



Denial of Performance: A Study of Gender Performativity and Resistance in *The Color Purple* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Ms. Parminder Kaur

Assistant Professor, Sri Guru Granth Sahib World University, Fatehgarh Sahib, India

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Abstract— The present paper will attempt a comparative study of the two female characters, Celie from *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker and Janie from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston, through the lens of gender performativity, a concept by Judith Butler. Butler argues that gender should not be seen as something constant or given. Rather, it is a performance that is imposed upon us by narrative heterosexuality. Celie and Janie initially fulfilled the patriarchal expectations of their gender by performing various gender roles expected of them. Gradually, as their journey progressed, they resisted and rejected the roles assigned to them, such as an obedient wife, caring mother, and a woman who does all the household work. On the one hand, Celie rejects the role of a subservient wife after achieving financial independence by setting up a pants business. On the other hand, Janie fights for autonomy through her rejection of the control of her husband over her. There are numerous scenes in both novels that illustrate how gender performance is enforced upon them and is eventually rejected by both. By analysing the characters of both the protagonists through the lens of gender performativity, this paper will elaborate upon how those two women reasserted their autonomy and identity by resisting what was expected of them because of their gender.



Keywords— Gender, roles, Performance, Gender Performativity, Judith Butler, Autonomy, Identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender Performativity and Patriarchal Control

Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir 267) marked the foundation for the understanding of gender as a socially constructed phenomenon. For Beauvoir, sex refers to biological differences, but gender is shaped by cultural norms, social expectations, and lifelong conditioning. According to her women are not inherently passive but are made to occupy that position through a process of internalization. Her distinction between sex and gender becomes especially relevant when examining women's lived experience in literature.

Based on Beauvoir's groundwork, Judith Butler redefines the conversation by arguing that gender is not only constructed but also performed. In *Gender Trouble*, she

posits that gender is constituted through repeated behaviors and actions. She says, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performativity constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results." (Butler 25). It means that gender is not something we are, but something we do through repeated actions, behaviors, and roles. Society creates expectations for how men and women should act. This is how gender performativity shapes gender and social roles, which restricts how one has to behave in certain roles and situations.

At the outset of the respective texts, Celie and Janie are expected to fulfill idealised expectations of how a woman should be—obedient, enduring, and quiet. At the beginning of the novel *The Color Purple*, Celie embodies a gender performance marked by subjugation and silence.

Her gender identity is formed by how others see and treat her, and she internalises the notion that her worth is defined by her ability to please and serve the men in her life. Silence and acceptance are used against her, imposed by patriarchal figures who teach her to associate submission with virtue. She learns to be obedient from the very beginning. In the beginning, she is warned by Pa, “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (Walker 3). He introduces Celie to a world where silence is survival. This marks the start of Celie’s journey of internalised silence and trauma. This continues when she is forced into marriage with Mr. _____, who treats her as property but not a partner. She says, “He (Mr. _____) beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don’t never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie you a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear man” (Walker 23), here, her emotional numbness and dehumanization reflect the deep impact of prolonged oppression.

It shows her as a passive and silent character who accepts abuse as part of her role as a woman. This is not an inherent trait but socially rehearsed behaviors that align with cultural expectations of womanhood in her context. Her obedience is not just a result of social conditioning, but it is a performance rehearsed through her encounters with trauma.

On the other hand, in Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes were Watching God*, Janie’s identity is shaped by others’ expectations of how a woman should look, act, and speak. Her grandmother pushes her into marriage with Logan Killicks, hoping that she will get a protective environment, and she is told to be obedient and to prioritise her domestic life to lead a happy married life. Her voice is frequently silenced by the men in her life. First by Logan Killicks, then by Joe Starks, who insisted her to remain quiet in public, especially in the store, because her place is to be “seen and not heard”. These expectations show a performed gender role rooted in survival. Janie is taught to perform the role of a dutiful and obedient wife, but she finds herself stuck in a relationship where love and emotional connection are absent, and she realises that she has to find a way out.

Bell Hooks emphasises that, “oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story.” (Hooks 43). This is true of both the protagonists understanding they have to break the socially constructed roles to assert their autonomy. Gradually, they both evolve from passive subjects of patriarchal control to the owner of their own identities. Silence is often interpreted as submission, but in both of

these novels, silence becomes a form of resistance. Celie’s early muteness is a form of survival. Her act of writing letters to God is a seminal act of resistance. It creates a space for her inner voice to grow as it cries for help. When she writes to Nettie, “I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time” (Walker 218), she reflects that she is no longer performing the roles assigned by society. Gradually, this voice becomes a force of resistance when she finally says to her abuser, “That jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot” (Walker 187), here her language shifts from coping to confronting. She asserts her autonomy further when she starts her business of sewing pants. It also symbolises the stitching and designing of her new self. This business is symbolic of autonomy, and with this, she reclaims the power to define her work, value, and identity.

In contrast, Janie’s silence works differently. She speaks only when it is needed, and even her silence becomes charged with meaning. Gradually, she sheds the roles that others had scripted for her as she says, “Ah done live grandma’s way, now Ah means tuh live mine” (Hurtson 156). Her quiet refusal to mourn on Tea Cake’s death is not just an act of mourning on her terms; it is a defiance of societal rituals that reduce women to performative roles even in moments of pain. She rejects the role of a woman who mourns over the death as “she was too busy feeling grief to dress like grief” (Hurtson 239). She also rejects her loveless marriage and asserts her desires. She says, “Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think” (Hurtson 56). Her assertion of her bodily desires reaffirms her position as a subject, not a mere object.

II. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Both the characters redefine what it means to be a woman- not through conformity, but through resistance, creativity, and love. They challenge Butler’s notion of gender as a performative act, not by completely escaping it but rewriting the script. They do not only refuse to perform passively assigned roles but craft new identities rooted in autonomy. They challenge traditional definitions and restricted norms of femininity and assert their individuality and through resilience, Celie and Janie reclaim their subjectivity, asserting that womanhood is not a role to be played, but a life to be lived freely.

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