



ISSN Print: 2664-8717  
ISSN Online: 2664-8725  
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.00  
IJRE 2024; 6(1): 22-25  
[www.englishjournal.net](http://www.englishjournal.net)  
Received: 07-12-2023  
Accepted: 12-01-2024

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## Identity and social construction in André Aciman's Narratives

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2024.v6.i1a.157>

### Abstract

This paper, entitled "Identity and Social Construction in André Aciman's Narratives," attempts to explore the different aspects of the queer through a study of Aciman's selected novel, *Call Me by Your Name* (2007). It explores how the concept of queer is placed under the power paradigm. Queer fiction like Aciman's novel encapsulates the confusion faced by those that are deemed to be queer and thus requires serious attention in the formation of society. The entire institution of identity and social construction in a society lies within the context of heteronormativity. This paper therefore questions how certain characters in the novel, despite situating themselves within the boundaries that the idea of heteronormativity has completely restricted, still failed to come to terms with who they really are and remained confused throughout the novel.

**Keywords:** Social Construction, Italian-American writer, André Aciman's Narratives

### Introduction

Born on January 2, 1951, in Egypt, André Aciman is an Italian-American writer. Influenced by his home and upbringing, Aciman's novel *Call Me by Your Name* (2007) is set in northern Italy. In studying the characters of Aciman's novel *Call Me by Your Name*, it is apparent that the beliefs related to sexuality are entirely controlled by a whole system of institutions, and individuals are therefore subjected to the power that lies within the notion of sexuality. Foucault states, "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere."<sup>[1]</sup> All individuals in a society are nonetheless required to live up to a certain standard set in relation to the issue of sexuality.

Power has carried a standard to be followed, resolutely imposing its principle on all the characters in the novel *Call Me by Your Name*. Starting from childhood, the protagonist in Aciman's novel Elio was made alert to what could be deemed 'wrong' particularly in terms of sexuality. By following the rules that are readily available to him, Elio, like every other individual, also tried to construct his home according to the rules and regulations set for him. The rules that children have learned from the adults around them highlight the fact that a seventeen-year-old character like Elio could still follow every rule but still find himself lost in their parents' home. The arrival of Oliver brought Elio to a real home; Elio did not even yet realise that he hadn't been home for seventeen years.

Elio thus said,

This is like coming home, like coming home after years away among Trojans and Lestrygonians, like coming home to a place where everyone is like you, where people know, they just know-coming home as when everything falls into place and you suddenly realize that for seventeen years all you'd been doing was fiddling with the wrong combination<sup>[2]</sup>.

As much as individuals could never be confined under certain standards of regulations, Elio too had seen that the standard of his entire surroundings was not the standard of what he could call home. He says, "We are not written for one instrument alone; I am not, neither are

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality I: An Introduction* (Vintage Books, 1990), 93.

<sup>2</sup> André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 19.

you.”<sup>[3]</sup> With the conceptions of gender and sexual categorizations, the concept of sexuality is bound to be kept silent under certain discourses and thus limited to selected categorizations authorised by the institution. Individuals are bound to stay quiet and be limited by certain cultural norms dignified by society, so that power could easily be imparted by means of religion, culture, social, political, traditional knowledge, and so on. When this power established by different norms has been regarded as the champion of the institution, the very idea of power itself could still be downtrodden by what has been regarded as nothing but silence. Silence is what exposed Elio and Oliver in many situations, and Elio knew that it is this silence that could expose him<sup>[4]</sup>. The whole concept of sexual identity becomes really complex as its functions rely merely on the very construction of power and knowledge as a whole. It is not sexuality that is regarded as important within this social institution, but it is the concept of sexual identity that creates complexities within this ambit of power and knowledge social institution. Altman also stated in his review, “The History of Sexuality. Volume One: An Introduction by Michel Foucault and Robert Hurley,”

Our culture, he concludes, is one which has developed a “scientia sexualis” rather than an “ars erotica” (A sexology rather than an erotic aesthetic tradition), one in which power has become organized less by law (The right to administer death) and more by norm (The power to categorize and regulate the biological energies of life)<sup>[5]</sup>.

The very idea of dignity in an individual goes vis-à-vis the matter of handling certain cultural norms formulated in a society. When Elio wanted to prove that nothing was wrong with him and that he was no less human than any other young man his age, he also still wanted to prove to himself that he held his dignity. The ‘dignity’ Elio talked about has become quite complex when it is something that could be picked and thrown away easily. He says, “I would have been satisfied and asked for nothing else than if he’d bent down and picked up the dignity I could so effortlessly have thrown at his feet.”<sup>[6]</sup> The idea of satisfaction in Elio depends on the pick and throw of the dignity established according to his cultural norms, and while regarded as firmly established, its unfixedness lies in the effortlessness of his picking up and throwing away. An individual’s sexuality is no longer one part of an individual’s content; instead, it is the subject of the entire individual’s life.

So much as Elio could not understand his true identity, Oliver was not sure of his given identity, even though he kept repeating that he knew himself. Elio wanted to find happiness in who he was and had hoped for satisfaction in it too. Oliver instead gave up on his own satisfaction so that he could satisfy the world. Elio resists submitting himself to his given identity numerous times and wants to fight for who he really is. In the case of Oliver, his way of knowing himself works best with his way of submitting himself to the power that rules upon him and thus accepting it. It was this power

upon him that identified him with a given identity, yet he was still confused when he highlighted the fact that taking this given identity was his calculation of being ‘good.’ This was made clear when he wanted to resist his desire for Elio and said, “I want to be good.”<sup>[7]</sup>

The concept of being ‘good’ entails the idea of submitting oneself to the institution in Oliver, and this idea of being ‘good’ is what led his life until the ending of the novel. Though he knew that his identity was found in Elio by calling Elio by his name, he wanted to find an identity that was found acceptable and stable in a society and thus got married to a woman later in his life. Though he knew that he seemed to have more in life than a heterosexual male would have in the homophobic world, Oliver also knew what he lacked in accordance with the homophobic world. This, according to him, is his way of knowing himself. Knowing oneself in Oliver means knowing oneself in accordance with the power of heterosexual institution. As Diana Fuss states, “The homo, then, is always something less and something more than a supplement – something less in that it signifies lack rather than addition, and something more in that it signifies an addition to a lack, a lack which, importantly, may not be its own.”<sup>[8]</sup>

As stated by Fuss, heterosexuals hold authority over sexuality, and a character like Oliver was also put forward to maintain the ongoing system set before him. His idea of knowing himself involves his idea of accepting the power that rules upon him, and his idea of being ‘good’ could also be bounded by his knowing of his father’s power over him, in which his desire in life would require a “correctional facility.” Oliver considered Elio to be “lucky” because he has a father who seemed to understand their relationship, while his would have punished him if he knew who Oliver really was<sup>[9]</sup>. Oliver’s father has his own way of regulating his power over his son, which is by no means free from the regulatory regimes of sexual categorization.

Butler states, “Freedom, possibility, agency do not have an abstract or pre-social status, but are always negotiated within a matrix of power.”<sup>[10]</sup> Elio’s father is a character who seemed to understand how there is always this negotiation within “a matrix of power” but who also couldn’t really do anything about it. Elio’s father was held back in highlighting his complexities; his way of opening himself up to his son still left Elio in wonder about who he was and who his father was. What held Mr. Perlman back from speaking of what he had seen or felt exactly in life could be something that has been regulating him throughout his entire life. “Speaking abstractly was the only way to speak the truth to him.”<sup>[11]</sup> Though open and understanding unlike Oliver’s father, Elio’s father was also never free from the regulatory regimes of sexual categorizations, and the freedom that he could provide his son is never free from a “matrix of power” within the ambit of heteronormativity. This time, Elio was left confused about himself and his

<sup>3</sup> André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name*, 18.

<sup>4</sup> André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name*, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Altman, Meryl, “The History of Sexuality. Volume One: An Introduction by Michel Foucault and Robert Hurley,” *The Radical Teacher*, no. 29 (September 1985): 14. [www.jstor.org/stable/20709494](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20709494)

<sup>6</sup> André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 34.

<sup>7</sup> André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 83.

<sup>8</sup> Diana Fuss, ed., *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (Routledge, 1991), 3.

<sup>9</sup> André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 221.

<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler, “Critically Queer” *GLQ*, vol. 1, no. 1, (November 1993): 22, doi: 10.1215/10642684-1-1-17

<sup>11</sup> André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name*, 218.

father. Elio therefore questions, “Was my father someone else? And if he was someone else, who was I?”<sup>[12]</sup>

The whole knowledge of sexual and gender identity is questioned with the notion of differences that are socially constructed. Identities are maintained within the power paradigm of the entire institution. A rigid identity of male and female enclosed the acceptance made within the heteronormative structure in which an individual's sexes and their sex acts are entirely controlled. Differences and similarities control not only the identity but also the sex act of every individual. An individual has been shown these differences and similarities since childhood, in which a character like Elio was also made aware of what wrong he could have done with the sex act he had with Oliver within the boundary of the heteronormative world. “Similarity and differences being irretrievably entangled in each other. Difference is no less socially constructed than similarity.”<sup>[13]</sup>

Though confused, Elio could not figure out the reason for his guilt. His question lies somewhere between his gender similarity with Oliver and his gender difference with Marzia. His sex act with Marzia seemed to be ‘right’ but his sex act with Oliver seemed to be ‘wrong.’ Elio then questioned himself, “Would I always experience such solitary guilt in the wake of our intoxicating moments together? Why didn’t I experience the same thing after Marzia? Was this nature’s way of reminding me that I would rather be with her?”<sup>[14]</sup> Instead of questioning the whole notion of identity structure, seventeen-year-old Elio found guilty in himself and assumed that it was “nature's way” of reminding him to turn back to Marzia. With Marzia, Elio seemed to find safety and acceptability in his upbringing heteronormative world. As Kinsey explicitly stated, “The hetero/homo division was not nature’s doing: ‘Only the human mind invents categories and tries to force facts into separated pigeon-holes. The living world is a continuum.’”<sup>[15]</sup> It was later, when Elio merged his identity and Oliver’s identity into a “man-woman” identity, that he looked back and realised he didn’t “regret none of it.”<sup>[16]</sup>

Rome is the place where Elio discovered who he really was, what he was composed of, and where he truly belonged. With his understanding of gender differences in the heterosexual world, Elio then started to realise his desire and the repression that he had been living all through within the institutionalised distinction of heteronormativity. It was at that moment that he had nothing left to hide from Oliver, and he said, “I had never felt freer or safer in my life. We were alone together for three days, we knew no one in the city, I could be anyone, say anything, do anything.”<sup>[17]</sup> Knowing no one in the city freed Elio and Oliver from the system of bound social actions which was defined by their “social identifications.” Jenkin states, “In terms of identifications, what people think about us is no less

important than what we think about ourselves.”<sup>[18]</sup> As much as an individual is defined by their social identifications, the sexual desire and sexual practice of an individual have also been constantly regulated by the sexual orientation constituted within their culture, tradition, religion, and society. Turner states,

Instead, the relationships among desire, repression, and politics become matters for scrutiny. But even this is too simple, for – as Sedgwick insists in the same article – one cannot understand desire and repression without understanding gender, which in our culture is inextricably related to sexual practice and sexual identity<sup>[19]</sup>.

With different identities established firmly in accordance with the belief of heteronormativity, the entire institution stood resolutely to oppress those who were against the rules set within the heterosexual orientation. After experiencing how these rules have laid power over those that are deemed to be ‘homosexuals’, characters like Elio’s father and Oliver chose not to display who they truly were in society. Though Oliver was considered to be “the one who thought exactly like”<sup>[20]</sup> Elio, Oliver chose not to speak up about himself, unlike Elio, and thus said that Elio has made “things difficult.”<sup>[21]</sup> It was his desire that could not stop him from revealing who he truly was and was thus left revealed through actions most of the time. All these seemed to disturb Oliver so much, for he knew the costs of his action. With an unending demand for the attainment of stability, especially in the matter of his given identity, Oliver has to identify himself with his given identity in ways that do not upset the power which ruled upon him.

#### As Foucault also stated

Power over sex is exercised in the same way at all levels. From top to bottom, in its over-all decisions and its capillary interventions alike, whatever the devices or institutions on which it relies, it acts in a uniform and comprehensive manner; it operates according to the simple and endlessly reproduced mechanisms of law, taboo, and censorship<sup>[22]</sup>.

Knowing the consequences of their sex act under the power of the heteronormative world, Oliver initially found that his relationship with Elio would be “very wrong,”<sup>[23]</sup> and thus eventually fled away from Elio, yet he was never really freed till the very end of the novel. Even after getting married with children, Oliver still said that he was like Elio and that he remembered everything<sup>[24]</sup>.

Witnessing the whole notion of identity and social construction under the power paradigm, the characters in Aciman’s novel ultimately represent the reality of individuals who disengaged themselves from the scope of categorising identity even while these characters seemed to

<sup>12</sup> André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 219.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Routledge, 2008), 157.

<sup>14</sup> André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name*, 149.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Ned Katz, “The Invention of Heterosexuality,” chap. 5 in *Race, Class and Gender in the United States*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (Worth Publishers, 2016), 54.

<sup>16</sup> André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 159.

<sup>17</sup> André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name*, 169.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Jenkins, “Categorization: Identity, Social Process and Epistemology.” *Current Sociology*, vol. 49, no. 3 (July 2000): 8. SAGE, doi: 10.1177/0011392100048003003

<sup>19</sup> William B. Turner, *A Genealogy of Queer Theory* (Temple University Press, 2000), 4.

<sup>20</sup> André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 233.

<sup>21</sup> André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name*, 80.

<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality I: An Introduction* (Vintage Books, 1990), 84.

<sup>23</sup> André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 80.

<sup>24</sup> André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name*, 241.

go along with the productive strategy of social construction within the heteronormative world.

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