Gender is Performative in Illusive Beliefs

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Abstract

This paper will focus on Judith Butler's work on gender and performativity. It will use Butler's notion of gender as performativity and the example of drag queen as a way to understand the reality of female gender from unreal one. It will explore that the reality of gender is not fixed as we generally assume it to be and it will expose the weakness of gender reality to create a true model of gender. This essay examines the works of Angela Carter. The novel under the study is *The Passion of New Eve (1977)*. Understood through the lens of Butler's theory of gender performativity, Evelyn, manifests the idea that gender identity is not fixed in nature but it relies on culturally constructed signification. He will emphasize that gender is something that is attached into the body through socialization, and not something that is fixed at birth. It will be manifest how Evelyn as female gender constructs a new subjective performativity. Evelyn does this with his queer appearance and his transformation opens up some paths for the Third gender.

Keywords: Gender, Subjectivity, Butler, Atwood, Performative

1. Introduction

Weiss (2005) explains that the British philosopher of language, John L. Austin (1911−1960), first introduced the term "performativity" in 1939 (76) which Austin called a "new and ugly word" (Harnish, 3). According to Huffer (1995), Austin's speech act theory marks an intervention into the exclusion of truth from representation by asking about the link between "the way things are said and what those things that are said can do" (29). According to Johnson, (1977) Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* is an attempt to draw up a list of what Austin calls "performative utterances" (144). The relationships between words, actions, and the contexts in which utterances are made are central components of this theory. (Hermansen, 390). If a person makes a performative utterance, Austin argues that:

he is doing something rather than merely saying something…Suppose, for example, that in the course of a marriage ceremony I say, as people will, "I do" …or suppose that I tread on your toe and say "I apologize"…In [such] cases it would be absurd to regard the thing that I say as a report of the performance of the action which is undoubtedly done…We should say rather that, in saying what I do, I actually perform that action. (Weiss, 76)

Kerry M. Mallan (2002) discusses Austin's work on language studies as indicating a significant change in linguistic philosophies by concentrating attention on "what language does rather than what it is, and away from language as a formal structure to language as a social process" (1). Austin used the term performative to indicate "that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action - it is not normally thought of as just saying something" (Ruitenberg, 40). Hall also adds that Austin objects to the logical positivists' focus on the verifiability of statements, and he introduced the performative as "a new category of utterance that has no truth value since it does not describe the world, but acts upon it - a way of doing things with words" (185). Mallan (2002) adds that "performative" is Austin's phrase for language with the primary function of doing something. Rather than viewing language as describing some objective reality, Austin argues that the performative indicates that "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action" (1). Austin gave a simple distinction between two ways we use words: the constative and the performative utterances. He originally distinguished constatives from performatives.

Austin's original aim was to disrupt the convention in British language philosophy that the only issue of importance was truth of correspondence. It is exactly this aim which has attracted attention from students of literature, dealing ordinarily with texts whose truth-value may have little to do with correspondence and whose intellectual significance would be minimized therefore by positivist belief systems (Slinn, 60). Austin posits his famous distinction between constative and performative utterances, only to problematize the binarism of his own opposition over the course of the subsequent eleven lectures (Huffer, 29). He introduced the term performative to refer to a

particular kind of speech: the kind that does not report or describe an action, but rather commits the action (Ruitenberg, 262). Johnson explains that the name performative is derived from perform, the usual verb with the noun action and it indicates that "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action" (144). Peter Digeser (1994) points out that "performatives are words that do things in our language such as: promises, threats, warnings, bets, declarations, vows, oaths and so on. The central attribute of a performative is that in the proper circumstances, saying the words makes it so" (662). In the case of a performative utterance, "in saying what I do, I actually perform that action". In saying "I invite you for dinner tomorrow," I actually issue the invitation (Ruitenberg, 262). In saying I apologize or I promise, I do not assert something true or false. I am performing an action (Dinneen, 514). Austin opposes performative to constative utterances, the kinds of statements that have traditionally occupied philosophers. "It was far too long the assumption of philosophers," Austin discusses that, "the business of a 'statement' can only be to 'describe' some state of affairs, or to 'state some fact,' which it must do either truly or falsely" (Huffer, 29). James D. Marshall (1999) emphasizes that:

Essentially constatives are true or false. The term differs from 'statement' or 'description' or 'fact', for he wishes to talk about utterances which have been assimilated to straightforward statements of fact whereas they are intended as something quite different. In particular he wishes to avoid the descriptive fallacy, that something is how it is described (312).

To take a classic example from modern philosophy, the utterance, "The cat is on the mat", is a constative. It describes a state of affairs and is verifiable or falsifiable according to the empirical test of looking at the mat (Begam, 141). Austin's concept of performative is important to explain since Butler builds on Austin's work on performatives and argues this matter in her book, *Gender Trouble* that "gender is a corporeal style, an act, as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where performative suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (Denise Perry, 19).

Butler originated the theory that gender is not an essential quality but rather a performative one. She applauds Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one," as well as the challenge her work posed to essentialist notions of gender that would bind it to an irreducible material sex (Dreyfus and Wrathall, 496). When Beauvoir claims that woman is a historical idea and she is not a natural fact, she clearly underscores the distinction between sex, as biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity. According to that distinction

to be female is a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project (Butler, 522).

Butler describes gender identity as:

If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, and a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification. [...] It is, for Beauvoir, never possible finally to become a woman, as if there were a telos that governs the process of acculturation and construction. Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. (qtd. in Hill, 32)

Drawing on Austin, Judith Butler applies the notion of the performative to gender, and introduces performativity as a mode of analysis or approach to issues of language, culture and society. She develops her understanding of performativity by using John Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* as a crucial resource. Butler calls on his understandings of illocutionary force which is the intention in saying and especially perlocutionary force which is the effect of saying. (Chambers and Carver, 38). Unlike Austin, Butler implies that the truth/falsehood dimension can be completely removed from the performative. For example, Butler argues that under the prevailing practices, "gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control" (Digeser, 663). In other words, Butler explains Austin's concept of the illocutionary force of performatives as "the turning of words into acts in a way subject to misuse, misfire and failure" (Tomares, 80). She argues that failure to reach consensus on the meaning of a single word presents the word's possibility of mutability:

[I]f utterances can be the bearers of equivocal meanings, then their power is, in principle, less unilateral and sure than it appears. Indeed, the equivocality of the utterance means that it might not always mean in the same way, that its meaning might be turned or derailed in some significant way, and that words that seek to injure might well miss their mark and produce an effect counter to the one that is intended. The disjuncture between utterance and meaning

is the condition of possibility for revising the performative, of the performative as the repetition of its prior instance, a repetition that is at once a reformulation. (Tomares, 80)

This point of view can be considered as a way to elaborate how some speeches and utterances with respect to the construction of female identity can be rooted in repetition and the new performativity of female behaviour can open some ways to reformulate it. Butler reacted and engaged with problems that arise when performativity refers to both language and gender: "It may seem that there is a difference between the embodying or performing of gender norms and the performative use of discourse. Are these two different senses of 'performativity' or do they converge as modes of citationality?" (Weiss, 77). She later addresses the instability that ensues when attaching language philosophy onto speculations about the body, and Butler argues that the two are invariably related:

The speech act is at once performed (and thus theatrical, presented to an audience, subject to interpretation), and linguistic, inducing a set of effects through its implied relation to linguistic conventions. If one wonders how a linguistic theory of the speech act relates to bodily gestures, one need only consider that speech itself is a bodily act with specific linguistic consequences. Thus speech belongs exclusively neither to corporeal presentation nor to language and its status as word and deed is necessarily ambiguous. (Weiss, 77)

Austin's theory of performativity can lead to an understanding of how some utterances create the construction of female identity in society and there is a force beyond these speeches to create a regularised female identity.

2. Gender as Performative and Subversive Subjectivity

Rachel Carroll (2000) mentions that "Carter's text could be read as most interesting, and most postmodern, not in its representation of history but in its rendering of time" (188). Carter clarifies how significant it is to present the history in which the construction of gender is natural and usual and she highlights how the repetition of some ideas and perspectives can have a strong affection on shaping gender identity. As Sally Robinson suggests, "For Carter, gender is a relation of power, whereby the weak become 'feminine' and the strong become 'masculine'. And, because relations of power can change, this construction is always open to deconstruction" (499). In fact, the construction of identity is always open to deconstruction and the construction of gender is rooted in power and language. According to Janine Marie Root in her monograph *Performing and Identity in Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus and Wise Children,* the ways in which individuals understand themselves and their relationship with the world around them is an ongoing concern in the fiction of Angela Carter. Anna Katsavos (1997):

I try, when I write fiction, to think on my feet - present a number of propositions in a variety of different ways, and to leave the reader to construct her own fiction for herself from the elements of my fictions. Reading is just as creative an activity as writing and most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles; especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode (5).

Carter highlights that there is a possibility to create a new construction of belief which can be observed in her novels. It can be a way to talk back about what has been believed and create a new perspective for the present and future through her novels. This research also attempts to construct a new fiction by exploring Carter's Grace and unravel the split subjectivity of Grace and open up some new ways to reconstruct it. Her fantasy manner of writing and style of magic realism are a way to manifest how this construction of gender can also be a fantastic in the shape of reality which is presented as a natural. This will be investigated in this research and it will give a different view to look at the constructed world.

The period since the Second World War has seen a paradigm shift in attitudes to gender and sexuality. The sexual revolution of the late 1950s and 1960s and the work of the feminist movement during the period have profoundly changed the way in which men and women relate to each other socially, economically and culturally. A cultural revolution has also taken place in terms of social attitudes to the structure of the family, same-sex relationships and our understanding of sexual identity. *The Passion of New Eve* is an innovative and experimental exploration into the way in which gender is constructed in contemporary society. *The Passion of New Eve* was published in 1977 and involves the adventures of a character called Evelyn who at the beginning is a man, but by the end of the book, through an enforced sex change, becomes a woman (Bentley, 96). Evelyn thus becomes the new Eve of the title. Eve/lyn is a metaphor of the performing path, the all-time illusion of womanhood. In the process of going through the transformation, she demonstrates the artifice of that womanhood. She passes through gender as he transforms from male to female biologically and masculine to feminine culturally. She prepares the way for liberation and questions the truth of gender and gendered identity.

The question arises here "is woman a real or an illusion?" which centres on Eve/lyn's transformation and it puts to question an ostensible reality of femininity/masculinity. The riddle is puzzled over in this study. This section desires to solve this riddle and reveal the hidden truth using Butler's performative model of gender. In *The Passion of New*

Eve, the insistence of the performance of femininity is manifest at the beginning. The main character is Evelyn whose identity is changed. While he was transforming, he constructs feminine identity within his masculine shape. "She, this darkest one, this fleshly extinction, beyond time, beyond imagination, always just beyond, a little way beyond the finger-tips of the spirit, the eternally elusive quietus who will free me from being, transform my I into the other and, in doing so, annihilate it" (Carter, 59). Evelyn's identity is changing from superior as a male to inferior as a female, from the domination of man to the subordination of woman. It manifests social script of gender. The character shows that the role of woman as "the other" and man as an "I" is just an expression and this transformation provides the possibility of destroying the gender script since Evelyn is engaged in the logical category of I/other and manifests that it is these expressions (I/other) that create the subject. Evelyn depicts performative politics that "engage a deconstructive politics that intervenes and unsettles hegemonic meanings" (qtd. in Youdell, 512). After he goes through his imposed transformation at the hands of his Mother, he feels that the inside of his body is masculine and the outside appearance is feminine "I was literally in two minds; my transformation was both perfect and imperfect. All of New Eve's experience came through two channels of sensation, her own fleshly ones and his mental ones" (Carter, 77-8). This change of Evelyn between flesh and mind also manifests that the gender scripts itself in which the binarization of flesh=female and mind/thought=male are "fundamentally unstable discursive productions that in effect serve to make masculinity and femininity intelligible" (qtd. in Nayak and Kehily, 460) and the construction of Evelyn as an impersonation suggests "the deconstruction of gender into its socially constitutive parts as either masculine or feminine" (qtd. in Nayak and Kehily, 460). What Evelyn sees in the mirror is his 'inside essence' [the body] is masculine but his 'outside' appearance is feminine.

When I looked in the mirror, I saw Eve; I did not see myself. I saw a young woman who, though she was I, I could in no way acknowledge as myself, for this one was only a lyrical abstraction of femininity to me, a tinted arrangement of curved lines. (Carter, 74)

He could see the constructed image of femininity in the mirror. Evelyn explodes the inside/outside paradigm completely and reflects Newton's statement:

At its most complex, [drag] is a double inversion that says, "appearance is an illusion." Drag says [Newton's curious personification] "my 'outside' appearance is feminine, but my essence 'inside' [the body] is masculine." At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; "my appearance 'outside' [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence 'inside' [myself] is feminine." (Butler, 186)

It highlights the point that Evelyn couldn't see his gender and he was unsure if he is a man or a woman. He could not see himself as a man, but he sees his constructed gender as a woman. This uncertainty about who he is and what is his real gender is the moment when it reflects Butler's statement that the moment in which one's staid and cultural perceptions fail, when one cannot with surety read the body one sees, is precisely the moment when one is no longer sure whether the body encountered is that of a man or a woman. The vacillation between the categories itself constitutes the experience of the body in question (Butler, xxiv). Even, when Mother asks him, how do you find yourself? He replies, "I don't find myself at all" (Carter, 80). My suggestion is that he calls the question the distinction between real and unreal, natural and artificial, surface and depth, inside and outside. It means that when we look at the Evelyn, he is as a man symbolized as a woman or a woman appearing as a man, then one takes each of these perceptions as the "reality" of gender: the gender introduced through the simile lacks "reality", and is taken to constitute an illusory appearance.

3. Conclusion

Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) works to answer the question in the introduction: woman is a real or illusion. It was unraveled the constructed image of femininity in the society and opens up some ways to escape the gendered confinement. The discussion attempts to highlight the fact that Eve/lyn's essence or identity is false. It becomes clear how to understand the real from unreal. This paper comes to understand the possibility to reproduce the produced inside of gender identity. It is illuminated that Eve/lyn'sinvolves crossing gender as he moves from male to female biologically and masculine to feminine culturally .The process he goes through manifests that gender is not fixed as a tangible series of properties in the natural world but is located the mind.

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