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**Embodied Identities, (Re)Constructed
Selves in British Culture**



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1. “He was a woman”: Constructing/Deconstructing/Reconstructing Gender Identities

Numerous academic discussions within various humanistic areas have focused lately on the issue of gender¹ as being an essential component of one’s identity and as being historically and culturally constructed. Belonging in the beginning to traditional binary oppositions, where it described the male versus female dichotomy, gender seems to have been turned (by recent discussions on homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality and transsexuality) into a free-floating signifier, whose main features are flexibility and changeability. Psychoanalysis, philosophy, history, feminist studies, men’s studies, to name only a few humanistic areas, have approached the issue of gender in their attempts at defining (post)modern identity. Gender has been defined by most scholars in these areas in Foucauldian terms, as a discursive formation, as a norm which shapes subject positions and interpellates human subjects to occupy one of these positions. In Judith Butler’s words, “gender is a contemporary way of organizing past and future cultural norms, a way of situating

¹ According to David Glover and Cora Kaplan, “gender is now one of the busiest, most restless terms in the English language, a word that crops up everywhere, yet whose uses seem to be forever changing, always on the move, producing new and often surprising inflections of meaning. We talk about gender roles, worry about the gender gap, question whether our ideas are not gender-biased or gender-specific, and we might look for additional information on those and related topics in the rapidly expanding gender studies section of our local bookstore” (2001: IX).

oneself in and through these norms, an active style of living one's body in the world" (2000: 285).

Relying mostly (as a theoretical background) on some of Judith Butler's theories on gender², and keeping in mind some of the most important theoretical ideas on embodied gender put forth by Michel Foucault, Simone de Beauvoir, and Monique Wittig, I intend to focus in this study on a reading of embodiments of gender in Virginia Woolf's novels. I shall try to show how gender was written at a corporeal level at the time, how bodily parts were used to emphasize the quality of belonging to a certain gender category³. I shall also try to show that there were at the time already established gendered corporeal styles that some characters (if not all of them) are striving (or forced) to adopt. "The choice to assume a certain kind of body", Judith Butler argues, "to live or wear one's body in a certain way, implies a world of already established corporeal styles" (2000: 286). Judith Butler also argues that "in so far as social existence requires an unambiguous

² As Judith Butler's theories have been much debated, critiqued and criticised within the area of gender studies and generally within the humanities, I have decided to make a selection of the theories she has put forth so far. I have focused exclusively on the theoretical views with which I agree and which seemed to be the most appropriate theoretical tools in my attempt at proving my ideas, (mainly in those texts published by her in the early 1990s, at the beginning of her career). The main ideas which make up the theoretical basis for the analyses in this chapter are: gender is not a natural category; it is not the expression of natural, anatomical sex; gender is performative, femininity and masculinity being constructed by the very process of performing gender.

³ All analyses will be done using a contemporary perspective on gender and keeping in mind the fact that at the time (i.e. at the beginning of the twentieth century), the category of gender had not been defined yet. According to David Glover and Cora Kaplan, phrases like "gender role" or "gender identity" did not exist before the Second World War, becoming current in sexology only as late as the 1960s (2001: X).

gender affinity, it is not possible to exist in a socially meaningful sense outside of established gender norms” (2000: 287). Starting from this contention I intend to show that gender could be interpreted in the novels in my focus in terms of a process of embodiment which is the result of a repeated performance of acts of gendering.

In *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler argues against the traditional idea that gender is the cultural expression of (natural, anatomical) sex. She contends that gender cannot be said to follow from sex and that there is a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. The construction of femininity is not necessarily related to female bodies, and likewise the construction of masculinity is not necessarily related to male bodies. She further argues that, even if one accepts the idea of binary anatomical sexes, one does not have to assume that genders as well should remain as two:

The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one. (Butler 1996: 10)

Gender is in her understanding a relation among socially constituted subjects in specifiable contexts. This relational point of view suggests that identity and gender cannot be defined except within and through the relations in which they are determined.

Being a “shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations” (1996: 15). Gender is a role ascribed to each subject, a part that everyone has to learn and play, a continuous process of becoming:

Becoming a gender is an impulsive yet mindful process of interpreting a cultural reality laden with sanctions, taboos and prescriptions. [...] To choose a gender is to interpret received gender norms in a way that reproduces and organizes them anew. Less a radical act of creation, gender is a tacit project to renew a cultural history in one’s own corporeal terms. (Butler 2000: 288)

In Butler’s understanding of the term, gender is performative, i.e. it constitutes identity, and it is always a doing. She argues that there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender and that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results: “Subjected to gender, but subjectivated by gender, the “I” neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves” (1993: 7). In the *Preface* to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler explains how she first interpreted the notion of performativity of gender. She says she took her clue from Jacques Derrida’s reading of Kafka’s *Before the Law*, where the one sitting before the door of the law attributes a certain force to the law for which he is waiting. “The anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning,” she argues, “is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures its object” (XIV). Applying this theory to a reading of gender, she says that the latter “operates as an interior essence that might be disclosed, an expectation that

ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates” (XIV). She further argues that there are two directions for interpreting the performativity of gender:

In the first instance, the performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis, the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself. Secondly, performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effect through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration. (1999: XV)

The theory on the performative character of gender argues that what is taken to be a general essence of gender is in fact manufactured through a sustained set of acts posited through the gendered stylization of the body. This theory shows that what is taken to be an internal feature of the subject is one that the subject anticipates and produces through certain bodily acts, “an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures” (1999: XV). In a recent interview Judith Butler defined gender performativity in terms of “the slow and difficult practice of producing new possibilities of experiencing gender in the light of history, and in the context of very powerful norms that restrict our intelligibility as human beings. They are complex struggles, political in nature, since they insist on new forms of recognition.” (Birulés)

Gender has always been interpreted, Judith Butler argues, within the traditional matrix of heterosexuality, which she defines in terms of a normative discourse within whose boundaries those two categories are constructed, under the form of the masculine versus feminine dichotomy: “the heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical