalistic. The heterosexual regulatory ideal also denaturalizes the place where specific sexual acts supposedly take place. Interestingly, Butler points out that the heteronormative discourse tends to compartmentalize the human body into two different libidinal loci and stresses that there are only two erogenous spaces on the body: the vagina and the penis. Gay sex, therefore, cannot be inscribed within those two physical spaces (1999:146). By using the knotted scene aforementioned, one can examine how Kushner seeks to equate homosexual with heterosexual partnerships by proving that they are both natural and legitimate.

In his play, Kushner employs another important element of epic staging which is theatrical illusion. The most conspicuous theatrical illusion deployed in the play is the angel itself. In Christian belief, angels are depicted as spiritual beings who serve God. They are believed to be the ones who bring messages to God's people and protect them from God's enemies. Interestingly, Kushner uses the angel as a character adhering to the traditional use of the *deus ex machina*, who is sent to assist the gay protagonist in his whirlwind struggle with AIDS. In *Angels in America*, Kushner uses the angel as a sort of irony to Christian symbols and iconography. By depicting the angel as "hermaphroditically equipped as well with a bouquet of phalli" and "eight vaginas" (174) not only does Kushner revise the Christian depiction of angels as asexual spiritual beings, but also reconstructs patterns of gender and sexual identity by the blurring of normative binaries such as sexual/asexual and man/woman. Arguably, the playwright's use of the angel as an irony of Christian iconography is envisaged in the many dialogues between the spiritual character and Prior. This is especially manifest in a particular conversation in *Perestroika*, wherein the angel attempts to catapult the ailing protagonist to prophecy by boastfully attesting:

Angel (With another gust of music): American Prophet tonight you become, American Eye that pierceth Dark, American Heart all Hot for Truth, The True Great Vocalist, the Knowing Mind, Tongue-of-the-Land, See-Head!
Prior: Oh, Shoo! You're scaring the shit out of me, get the fuck out of my room. Please, oh please... (*Angels* 170)

It is actually interesting to observe in the above conversation how the angel – a Christian figure – calls upon Prior, a homosexual character with AIDS as a prophet. One can accordingly infer that Kushner seeks to underscore his assimilation of homosexuality with spirituality and prove that they are both commensurate. Kushner deploys the angel as a significant theatrical illusion to distance the spectators from the common belief that gays are individuals devoid of value and morality as is commonly thought by Christian zealots.

To further entrench his use of epic staging, Kushner has recourse to the actor's direct address to spectators so as to entice them to respond critically to the play's thematic foci. According to Brecht, the distancing effect is achieved by the way the "artist never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him [...] the audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place" (1964: 91). Speaking directly or otherwise acknowledging the audience through an imaginary wall in a play is referred to as "breaking the fourth wall". It is considered to be a technique of metafiction, as it dismantles the conventional boundaries set up between actors and spectators. This technique is deployed by Kushner in the last moments of *Perestroika*. At the end of the play, Prior steps to the edge of the stage and addresses the audience directly:

We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come. Bye now. You are fabulous creatures, each and every one. And I bless you: More Life. The Great Work Begins (*Angels* 180).

With his direct address to the audience, Prior is revealed as a character with a prophetic voice and staunch moral authority who stands for the emotionally, socially and politically marginalized gay men. Prior, indeed, aspires to stimulate the audience to ruminate on the multifarious proclivities that encumbered gay men

during the 1980s and induce them to consider gay issues as an integral part in the American political and cultural agenda. In this respect, Kushner states in one of his interviews:

I think that after listening to gay people- various kinds of gay people- and thinking about ways in which gay issues are not marginal, but central to the American political and cultural agenda, I hope that people will come away with a sense of comfort, a sense of curiosity, a sense of excitement, a sense of having been exposed to something that maybe they thought they knew, but didn't know as well as they thought they knew, or hadn't known at all (Vorlicky 47).

One, therefore, can clearly infer how Kushner endeavors to provoke his audience to reflect upon the oppressive social constructs that shaped the gay experience in America. He seeks to create a sense of incumbency among his audience to diminish gay oppression and attempts to instill a sort of communal acceptance of gay people's gender and sexual identities.

Subsequently, by deploying significant Brechtian tenets in his play, one can assert that Kushner invites his audience to act as historical materialists fighting against all regulatory ideals that marginalize gay people. According to Walter Benjamin, a historical materialist is the one who vigorously strives to end an oppressive past and revolutionarily participates in its cessation. In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History", Benjamin corroborates:

A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a nomad. In this structure, he recognizes the sign of Messianic cessation of happening, or put differently, a revolutionary chance to fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history – blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time canceled; in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of history (Benjamin 262).

Kushner's intention behind adapting Benjamin's historical materialism is to push the audience to examine the heterosexual oppressive social constructs and propel them to inveigh against them.

IV. Notes

¹ Quoted from R. Geis, Deborah, and Steven F. Kruger, Eds. *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*. Michigan: Michigan University Press, 1997. Print, p 36.

²<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/3/20/fred-phelps-westborobaptistchurchfounderdiesat84.html>
accessed on 07 /04 /2014

³ Quoted from Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999. Print, p 9.

⁴ In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler describes modern notions of identity as being made up by regulatory ideals (1). These regulatory ideals or regulatory fictions as Donna Haraway describes them provide idealized and reified norms which people are expected to live up to. Thus, categories such as male and female, straight or gay, young or old are not believed to be biological facts, but rather categories which people create and recite through performance.

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