


# THE POLITICS OF OTHERNESS IN THE TIME OF CRISES: REVISITING TONY KUSHNER'S ANGELS IN AMERICA

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## ABSTRACT

*The recent COVID-19 pandemic has revealed once again that the effects of health crises have been more severe for some groups compared to the others. The most prominent of these groups is non-binary or LGBTQ+ individuals who have long faced social discrimination. The disadvantaged position of LGBTQ+ people during worldwide epidemics attracted the attention of playwrights especially in 1980s and 90s. Although this could be attributed to the AIDS epidemic during the time, playwrights problematized the “otherness” issue influencing LGBTQ+ people through AIDS and the political response to it. One of the most significant of these was American playwright Tony Kushner. In “Angels in America”, Kushner put forth not only the problems of LGBTQ+ people during AIDS epidemic but also the problem of otherness in different levels as a social and political phenomenon. This article aims to explore the concepts of “responsibility” and “otherness”, which Kushner problematized in his play based on the philosophical approaches of Levinas and Benjamin, in light of the current developments regarding health crises and the political response. The article claims the disadvantaged position of minority groups during crises including AIDS and COVID-19 is more of a political issue regarding the attitudes of right-wing/conservative politics (which has not changed even today) rather than the difficulties posed by the pandemics themselves. In that respect, Kushner’s activist theatre proves to be guiding in evaluating the conditions of “the others” during the pandemic.*

**Key Words:** Covid-19, LGBTQ+, theatrical activism, Tony Kushner, Angels in America

## Kriz Dönemlerinde Ötekileştirme Politikaları: Tony Kushner’ın “Angels in America” Oyununun Yeniden Değerlendirilmesi

### ÖZET

*Yakın zamandaki COVID-19 pandemisi sağlıkla ilgili krizlerin etkilerinin bazı grupları diğerlerine göre daha yoğun bir şekilde etkilediğini de bir kez daha gözler önüne sermiştir. Bu gruplar arasında tarihte olduğu gibi günümüzde de toplumsal ayrımcılığa maruz kalan “non-binary” ya da LGBTQ+ bireyler ön plana çıkmaktadır. LGBTQ+ bireylerin salgın hastalıklar sırasındaki dezavantajlı durumu, özellikle 80’li ve 90’lı yıllarda tiyatroyun da ilgisini çeken bir konu olmuştur. Bunun sebebi 80’lerde baş gösteren AIDS salgını olarak açıklanabilirse de, bu salgından yola çıkarak bazı oyun yazarları LGBTQ+ bireylerin ötekileştirilme sorununu oyunlarına taşımışlardır. Bu oyun yazarlarından en önemlilerinden birisi ise Amerikalı oyun yazarı Tony Kushner’dır. Kushner, “Angels in America” oyunuyla sadece AIDS salgınında LGBTQ+ bireylerin yaşadığı sorunları değil, daha genel anlamda toplumsal ve politik bir sorun olarak ötekileştirmeyi ele almıştır. Bu makalenin amacı Kushner’ın oyununda Levinas ve Benjamin’in felsefelerinden yola çıkarak sorunsallaştırdığı “başkalarına karşı sorumluluk” ve “ötekileştirme” kavramlarını günümüz koşullarında politikacıların kriz dönemlerinde “ötekiler”e yaklaşımı ışığında yeniden değerlendirmektir. AIDS ve COVID-19 gibi kriz dönemlerinde dezavantajlı grupların yaşadığı problemlerin salgınların kendisinden çok sağlamuhafazakâr politikalardan kaynaklandığı ve bu durumun günümüzde de değişmediği iddia edilmektedir. Bu anlamda Kushner’ın aktivist tiyatrosu günümüzde “ötekilerin” yaşam koşullarının değerlendirilmesi açısından da yol göstericidir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Covid-19, LGBTQ+, aktivist tiyatro, Tony Kushner, Angels in America

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## Introduction

Mostly regarded as a phenomenon of the mid-80s to mid-90s, AIDS plays – if such a category exists- continue to be relevant in today's world convulsed by the Covid-19 pandemic, not only with their epidemic-centered plots but also with their emphasis on the specific challenges faced by “the Others” during these times. American playwright Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize winner play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* stands as a unique example of this approach with its ambivalent (not necessarily in a pejorative sense) content ranging from Mormonism to racism and sexism. While the two crises (Covid-19 and AIDS) differ in various ways, both highlight the significance of empathy, community, and perseverance; thus, the paper claims that Kushner's play with its themes of illness, isolation, discrimination, and the significance of connection in times of crises can provide new insights to the politics of otherness in the USA.

*Angels in America* consists of two parts, *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*, the first part premiered in 1991 and the second in 1993, following the catastrophic AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. The first cases of AIDS in the USA were reported in June 1981 when The U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC) announced a lung infection (PCP) in five gay men in Los Angeles and 700,000 people have died due to the epidemic since then, the biggest percentage belonging to minority groups and gay/bisexual men. According to the CDC's report, in 2018 gay and bisexual men made up 69% of the 37,968 new HIV diagnoses in the United States and dependent areas. The same report adds that racial and ethnic disparities continue to be a determining factor, with 37% of the infected Black/African American and 30% Hispanic/Latino, which suggests that the problem couldn't be detached from racial identity (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022).

Another interesting fact in the report is that even in 2018, only 65% of the infected were able to receive some HIV care, while 35% did not receive treatment. The report highlights that “stigma, homophobia, and discrimination affect the health and well-being of gay and bisexual men and may prevent them from seeking and receiving high-quality health services, including HIV testing, treatment, and other prevention services. These issues place gay and bisexual men at higher risk for HIV” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). However, it should also be noted that there may be other reasons not necessarily related to sexual and racial discrimination for the high percentages of HIV among gay and bisexual men. One such reason might be the low rate of PrEP use among Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino gay and bisexual men compared to White gay and bisexual men, as CDC reports.

Although the illnesses differ in various ways, a similar discriminative approach towards LGBTQ+ individuals were seen during Trump administration. To give an example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, “30% of LGBT have had their work hours reduced compared to 22% of the general population” (Acosta, 2020). The rates are similar in the other items as well; LGBTQ+ people have faced higher levels of financial loss. This same report also puts forth that LGBTQ+ people experience discrimination in health care, which is directly related to Trump's policies against LGBTQ+ people's healthcare rights. Undermining Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act, which explicitly protected LGBTQ+ people's health care rights, creating a new office that would defend medical professionals who refuse to care for LGBTQ+ people, cutting over a considerable amount of PEPFAR (the program that fights AIDS) budget are some policies implemented by Trump government during this period. Hence, notwithstanding variances, one may infer that certain societal factions have consistently encountered discrimination during times of health crises, thereby implicating political policies as opposed to inherent qualities of the maladies themselves. This idea was reflected in Kushner's play, which makes the play relevant today. Consequently, the themes encapsulated in *Angels in*

*America* can be seen as germane to the current Covid-19 crisis, and the play is prophetic considering the American politics of otherness during the crisis.

The first literary response to the AIDS epidemic, although it remained off-Broadway, came from playwright and AIDS activist Larry Kramer in 1985, with his play *The Normal Heart* focusing on the experiences of The New York gay community between 1981-1984, followed by William M. Hoffman's play *As Is* which was able to make its way through Broadway in the same year. However, Kushner's two-part play *Angels in America*, published six years later, made a tremendous impact with both its subject matter and theatrical techniques. As Daniel Mendelsohn (2004: 42) puts it, the play was received as "an enraged, seethingly articulate, intellectually ambitious, high-flown response to the stultifying and smug atmosphere of denial, silence, and willful ignorance".

The play moves around the intertwined - not always in real life but sometimes in dreams, as in the case of Harper and Prior meeting in a mutual dream- lives/struggles of two couples accompanied by a number of side characters and focuses on a wide range of issues from AIDS to closeted homosexuality, Mormonism and justice system. Due to its distractions for the reader and the audience, this thematic ambivalence in the play has sometimes been attributed to the playwright's lack of focus, which Omer-Sherman (2007: 7) disagrees. Although Omer-Sherman acknowledges that the "epic scope" and "disparate matters" of the play require a strenuous effort to follow it, the playwright's skill and success in banding them together coherently invalidates the argument which attributes a negative meaning to the ambivalent form of the play. Freedman (1998: 91) in line with Omer-Sherman focuses on the significance of the play in terms of its innovative form and claims that Kushner "conjoins recent American political history, gay male identity politics, Brechtian alienation devices, Mormon mythmaking, Broadway schtick, and cabalistic lore". David Savran (2005: 15) adds that the play's being ambivalent "does not mean that all the questions it raises remain unsolved".

Although *Angels in America* seems to focus on the challenges faced by the protagonist Prior Walter who has been diagnosed with AIDS and thus abandoned by his lover Louis Ironson, all the characters in the play must deal with the problems caused by otherness and its political response. Thus, the play problematizes the more general concept of otherness in the USA through the AIDS theme without demonizing any character. Louis may read as a selfish character for abandoning Prior in such a difficult situation; however, he is also genuine in his fears and bewilderment, which leads the reader to empathize with the character. By portraying Louis as an irresponsible character, Kushner aims to criticize a larger society's unresponsiveness to the suffering of an individual rather than to create a single villain character; thus, Kushner's characters should read as embodiments of a larger system rather than single individuals, which turns *Angels in America* into a social and political critique.

This critique of social and political unresponsiveness is apparent even from the first scene of *Millennium Approaches* when Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz says "She preferred silence. So I do not know her and yet I know her" (Kushner, 2013: 10) in the funeral of Louis' grandmother, a tragi-comic statement which hints that the members of society tend to ignore the existence of the silent individual until their death, a reference to the ignorance of the gay individuals with AIDS. Similarly, when Prior says to Louis; "There are thousands of gay men in New York City with AIDS and nearly every one of them is being taken care of by... a friend or by ... a lover who has stuck by them ... Everyone got that, except me. I got you" (Kushner, 2013: 10); he implies a broader social and political problem rather than his abandonment by Louis, by underlining that the only person who could take care of you in case of AIDS is a lover and you are all alone in the whole social and political system without the existence of such a

lover. The situation was similar in the Covid-19 crisis when people had to rely merely on their close environment during the long lockdowns.

Freedman (1998) explains the significance and social critique in this scene through a reference to the Jewish identity of Prior's grandmother, connecting the experiences of Jewishness and queerness in America. For Freedman (1998: 92) "the fate of Sophie Ironson (Louis' grandmother) in America "melting pot where nothing melted"- chimes with and ironically foreshadows Prior's". However, it is significant to note that Kushner neither portrays Prior as a victim in the play nor creates an over-sentimental atmosphere out of Prior's sickness.

Although standing as the antagonist and the villain of the play, the other character with AIDS Roy Cohn could at the same time be considered Louis' doppelganger, embodying a parallel social and political critique. Roy is an abstinent homosexual in fear of homophobic attacks of his political rivals and as Freedman (1998: 93) puts it, suffers from "self-hatred" caused by imposed expectations and social roles; however, Kushner once again reminds us the bigger picture behind Roy's self-hatred and his lack of ethics especially in the case of Ethel Rosenberg. Joe Pitt's contrived marriage to Harper, Harper's Valium addiction and hallucinations, Belize's struggle with being black and homosexual, even the predicament Hannah faces due to her motherhood role all converge to constitute a social and political critique.

Understanding the social and political critique in *Angels in America* also requires underlining the significance of Jewishness in the play as complementary to sexual otherness. Freedman (1998) claims that the connection between Jewishness and sexual otherness emerged as a theme in theatre long before *Angels in America*, even in the mystery plays of the medieval times or in Shakespeare; in his own words "The Jewish other and the sexual other were thus frequently placed in vibrant contiguity in the literary traditions of the West well before sexologists or psychologists or race theorists codified that relation" (Freedman, 1998: 91). Obviously, Kushner transformed the theme of Jewishness into a social and political critique together with sexual otherness, although Freedman (1998) criticizes Kushner for disrupting the balance between the themes in favor of the latter, which might be a valid argument. However, it is understandable, taking into consideration that "sexual otherness" stands in the center of Kushner's play, whereas Jewish identity or Mormonism acts in supporting roles.

Omer-Sherman (2007: 10) explains the relationship between sexual and national/religious otherness in *Angels in America* with the claim that Kushner connects the fate of a nation with that of the individual, using Jewishness as a theme. Farahani and Akhavan (2017: 76), defining Kushner as a "political activist", - a claim which Harold Bloom (2005: 2), the renowned Kushner scholar disagreed, and rather claimed that Kushner is a theological playwright - rightly adds that Kushner, through a number of minorities criticize the "hidden immoralities" of American government. I claim that this could easily be extended to the "hidden immoralities" of right-wing politics around the world, not only in America, which makes Kushner's play universal.

### **Reflections on Levinas and Benjamin: *Angels* and Otherness**

As many have argued, Emmanuel Levinas' ideas on responsibility are insightful in blending Kushner's artistic approach, its philosophical grounds, and the politics of otherness. For Levinas (1989) human beings have a primal responsibility towards the Other, which Omer-Sherman (2007) explains through a reference to "achraiut", the word used for responsibility in Hebrew (Levinas was Jewish). The root of the word "achraiut" is "acher", which literally means "the other", and Levinas repeatedly emphasizes the relationship between responsibility and the other. Levinas (1989) prioritizes responsibility over any other acts, underlining its

premortal and postmortem existence. For Levinas (1989: 10) the essence of “signification” is “the relationship with the other”, which he defines as “the one for the other” implying a responsibility even towards the people we are not acquainted with.

Levinas (1989) even puts forth the claim that the responsibility we feel towards the other constitutes the essence of our self-consciousness: “It has meaning only as an upsurge in me of a responsibility prior to commitment, that is, a responsibility for the other. There I am one and irreplaceable, one in as much as irreplaceable in responsibility” (Levinas, 1989: 10). The oneself cannot form itself for Levinas, which emphasizes the passive nature of oneself, implying that the One was already naturally created as a passive being; however, requires the interaction with and responsibility towards the other to constitute its unique identity. This being the situation, Levinas also points out that responsibility towards the other is not a voluntary but an obligatory act to constitute oneself; thus, the oneself “is not able to resign” from this act, which Levinas summarizes as “responsibility prior to any free commitment, the oneself outside of all the tropes of essence, would be responsibility for the freedom of the others” (Levinas, 1989: 104). Levinas (1989: 45) claims responsibility is not a coincidental phenomenon but rather antecedes essence: “I exist through the other and for the other, but without this being alienation”.

Séan Hand (2009: 56) focuses on the term “substitution” as used by Levinas to clarify oneself and the other in Levinas’ work. Hand quoting Levinas, defines “substitution” as “an absolutely extreme possibility of every sacrifice for the other” (Hand, 2009: 56) and this “sacrifice for the other” leads to “justice” in ethical sense, necessary to constitute consciousness, in other words “oneself”. However, not being able to create oneself without the other may also wrongly impose a oneself-centric approach which assigns a supporting part to the other at the service of actualization of oneself, or consciousness, as Burggraeve also underlines:

*I try to gain access to the other by stripping him of his alterity via concepts, categories, and thematization. In this way, I can make “images” or photographs of the other person so that I suppose myself to know him. In doing so, I approach the other not according to his otherness itself, but from a horizon, or another totality (Burggraeve, 1999: 30).*

This reductive approach leads to an exertion of power over the other; in other words, it otherizes and ignores the existence of the other, which predates the existence of oneself. This approach is reflected most obviously in Roy’s self-denial and his relationship with Belize in *Angels in America*. When Roy is diagnosed with AIDS, his first reaction is, “It afflicts mostly homosexuals and drug addicts... Homosexuals and drug addicts. So why are you implying that I... I’m not a drug addict” (Kushner, 2013: 44). Roy is not desperate about being sick but he fears most, due to this sickness, to be identified with the other he has always ignored. He even threatens the doctor not to use the word “homosexual” by saying “And I will proceed, systematically, to destroy your reputation and your practice and your career in New York State, Henry. Which you know I can do” (Kushner, 2013: 44). This reminds us of gay men who define themselves as heterosexuals because they take a penetrator position during the sexual intercourse with other men, and who tend to be homophobic even though they themselves are homosexuals.

However, Roy proposes a more sensible explanation for his self-denial: “Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. Homosexuals are men in fifteen years of trying cannot pass a pissant antidiscrimination bill through City Council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout. Does this sound like me, Henry?” (Kushner, 2013: 46). On the same page, Roy brags about “bringing the guy” he is “screwing to

the White House” and thus he says “Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man, who fucks around with guys” (Kushner, 2013: 46). The quotes are one of the most interesting in the whole play as they both display- unintentionally- the legal discrimination posed against homosexuals from the mouth of the most homophobic character of the play but also shed light on the cause of Roy's self-denial, which emerges as hunger for power, thus, Roy's self-denial is not an ontological problem but rather a social and political one, in line with Levinas' theory on the relationship between the one and the other. Roy ignores the other, and through it ignores his own self, due to his unwillingness to sacrifice his powerful social position for the sake of the responsibility towards the “weaker” other, in this case towards his own self, as well.

In Act Two, Kushner once again refers to the idea of responsibility through Roy: “Responsibility; that's a trap, too... Life is full of horror; nobody escapes, nobody; save yourself. Whatever pulls on you, whatever needs from you, threatens you” (Kushner, 2013: 61) says Roy to Joe, revisiting the idea that Kushner does not portray Roy as an absolute villain, but rather a victim of social expectations and power. Thus, Roy has often been misinterpreted as Shakespeare's Richard III, as a totally villain character, a common comparison put forth by Savran (2005: 15).

Kushner avoids reducing the problem to self-denial of sexual identity though, extending it to racial and religious power relationships throughout the play, one example of which is the relationship between Roy and Belize. Roy and Belize meet in the second part of the play *Perestroika* in which Roy is hospitalized and Belize is appointed as his nurse. “Get outta here you, I got nothing to say to you. I want a white nurse. My constitutional right” (Kushner, 2013: 150) are Roy's first words to Belize, which supports the idea that Roy's discriminative attitude towards the other is not merely based on the self-denial of his sexual identity but rather is rooted in his hatred towards any other. However, Roy knows he needs Belize within the condition he is stuck, which frustrates him even more. As Omer-Sherman (2007: 12), citing Levinas, also puts it “we are always already obligated to the other”, a fact which Roy is unwilling to accept in order not to give away his central and privileged social position as the One.

Levinas explains this attitude with the “reduction of the other to the same” which leads to “tyranny”. Burggrave (1999: 33) explains:

*Tyranny consists in an I trying to subjugate the others- without killing them- in such a way that in one or another manner they give up to him their freedom. The tyrant attempts by persuasion, rhetoric, propaganda, seduction, trickery, diplomacy, demagoguery, (threats of) torture or physical violence, brainwashing, plagiarism, intimidation, or bribery to bring other free subjects to abandon the autonomous exercise of their freedom in exchange for satisfaction of their needs.*

This idea of “tyranny of the one” clearly explains Roy's attitude towards the other. The one, personified in Roy, continuously attempts to ignore or deprive the other of its autonomy and freedom through manipulative ways, which, in a more general sense, can be applied to the attitude of political tyrannies as well, who tend to consolidate their poles through depreciating the opposition of “the others” by labelling them as terrorists, traitors, or “perverts” as in the case of LGBTQ+ individuals. Thus, Michael Austin's (1997: 25) approach to the play as “a play about America: its problems, its values, its struggle with the terrible pandemic of AIDS, and even its occasional potential for good” is worth underlining. Kushner's play is a political play that questions the politics of Reagan-era America through the philosophies of Levinas and Benjamin. Some characters, such as Joe and Roy, obviously represent right-wing Republican characters, whereas Louis, Prior, and Belize are portrayals of the left-wing; however, as Corby (2011: 16) underlines, Kushner “connects the political with the personal and opens an ethnically

motivated space for his own radical position". Corby's evaluation bears significance as *Angels* is a political play, not - political propaganda.

Not only Levinas' theory on responsibility and otherness but also Walter Benjamin's understanding of history in "*Theses on the Philosophy of History*" influenced Kushner, another reference point to be considered to explore the theme of otherness in Kushner. Benjamin (1968), who links the history of civilization to the history of barbarism, claims that this barbarism transmits from one owner to the other, which reminds Simone de Beauvoir's argument in *The Second Sex* that oneness and otherness transmit from one agent to the other throughout the history of humanity. The passage below from Benjamin (1968: 257) summarizes his idea on the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed:

*The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that "the state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm.*

The last sentence in the quote bears significance in understanding Benjamin's criticism of progress and its implications on Kushner's *Angels in America*. As Charles McNulty (2005: 43) rightly asserts, Kushner's angel in *Angels in America* has been inspired by Benjamin's anti-Hegelian understanding of history, whose claim, as cited by McNulty, is that history is not a "narrative on progress" but a narrative on "destruction", and we are in a crisis/a catastrophe today, a catastrophe which is identified in Kushner in the form of AIDS and otherness. Savran (2005: 15) adds to McNulty that Walter Benjamin does not consider the present as a "moment of transition" unlike Marxist historiographers but rather as a moment in which "time has come to a stop". The resemblance between Kushner's angel and Benjamin's description of the angel of history in Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* painting proves Kushner's inspiration from Benjamin as well. Benjamin (1968: 257) describes the angel of history as:

*... he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread... His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.*

Savran (2005: 15) rightly claims that Benjamin's angel, as well as Kushner's angel, does not only problematize the idea of progress but also embodies the current catastrophic condition. Catastrophe in Kushner, though, does not only mean the catastrophic epidemic of AIDS but also the catastrophe of racism, homophobia, political degeneration, and otherness in the broadest sense, which turns *Angels in America* into an activist piece of theatre, thanks to the subject matter of the play and the influence of Levinas and Benjamin in the philosophical background of the play. It is important to note that Kushner's experimental theatrical style contributes a lot to the play's approach to otherness. Split scenes underlining the intertwined lives of characters from different social groups, and the use of anti-realistic elements such as intermingled dream scenes imply the idea that homophobia cannot be isolated from other forms of discrimination.

Although harshly criticizing Reagans' attitude and indifference towards the AIDS pandemic, the play is not only a historical account of Reagan period but also a general criticism to American politics towards "the others". As Frank Rich (1993) explains the play would be catastrophic if it were ideologically didactic. It is true that *Angels in America* is a play about

America and AIDS at one level; however, through these, as explained so far, Kushner problematizes the more general issue of otherization and power relations between the one and the other, which makes the play relevant even today. Thus, criticism of the Reagan era in the play may well be extended to right-wing politicians such as Donald Trump who ruled the USA during the first part of the pandemic.

It is known that Ronald Reagan was indifferent to the AIDS epidemic for a long time, and his press secretary Larry Speakes (2016) was even joking about the epidemic, labelling it a "gay plague". Even after over 1000 deaths, Speakes (2016) was saying, "AIDS? I haven't got anything on it". However, it is to be noted that it was not only politicians to be blamed for indifference. In this same interview, we see that the members of the press were also making fun of the epidemic through language representative of sexist jokes most LGBTQ+ people face throughout their lives. Reagan himself did not mention the word "AIDS" until 1985, four years later than the first appearance of the disease (Garner, 2019). And, only in 1987, upon rising protests, Reagan had to take some steps regarding the disease, which had already infected 47,000 people (Garner, 2019). It would not be wrong to say that the language used in the press conferences and Reagan's long denial of the disease represented the government's approach to non-binary citizens of the country. For the Reagan government, this was a disease that affected "the others" and thus, could be ignored. Reagan even believed that homosexuality was sinful and "maybe the Lord brought down this plague" (Garner, 2019) a stance taken by many right-wing conservative politicians around the world. Thus, the lives of thousands of homosexual people in the USA during the AIDS epidemic were lost based on the political stance of the government rather than the epidemic itself. A similar situation was observed during the Covid-19 pandemic thirty years later. Drabble and Eliason's research makes a connection between the other epidemics in history and COVID-19, claiming that "the inequalities in the impacts on health and well-being have been evident in other epidemics, natural disasters, and crises such as climate change, police violence, lack of affordable housing, HIV/AIDS, poverty and unemployment" (Drabble & Eliason, 2021: 545). Similarly, Holloway et al.'s research on the effects of physical distancing on mental conditions of LGBTQ people found out that "the majority of the participants reported increased anxiety and loneliness since the COVID-19 pandemic began" (Holloway & Garner, 2021: 692). It is obvious that policies of right-wing politicians such as Reagan and Trump have added considerably to these existing problems of LGBTQ+ individuals rather than aiming for a more egalitarian society.

The very first quotation Kushner uses on the play is prophetic in terms of the "vulnerability" theme commonly underlined by aforementioned researchers studying the effects of Covid-19 on LGBTQ+ individuals. Kushner quotes American poet Stanley Kunitz's "The Testing-Tree": "In a murderous time, the heart breaks and breaks and lives by breaking" (2013: 7), which serves as a prefatorial quotation suggesting the theme in the rest of the play. It is suggested that in the play, the ones who break hearts are the ones who are heart broken. When Prior tells Louis that he has contracted AIDS, Louis is bewildered as well as afflicted by the news; however, he cannot find the inner strength to stand with Prior and decides to break up with him. However, it would be superficial to read Louis as a villain character, as explained in more detail in the previous sections. It would not be wrong to claim that Louis's attitude towards the vulnerability of other people is also an indication of his own vulnerability as a gay person.

The vulnerability of the gay characters in the play cannot be explained only through their personality traits, though. Their vulnerability stems from the disadvantaged position they hold in society mostly resulting from the policies of the governments and the fact that they will not be treated equally with heterosexual citizens of the society in difficult times. Thus, the characters are not vulnerable because they are gays, but the characters are vulnerable because



they have faced discrimination all their lives and that they know, as a fact, that they will have no support from society or the government in case of a hardship such as a pandemic. When Louis says, "Everyone gets to put dirt on the coffin once it's lowered in" (Kushner, 2013: 19), there is a metaphorical meaning behind suggesting that if you are already in a coffin, people will try to cover you in dirt and then ignore your existence. Similarly, when Louis is crying in the bathroom of his workplace and Joe tries to help him, he says, "The others just opened the door, saw me, and fled; I hope they had to pee real bad" (Kushner, 2013: 29) which is another reference to the society's indifference towards the one who needs help.

Discriminative attitudes of politicians against LGBTQ+ characters are empowered by social institutions, as well. In the dream scene where Prior and Harper meet in the same dream, Harper says, "In my church we don't believe in homosexuals" (Kushner, 2013: 32), which, of course, is a criticism towards religion. Kushner implies religion reduces life to a matter of believing and not-believing, and denies the existence of what it does not believe. Similarly, in Act II, when Joe and Roy sit in the bar and Joe talks about Harper's problems, he says, "Everyone tries very hard to live up to God's strictures, which are very...um..." (Kushner, 2013: 55) which suggests how orthodox institutions such as religion make people's lives harder. A few lines further, Joe, who is a secret homosexual, implies the reason for rejecting his real identity by saying, "I wanted to be one of the elect, one of the Blessed. You feel you ought to be, that the blemishes are yours by choice, which of course they are not" (Kushner, 2013: 56). Of course, we understand that in such society homosexuals are not accepted among "the elect", and can never be "the Blessed", which results in self-rejection and vulnerability.

Like religion, family is another institution that makes the lives of homosexuals harder and puts homosexuals in a more vulnerable situation. One example is Joe and Harper's marriage, which is not love-based but which has been formed obligatorily. Getting married and having a family is the only means for a homosexual to be accepted by society, in the play; thus, Joe gets married to Harper, although he knows that he is homosexual. He feels the need to satisfy his own parents through this marriage, so when Joe calls his mother Hannah to reveal his homosexuality, the first question he asks is "Mom, did Dad love me?" (Kushner, 2013: 78) in fear of not being loved by his own parents because of his sexual identity. And, as representative of the rest of society, his mother decides to ignore the fact that her son has revealed his homosexuality "You really ought to go home now to your wife. I need to go to bed. This phone call- We will just forget this phone call" (Kushner, 2013: 78)

Kushner underlines another significant problem about the condition of homosexuals in society through Louis' long monologue, in Act Three. Louis says towards the end of his monologue "What AIDS shows us is the limits of tolerance, that it's not enough to be tolerated because when the shit hits the fan, you find out how much tolerance is worth. Nothing. And underneath all the tolerance is intense, passionate hatred" (Kushner, 2013: 94). That must be one of the most significant lines in the whole play as it attracts attention to a false belief that has persisted in modern societies. Even today, homosexuals and other unorthodox groups are referred to by the rest of society as people "to be tolerated".

This kind of social/political discrimination obviously leads some people to a hunger for social power, as identified in Roy's character. On one level, Roy can be read as the embodiment of corrupt capitalism in *Angels* with his never-ending duties and illegal ways to keep his position and lust for power; however, on another level, he can also be read as one of the victims of the political system. "I see the universe as a kind of sandstorm in outer space with winds of mega-hurricane velocity, but instead of grains of sand, it's shards and splinters of glass" (Kushner, 2013: 13) says Roy, which is suggestive of his position in the world. Roy is overly

obsessed with keeping a strong position in his career, which can be explained by his sub/unconscious fear of the social/political disadvantages his homosexuality is likely to pose. If he kept a strong position in his career and held power, this would compensate for his homosexuality, and he would not face sexual discrimination within the existing political system, at least openly by the people around him. However, this results in his turning into a corrupt and villainous character both in the play and in real life. The best quote to summarize the rationale behind his attitude should be:

*I don't want you to be impressed. I want you to understand. This is not sophistry. And this is not hypocrisy. This is reality. I have sex with men. But unlike nearly every other man of whom this is true, I bring the guy I'm screwing to the White House and President Reagan smiles at us and shakes his hand. Because what I am is defined entirely by who I am. Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man, Henry, who fucks around with guys (Kushner, 2013: 46).*

Thus, Kushner here attracts our attention to the close relationship between power and sexual discrimination. If you hold power in your hands, referring mostly to economic/political power, you will face the discrimination resulting from being the other in the society, much less severely. Roy explains this with the word "clout" in Act One, saying that the most important thing in this world is "clout", not your ideology or sexual taste. "Who will pick up the phone when I call, who owes me favors" (Kushner, 2013: 46) is what really matters for Roy, and clout is possible only through eliminating your sexual identity for the sake of your social position.

When we look at the condition today in the time of the pandemic, Roy's obsession with economic power can be understood better. U.S. Census Bureau reported in August 2021 that LGBT individuals had to face a more severe economic insecurity compared to non-LGBT Americans during Covid-19 (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.). HRC Foundation's report explains this situation through the relationship between positions generally assigned to LGBT people and Covid-19. HRC Foundation's report puts forth that 40% of LGBTQ adults were employed in restaurants. The pandemic harshly affected food service, K-12 and higher education, hospitals, and retailers. The report also explains that LGBTQ people "lack access to medical care, paid medical leave, and basic necessities" (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.). The situation gets even worse for transgender people and transgender people of color. Ilga Europe's report supports the findings and claims that "a greater than average rate of LGBTI people are unemployed and in precarious jobs, and live on very limited and unstable financial resources" (Ilga Europe, 2021). This report also underlines the discrimination against LGBTQ+ members by healthcare providers. However, all forms of mentioned discrimination are rooted in the policies of the governing powers. It is also to be noted that these results are based on the situation in the USA only, a country that provides a relatively freer environment to non-binary people. The situation in the rest of the world, especially in developing and under-developed countries, is likely to be much harsher for LGBTQ+ people. This is a field that requires further research.

## Conclusion

Kushner's play, one of the masterpieces of gay writing, is also overtly political, although it is not political propaganda. The play harshly criticizes not only the political indifference towards LGBTQ+ individuals with AIDS during Reagan era America but also the indifference of American society towards disadvantaged groups. Although Reagan government was able to achieve a certain economic growth in the country through Reaganomics, it ignored the AIDS crisis for a very long time, which resulted in the death of over 50,000 people from AIDS by the time Reagan left office in 1989. Most of these people were obviously LGBTQ+ individuals.

Thirty years after the AIDS epidemic, humanity faced the Covid-19 pandemic, which revealed once again that indifference towards disadvantaged groups has not changed much.

Trump-Pence administration has a reputation for anti-LGBTQ lawmaking, such as banning trans people from serving in the military or attempting to allow healthcare workers to refuse care to LGBTQ people. These developments proved once again that the condition of LGBTQ+ individuals or right-wing populist politicians' approach to these groups has not progressed much since the 1980s. There is not even much research to be able to evaluate the situation outside of "the land of freedom" the USA, but obviously, it is not better in underdeveloped or developing countries.

The problems posed by Kushner in *Angels in America* are not restricted to a certain period or a certain political figure. Although Kushner's *Angels in America* was written following the AIDS epidemic and might seem at first glance a play about AIDS, it reveals and deals with the much broader issue of "otherness" and "the feeling of responsibility" in the light of Levinas and Benjamin, underlining the fact that minority groups, specifically the sexual ones, have always been under a more severe threat in the time of a crisis both physically and psychologically. It has been revealed once again with the Covid-19 pandemic that LGBTQ+ rights are a political issue and right-wing/conservative politicians have continued using it as a tool to secure their political positions. As Waterman (2020: 759) puts it, "For Kushner, all of the time is plague time, much as, for Camus, all of existence is a form of quarantine". The situation in the US and many other countries around the world proves Kushner's approach once again and leaves us with thoughts on the power of literature and theatre in a time of social crisis.

### Information Note

The article has been prepared in accordance with research and publication ethics. This study does not require ethics committee approval.

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