

Masculinity and Performativity in Patrick White's *The Solid Mandala*

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Abstract :

In every community, the role of both women and men is important for all round development of their families in all aspects. When a man and woman lead their life together as a couple with their children then it is known as 'Family'. It depicts the gender roles and social conformity in all phases of their public life. But Judith Butler's opinions are in contrast to this sort of social norms. In her critically acclaimed 'Gender Trouble', the author had explicitly interpreted the concepts of gender identity and performativity. She argues that gender is performative and its identity is not stable. Her viewpoint distinctly implies that gender identity is subjected to social order and traditional practices. The main objective of the paper is to focus on the men's role in the conventional social order from the literary point of view. Along with that, the paper attempts to critically analyse Judith Butler's 'Performativity of Gender' vis-à-vis The Solid Mandala.

Keywords: *Nostalgia, Mundane bondage, Gender Performativity, Effeminacy, Gender Identity, Transvestic disorder.*

Introduction :

According to Cambridge's Dictionary, 'Masculinity' means the characteristics that are traditionally thought to be typical or suitable for men. The plot of the novel revolves around the twin brothers and their love interest on the same young woman namely Dulcie Feinstein. Albeit Brown brothers tried their level best to marry her, they were not able to convince her to marry anyone among them. Not only Waldo brown was womanish in this case but also Arthur brown had the same persona. Moreover, they were sceptical of their own gender identity. In specific, the following two characteristic features disclose the ambiguity in Waldo brown's Gender Identity.

Waldo brown has a transvestic disorder as he liked to have women's attire than men's and his reticence prevented him from mingling with others easily. Secondly, he intends to marry Dulcie Feinstein for the sake of social life even though he lacked sexual attraction towards her. This exhibits Waldo's trait of following public life just to portray himself as a social person. In addition, his homesickness bonded him from all sorts of external works making his social appearance limited. Overall, Waldo was entirely different than any other men in masculine features.

This is applicable to Arthur Brown also who never determines to lead his life like any other normal man. He endeavours to look after Mrs Poultry who is neighbour to him. His excessive concern does not seem to be natural as it was quite bizarre to society. Apart from this, Arthur's unconditional love on Dulcie absolutely secludes him from the rest of other men in terms of social relations. Thus, the people of Sarsaparilla town considered the twin brothers strange and eccentric due to their unconventional personality. Even Mrs Dun, the neighbour of Brown brothers criticizes their strange behaviour by terming it as 'unnatural'.

From the gender perspective, Effeminacy can be envisaged as the prominent feature of the male characters of the novel. Throughout the novel, two major concepts - Masculinity and Performativity can be traced out from a literary perspective in connection with Butler's 'Performativity of Gender'.

Social relationships of Brown brothers through the lens of 'Performativity' :

In the broad area of Gender Studies, Men's study is quite a new concept which deals with the men's role and activity in society. In this area of studies, the male characters seem to be normal in public life but they want to prove their masculinity in all possible ways. Furthermore, 'Performativity of Gender' can be critically applied to the male characters in the literary context. In this aspect, Judith Butler's concept can be considered in which she unveils the relationship between gender identity and performativity in her book "Gender Trouble" (1990).

"There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results". (Butler, GT 33)

According to the author, gender identity does not depend merely on the expressions of a person in his social life. In addition to this, Performativity is a referential word which implies the activity of persons as a social norm. Moreover, Judith Butler had written about 'Performativity' even in her another critically acclaimed book "Bodies that matter":

"Performativity is thus not a singular 'act', for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition" (Butler, BM 12). In this statement, the author did not imply any confined meaning to the word 'performativity' and she regards it as a repetitive practice of a society.

When it comes to the topic of Men's studies, the main factor is nothing but the job or designation of men. Everyman's work doesn't remain the same in every society as it varies from person to person and the mode of work represents the gender roles in society. Therefore, men are preferentially hired for Industrial works which require physical strength to work effectively.

Even though all kinds of jobs require both physical and mental strength, men's jobs are complicated than that of women as the former's work demands much more physical strength to do strenuous works than the latter. But the male characters of 'The Solid Mandala' seem to be different in terms of physical ability as they inclined to stay in their house rather than going to work outside. It clearly shows their homesickness in which normally women possess. It is a novel that depicts the life of two unmarried brothers with opposite nature and behaviour. Both of them reside in the same parental house from their birth age to senility but they lack brotherly affection and family concern.

Reflection of 'Effeminacy' in the male characters :

The author has written this novel in four chapters. Among them, second chapter is the biggest which is related to the personal confessions and judgemental opinions of Waldo brown. It has Waldo's perspective which is the longest section whereas the third chapter has been narrated from Arthur's point of view. In these sections, Brown brothers defend themselves for their actions and accuse each other. For readers, their confession seems to be correct in many aspects. Hence, it is important to critically examine the characters of twin brothers. Waldo brown is physically challenged and intends to stay at his house most of the time due to his inability to work efficiently. But Arthur brown maintains amicable relationship with his friends and relatives, unlike his brother. This fact has deeply hurt Waldo who considers his brother as his foe in his social life.

"He hated his brother Arthur, although, or perhaps because, Arthur was the thread of continuity, and might even be the core of truth".(The Solid Mandala 187)

Waldo feels that he has been continuously cornered not only because of his physical disability but also Arthur's influence on others. Two brothers though born to same parents possess different interests and wishes. In sociological context, Arthur as a gregarious person earns social respect and becomes a respectful person whereas Waldo maintains reticence and stays out of the company of his friends, acquaintance and his relatives as well. Apart from this, Waldo's character is portrayed as an effeminate person due to his transvestic disorder as he aspires to wear women's garments in solitude. Though he was a librarian, he did not like his job of sitting for a long time without motion in the library. His inferiority complex has increased day by day due to his motionless activity and loneliness. In brief, his homesickness and dressing nature unveil the effeminacy in his personality. In his childhood, he was instructed by his mother to pray. She also had advised him to be strong which was not possible to him.

"Waldo had been taught to pray, because, said mother, everything depends on your own will, it would be foolishness to expect anything else, we can achieve what we want if we are determined if we confident that we are strong". (The Solid Mandala 77)

But Waldo brown never felt that he was strong mainly because of his physical disability.

Similarly, Arthur's character is no more different than Waldo in the aspect of masculinity as he wishes to stay with the women's company instead of men's. As proof, he always works for the two ladies in which one among them is his love interest. Dulcie Feinstein and MrsPoulter are the two ladies in which he has been associated with them for a long time. In his entire lifetime, the two women are prominent to him and he has no male friends at all. Normally, every person will have many friends of a respective gender. But it is not seen in Arthur's social contacts and his female affinity shows his womanish nature which can be observed in his unconditional support to them. Meanwhile, Arthur's friendly relationship with Dulcie turns into love for which she denies and gets married to another person. In spite of having a passionate love for her, Arthur fails to impress and loses her permanently. The same thing happens in the case of Waldo who aspired her to be his wife but gets rejected by her. Therefore, Brown brothers determine to remain lifelong bachelors instead of opting for any martial plans. Dulcie's stern denial to their love plea depicts the human relationship and the woman's expectation on her suitors which mainly depends on sexuality as well.

Twin brothers' love failure due to their Gender Identity :

M.A.R. Habib, an acclaimed critic has referred Michael Foucault's perspective on Sexuality in his highly acclaimed book:

"Foucault's work is important perspective proposes that sexuality is not simply the natural expression of some inner drive or desire. The discourses of sexuality concern the operation of power in human relationships as much as they govern the production of personal identity". (Habib, LCT 435)

In connection with this statement, it is possible to empathize with the feelings of Dulcie Feinstein as an aspiring bride who dares to reject the marriage proposal of Brown brothers. According to her, Sexuality is one of the main factors to maintain a harmonious relationship in the married life. In this aspect, two important reasons can be specified for the love failure of the Waldo brown. Firstly, Waldo was a disabled man who doesn't seem to be trustworthy in terms of his physical strength. Secondly, his transvestic disorder faded his manly nature. Despite this, he wanted to marry her not for his sexual gratification but to earn social respect as a husband to a beautiful lady. He confesses even this point also in the second section of the novel without concealing. Overall, this kind of eccentric behaviour showcases the binary nature of his gender identity as he didn't have the qualities of a duty-bound husband. He lacked the gender identity of a man from many perspectives even though he was a man morphologically.

On gender identity and morphology, Patricia Waugh has specified Judith Butler's opinion in her book: "Butler's main contention is that gender does not axiomatically proceed from sex. Although the sexes might seem binary in their morphology and constitution, for Butler there are no grounds to assume that genders ought to remain as two. Alternatively phrased, gender does not necessarily mirror sex. Consolidating and expanding a key argument in *Gender trouble*, that the relation of gender is not mimetic, *Bodies that Matter* and *Excitable Speech* (1997) abandon the notion of innate or intrinsic gender identity". (Waugh 442)

Thus, it is uncertain to assert that the person's behaviour will depend upon his morphology as the innate traits vary from one person to another. Waldo's dressing sense is the best example as he wanted to wear women's garments with the male body and his strange act raises the question of his gender identity in view of social norms.

Besides Arthur Brown, just like his brother fails to impress Dulcie and she never wanted even to imagine him as her spouse. She was reluctant of him because of his close rapport with Mrs Poulter. His concern on the married woman seemed frivolous and unnecessary to Dulcie. In spite of it, he did many things in order to convince her to marry him. Nevertheless, she did not reciprocate his affection for not being a responsible householder. His lack of discretion on his future endeavours made him lose Dulcie forever.

Throughout the novel, Arthur Brown appears as a reliable person and many positive things can be noticed in his personality distinctly as a socially respectable person. He was well known as a helper and he always wanted to extend any sort of support to both Mrs Poulter and Dulcie Feinstein without any expectation. Yet he appeared feckless in Dulcie's pragmatic view. His social inclination was not enough for her to accept his marriage proposal. Apart from this, he was like a helping hand to MrsPoulter which perturbs the serenity of Dulcie's mind. He candidly proclaims himself as MrsPoulter's caretaker with a religious message and assumes that Jesus had sent him to replace his position.

"She did honestly believe it. Since her Lord and master Jesus had destroyed himself that same day, she had been given this man - child as a token of everlasting life". (The Solid Mandala 312)

Even this religious tone of Arthur didn't go well with Dulcie. With these sorts of activities, he wanted to portray himself as a 'man of character' with social responsibilities. This distinctly shows that he has never appeared as a responsible householder to Dulcie in social life as he takes care of Mrs Poulter for no logical reason. In this regard, Arthur is praiseworthy for his humanitarian activities but he miserably fails in his love and sexual life. Psychologically, Sigmund Freud expresses the difference between love and sexuality in the human relationship which can be seen in the Habib's writing:

"Freud extended the meaning of sexuality to encompass not merely genial satisfaction but a broader bodily function, having pleasure as its goal and only subsequently serving a reproductive function. Sexuality now encompassed all of the emotions of affection and friendliness traditionally subsumed under the word love". (Habib, LC 236)

The Psychologist's opinion explicitly unveils the importance of love and sexuality in the human relationship. According to him, human emotions have the equal importance of love and sexuality which are vital for a happy married life to get satisfaction both physically and mentally. When this psychological viewpoint is taken into consideration in the marriage life, every young woman expects those characteristic features in her beau and vice-versa. In the case of Dulcie and Arthur's relationship, she had a full-fledged reliance on him but she was sceptical about his ability in leading a happy married life. In short, Brown brothers had one sided love with her and they were not able to empathize with her feelings. The peculiarity of one-sided affection of men has been described by

Simone De Beauvoir in her book 'The Second Sex'. Her views are comprehensively elucidated in Habib's "Literary Criticism and Theory" :

"...A man thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of a woman as a hindrance, a prison.." (Habib, LCT 683)

This statement implies the social liberty of men and women in which men consider themselves as the social representatives without paying any sort of special heed to the opposite gender.

In this novel, Brown brothers had an unrequited love for the same woman in their life span and they could not find an alternative option to Dulcie Feinstein who chooses some other as her husband. Even after her marriage also, the brothers don't bother to find suitable brides for them. If they were interested to lead a householder's life then they might have married any others. Unfortunately, Dulcie was the first and last love interest to both of them which reveals their disinterestedness in having a soulmate other than her. It can also be the narrow-mindedness and inferiority complex of brothers. As proof, Arthur writes a poem that is focused on their common agony of feminine attitude and mental turmoil which they endured.

"He saw the hatred Waldo was directing, had always directed, at all living things, or the blasphemous poem - because that, too, had a life of a kind - the poem which celebrates their common pain". (The Solid Mandala 294)

It is a common fact that every person wants to have an attractive life partner and there is no difference in them. In this context, social life can be taken into consideration as the unification of men and women in the name of marriage which constitutes a family. Therefore, 'Performativity of Gender' is directly traceable in the male characters of this novel.

Conclusion :

Expressing her notion about the psychological and biological aspects of gender Judith Butler says in her book 'Bodies that Matter':

"What has been understood as the performativity of gender—far from the exercise of unconstrained voluntarism—will prove to be impossible apart from notions of such political constraints registered psychically. It may well be useful to separate the notion of constraints or limits from the metaphysical endeavour to ground those constraints in biological or psychological essentialism". (Butler, BM 94)

In the conclusion of the novel, Arthur tries to console Waldo and suggest him to accept their fate as the god's wish. His religious opinion reveals that both of them lack autonomy.

"That's something you and I need never be, Waldo. Afraid, we learned too late about all this Christ stuff. From what we read it doesn't seem to work anyway. But we have each other". (The Solid Mandala 200)

Throughout the novel, the sufferings of twin brothers are intertwined with that of women's characters which have limited scope. Along with that, 'Performativity of Gender' as a prominent literary topic in the Gender studies adds a special scope to the men's characters in this novel.

Patrick White's 'The Solid Mandala' is a major literary contribution in the field of men's studies as much more focus has been given to the life of twin brothers. The author has succeeded in exhibiting Australian society and the life of unmarried brothers who fail to influence society in any possible manner due to their doubtful gender identity.

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