

# Navigating Identity Across Nonheteronormative Borders in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*

Jackie Kay'ın *Trumpet* Adlı Eserinde Heteronormatif Sınırların Ötesinde Kimlik

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## ABSTRACT

This article aims to examine the complexities of identity as a multifaceted social construct, focusing on the potential interactions of gender and queer theories with ethnicity, class, and nationality. Jackie Kay's novel *Trumpet* (1998) explores how gender intersects with various aspects of identity. The novel's main character, Joss Moody, is a Black Scottish trumpeter who faces challenges stemming from social pressures due to his unique sexual orientation and hybrid national identity. A critical reading of the novel through the lens of queer theory strengthens multiple dimensions of Joss's identity and demonstrates how gender interacts with ethnicity and class. This article delves into the intricate dynamics between social structures and marginalized individuals, addressing their quests for identity and efforts to transcend traditional expectations of gender and sexuality. Additionally, the study explores the ways in which media shape societal perceptions and reinforce traditional gender norms, examining Joss's responses to social norms as he challenges them. Focusing on the identity journeys of marginalized characters in the novel, the study concludes that queer characters face challenges related to their social positions based on ethnicity, class, and nationality.

**Keywords:** Gender, identity, intersectionality, queer theory, *Trumpet*

## ÖZ

Bu makale, cinsiyet ve kuir teorilerin etnik köken, sınıf ve milliyetle potansiyel olarak etkileşim biçimlerine odaklanarak, çok yönlü bir sosyal yapı olarak kimliğin karmaşıklıklarını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Jackie Kay'ın *Trumpet* (1998) adlı romanı, cinsiyetin kimliğin farklı yönleriyle nasıl kesiştiğini ele almaktadır. Romanın ana karakteri Joss Moody, deneyimleri, kendine özgü cinsel yönelimleri ve melez ulusal kimliği nedeniyle sosyal baskılardan kaynaklanan zorluklarla karşılaşan bir siyahi İskoç trompetçidir. Romanın kuir teori aracılığıyla eleştirel bir şekilde okunması, Joss'un kimliğinin birçok yönünü güçlendirirken, cinsiyetin etnik köken ve sınıfla nasıl etkileştiğini de gösterir. Bu makale, sosyal yapılar ve marjinalleşmiş bireyler arasındaki karmaşık dinamikleri inceleyerek, bu bireylerin kimlik arayışlarını ve geleneksel cinsiyet ve cinsellik beklentilerinin ötesine geçme çabalarını ele almaktadır. Ayrıca bu çalışma medyanın toplumun algılarını şekillendirme ve geleneksel cinsiyet normlarını güçlendirme yönlerini de ele alarak kimlik arayışındaki Joss'un sosyal normlara meydan okuyan tepkilerini ele alır. Çalışma, marjinal karakterlerin kimlik yolculuklarına odaklanarak, daha geniş sosyal mekanizmaları eleştirme ve toplumsal cinsiyete dair bulgular sunar. Makale, romandan kurgusal örneklerle desteklendiği üzere kuir karakterlerin etnik köken, sınıf ve milliyet kökenli sosyal konumlarıyla ilgili sorunlarla karşı karşıya olduğu sonucuna varmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Toplumsal cinsiyet, kimlik, kesişimsellik, kuir teorisi, *Trumpet*

## Introduction

Identity, as a multifaceted social construct, has long been the focus of sociological and literary debates. By comparing multiple components, identity assigns certain agendas and tendencies to humans throughout their lives. Race, ethnicity, class, and nationality are all closely considered intrinsic facets

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of identity formation, along with sex and gender. These intersecting factors gain dominance as they cooperate to produce unique constructions of identity, especially in the wake of recent queer movements. This article specifically seeks to explore the conceptions of gender and queer theory as they interact with multiple facets of identity. Various factors contribute to understanding identity from a broader perspective. As Barbara Smith states, “[q]ueer theorists argue that identities are always multiple or at best composites, with an infinite number of ways in which ‘identity-components’ (e.g. sexual orientation, race, class, nationality, gender, age, ableness) can intersect or combine” (Seidman, 1994, p. 173). As Smith highlights, queer activists primarily address “queer” issues, while issues related to racism, sexual oppression, and economic exploitation, despite affecting a significant portion of the queer community, may not fall within their primary focus (Smith, 1993, p. 13). Consequently, it is essential to recognize that people with queer identities do not simply encounter problems for their non-heteronormative orientations but may also encounter problems linked to their social positioning. Therefore, they instinctively seek to transform their identities through their relationships with others.

Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet* narrates the after-death revelation of the anatomical sex of Joss Moody, a Black Scottish trumpet player. Joss Moody experiences oppression due to his sexual orientation and his hybrid national identity. Born to a White Scottish mother and a Black African father, Joss feels the need to protect both his Scottish nationality and ancestral bonds. The novel principally shares the experiences of others—his wife Millie, his son Colman, his band mate, the doctor, the undertaker, and the registrar—while Joss’s voice is suspended until the end of the novel. In *Trumpet*, the ways Kay skillfully weaves together the complexities of sex, gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality offer a nuanced exploration of the intersections between these facets. Drawing on examples from Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet*, this article seeks to uncover the complexities underlying the multiplicity of identity and discover how gender intersects with race, ethnicity, class, and nation.

### Navigating Identities

In the intricate tapestry of human identities, the concept of homosexuality may be regarded as a vibrant threat that challenges traditional understandings of gender and sexuality. Within patriarchal societies, where monolithic interpretations often dominate, homosexual identity stands as an intervention into the rigid framework of social norms. Literature is a way of reading these norms to come up with possible solutions for the inherent problems therein. The literary texts having a potential to set the stage for a deeper exploration of social norms both problematize narrow definitions and also explore diverse possibilities for a given problem. In this way, they detail the multifaceted nature of human experiences and the rich tapestry of identities that exist beyond the confines of social expectations. Kay’s *Trumpet* fictionalizes and dismantles identity into its various constituents, challenging taken-for-granted assumptions in its formation. In her reading of *Trumpet*, Margaret Homans emphasizes the novel’s potential for featuring boundary crossings and nonlinear journeys for expansive human futures. For Homans, the novel contributes to advancing intersectional gender and race theory and challenges normative notions of origins, birth, reproductive lineage, and the identities they underwrite (Homans, 2020).

Homosexual identity is still considered largely as an intervention into “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses, and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality are not made (or *cannot* be made) to signify monolithically” (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 8). Queer individuals often experience being misunderstood and a sense of exclusion by the communities they are part of. Kay fictionalizes this problem through the characters of Sophie Stones, a journalist, who aims to make a success out of Joss’s life story, and Big Red, Joss’s band mate. Stones expresses her amazement after noticing Millie’s absolute attachment to “a woman who pretends to be a man” (Kay, 1999, p. 126). She considers Joss to be “a woman who stuffed wet cotton wool into a condom and tied on a couple of walnuts to fake the balls and penis” (Kay, 1999, pp. 126–127). Here, Stones’ opinion reveals her prejudice against Joss’s purpose and private life, centering on the accusation that he is faking. Thus, Stones is revealed to hold a socially higher position than Joss because of her heteronormative identity as a reflection of the predominance of heteronormative sexuality. In contrast, Big Red, a good friend of Joss, is his staunch defender, raging at and physically assaulting anyone “who said Joss had a baby face” (Kay, 1999, p. 148). Big Red’s reaction, while indicating an alliance with Joss, also confirms his firm denial of the privilege of heteronormative sex in society. Here, the interaction of the oppressed and the oppressor in *Trumpet* is intentionally constructed to reveal a “matrix of oppression and resistance,” through which the marginalization and the apparent powerlessness of the oppressed could be challenged (Gwyn & Okazawa-Rey, 2004).

To explore the context of Joss’s identity, Kay uses the power of the media and paparazzi to highlight the oppression enacted on Joss’s dead body. A journalist is already preparing his biography, as newspapers also interfere with Joss’s private life. *Trumpet* offers a counter-argument to newspaper claims that they were “living a lie” with Millie’s comment that they were, in fact, “living a life” (Kay, 1999, p. 95). The media has been demonstrated to be in a strong position to have the power to manipulate public opinion. However, queer theory challenges the media’s authority over the predominance of heteronormativity by refuting “the status of sexual orientation itself as the authentic and centrally governing category of homosexual practice, thus freeing up queer theory as a way of reconceiving not just the sexual, but the social in general” (Harper, 1997, p. 1). Therefore, the implementation of queer theory in relation to *Trumpet* reinforces multiple facets of Joss’s identity by revealing how gender and sexuality intersect with race, ethnicity, class, and nation.

Gender and race have been inseparable in some analyses presented in recent discourse; certainly, both are vital when forging a sense of identity. For centuries, whiteness has been associated with purity, beauty, virginity, and godliness, the claims to which have been implemented to justify colonialist claims of superiority based on skin color. Historically, white skin provided its bearers with the privilege to conquer and colonize the lands and cultures of the peoples of color in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. As Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks (2000) states, “[w]hiteness is a master signifier that establishes a structure of relations, a signifying chain that through a process of inclusions and exclusions constitutes a pattern for organizing human difference” (pp. 3–4). In *Trumpet*, the Black man’s position relative to the White man is perpetually questioned. For instance, through how Colman comes to understand the meaning of the White gazes trained on him, the novel addresses the stereotypes about criminality of the Black race. Matt Richardson (2012) argues,

Colman is haunted by the realization that, to the white people who surround him, he is like all the other black men—a criminal. He recalls the imago of the black male “mugger,” observing that “men who look exactly like Colman are always on the news,” identified as “more likely to be muggers” to the racist eye of the police; he recognizes himself as the epitome of criminality in the white mind and, as such, always at risk for some form of racial brutality often symbolized in the spectrum of the incarcerated black man (pp. 368–369). Whereas the identity of the White man is almost always constructed as godly and faultless, the Black man is readily labeled a potential criminal, a trouble to be avoided by the White man. Through the construction of whiteness as godliness and blackness as potentially troublesome, the Black man also accuses himself of his position in this hierarchy and, in return, internalizes the accusations of backwardness and criminality.

The term “queer” serves as an alternative means of identification that places one’s identity within a political and cultural context, relative to heterosexuality. In the case of Joss, it is his music and his nuclear family that give him a sense of life, instead of intermingling with society. He only reveals his secret to his wife, and everybody else is excluded from the protected zone. In the public, Joss wraps himself with a cotton cover. Influenced by his friend’s experiences with his father, Colman wants to see his father’s ‘wee man’ although he could never achieve his wish since “the bedroom door was always shut, tight” (Kay, 1999, p. 55). Nevertheless, “[Joss] unwraps himself with his trumpet. Down at the bottom, face to face with the fact that he is nobody” (Kay, 1999, p. 135). His only way of revealing himself to the public is through his trumpet, with which he “blows his story” to the external world (Kay, 1999, p. 136). With this instrument, he defeats his past and present, his image, and sexual identity. Joss gains confidence through his talent and thus distances himself from a superficial self that can be merely defined by a sexual identity. Not all individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning necessarily resonate with the term “queer” to articulate their sexual orientation or gender identity (Lanzerotti et al., 2002, p. 57). Instead, some may need additional labels that more strongly reflect their identities. Therefore, for Joss, both generational and racial factors influence the formation of his identity.

When White people fight against oppression based on gender, class, or sexuality without the need to address racism, they can indeed, as Lanzerotti et al. highlights, reflect the ways that could potentially reinforce racism for the sake of their own liberation. *Trumpet* also addresses the issue of race and represents Scotland as “a multi-racial territory despite its comparatively small share of Britain’s non-white population and as a sign of the hybridity that is part of Britishness itself” (Clandfield, 2002, p. 4). According to Peter Clandfield, Kay’s unifying blackness and Scottishness sets a peculiar example of British hybridity (Clandfield, 2002, p. 4). The novel highlights the notion that “the postcolonial and the queer need to be thought of together” (Fong, 2011, p. 244). Derived from Mark Stein’s assertion in 2008 (p. 254) that “we are all hybrid,” the intricate components of hybrid identity find a point of convergence within Kay’s narrative. Within Kay’s narrative, this phenomenon is exemplified through the portrayal of Joss, whose physical attributes serve as a locus upon which various aspects of hybrid identity are scribbled. Joss’s body becomes a repository of intersecting factors, where racial and sexual dimensions intersect, creating a multifaceted representation that would reflect the complexities inherent in modern identity. As Richardson (2012) discusses,

Gender fragility and uncertainty are part of what makes black bodies dead in the Scottish nation. [...] A black man who is ultimately in a feminized position in relation to legitimate patriarchal white masculinity. [...] The revelation that his father was not born with a penis forces Colman into his own painful and terrified recognition of the fragility and social femininity of black manhood (pp. 362–363). Richardson verified the obscurity of the transgender in discourse. Black masculinity is feminized and defeated by White masculinity. The position of the Black man in the text does not occupy massive importance, deferring to Scottish identity. The fantasized power of the black phallus is absent because of the condition of Joss Moody. When Joss’s image as a Black male artist is shattered, Colman’s faith in his own gender fades away. When the truth is exposed to the public, Joss “falls out of favour with the British public and returns to being an outsider along with other black Scottish people” (Richardson, 2012, p. 363). Kay reveals this fall from grace as a reason for combining gender and nationality as interrelated in this context. Joss simultaneously lost his sexual identity and nationality. Joss’s father’s death leads to his loss of identity, leading to his embracing of a new gender. Similarly, Joss’s death transformed Colman’s identity. Colman is terrified by the fragility of his Black manhood and hides his fear under the pride of “his cock [which] seems bigger than his father’s death” (Kay, 1999, p. 140). However, Colman experiences a growing concern about the potential loss of his ties to his ancestral roots. The argument that “[I] ong-held views on the human experience of loss have expounded grief as an emotional trajectory from distress to recovery” resonates deeply with Colman’s journey as he navigates his own unique experience of loss (Aygan, 2023, p. 56). While traditional perspectives have often depicted grief as a linear progression from pain to eventual healing, Colman’s narrative challenges this notion. Rather than following a prescribed trajectory of distress leading to recovery, Colman’s emotional landscape takes unexpected turns. His feelings of concern and unease about losing his ties to his ancestral heritage mirror the intricate nature of grief. Just as traditional views of grief are evolving, so too is Colman’s understanding of how his connection to his ancestral roots influences his identity and his place in the world.

Family operates as a key detriment in the formation of Black nationalism. Represented in the narrative through the lens of Black Scottish minorities, the tenets of Black nationalism are upheld by strong familial bonds, often under the stewardship of a patriarchal figurehead. Prior to examining the discourse surrounding the role of the family in Black nationalism, it is important to acknowledge the viewpoints expressed by African American intellectuals who argue that the family serves as a crucial foundation for the development of the Black nation. Highlighting the significance of patriarchal power within this perspective, Rushdy (2001) asserts that families symbolizing the race can unite to form a nation:

African American intellectuals espousing black nationalism have long argued that the family represents the site for the development of the black nation. The black nationalist asserts that ‘those families representing the race can form a nation only when [...] patriarchal power is evident’ (pp. 109–110). Regarding this gender-conscious view of nationalism, Kay’s depiction of Joss as a father figure who is *present*, but no longer dominant, is more startling than the *absence* of a father. The absence of masculine power—that is, a male

leader—dismantles the notion of completeness for the Black nation. The Black nation's identity is queered by the lack of a patriarch. This leads Kay to associate the death of Joss's father with enabling Josephine's transition into Joss. The disconnection from his Black bloodline and the absence of a strong patriarchy might lead to the queering of Joss.

The marginalization of Black sexuality in a White domain has directed black women to create a defense mechanism to protect their identity as informed by their nationhood. The "salvific wish" of the black community, especially their women, comes out as an "aspiration [...] to save or rescue the black community from white racist accusations of sexual and domestic pathology, through the embrace of conventional bourgeois propriety" (Jenkins, 2002, p. 973). This desire to protect the traditional Black family structure is a defense mechanism to dismantle the disgrace attributed to Black sexuality. Michael Warner (1999) argues, "[I]ike the related stigmas of racial identity or disabilities, it may have nothing to do with acts one has committed. It attaches not to doing, but to being; not to conduct, but to status" (pp. 27–28). The very notion of black color is an irreversible fact determining the cultural position of its bearers. Therefore, the presence of a salvific wish in African American communities becomes inescapable, as justified by their exclusion in White-dominated public sphere. Class could be considered another intersecting field that is directly linked to the construction of homosexual identities. Queer theory focuses on identity that represents a "constraint queer theory attempts to transgress, subvert, and disrupt" (Cover, 1999, p. 2).

Queer theorists mostly stress the element of desire, often ignoring its link with the theory. As stated by Morton, this concept enables a comprehensive explanation of social injustice on a global scale, encompassing not only various geographical regions but also the specific social issues within Western societies. This occurs within a framework of distinct economic and class relationships (Morton, "The Class Politics of Queer Theory," 1996, p. 474). The distribution of resources among Western and non-Western citizens determines the construction of sexuality. In John D'Emilio's *Capitalism and Gay Identity* (1992), the collapse of the free-labor system in the West was given as a reason for the breakdown in family units, affecting the basic economic units, which caused the emergence of social/sexual freedom (p. 5).

In *Trumpet*, Kay also deconstructs the idea that Scotland, a Western stronghold, should be narrated through a White discourse by establishing a Black transgender discourse. The relativity of realities deconstructs the available assumptions about gender, race, and nationality in the novel. The funeral director was shocked to learn that Joss was biologically female, and this brought him to question his understanding of the relationship between biological sex and gender:

All his working life he has assumed that what made a man a man and a woman a woman was the differing sexual organs. Yet today, he had a woman who persuaded him, even dead, that he was a man, once he had his clothes on (Kay, 1999, p. 115). Even his wife Millie questions how Joss, who can "walk like a man, talk like a man, dress like a man, blow his horn like a man," can be biologically female" (Kay, 1999, p. 37). Commonly held views are insufficient to transition Joss into male, although he lives like a man.

Joss's hybridity includes his blackness and Scottishness. As Richardson states, "the novel reminds us how black Scottish people are cast from the boundaries of nationhood, invisible in the past and ambivalently part of the present" (Richardson, 2012, p. 363). After his bond with his blackness is broken, he not only abandons Scotland to be Joss himself but also seeks to regain his Black identity away from his Scottish mother. Joss's statements to his son, "you are Scottish, you were born in Scotland, which makes you Scottish," demonstrate the multifaceted and complex nature of national identity (Kay, 1999, p. 190). Colman challenges his father's views, noting, "But he does not feel Scottish. He doesn't speak with a Scottish accent ... it's all the train's fault ... about crossing a border" (Kay, 1999, p. 190). Considering his foreignness, Colman blames his father for a blurred identity. Like his father, Colman lacks a sense of belonging because no sides of the binary structure constrain him. Similar to queering, gender, race, and nationality were not fixed on a stable ground. Joss clarifies this: "they didn't belong anywhere but to each other. Make up your own bloodline ... and trace it back. Design your own family tree" (Kay, 1999, p. 58). Without a biological attachment, Joss attains a wife and son. Thus, it is possible to identify lives and identities with unstable foundations.

Nationality rests on a complex interplay of social, historical, cultural, and political factors, which collectively influence an individual's sense of belonging to a particular nationality. Within this dynamic interplay, however, there is a conflict between the heteronormative patriarchy and the interests of capitalism. This tension is particularly pronounced in non-Western societies, where different religious, legal, and economic contexts lead to unique constructions of sexuality that diverge from their Western counterparts. The different positions held in diverse religious, legal, or economic spheres in the non-West bring about different constructions of sexuality from their Western counterparts. Desire and need are two different modes expressed in queer theory, the first corresponding to unconscious aspirations and the latter implicating the basic needs of humanity, such as food, clothing, shelter, and education. In his *The Class Politics of Queer Theory*, Morton (1996) asks, "what kind of subject can afford to explain politics and the social world strictly in terms of 'desire' except the subject whose 'needs' are already met?" (pp. 474–475). The quote suggests that there is a visible lack of attention to class, economic, and labor differences between White and non-White communities in the West, with the former holding a more privileged position. In the West, there are market-directed heteronormative sexualities that are given freedom, to the extent that their rules on consumption are obeyed with "devoted consumption" (Cover, 1999, p. 37). This is evident in brand loyalty, which is a response to freedom. However, the problem lies in the different modes of purchase learned from homophobic families. The understanding that lesbian/gay groups are a *market* with ready cash marginalizes non-heterosexual individuals. For instance, Joss's biological sex does not correspond to his gender orientation. He wears masculine "cufflinks, watches, hair grease, suits, buttons, ties" (Kay, 1999, p. 135). Here Joss's outfit hints at the idea that he must wear in a masculine way that would promote his socially enforced gender identity.

In reference to the desire to reveal one's identity, Kay fictionalizes characters who have chosen to reidentify themselves by changing their names due to race, gender, and sexuality. When Joss's father arrives in Scotland, he, like many African immigrants, changes his name. The name he adopts, John Moore, is not the one he originally had when he arrives on the boat. John Moore is accepted at a big house, as a servant polishing his master's boots "till he could see his own dark face" (Kay, 1999, p. 275). As a result of abandoning Africa

for Scotland, John Moore's life is shaped by his new name. His marriage to a White Scottish woman can be seen as a side effect of his new name. The act of renaming the transition between identities is something Joss shares with his father. Joss transforms from Josephine upon disconnection from his maternal land. Josephine Moore's life in Scotland differs from Joss Moody's life in London. Millie becomes the wife of Joss, a queer man. Her marriage and bond with her husband changes Millie's life, and her relabeling from wife to lesbian, after Joss's exposure to the public, functions as a renaming of Millie as well. Colman too had another name; he asserts his belief that if he had kept his old name, William Dunsmore, his life would have been different too: "A William Dunsmore smile would be different from Colman Moody's smile" along with a variant facial expression (Kay, 1999, p. 56). His personal history and identity would have been transformed, and he would not have a Black Scottish trumpet player as an adopted father.

## Conclusion

The study has demonstrated the ways in which *Trumpet* can potentially offer a thought-provoking reconsideration of the complex intersections between gender, race, class, sexuality, and nationality. It has illustrated that the characters existing beyond binaries grapple not only with their nonconforming sexual identities but also with the formidable forces of marginalization and silencing, emanating from multifaceted sources of power, including the pervasive influences of media, marketing, and the psychological pressures of society. While queerness may be considered a facet of identity in discussions of non-heteronormativity in close relation to intersectionality, the study also has discovered the ways in which the novel highlights the cracks and contradictions within diverse characterizations. The marginalized characters in *Trumpet* are almost always left in a position to constantly negotiate their identities in relation to others, while they also navigate across the borders of marginalization due to their own internal struggles. The study, having *Trumpet* at its center has exemplified the significance of conducting an intersectional analysis while addressing problems of marginalization and inequality, and thus it has called for the need for a more inclusive and nuanced approach in discussions of gender and identity.

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