

Reconstructing the Concept of Gender Performativity in Blasphemy and A Woman is no Man: A Judith Butler's Perspective

Salma Shaikh¹, Mehboob Ali Mangrio², Zahra Khan³

¹ Lecturer in English, College Education, University of Sindh, Jamshoro,
Email: salma.shaikh@scholars.usindh.edu.pk

² MS Scholar, Mehran University of Engineering and Technology, Jamshoro,
Email: mehboobmangrio12@gmail.com

³ Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, Bahria University Karachi
Campus-Pakistan, Email: zahrakhan.bukc@bahria.edu.pk / zkhan8011@gmail.com,
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8519-6892>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v4i1.2457>

Abstract

This research study analysis how the concept of gender is constructed and reinforced in Durrani's *Blasphemy* (1998) and Rum's *A Woman Is No Man* (2019). The research is carried under the Butler's theory of *Gender Performativity* to analyze and understand how gender is performed in these books. The study is grounded on Butler's idea that gender is not something we are born with but rather something that is constructed and performed through socio-cultural interactions. The study explores how gender roles are given, acquired, and performed in different social and cultural settings. The findings are found by applying the textual analysis method to analyze the action, personalities, and real life experiences of both male and female characters. The findings clearly stand that that gender is not biological but rather socially constructed through culture, religion and the system that favors men which caused the subjugation of women. Moreover, the study also presents the hardship and troubles that female characters endure in their lives with strong rebellious actions against those gender based boundaries. The study includes both genders to identify the underline mechanism that perpetuate gender inequality. This research significantly contributes to the field of gender studies by applying literary research method that highlights how gender is constructed and through actions and how it affects people's ability to make choice and the way society is framed.

Keywords: Gender, Performance, Performativity, Socially Constructed.

Introduction

The topic of Gender has always been the center in Feminist field of study especially when it comes to understand how people's identities and roles are formed and controlled in society. Gender is generally considered something biological and natural but now the research studies have explored that it is societal formed through repeated actions and expectations. Butler's theory of *Gender Performativity* has changed the notion of gender that it is not something you are born with, but rather something you performed repeatedly under certain social rules. This research paper analyzes the idea of *Gender Performativity* in the selected novels: Tahmina Durrani's *Blasphemy* and Etaf Rum's *A Woman Is No Man*. These books, written by female writers from different societies and cultures, represent deep rooted concepts of man and woman and how strict gender based rules are rooted in these societies where a man holds most power over a woman. Durrani's book reflects

how Pakistani culture deals with social and religious matters, while Rum's book focuses on the challenges faced by Palestine-American women who rebel to fit into traditional roles in a foreign society.

The objectives of the study:

The main objective of this research paper is to evaluate how gender-based performances are formed and represented in these books; the problem is the gravel, which is in brief supply. The other objective aims to uncover the systematic roots of gender inequality by incorporating both male and female characters.

Literature Review:

Previous researches on *Blasphemy* and has mostly analyzed the issues like: oppression, the misuse of religious teachings, and the patriarchy that oppressed women. Zaidi (2015) has highlighted how female characters endure pain and struggle back, especially portraying how the protagonist Heer endures all suffering due to social expectations despite a bad marriage. Tahir (2020) researched how religion is inappropriately used to control people, compelling them to accept the patriarchal power through wrong religious teachings and beliefs. On the other side, reaches have analyzed Rum's *A Woman Is No Man* from different perspectives like stereotypes gender roles and lasting effects of trauma passed down through from generation to generation. Silvis (2020) carried research to analyze the main character's struggle against the strict gender based performances that are forced to act according to the social expectations of people. Hassan and Aurangzeb (2022) study the novel applying patriarchal theory focusing on how women's life is limited through the systems in and outside their homes. The researchers mainly focused on female characters in the book portraying their struggles and rebellious behaviors against the patriarchal social norms.

Research Gap

The most existing researches are limited to feminist studies that focus predominantly on female experiences. There is noticeable gap in examining the male characters and the broader social mechanism that sustains gender-based inequalities and injustice. This current study tackles that gap by applying Butler's Theory of *Gender Performativity* which includes the analysis of both genders.

Theoretical Framework

This research is conducted through the theoretical lens of Butler's idea of how gender is constructed and performed, discussed in her book *Gender Trouble*. Butler has discussed that gender is not biological inherent but rather a socially developed concept that people express through actions and social expectation. Those gender based roles create a subjugated environment for women to suffer systematically. The current research is focused on those three key concepts of Butler regarding gender: Gender is socially constructed, performed through repeated actions, and gender is not biological but rather social expectations.

Research Methodology

Close reading techniques of textual analysis by Brummett are applied which falls into a qualitative method of study. The selected novels are the primary source of data and academic research articles and theoretical text are the secondary source. Through close reading method the study uncovers the roles and consequences of gender performance in characters' lives.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The data is collected through the qualitative analysis of *Blasphemy* (1998) and *A Woman Is No Man* (2019) under Butler's theory of *Gender Performativity* (1999). The study examines how gender is socially constructed, culturally performed, and forced within the domestic as well as social sphere.

Gender as a social construction

By using Butler's idea of a gender as a social construction it is found that gender identity is deeply imposed and reinforced through socio-cultural expectations. In *A Woman Is No Man* females silence is normalized and internalized, representing how women are limited to accept voicelessness as a part of their identity (Rum, 2019). Similarly in *Blasphemy*, the protagonist Heer's lack of autonomy portrays how patriarchal society shapes female identity. Heer's dependence on male authority for each decision making reflects the systematic nature of gendered subordination. These portrayals affirm Butler's idea of gender as a social construction rather than a biological inherent.

Cultural Reinforcement of Gender performances

The analyzed data reveals that cultural norms play a significant role in sustaining gender inequality. Both stories represent societies where male dominance is normalized and institutionalized. The preference for male children is grounded in both novels, reflecting patriarchal values that associated with sons as honor to the families, lineage, and financial security, while daughters are considered as liabilities (Durrani, 1998; Rum, 2019). Moreover, female characters are confined to private spaces and require male authorization for public engagement. Such practices exemplify Butler's theory (1999) asserting that gender is regulated through cultural framework that controls human behavior.

Gender Performance and Repetition

Butler (1999) conceptualizes gender as performativity, adopted through repeated actions that create the illusion of stability. In both selected novels, gender roles are sustained through repeated performances of obedience, ethics, and silence endurance by women and authority of men over women. The study finds, women are consistently instructed to conform to tradition expectation across generation (Rum, 2019). Similarly, Heer's repeated submission in *Blasphemy* represents how gender identity is sustained through continuous enactment. This repetition of gender performances naturalizes gender norms and discourages deviation.

Social Expectation and Power Relations

The findings show that the gender roles are closely related to power dynamics within domestic sphere. Men are centralized as authority figures while women are assigned subordinate roles. This division results in emotional and physical oppression, which is often normalized within cultural contexts. In both selected texts, women are merely defined in relation to men- as daughters, wives, and mothers-reinforcing their dependency and limiting their autonomy (Durrani, 1998). Additionally, social expectation compels female characters to maintain silence related to marital issues, thereby perpetuating oppression cycles (Rum, 2019).

Discussion

The comparative analysis of the selected texts of Durrani and Rum demonstrates that gender roles are socially constructed and culturally maintained through repetitive practices. Butler's (1999) theory of *Gender Performativity* explains how these gender roles are normalized and sustained. The narratives of the novels highlight the restrictive nature of patriarchal system and expose the

impact on women's lives. The study finds that the effect of such gender based systems not only compels women to suffer in silence but also creates rebellious emotions and actions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis reveals that gender discrimination in the selected novels is perpetuated through cultural norms, social expectations, and repeated gender based performances. By using Butler's theoretical perspective, this study finds the constructed nature of gender in different geographical cultures and emphasizes the need to challenge such rigid norms that constrains females' autonomy.

References:

- Brummett, B. (2018). Techniques of close reading. Sage Publications.
- Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity. Ed. Linda Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Durrani, Tehmina. Blasphemy: A Novel. New Delhi: Penguin, 1999. Print. El Saadawi, Nawal. Zed Books, 2007.
- Saleem, D. (2020). Marginalized selfhood of women in Tehmina Durrani's Blasphemy. Patan Pragya, 6(1), 24-29.
- Silvia, A. (2022). Gender Stereotypes in Etaf Rum's A Woman Is No Man Novel. Panopticon: Journal Of English Letter's Student, 1(1).
- Tahir, N. (2020). Politics of Religion in Tehmina Durrani's Blasphemy. University of Chitral Journal of Linguistics and Literature, 4(I), 1-10.
- Zaidi, N. (2015). Female body and self-ownership In Tehmina Durrani's Blasphemy. Pakistan Journal of women's studies, 22(1).