

"Where you stand determines what you see": The Politics of American Multiculturalism in Kushner's *Angels in America* (Millennium Approaches and Perestroika)

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Abstract

*There are strong reasons to accept the position that multiculturalism is a complex theoretical backbone of "American-ness". In spite of the theoretical and pragmatic attempts to reduce the diverse markers of peoples' cultural identities into a general category, Americans' acceptance of their American identity(ies) is significantly defined by diverse but distinctive cultural experiences. Using the liberalist paradigm to explain American multiculturalism, therefore, the American environment has to be viewed as a cluster of cultural identities which either tolerantly or violently exclude each other. It is however interesting to note that in contrast to the essentialist, the deconstructionist model would see the American cultural realities in terms of the narratives that have served to idealise its "true" cultural homogeneity. To this model, the American identity is an imagined reality. What becomes even more disturbing, going by these conflicting views, is the complexity of choice highlighting individual's and groups' participations in the politics that entrenches multiculturalism in America. This paper examines the challenges facing Americans' acceptance of multiculturalism and the politics of "group differentiated rights" that problematises the choice or choices individuals and groups make in the process of acquiring the American identity. The paper uses Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (Millennium Approaches and Perestroika) to demonstrate that Americans' desires to express multiculturalism is complicated by their participation in the politics of its acceptance and rejection simultaneously.*

Introduction

The United States of America emerged as a multicultural society from the beginning. Even though the early immigrants were mainly Europeans, they were different in certain respects because they were motivated to migrate by diverse experiences. Diverse and complex perceptions about religion and belief practices were, however, major crisis which triggered migrations and the eventual founding of the New World. The crisis shows enough evidence of the beginning of American multiculturalism. Moreover, the ideas which gave birth to the migration of peoples across Europe to the New World was targeted at a new orientation that would make the future better for the immigrants. Part of that orientation was that the culture, cultural and religious practices associated with the dominant hegemonic worldview had to change. In other words, many immigrants hope for a new understanding of humanity that would recognise and respect individuals and groups as they were in all facets of social, economic, and cultural life.

Nor is it also a matter for contestation that the American cultural environment, given its foundation experience of multiculturalism, has continued to struggle to mainstream into a "monocultural" democratic system. Part of the idealistic vision of the so called American Dream is to achieve a monolithic democratic American culture that would theoretically and practically harmonise peoples' differences into a homogeneous cultural experience. To that end also,, expressions such as "the melting pot" and "the salad bowl", have been used to metaphorically capture the multicultural experiences of the American society. However, the politics of perception and understanding about the contemporary notion of culture, which drives American multiculturalism has added a complicated dimension to the ideals . In other words, the call for social equality and expression of cultural freedom by different groups who feel excluded from certain social and cultural privileges have translated to a complex notion of multiculturalism. Individuals, groups, and communities who acknowledge and extol America as a land of liberty, opportunities, and equality in one context would turn back to carpet the society as a place where marginalisation thrive. Prior to the 1960s' general outcry and protests by African Americans against racialism, multiculturalism was

broadly understood as a system of accommodation or integration of minority groups by the mainstream White culture. But this understanding soon become complicated by the advent of contemporary rethinking of culture beyond race and religion. It was not unexpected that the rethinking of culture would pave the way for individuals and groups to challenge the status quo.

Theorizing Culture: The Two Poles of Multiculturalism

It has been argued variously by cultural and political theorists that multiculturalism has, particularly in the twentieth century, more critically attempted to address the connection between the cultural status of minority groups and their accommodation by the majority culture. The objective is often to locate and address the gap in the idea that mainstream culture and their peripheral, accommodated counterparts in multicultural societies have to understand toleration as the basic answer to multicultural exigencies. Will Kymlicka, a frontline cultural theorist, proposes the concept of "group differentiated rights", where there is the principle that adequate recognition is accorded all minority cultures. The purpose of this is to operationalise a system that addresses the seemingly undefined identity status of minority communities. Through this suggestion, sub-cultural groups who experience various forms of disadvantages in the society would not only be recognised but would also be given the chance to participate as equals in the process of developing a "homogeneous" culture. Yet, the arguments against negative normative tendencies of multiculturalism have continued. Essentially, Ganesh Nathan in support of the anti-essentialist approach to the understanding of multiculturalism agrees that the "politics" playing around the subject could always be revisited to address the backlash arising from certain normative trends that have underscored the understanding of multiculturalism.

In this paper, I take the argument of "politics of multiculturalism" from Ganesh to examine the politics that make American multiculturalism a complex experience in Tony Kushner's play, *Angels in America* (*Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*). Specifically, the essay focuses on the experiences of the gay characters in the plays to explicate the impact of characters' participations in the cultural diplomacy of

American multiculturalism. I argue that the American experience captured in the plays stem from the demand for "group differentiated rights". This agitation accommodates the gay characters' push for the positive accommodation of their peculiarities. This demand is made in the face of the complexities trailing the reality of the American essentialist liberal multiculturalism in the mid and late twentieth century. Groups and communities, including lesbians and homosexuals in particular, have engaged the mainstream straight culture in arguments concerning the true meaning of citizenship in a democratic culture. Thus, American multiculturalism as represented has gone beyond ethnic and religious issues. Interestingly, the gay community constitutes a sub culture of people from different racial, religious, and social affinities. It is captured that over time, the individuals of this community have shared a common experience of lack of recognition in the society as a result of their expression of sexuality which, in the perception of the mainstream straight culture, make them a queer community of Americans.

The gay characters simultaneously identify with other cultural and/or practices. Thus, some of them engage in diplomatic tactics against the status quo. In other instances certain individuals have had to present their arguments against certain cultural practices from the position of their cultural ideology. In all the American democratic political culture becomes a mainstream culture within which sub cultures have to negotiate their rights so as to be mainstreamed into assumptions underscoring multiculturalism. This scenario reveals the contradictory engagements regarding the central culture of "American-ness" in *Angels in America*. Multiculturalism is expressed as a complex idea to take care of the challenges confronting "group differentiated rights" in the American society captured in the plays.

***Angels in America* and the Complexities of American Multiculturalism**

Millennium Approaches and *Perestroika* are jointly titled *Angels in America* and sub-titled "A Gay Fantasia on National Themes". David Biale, Michael Galchinsky and Susannah Heschel describe the two plays as "multicultural play par excellence" (225). Their point is that the deployment of language in the plays is a signification of the

playwright's interest in cultural issues. The major characters are from diverse racial backgrounds and at some crucial points in the plays speak the languages of their origin. Nevertheless, *Angels in America*, in a fundamental way, is a play on the relationship between the American culture of democracy and the place of the individual's citizenship ideals and communities' identities. The plays represent diverse but complex images of culture in America by focusing on the political bonds about citizenship and identity. In other words, *Angels in America* represents the complicities between the mainstream and sub cultural groups through the characters' experiences. These complicities are revealed through interactions of the vital aspects of the Jewish Americans', Italian Americans', African Americans', WASP's, Mormons', Eskimos', gays', and straight characters' cultural experiences. Thus, the themes of religion, love, marriage, betrayal, justice, and HIV/AIDS are pivotal tropes that further point to the social and cultural concerns in the plays. To be sure, therefore, an acknowledgement of these motifs and images of culture in relation to characters situations is important to the understanding of *Angels in America*. More so as these insistently call attention to the window through which the obvious and hidden significance of the play's proposed resolution to the dilemma of cultural progress in the society depicted could be gleaned.

The plot of *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* is woven around the story of a community of homosexuals who in various ways and for peculiar reasons are socially and psychologically alienated from the mainstream social and cultural norms of the society. Most of the characters are struggling to decipher the essence and import of their social relationships with each other and with other Americans outside their circle. The story is set in New York in the mid 1980s. The characters' disillusionment is triggered by what, for them, has been misconstrued to be the mainstream and dominant worldview about race, sexual identity, and gender relationships in America.

The central characters, Prior Walter, Louis Ironson, Roy Cohn, Joe Pitt, and Belize are homosexuals living in New York. Life is depicted as traumatic for them in specific respects to the social privileges that they feel they should enjoy in the form of "group differentiated rights". They are stigmatised because of the queer identity they proclaim and so find

it painfully difficult to express personal freedom about gender identity in public or even find justice in the courts. Even though some of them acknowledge living in a country where the tenets of multiculturalism and egalitarianism are not in contention, it is not clear whether all of them enjoy certain basic cardinal points of freedom, particularly freedom of speech and freedom from fear. What seems clear to them is that some of them are "enslaved" by the society's "undiplomatic", "unpatriotic" social and political attitudes towards homosexuality and the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Consequently, while some of them are agitated and engage in anti-social actions, some others diplomatically attack the society. Prior is an entertainer who is betrayed by Louis, his lover. Louis takes a new lover, Joe because Prior is living with AIDS which he (Louis) feels unsafe with. Joe is a Mormon by religion and Republican by politics. His marriage with Harper, an agoraphobic, valium addict is gradually ebbing away primarily as a result of Joe's fear to disclose and freely express his sexual orientation. The most anti-social character amongst them, however, is Roy. In Kushner's introduction to *Angels in America* Roy is delineated after a real, historical, infamous New York conservative lawyer who died of AIDS in 1986. Roy is a die-hard Republican who takes the liberty he enjoys to vehemently reject the idea of being labeled a homosexual. He argues that his political clout and social class stand strongly to determine his identity and not his sexual orientation. For him, what defines the individual in America is his/her affiliation with the White House. He tells Henry, his doctor:

AIDS. Your problem, Henry, is that you are hung up on words, on labels, that you believe they mean what they seem to mean. AIDS. Homosexual. Gay. Lesbian. You think these are names that tell you who someone sleeps with, but they don't tell you that (*Angels in America* 51).

In Roy's understanding, *what* defines any human is determined by *who* he/she is, thus, words like gay, lesbian, and homosexual are labels that refer in America to people who are politically and socially unrecognised and lack clout and identity. He has been diagnosed of HIV/AIDS at a

time in America when it is difficult to get basic treatment for the people living with the disease. The American society, unfortunately, considers HIV/AIDS as the disease of homosexuals and so people living with its symptoms are derided and never given any serious attention. This is the reason Henry has to advise Roy to use his political clout to get the White House to come to his rescue and get him on an "experimental treatment for liver cancer" (52). Of course Roy uses his connections according to the advice by his doctor. But he achieves his plan even where other members of the gay community are also dying of the disease. Prior Walter particularly finds it difficult to manage his conditions.

Roy is an outlaw who consciously and proudly manipulates America's social justice system in order to achieve a high political identity. In other words, he has seemingly imbibed the political culture of the privileged Americans which has also informed his unconcerned attitude to the plight of other Americans like Prior. Roy's expression of multiculturalism is therefore shaped by class culture as his politics of survival betrays a common goal of group differentiated rights. Indeed, Roy's conscious involvement in several unprofessional and politically unethical conducts is antithetical to the goals of multiculturalism as a theoretical backbone of the mainstream culture of American-ness. Consequently, it is not surprising that virtually all the other gay characters abhor Roy's political philosophy and social identity. Many of them never want to be identified with him because they consider him as the quintessential Anti-American in all of its ramifications.

Beyond the character of Roy and all the cultural contradictions he represents, the overall thematic depth of *Angels in America* is crucial to the politics of multiculturalism in the two plays. The plays are jointly and connectedly link to the theme of political and cultural progress in America. The complicities involving the major characters' conscious or unconscious tackling of the politics of multiculturalism and social recognition in America are depicted. Social and cultural constructs like citizenship, family, sexuality, identity, gender and love are expressed in complex ways by the characters. These constructs are perceived by the characters as values that should naturally derive from "group differentiated rights". Roy, Prior, and Louis are motivated, in their different approaches to this issue, to challenge the general perceptions

of citizenship rights. These characters are innately convinced that rights such as sexual and gender rights are entrenched values in the citizenship bond between them other Americans. Yet, they seemingly forget how the question of American multiculturalism is overwhelmingly fundamental to citizenship. Indeed citizenship is intricately interwoven with multiculturalism as it brings to the front burner questions about the complicated diplomacies underscoring the whole objective of "group differentiated rights". Furthermore, these characters' motivation would ordinarily call attention to the validity of their insistence on multiculturalism as they express their isolated and parochial sense of moral judgment for social integration. It queries the manner in which some them engage in the politics of multiculturalism in America. It is imperative to restate that the American society depicted in *Angels in America* illustrates a setting where characters' dreams of a free, egalitarian, harmonious, happy society are driven by complex selfish desires. Roy's social and political morality and attitude, particularly to the basic rights of "the marginalised" might have influenced his perceptions of citizenship as it connects to American multiculturalism.

It is equally fundamental that the cultural environment of the characters is plagued by contradictions which emanate from the conflicts between the gay characters desires to achieve personal and community/group identities to the exclusion of others' and their general preferences for an American cultural identity or American-ness. In fact, characters' individual and group demands, the philosophy on which these are based, and the principles upon which the American society captured in these plays are concretely interdependent and simultaneously idealistic. This is because these issues co-referentially constitute a theoretical space through which the complexities of multiculturalism are mapped out in real actions. The characters' minds are seemingly ingrained in a socio-cultural process that is located within their psychological need for a common, centrally true American culture and which simultaneously derives its ideals from the selfish idea of it.

Unfortunately, many of these characters have to engage tactically in the politics of multiculturalism, negotiating their "group differentiated rights" by connecting to government policy drive on its path to achieving a multicultural society. Overall, it appears to them that their

personal and collective experiences of citizenship rights are threatened. But what this actually reveals is that their supposed natural right to "liberty" and "social equality" are being challenged by the manner in which privileges are accorded to certain members of the society. Unarguably, liberty and natural rights are political concepts which are strongly enshrined in the American justice and social systems. The basic objective of the concepts, however, is to inculcate in individuals and groups the spirit of selflessness, a fair ambition and creative drive towards goal actualisation. Ironically, there is a sense in which the right to liberty and equity in the American society captured in *Angels in America* have also promoted the culture of self-indulgence. Consequent upon which individuals and groups, in attempts to achieve personal and group goals, have to put forward arguments from parochial perspectives.

Kushner, to this end, has contextualised *Angels in America* within the framework of characters' wish to actualise "group differentiated rights" through their awareness of the events in the political sphere of the American life. He achieves this through a special focus on the political realities in America during the President Ronald Reagan administration. Kushner recalls in an interview with Neal Conan on the *Public radio network* in the United States of America on September 13, 2011 (accessed on www.npr.org) the political windstorm that pervaded American politics which inform his plays thus:

During... the Reagan years, there was a sort of sea change taking place in American politics... I feel, going back now, that the early '90s, the late '80s, for all the horrors of the AIDS epidemic, were comparatively innocent and carefree times compared to where we are now.

Certain individuals among the characters, Roy Cohn, Martin Heller, Joe Pitt, and Louis Ironson are, from personal and group angles, actively engaged in the political intrigues that play out between the main political ideologies of Left and Right in America. In the plays Ronald Reagan is depicted as not only the arrow head of the Republican Party's politics but also its standard bearer. Roy and Martin, and Joe are

Republicans, and therefore, Reagan supporters. These characters express sentiments in favour of the ideology of their political party and Reagan's administration's implementation of the Affirmative Action.

Martin articulates the political calculations of the Conservatives to Joe in order to strongly convince him to support Roy in his (Roy) struggle to fight his impending debarment. Like Roy, underneath Martin's canvassing is a selfish objective to place political right above other group rights even in the face of "group differentiated rights". His political position (where he stands) determines his perceptions and ultimately his identity. Motivated by the ways in which political power in America is playing out in favour of the Republican Party, Martin diplomatically raises the optimism about the triumph of gay rights. His analysis shows a depth of diplomatic approach to recruit Joe fully into the culture of selective and selfish freedom.

It's revolution in Washington, Joe. We have a new agenda and finally a real leader. They got back the Senate but we have the courts. By the nineties the Supreme Court will be back-solid Republican appointees, and the Federal bench- Republican judges like land mines, everywhere, everywhere they turn. Affirmative action? Take it to court. Boom! Land mine. And we'll get our way on just about everything; abortion, defense, Central America, family values, a live investment climate. We have the White House locked till the year 2000. And beyond. A permanent fix on the Oval Office? It's possible. By '92 we'll get the Senate back, and in ten years the South is going to give us the House. It's really the end of Liberalism. The end of New Deal Socialism. The end of ipso facto secular humanism. The dawning of a genuinely American political personality. Modeled on Ronald Wilson Reagan. (*Angels in America* 69)

Martin and Roy are particular about the Courts and the political roles the American Bar and the Bench can play to ensure that the political climate is manipulated in favour of the marginalised homosexuals and

other socially stigmatised Americans. For them, America in the hands of the Democrats will never fulfill its American dream of "group differentiated rights" for individuals and groups. Beyond this obvious articulation of the politics in America is Martin's and Roy's innate desires to become free from the stigma of homosexuality. Just like Roy, Martin's other agenda is to engage in only those things that satisfy his sexual orientation urge. But he speaks about this through his selfish diplomatic concerns for progress in America in the area of social equality for all. As a closeted homosexual like Roy and Joe, Martin also calls Reagan "a real leader" as a result of the administration's political agenda for liberty and the right of individuals to speak out but he is only expressing his innate desires for freedom through same sex pleasure.

The concept of "group differentiated rights" which underscores Martin's concerns with Affirmative Action, is riddled with ironies and contradictions. One cannot but notice this as some of the other characters perceptibly reject Reagan's implementations of the objectives contained in the script of the Affirmative Action. Belize is one of such characters who views the administration as anti-affirmative action because it supports a return to racial discrimination and inequality by redefining democracy in terms of Americans' "ability and qualification". For Belize Affirmative Action is simply a ploy which puts the whites at privileged positions when it comes to the implementation of social and political conditions for peoples' rights. There are seamless contradictions in the ways social privileges are accorded some members of the American society which Belize believes is impliedly supported by the administration of Reagan.

Terry H. Anderson buttresses the point that there are certain political backlash which the Reagan administration's attitude to minority rights brought into the implementation of the freedom component of the American democratic values. He observes that this "backlash appeared politically as President Ronald Reagan moved into the White House", quoting the president as saying:

We must not allow the noble concept of equal opportunity to be distorted into federal guidelines or quotas which require race, ethnicity, or sex - rather than

ability and qualifications-to be the principal factor in hiring or education (14).

Whereas Belize's arguments that America is "just big ideas, and stories, and people dying" and "Terminal, crazy and mean" (*Angels in America* 228) are direct attacks on Reagan's administration's attempts at what he perceives as a re-interpretation of liberty and social equality, he expresses an outright hatred for America's accommodationist tendencies using Louis as a subtle subject of racism. Racial accommodation is strongly rejected in the theory of American multiculturalism. Louis has recently betrayed Prior who was Belize's former lover, thus, Belize sees Louis as the image of America that has betrayed true "freedom" as he says: "Nothing on earth sounds less like freedom to me". His negative reactions to Reagan's social policies on affirmative action is enough to support critics of *Angels in America* who believe that it is impossible to divorce *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* and many other plays by Americans across racial and gender divides from the dynamics of politics in the American society. More important, however, is that Belize's comments and actions (being an African American ex drag queen) about America's multicultural values are driven by the desire for "group differentiated rights" than the progress of democratic system in their country.

Kushner's gay and nongay characters in the two plays are in constant conflict with themselves as individuals and as a community, both psychologically and socially. For all intent and purposes, their actions and inactions are shown to be critical to illuminating the foundations for the "true" American cultural progress. Thus, *Angels in America* is a "fantasia" projecting the vision of progress for the American sociopolitical and cultural dilemmas. This vision of progress intertwines with the cultural reality of the contemporary time to reveal the complex nature of the politics of multiculturalism in America and the conflict of diplomacy that characters experience.

In conclusion, African Americans', homosexuals', Jewish Americans', as well as WASPs' experiences of "group differentiated rights" of American multiculturalism are in crucial focus in *Angels in America*. *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* implicate, to this end, the

cultural currents that morph to define the complexity of the American society by depicting the characters in the plays as politically and culturally conscious individuals and community. The characters understand the diplomacy and the politics underscoring the issue of multiculturalism in the American environment. Hence, James Corby's conclusion:

One is almost invited, therefore, to look for a political stance that the play might be said to promote. This is complicated, however, by the sheer wealth of often disparate, politically-oriented ideas and positions that Kushner weaves into his drama (16).

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