

RESEARCH ARTICLE

PERFORMATIVITY AND GENDER CONSTRUCTION: UNDERSTANDING
THROUGH SALMA'S POETRY

Dr.S.Sujaritha

Assistant Professor of English
Pondicherry University community College
Lawspet, Puducherry, India

Abstract

William Wordsworth's saying "Ignorance is bliss" many times proves it as a fact. Once one gets knowledge/ experience, ignorance is lost which leads to a constructed knowledge. The knowledge what one receives is mostly based on the societal construct. Hence it is not the real knowledge; where as it is a constructed one which later becomes an ideology. Power constructs knowledge in order to create its own preferences. Judith Butler's concept of "Performativity" in gender explains how through performances/ simple acts power structure is constructed. When some act is performed continuously it becomes the practice and slowly becomes a norm of the society. Thus power structure exists in all the societies creating binary divisions: a dominant/ ruling class to exhibit their domination over a dependent/subordinate class. Consequently all the discriminations will have knowledge constructed society through power, binary division and people's ideology to accept that as norm of the society. The ideology regarding gender roles has become the knowledge of the society. The paper reads Salma's, a famous

Tamil Muslim Woman writer, works in translation to depict the life of Muslim women community of Tamil Nadu. The hypothesis of the paper is to read Salma's works parallel with the concept of 'Performativity' to project the constructed knowledge of the society and the treatment received by the deviators from the norm.

Keywords: Gender, sex, performativity, ideology, discourse.

"A gender-equal society would be one where the word 'gender' does not exist: where everyone can be themselves." -Gloria Steinem.

The word gender is a loaded one with many connotations. Earlier it was used as a synonym for the word 'sex'. It is proved from Samuel Johnson's sixth edition of *A Dictionary of the English Language* which got published in the 18th century referred gender as "masculine, feminine or neuter; or it could either mean a 'sex'"(Glover and Kalpan: XI) . But later as the society

RESEARCH ARTICLE

changed the word gender becomes dense with several attributions. WHO defines gender as, “Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men – such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed. While most people are born either male or female, they are taught appropriate norms and behaviours – including how they should interact with others of the same or opposite sex within households, communities and work places”.

It proves that gender is not natural whereas human made. Thus Simone de Beauvoir claims, “One is not born, rather, *becomes* a woman”. It is understood that gender is not a stable identity instead it is “a stylized repetition of acts”. It is constructed through body language, gestures and movements. As body plays a major role in constructing gender, it is seen as an object to carry cultural and historical idea. Judith Butler in her article “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” explains how gender is constructed through specific day today acts and how such acts transforms culture through it. The paper tries to read butler’s concept performativity with Salma, a Tamil writer’s life and her works, to examine the construction of gender roles in Tamil Muslim community.

Salma is the pen name of Rajathi Rokkaiah from Thuvankuruchi, Trichy Dist., Tamil Nadu. Her society follows the rules of the Jamaat (mosque) of their place. It decides the role of men and women. Though many feminists object importing gender roles from childhood onwards that is differentiating from toys to activities based on gender, it is the norm of many societies. Salma was born in one such society. It was a practice in their place that women were not allowed to get out of their house after puberty. Salma too was stopped from her schooling at the age of 13. Her literary career started at her home during that time. With her father’s help she published some of her poems. After her marriage, she was forced to stop writing by her husband and in-laws. She considered writing as the source of her life and continued it without their knowledge and published it under the pen name Salma. She narrates about her secret writing in one of her interviews as, “I’d hide in the toilet, stand there and write down as much as I could. I hid the pen in a box meant for sanitary towels. I hid my poems in the wardrobe under piles of saris”. (Readers Digest:71)

Salma is the first Tamil Muslim woman writer to project her society to the world. Her works enable the readers’ to enter inside the unknown world of Tamil Muslim women, their life condition, problems and the subjugation of women under the patriarchal society. Her works

RESEARCH ARTICLE

project the customs and practices of her society. It proves that gender is not a fact where as it is constructed through various acts and through those acts an ideology is framed. Butler names gender as a 'project' which should act according to its culture and it becomes a kind of strategy to be performed under a harsh situation. Irrespective of their desire, women were forced to play their subordinate gender role. Salma explicitly project women's secondary position through her life experiences and her observation of her people in her works. Regarding her characterization she states thus, "I am in many characters... a bit of me in every character" (www.Tribuneindia.com).

From such a society Salma emerged as a rebel. When a complaint was framed on her stating that she is against Islam, she explains her stand clearly. She states, "My writings had never criticised religion directly. I only spoke about the system, the culture and the tradition, and about how our male- dominated society is controlling the women. They don't give any proper freedom, rights, to them. Islam has permitted something for women, but the religious people in our place won't give us those rights" (www. Desiblitiz.com).

Her first work is a poetry collection named One Evening, Another Evening (2000), The Green Deity (2003), The Hour Past Midnight (2004), The Dreams (2016)

Curse. This paper reads Salma's poems to present the revolutionary seed in her work. The paper looks at her two collections of poetry in four categories based on the theme of writing: 1. Restrictions imposed by patriarchy, 2. Loneliness of women, 3. Life without love, 4. Sexual exploitation. In the preface of her poems she warns the readers that her poetry might bore the readers as many poems state the same theme. She gives self-explanatory note for this that they linger in the same situation every day and it becomes habitual.

Restrictions imposed by patriarchy:

Butler claims that as gender is an idea, the bodies of women are expected to know its limitations and to act accordingly. Moreover through punishments, gender roles were\are made as strategies in societies. Thus gender acts are shared experiences and collective action and it becomes less individual oriented. This social drama of gender biased roles become norm of the society. Salma's society too constructed its norms and showed its suppression upon the women society. Men in her society enjoyed utmost freedom where as women were restricted inside their house. People thought that women are fit only for marriage, child bearing and housekeeping. Beyond that they should not aim high. The poem 'Breathing' presents men as the masters of women and everything about a woman's life is decided

RESEARCH ARTICLE

by the men. "It all happens in my name/ Without me being there". The poem titled "My picture" projects the dominance of the male society which crushes her naturalness in favour of its determination. The society repaints her picture with its desired colours and patterns. The poem "Decline" projects the oracle's constant murmuring of the unwritten morality to be followed by women. An untitled poem talks about a helpless condition of a butterfly in a closed house. It loses its colours by hitting on the wall and door with a hope to get away from the restricted place. Slowly it understands its helpless condition. Later if it gets a hole to leave that place, it leaves even without its beautiful colours. In the restricted society women live by losing themselves. The poem "Worm" symbolises worm with patriarchy. The speaker becomes accustomed to the worm in her food and she becomes tolerant to eat the food by rejecting the worm. Slowly the worm becomes leech and climbs her body to take its food. She concludes the poem with a fear that it may kill her. The poem may try to state that the patriarchy slowly grows itself from the tolerance of women and later tries to end the life of women.

Loneliness of women:

Butler states that the aim of gender is to construct psychological inferiority in the mind of women. Unless women come out of this they have to linger in the prison eventually. This feel of inferiority leaves

them with the belief they are under men and they should undergo their routine work silently. Such a routine work of women community bored Salma and she indulged in loneliness. The restriction upon women let Salma to prefer aloofness from her society. The poem "Closure" presents her confidence in her loneliness. She states that she has constructed a bulwark to lead a confident and safe life. She does not want to allow anyone inside and rejected others and sometimes even the angels from entering.

In a poem her loneliness leaves her to long for the company of non-living objects such as cot, mirror. Her identity is removed and she does not have any place to linger. Hence she has to continue her life with those objects. In the poem "A Deserted Place" she replies to a question about the reason for her loneliness as that she may get her identity from this loneliness and she prefers to live in the endless isolation.

Life without love:

Hetro-sexual relationship is made as a norm by the society. Butler states that sexual reproduction is a loaded act which leads to the reproduction of human beings in gendered modes. Foucault mentions regarding it as "the notion of 'sex' made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological

RESEARCH ARTICLE

functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle...” (154). Butler argues that sex, gender and heterosexuality are historical products but over time they are seen as natural. Such social relationships later become hegemonic conditions. This condition gives raise for male domination upon women.

The society later recommended the institution of marriage where women lost their space completely. Salma’s poems project marriage as a relationship without love and concern. The husband who is addressed as a better half of the wife does not know about his wife’s likings and interests. In a poem she mentions that the breeze that touches her, her destructing life, her affectionate children, rare rain and even her poems know her well where as her husband is ignorant about her. In the poem “Princess’ Frog Dress” Salma explains her attempt to fit into the expectation of her husband. She uses the frog dress as a metaphor to denote the role of married women or the transformation of women in the patriarchal society. She wears the unfitting dress which her husband bought with fondness. He asks her to alter her physic to be fit for the dress by ignoring her discomfort. She started to feel that dress as a part of her body that is she too enters into the marital world of women. The popular poem “Contract” talks about a kind of agreement between a husband and wife.

The speaker’s mother and sister blame her for the failure in the conjugal bed. The husband too may have complaints. But her stand in such circumstance is made by history. Here history and society decides the emotions of women. In order to bore children, to get some favours and if possible to order him, she opens her vagina. The poem “Smiles” presents the tragedy of losing her smile. She tries to collect her past happy, truthful, beautiful smiles which are precious. Such smiles cannot be created now as the present smiles are with defects. In another poem she describes about the uncertainty about their relationship. There is no warmth in their relationship which develops emptiness and bitterness. The poem “This Your House” and “Place” talks about rootlessness of her life in her in-laws house. Though she knows the house closely she never felt it as her home. These poems portray the relationship between the husband and the wife as a failure.

{Hegemony is the term coined by Gramsci, who describes it as a construction by our cultural practices and the influence of our society. Unlike ideology, hegemony is not a thought or process but it is seen as a common sense.}

Sexual Exploitation:

Body is a very complex and controversial field for the feminists and critics. “The body ... is a materiality that

RESEARCH ARTICLE

bears meaning” (Butler: 272). Thus body is seen as an object to carry cultural and historical idea of a society. In almost all the patriarchal society women are taken for granted for men’s desire. Salma believes that body and emotions are united. She states “A woman’s subjective feelings are structured in relation to her body. In fact, her feelings are structured from her body itself. It is the body which determines her feelings”.

(www.Poetryinternationalweb.net).the famous poem “A Midnight Tale” talks about the change in the body of a woman at postnatal period. The husband expresses his dissatisfaction with his wife’s body by claiming his body will remain same unlike hers. The speaker thinks that the body of men will not change even after having children. Nature also has dishonest to women. Most of her poems talk about the pain of undesired sexual intercourse.

Salma’s writings opened a new theme among the Tamil women writers. In her preface to the poem collection she mentions that the Tamil writers restrict themselves within a narrow framework. When she tried to cross it she received disapproval from both literate and illiterate. It is understood that even education fails to break the construction of gender. Even many men writers criticised her writings and gave death threat. Even her children faced embarrassed when her friends’ parents criticised as ‘bad woman’. She

faced everything boldly and commented about this as, “Women’s minds and bodies are suppressed, and that leads to violence because they are under total control... My pain, choices, desires and thoughts; i want to express everything. Then only, I can participate in life with equal rights.” (The Hindu: 2013). She breaks the barrier of her community in the name of gender in order to fulfill her dreams. Salma too shares Butler’s view that, “Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy”. (282) her boldness and her dream to lead a free life enabled her to create her own identity.

References:

- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H.M Parshley. New York: Vintage. 1974.
- Butler, Judith. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. Edi. Sue- Ellen Case. London: The John Hopkins University Press. 270-282.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Random House, 1980.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

- Glover, David & Cora Kalpan. 2000. *Genders*. U.S.A: Routledge, 2009.
- Rawther, Soyesh. H. “Salma beyond Worlds” The Hindu. 23 March 2013.
- Warriar, Krishna. “The Three Faces of Salma” Reader’s Digest. Oct.2013.
- Salma.Oru Maalaiyum Innoru Maalaiyum (An Evening and Another Evening). Kala Chuvadu, Nagarcoil,2000
- ---. PachchaiDevathai (Green Angel)Kala Chuvadu, Nagarcoil, 2003.
- <http://www.who.int/gender-equity-rights/understanding/gender-definition/en/> on 5/2/18