

PERFORMATIVITY: A GENEALOGICAL STUDY OF TASLIMA NASRIN'S *FRENCH LOVER*

Dr. Namratha Manoharan

Ass.t Prof.

Kannur, Kerala

'Gender performativity' is a concept which draws ideas extensively from psychoanalytic, feminist and post-structuralist theories in order to draw formulations of identity and subjectivity. It traces the processes by which people become subjects when they assume the sexed / gendered identities which are constructed for them within existing power structures with the aid of certain linguistic devices. Michel Foucault's historical analysis of the variable constructions of sex and sexuality in different societies and contexts, and Derrida's notion of 'meaning as an event' are the basis on which this theory is built. Similarly, feminist thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir, Monique Wittig and Luce Irigaray are major influences. Butler is less interested in 'the individual' and 'individual experience', than in analyzing the processes by which the individual comes to assume his or her position as a subject. Butler's work *Gender Trouble* traces the processes by which identity is constructed within language and discourse. The term Butler uses to describe this mode of analysis is 'genealogical'. A genealogical investigation into the construction of the subject will assume that sex and gender are the 'effects' rather than the 'causes' of institutions, discourses and practices. Here Butler is extending de Beauvoir's famous insight that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine" (*Second Sex* 281). Performativity is different from performance in that the latter presupposes the existence of a subject or an actor who is doing the performance. Butler

describes woman as a subject –in- process that is constructed in discourse by the acts they perform.

Taslima Nasrin, an award winning writer and human rights activist, is known for her powerful writings on the oppression of women and her criticism of religious fundamentalism. Her novel *French Lover* begins with the description of Nila alighting at the Charles de Gaulle- “draped in a red silk sari with gold on her ears, nose and hands smudged bindi on her forehead and sindoor smeared in her hair”. (1) She has dressed in this manner simply because her father had insisted her to do so and it was meant to please her husband, Kishanlal, on her arrival in France to spend the rest of her life with him. The novel also throws light upon Indians’ attachment to the yellow metal. A ceremony like the wedding would be incomplete without gold and the status of a family is often measured in terms of the amount of sovereigns gifted to the bride by her parents. She had agreed to this marriage simply because her ‘high caste’ lover; Sushanta had ditched her and since it was improper in her society for a lady of marriageable age to stay alone. Kishan had known all about Nila’s affair before their marriage whereas she did not know much about him including his previous marriage with a French woman. During the couple’s fight with each other, Nila is often blamed for her previous relationship whereas Kishan takes some sort of pride in announcing that his relationship with the French lady was necessary and it is just because of this that Nila is even enjoying her French citizenship.

Initially, the identity of the protagonist is not revealed to the readers, instead the author simply says, - “Red Sari had come from her father’s hotel to her husband’s. Life would pass between one hotel and the other.” (2) This is the case with most women in the sub- continent: as a child, a girl is forced to identify with her father, as a wife she is tagged along with her husband and as a mother she is forced to be identified with her son. Nila, waiting in the airport, surrounded by walls of steel is symbolic of her own caged existence which she experiences throughout her life. The moment Nila steps out of the airport, her husband eyes her as a “red, juicy piece of meat” (11), something for him to savour and to be enjoyed. On the day of her arrival in France, Kishan displays his ‘catch’ before his friends who make comments on her bodily features.

After all his friends leave the house Kishan dictates to Nila the duties that are expected to be done by her, just because she happens to be a woman. She will have to cook wonderfully for her

husband, keep his house clean and will have to yield to his sexual advances also. He also makes it a point to say that she could compromise on her tastes and likings since she is a woman, and also because it would be difficult to cater to two different kinds of habits in the same house. When Nila confides in him that she is not a good cook, he confronts her with the question: “how can you be a woman and not know how to cook” (24) and gifts her later with books on cooking so that she can prepare food items of his choice and he also asks her to take tips from Sahana and Chaitali who are ‘accomplished cooks’. When they visit Sunil’s house, Kishan reprimands his wife openly for reading books and that too with her legs up on the sofa and asks her to help Chaitali in the kitchen. According to him there were certain etiquettes to be followed by Indian women. Nila’s husband also did not want to discuss about his business with her since he felt that women were insipid and ignorant. Nila had been conditioned in such a manner that she considers it wrong to strip before a male doctor, without seeking permission from her husband. After having stitches on the forehead Kishan remarks that her beauty was lost. Nila was his ‘property’ and if she was all right all credit was due him. Nila was not allowed to venture out of the house alone, she could only see the city when Kishan can spare the time for her. Moreover, she has little choice when it comes to buying things even with the money earned by her. He expects her to behave like a typical ‘Indian wife’, who does not answer back and question him. In fact Kishan expected from his wife not just qualities, but beauty as well- so Nila had to take a bath, do her face and wear a nice sari before he came home every evening after his job. She had to run a household without pay. She had just one identity, that of Mrs. Kishanlal.

She had to gratify her husband’s wishes since she had no money of her own. A wife is expected to respect her husband; and when Nila did not put her leg down on seeing him, he grows impatient at her and shouts at her, that he has given her all sorts of luxuries to live with. He cannot understand what ‘independence’ means to Nila; why she needs money and job of her own. Sunil, the match- maker was called to say that Nila was disobeying her husband so that her family and friends could give her ‘good advice’. Kishan also becomes furious when she cooks her traditional Bengali delicacies like fish and meat for her European friends although he expects her to cook dishes whenever his friends were visiting them. He thinks that Nila was making use of every opportunity to insult him, since she has got a job of her own and money in her hands.

In their initial days of marriage, Nila had to ask him for money whenever she was in need and although Kishan considered that looking after his wife was part of his duty, for Nila, it came with a price. She says to Kishan: "I have to live according to your wishes because you are the master; you are the boss; without you my life is pointless and I am a mere servant who'll clean your house, cook, serve and provide sexual gratification at night.... I have to give you an heir. I have to because you want it, as if it has nothing to do with me, and everything to do with you.... this I, who has evolved over so many years, has to give up her habits, her language, her culture, her nature and fit herself into your mould"(79,80). This attitude of Kishan towards his wife is apparently due to his upbringing- he was taught right from the age of six not to indulge in the whims and fancies of the women folk. Often, Nila is forced to remember her childhood days, when Sunil, her brother's friend would laugh at her for reading books enthusiastically. He used to make fun of her constantly by reminding her that she would end up finally doing household chores, however educated she may be.

At social gatherings and parties, while men talk of politics, industries, cricket and so on women are expected to discuss about 'trivial' issues like cooking, children and so on. Nila often remembers her mother, Molina, and compares her life with Kishan to Molina's who has been a 'perfect' homemaker. Her mother; although belonging to a rich family, is forced to make a lot of sacrifices to fit into the role of an 'ideal' housewife, and that too in the wake of her knowledge about her husband's illegal affair. Her father was never satisfied with whatever her mother did and always complained and although Molina tries hard to please her husband, she fails miserably. She had to stick on to the role of an 'ideal housewife' or else she would be called a 'misfit' by her family and the society at large. Nila also remembers that whenever she came back home after college, she would search for her mother in the bedroom, kitchen, puja or vegetable garden on the terrace. These are some of the places meant for the women folk in most Indian households. Her father and her brother are not concerned about Molina even when she is critically ill. No one spoke about this "because that's how women often are in their husband's house" (142). Even when Molina was twitching in pain, they did not want to spare time for her although Anirban was a doctor himself. This was to be her destiny, even though "she'd never looked after herself, paid any heed to her own pleasure or health".(142) Even as Molina takes her last breath, Nikhil and Anirban, ignoring her painful wailing are sleeping soundly in the room next to hers. A few days after her mother's death Nila is asked to leave 'her' house in Calcutta

since married women “come to their father’s house for a short while, not to stay”(155). She is also advised to ‘behave properly’; so that everyone approves of her and that her father and brother can hold their head high in society. Evidently one can see that, tradition; which insists on values like love and devotion from women towards their families has crippled the growth and development of their personality.

After her escape from Kishan, Nila meets her French lover, and she becomes quite intimate with him. She feels his love for her with her body and soul and she gets the feeling that after all her life was worth living. But later, the relationship becomes complicated, for Benoit Dupont was a married man with a daughter and he cared for his legal wife, Pascale and his daughter. Finally Nila realizes that her French lover’s intimacy towards her was also ‘performance oriented’ rather than ‘process oriented’. He too was not much different from Kishan, her Indian husband who dominated her. Sunil, her brother’s friend also ‘misunderstands’ her longing for love, care and protection and assaults her sexually. Thus one can see that in the three stages of Nila’s life, patriarchy plays a role in ‘conditioning’ her to accept the roles defined for a female by tradition.

There is also a notion in our society that fair skin is superior to dark skin, especially with regard to women which is of course generated and maintained by the billion dollar cosmetic and beauty industry. Mithu, Nila’s cousin remains unmarried since no boy is willing to marry her because of her dark skin. Finally, she is forced to commit suicide so that she would not be a burden on her family. Nila’s brother, Nikhil too was in search of a fair girl, although he was dark in colour and when Nila questions this, he says “it doesn’t matter if a man is dark”. (272) Thus male dominated society ostracises women who are dark in colour.

The concept of performativity cannot be limited to gender alone, but its arenas are spread out to other important social issues also. Tumpa, Sunil’s little daughter did not know Bengali and her parents take a certain kind of pride to admit it before their friends. This is because of our notion that our mother tongue is inferior to any foreign language and years of colonial rule has forced us to think in this fashion. Similarly, one finds that highly qualified and talented Asians, Africans and people belonging to the third world countries are seeking illegal jobs in foreign countries just because their own county does not attract them and they prefer doing some odd jobs in foreign countries. Being an Indian woman, Nila’s passport was scanned; she had to pay

money and was detained and made to stand in a corner in the airport. This is because almost all people from third world countries are looked down by the White officials. She is also discriminated in bus by ticket examiners because of the colour of her skin.

Thus one can see that almost all the roles that a person complies with in society is framed and maintained by the dominant ideologies governing a society. The ideology of the 'ruling class' with its superior and parochial strength thus stunts the spiritual, economic and psychological freedom of the submissive and marginalized category. One should recognize the harmful effects of this 'performance oriented' social mechanism and overcome it so as to become a 'complete individual'.

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