

Ready or Not, Here I Come.
(A study of the 'closet' and different ways of 'coming out' of the closet)

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In today's world where Gays and Lesbians have laws protecting them and laws allowing them to marry one another, one can ignorantly assume that the LGBT communities are now free from all sorts of oppressions or discriminations. Yet in spite of the attempts, made by authorities and governments in many fields to protect the LGBT community, hate crimes are still committed against them in various forms and degrees. NCAVP's 2011 hate violence report reveals the highest number of hate violence murders ever recorded in the USA. Thus, it still is a big risk for a person whose sexual orientation belongs to the term LGBT to somehow openly and bravely come *out of the closet*, and to try and be normal about it in a heterosexual community.

Being in the closet provides shelter, secrecy and security whereas if one comes out, one risks being verbally molested, mentally discriminated, socially alienated and physically abused to say the least. Therefore many persons belonging to the LGBT community feels threatened to come out to a heterosexual

community where homophobias and heterosexism are still lurking heavily and where homosexual panic is still advocated.

This paper will therefore attempt to take a closer look at the closet and identify three different types or manners of coming out of the closet i.e., (1) Self realization – coming out to oneself (2) Self acceptance – coming out to LGBT community, and (3) Seeking approval – coming out to Heterosexuals. Three texts are selected for an in depth study namely, *Paul's Case* by Willa Cather, *The Boy from Brighton* by Geoffrey Knight and selected episodes of Lynn Johnson's comic strip *For better or for Worse*. These texts are selected for the different psychological and mental struggle they pose towards the subject selected i.e. being in the closet and to come out of the closet. All three texts suggest different ways in dealing with one's own sexuality.

In *Paul's Case*, Paul seemed to know his sexual orientation though the author does not clearly mentions it, in *The Boy from Brighton* Charlie innocently does not seem to acknowledge his reasons for wanting to kiss Joe whom he secretly likes and in *For better or for Worse* Lawrence is fully aware of his sexuality and is willingly coming out of his closet.

The Closet: What is the closet? Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her book *Epistemology of the Closet* said, "The gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people.... It is still the fundamental feature of social life" (Sedgwick, 68), she also remarked "The closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century" (Sedgwick, 71). So according to Sedgwick, the

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closet need not necessarily be associated with gays and lesbians only but could point to or mean the many closets that humans encounter or face in our lives in every sphere. She also pointed out that the term closet is also a true representation of the oppression of the gay community.

Unlike Sedgwick a notable writer Joanne Winning in one of her essay 'Lesbian modernism: writing in and beyond the closet' writes, "The closet describes the private hiding space in which lesbians and gay men who will not admit publicly to their sexual identity either reside or put their dissident sexuality" (Stevens,50). Joanne Winning's definition of the closet suggests that one is automatically closeted if one does not come out about his / her sexuality meaning being in a closet is not a conscious effort.

George Chauncey speculates that the term's usage comes from the notion of the 'skeleton in the closet' hence it suggests; secrecy, shame, abjection and surveillance. So the closet sometimes act as a recluse for all LGBT community, a safe house where one can be oneself without having to be afraid of others knowing about him or her sexual identity. But sexuality or sexual identity is yet another very sensitive case for discussion in the ambit of Queer Theory. Lois Tyson argues that, "sexuality is completely controlled neither by our biological sex (male or female) nor by the way our culture translates biological sex into gender roles (masculine or feminine). Sexuality exceeds these definitions and has a will, a creativity, an expressive need of its own" (Tyson, 335).

This paper represents Paul, Lawrence and Charlie as *closeted gays* who chooses differently, according to their own

circumstances and consciousness, on how to come out i.e., either to themselves or to a heterosexual community. Charlie's childhood innocence and ignorance made it impossible for him to acknowledge and comprehend his own sexual identity and hence he could not understand when Joe rescued him and resuscitated him. He anxiously asked, "Did you just kiss me?" to which Joe awkwardly replied, "No! Bloody Hell, No! That wasn't a kiss; I just saved your life! You could a drowned out there!" (Knight, Chap 4, L 26). It is interesting to note that Joe emphatically denied kissing Charlie. This denial, the very heavy exaggerated tone that Joe used to say 'No' to the accusation hurled at him by Charlie somehow suggests his own ignorance about his sexuality and his closetedness. Charlie's inability to grasp his sexuality is again made clear when he says, "It was the boy from Brighton who kissed me - and then I began to breathe again. He re-started my clock..." (Knight, Chap 3, L 1 – 4). His insistence on translating the mouth to mouth resuscitation act as a kiss, confirms his liking towards the same sex or his homosexuality. Yet, he himself could not clearly identify himself as one due to his limited understanding of the world around him and people at his very young age. For instance when he saw Aunt June with another woman he reacted innocently and thought to himself, "The woman with the glasses opened her palm and let Aunty June's hand slide into hers – and both women smile." (Knight, Chap 5, L 25).

Paul in *Paul's Case* could be said to be aware of his sexual identity as he intentionally and deliberately, in his own consciousness, decided to spend an entire night with a Yale freshman during his

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wild escapade in a hotel in New York, though the exact details of how they spent their night is not mentioned. Paul decides to get away from a heterosocial community who could not accept him and understand him as he is, by running away to New York where according to him he could enjoy life to its fullest and where “everything was as it should be” (Cather, 8). Michel Foucault in his book *The History of Sexuality* talks about the formation of the homosexual when he said, “The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (Foucault, 43). Foucault implies that culture and society through their many sidedness and intense repression has actually created an understanding of the homosexual as a species, thereby making it intensely difficult for them to be socially accepted and appreciated. Paul’s drawing master remarked, “... there’s something sort of haunted about it. The boy is not strong, for one thing. There is something wrong about the fellow” (Cather, 2). His fine taste in art, music and fashion and the amount of time he normally spends dressing up somehow reluctantly and subtlety reveals that Paul is a homosexual though he himself never admits it openly. His decision to end his life ultimately could be interpreted as a desperate attempt to come out of his closet permanently. Willa Cather herself is claimed by some to be a closeted lesbian herself. This closetedness could well be reflected in the character of Paul.

Lawrence is a childhood friend of Mike in Lynn Johnson’s comic strip “For better or for Worse”. Mike was never aware of the sexual orientation of his best friend Lawrence, since Lawrence never came out of his closet. But when Lawrence did come out of

his closet it was very difficult for Mike to accept him the way he was. His closetedness is clearly revealed when he said to Mike that, "...I've known I was different for a couple of years. But it was always there" (Johnson, ID: 2254).

These three characters Charlie, Paul and Lawrence have their own closets not just because of their associations but because they chose to be in the hiding. Both Lawrence and Charlie seem to be in a classic case of denial and disapproval in their childhood and initial stages of understanding themselves while Paul seems to be more accepting towards who he is. Paul's closet is his school, his father and his locality where he feels defeated. Charlie's closet is his mother, who strongly affirms to her Sister June that Charlie is not a freak. Identifying one's own sexual identity is very difficult and according to Vivienne Cass's *Homosexual Identity Formation* (1969) the process of identifying oneself to be a homosexual undergoes 6 steps:

- a) Identity awareness
- b) Identity Comparison
- c) Identity tolerance
- d) Identity Acceptance
- e) Identity Pride and
- f) Synthesis.

The first two stages are when the subject is still too young to understand his / her differentness. They realize their difference only at the 3rd stage i.e. when they have matured a bit.

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The process of coming out of the closet requires a great deal of courage. Many persons belonging to the LGBT community decides to be closeted due to their lack of courage. Joanne Winning says, it is an honest “articulation of one’s own sexuality” but Judith Butler is a little pessimistic to the act asking “can sexuality even remain sexuality once it submits to a criterion of transparency and disclosure?” (Abelove et al, 309). Butler continued, “. . .being ‘out’ must produce the closet again and again” (Abelove et al, 309) insisting that a complete coming out process is impossible. Suzanna Danuta Walters in her essay ‘From Here to Queer: Radical feminism, Postmodernism, and the Lesbian Menace’ says, “coming out implies a becoming, a construction of the self as gay, now not hidden within the fiction of heterosexuality” (Morland, 20). It is clear therefore that coming out projects an image of the person coming as wholly understood by the male dominated heterosexual world. But, for kids like Charlie and Joe, teenagers like Paul and Lawrence; one first has to come out to oneself before coming out to others. A process already mentioned above in Cass’s model.

Charlie and Joe in *The Boy from Brighton* innocently displayed their ignorance towards their sexuality but at the very end Joe eventually comes out openly to Charlie when he utters “I don’t think I’m meant for anyone who wears curler” (Knight, Chap 7). Joe reveals his anxiety and dilemma towards his sexual orientation through this line. The story therefore becomes Joe’s acceptance of himself by admitting to something he had not known before. Charlie on the other hand had already revealed or come out when he mistook Joe’s action to resuscitate him for a kiss and

his ever growing desire to kiss him back which he eventually did towards the end of the short story “and suddenly, before I could even stop myself, I leaned in and kissed him” (Knight, Chap 7). Lawrence though in *For better or for Worse* came out in a kind of a classic coming out way. He told Mike his childhood friend, who just could not believe him. Mike’s inability to understand Lawrence’s sexual identity confirms the condition of gays and lesbians in a heterosexual community. And when Lawrence came out to his parents the condition worsen as he is kicked out of the house by his father who says, “Go wherever ‘your kind’ hangs out!!!” (Johnson, **ID**: 2265). Lawrence father portrays a very classic case of male’s homophobia. Lawrence mentioned that it is not him who is not clear about who they are but the others who aren’t clear about them. Savin-Williams and EM Dube in 1998 reveals a very important discovery which they termed “6 Stages that parents may go through in reaction to the disclosure” they are;

- (1) Shock: Due to unawareness
- (2) Denial and isolation: Denial can take place in many forms;
 - a) Hostility,
 - b) Non Registering,
 - c) Non-Caring or
 - d) Rejection.
- (3) Anger: Parents recognizing their emotions
- (4) Bargaining: An attempt to make the child hide his / her sexuality

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- (5) Depression: Parents are saddened at this stage because of the life their child must now endure.
- (6) Acceptance: Son / Daughter's homosexuality is no longer a family secret or source of shame.

Lawrence's mother and father could be said to be going through all these six stages of reaction considering the way they reacted when Lawrence revealed his identity regarding his sexuality. This same reaction is reflected by Jeanette Winterson's mother in *Oranges are not the only fruit* when Winterson reveals her sexuality to her mother. Winterson's mother who was a deeply religious person could not accept her daughter's sexuality and she tried to force her to become straight through the church but failed to do so, and eventually she understood and accepted Winterson's sexuality.

Some of the most popular reasons why 'coming out' is such a complex process are: (1) Fear of un-acceptance or alienation (2) Inability to accept oneself (3) Homophobia (4) Heterosexism (5) Hate Crimes (6) Losing Job / Honour / Respect. Fear of acceptance is prominently featured in the character of Lawrence by Lynn Johnson. Lawrence hesitated to tell his best friend Mike and then later his mom and then his dad. Paul who was unaccepted and not respected anywhere in his own locality and school never confessed to anyone regarding his sexuality but rather chose to let it all out when he was alone in New York. Charlie and Joe were not mature enough to understand their sexual inclinations but unconsciously hinted to their orientation various times in the story.

Coming out of the closet doesn't necessarily bring in acceptance as mentioned before in fact the heterosexual community is still very hostile against those who come out of the closet. But, writers like Larry Kramer urge those in the closet to come out in his essay '1,112 and Counting' by shouting out, "I am sick of closeted gays. Every gay man who is unable to come forward now and fight to save his own life is truly helping to kill the rest of us" (Morland, 36).

In conclusion I would like to quote Lois Tyson who when talking about Queer theory said, "...our sexuality is socially constructed (rather than inborn) to the extent that it based on the way in which sexuality is defined by the culture in which we live" (Tyson, 336). Why should one's sexuality be closeted? or for that matter why should one need to come out! Lawrence when explaining his sexuality to his best friend Mike mentioned the Native Americans concept of a third gender or Two Spirit. Will Roscoe author of the *Zuni Man-Woman*, researched that in most Native American tribes such as the Zuni tribe you were not born with your assigned gender but rather it was something you grew into around the age of three or four. In the tradition of the Zuni tribe, children were not referred to as girl or boy until around the age of five. Prior to this age they were simply called "cha'le" or child. Two-spirits were not thought of as just a man or just a woman but as embodying characteristics of both genders in a single person, making them a more whole human being. The traditional roles of such people have included: (1) Healing (2) Mediation, and (3) The parenting of orphans. Native Americans therefore accepted transgender into their community

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and never treated them differently, and sometimes they were referred to as more complete in terms of gender.

In a heterosexual society closely guarded by its own invention – family, religion, social systems, hierarchies etc it is still very difficult for a closeted person to come out with his / her sexuality or sexual orientation. Much to the advancement of our human society with it's much acclaimed acceptance of the different kinds of our sexual orientation or sexuality, hate crimes against LGBT community are still very much committed. A closeted gay / lesbian still goes through various mental and psychological challenges to come out of the closet.

When Mike asked Lawrence if he has come out of the closet Lawrence replied, “No, I’ve just opened the door enough so I can see outside” (Johnson, ID: 2255). This casual reply that Lawrence gave to Mike is indicative of the fact that coming out is still a very difficult process for many gays and lesbians and that they are still just looking outside to see if the coast is clear. Lawrence’s cautiousness, Paul’s dilemma and Charlie’s ignorance are somehow intricately connected, connected by the very closet that they all belong to. Whether the state of being is conscious and out in the open or unconscious and hidden. Being in the closet compels or provokes a *coming out* which in turn sometimes recommends a *going in* thus completing the vicious cycle. Heterosexual communities still may need some time to fully understand the plight of the LGBT community but I hope that a day will come when nobody will have to crawl into a closet to be prompted to come out again.

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