
A FEMINIST UNDERSTANDING OF THE PERFORMATIVITY OF GENDER AND SEX- A STUDY THROUGH ‘A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS’ AND ‘ONE PART WOMAN’

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Abstract: The idea of gender equality and the societal attributes associated with it has always been a subject of larger discussions regarding feminine discourse legitimisation. When the fact that only women can give birth to a child becomes undeniable, the notion that giving birth alone completes her life comes along with it. With the assumption of certain roles to the sexes, gender not only becomes a social construct but also an ideology that naturalises inequality and performativity of the sexes. This paper, through the lens of portrayal of Mariam and Ponna of ‘A Thousand Splendid Suns’ and ‘One Part Woman’, argues that Sex and Gender are two terms that are thoroughly misunderstood to be used interchangeably. This imposition, in reality leads to the hindrance of the women to do things that are in reality of great necessity for the society. Disaster management is an example. The marginalisation of women into their sexual identity alone will be also subjected to scrutiny. The paper contests the set idea of gender around female sexuality. Taking feminist, Marxist and psychoanalytic theories as tools, the disconnect between sex and gender is established to reach the conclusion that biological sex is not declarative of ‘social’ gender.

Keywords: Gender, Performativity, Sex, Culture.

Introduction: The idea of sex and gender have become two components that are now inseparable over the course of time due to prudent social conditioning and misconceptions. The fact that sex is biological and its relationship with activities like earning, nurturing the young ones, fighting for the mother land etc. are completely arbitrary is often forgotten. With the assigning of certain roles to sexes, stereotypes emerge. Though gender is a social construct and sex is a biological fact, one can infer that even in the contemporary society, sex has become gender all the way along. When a girl is born, she is expected to be well-behaved for the better acceptance of her in her husband’s home. And as far the boys are concerned, they are expected to earn bread for the family within a particular age. If any of them falls short of these performances, then they are considered to be moving against the social norms and usually deemed as failures. Though feminist movements try to bring forth inequalities prevailing with the social construction of gender, the first wave of feminism did not dwell into gender roles and notions of sexuality. It was during the time of second wave of feminism that these topics were taken up for contesting the existing concepts of gender and performance.

In most of the cases, the performativity assigned to gender is ingrained unconsciously. The individual himself is not aware that they are performing something that is gendered. These roles are often highly legitimised by social and cultural contexts. In ‘A thousand Splendid Suns’ and ‘One Part Women’ , this unconscious ingression of social roles into biological sex is clearly visible. Khaled Hosseini and Perumal Murugan through three female characters locates these acts in the novels. When Mariam becomes a ‘harami’ for something that she never was even a part of, Ponna becomes the victim of dissing because of her inability to conceive a baby. This paper studies the socially ascribed roles of women in ‘A Thousand

Splendid Suns' and 'One Part Woman'. A feminist understanding of this notion in the light of 'Gender Identity' and 'Performativity' as put forward by Judith Butler will help to locate the extent at which these gendered acts in response to sex is largely legitimised within the larger concept of a 'proper life' that governs the society.

Language Determining Gender Roles: The constitution and construction of gender roles are solely by language. There is nothing that precedes it. It is often through language that socially construed ideals of gender are inscribed. Language becomes the site of a regulated repetition of gender so as to normalise the propagated idea within it. Perumal Murugan validates this fact with the small incidents that portrays how Ponna is often looked down upon by her in laws and neighbours. The sting of language is used very sharply by the characters in order make her feel guilty of not being a mother and her slight carelessness towards babysitting is also attributed to the same. The fate of Ponna and Kali is often worsened by the kind of words that are hurled upon them. The happiness and peace that brims around them causes trouble for the people around. The set belief that life of a woman becomes complete through motherhood and the masculinity of a man is determined by his ability to make heirs. There is a whole lot of pity and doubt that arouses regarding the fate of Kali's well-maintained land after their death about which the couple themselves is not bothered about as the neighbours seem to be.

In 'A Thousand Splendid Suns', Khalid Hosseini clearly shows how language can define a person's character and outlook. It assigns people their roles. The way Mariam, who is a girl born out of marriage, raised only by her mother most of the time in an isolated house which the author calls *kolba* and only to hear swear words like *haraami*, weed (mugwort) thinks is entirely contradictory to the way how Laila thinks. Laila being a girl bought up by a forward-thinking father, with sound education and orientation is confident and cunning enough to find her way out of things. Her father, Babi made sure that Laila was always ahead of her class by a step or two and also observed that it was now a good time for women in Afghanistan.

Though in two different contexts and countries, both these novels play a very profound role in defining how linguistic performativity shapes gender roles.

Culture: The social setup of a geographical space adversely affects the way its occupants think and act. The essential culture evolves from a basic set of norms to a larger identity which governs the people and in turn acts as an unwritten code of law. This code is embedded in the larger psyche of the society that most of them don't really break it as the code has an unbreakable relation with God/ Supernatural entities. Fear, is the prime factor which acts as a catalyst in making the mob adhere to the them.

The major idea that culture, in the course of time, has tried to reinforce is the larger patriarchal structure. This idea is strengthened through dehumanizing women- like considering females as a commodity and depriving them the rights and privileges of men. In 'A thousand splendid suns' the time period in which the plot unfolds is rather a time frame where Afghanistan is still patriarchal. Polygamy is a major part of the novel, beginning from Jalil (Mariam's father) who already has three wives. Later in the story, which unfolds in the 21st century, we can see it through Rasheed's desire of marrying Laila while still being husband to Mariam. Polygamy has its roots in Quran, but we see that in the novel, polygamy assumes a larger identity than being merely religious. This process is initiated by patriarchy.

This notion of patriarchal ideologies seeking legitimacy through religion can be seen in the text 'One part woman' by Perumaal Murugan. In the narrative, Ponna and Kali unable to have a child faces the stigma of the society in terms of ostracization. Here, the sexual roles of both the male and female are being understood and expected in their societal levels, and when one fails to accomplish such things, they are thought to be 'unfit' for their gender. The understanding of gender encompasses not just the societal constructs of the society, but they are based on the sexual roles, as simple as giving birth to an offspring. Discrepancies in them are sought to solve by relaxing the basic culture, as seen in the novel. There, the tradition of women who are unable to bear children being allowed freely mate with anyone on the last day of the annual festival. This induces the dilemma of pride versus desire to have a baby.

The very action of Ponna of choosing to have a baby is declarative of the magnitude of shame/ stigma she had to face or faces that she chooses the option of having a baby over her pride. Murugan thereby points out that females are the ones who are mostly targeted as 'useless' when they are barren, thus constructing it to be the supreme form of shame a woman can face. It is the essential culture that does so.

Acceptance and Its Performativity: Cultural conditioning has its effects in the society deeper than we often recognise. This moulds the way people think and, in the end, performs. What precedes the performativity and aids it is the acceptance of the norms related to gender. Women, due to awareness or lack of education of their rights, tend to accept their 'ill-fate' of abuse or discrimination as natural and already a part of the social system that they live in, rather than a construct. They consider their biological and sexual differences as inferior, thus creating their own gender as essentially an inferior one. Mariam accepts herself as a 'harami' multiple times even though it was her father by whose fault she became illegitimate. Even in 'One Part Woman', Ponna accepts the ostracisation from the society as her fault. All these instances of acceptance weave the central ideology behind the larger notion women being the weaker sex.

The perception of one's gender is declared to the outer world through overt and covert performances. Judith Butler opines that "Gender is always performative, though not directly by the subject" (Butler 25). This statement explains the larger idea of gender performativity in a social setup as mostly it is the patriarchy who creates and performs the codes of gender. Sometimes even the silence of women performs as their acceptance of these gender roles. For example, Mariam, when she is married off by her father, she knows he treats her like a burden and the only way for her is a marriage. This is a stereotypical notion of marriage and the very fact that Mariam kept silent throughout them is actually a performance of her acceptance. But the female gender and its prospectus is not only performed by women, but also men. Rasheed beating up and abusing Mariam is actually a performance of the idea that women are weak and they bound to be abused by their male counterparts. In 'One part woman', it is Ponna's brother who lures Kali away so that they can take Ponna away for the festival. This is another instance of a person other than a subject performing gender, as what her brother did was to 'help' her be a mother- again a gendered notion. Ponna, after a long dilemma, climbing the hill back to the temple as a part of the custom is her performing of her acceptance of choosing the pre-set notions of fulfilment of her gender/sex- giving birth, over her pride as a human.

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