

Exploring Gender as a Performance in Queer Theory Through the Lens of Experts

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Abstract

This conceptual paper elaborates on the concept of gender as a performance within queer theory, drawing on the insights of experts such as Judith Butler, R.W. Connell, and Jack Halberstam. This concept is grounded in queer theory, a literary theory that enables researchers to examine the representations of sexual identities and gender roles in literature and media entertainment through their characters. Gender as a performance investigates how gender norms and roles are constructed by culture. It deviates from the traditional views of gender, which, to be believed, was something human was born with. Judith Butler, a scholar within feminist and gender studies, proposed the idea of gender performativity, the foundational framework of future concepts. She stated how culture and media are essential factors in determining gender roles. Then, Raewyn Connell built upon Butler's concept and argued that within gender roles, particularly masculinity, there is a hierarchy that determines acceptance and privilege of a man in society, including hegemonic masculinity. Lastly, Jack Halberstam believed that if gender is an act, then anybody, regardless of their sex, can act in any gender they want. This led to female masculinity, the idea that a woman can act masculine, as it is not an inherited trait, but a performance. Understanding these concepts opens wider opportunities to examine literary works on their gender representation, whether they conform or not. Also, it allows the reader to question what normal is, in gender roles and norms, as they are considered as performance, not a naturally obtained trait.

Keywords: *Gender performativity; Jack Halberstam; Judith Butler; Raewyn Connell; queer theory*

Introduction

The objective of this paper is to explain the concept of gender as a performance within queer theory. Originating in the 1990s, Queer theory challenged the traditional ideas about gender and identity. It is an expansion of feminist and poststructuralist theory, questioning fixed ideas of how a man and a woman should act. Queer theory questions traditional sexual identities and gender roles, introducing fresh perspectives on sexuality, gender, and man/woman (Jagose, 1996). Moreover, it should not be restricted to gay male and lesbian genders and sexualities but should be used to non-heteronormative identities and situations (Sedgwick, 1990; Liu, 2020). Thus, this theory offers a powerful tool for examining how literature represents or reinforces gender norms.

There are multiple terminologies within queer theory, such as Gender Performativity, proposed by Judith Butler. She is one of the most influential experts in this field. This terminology suggests that gender is enacted through repeated behaviors and linguistic expressions, rather than something inherent to an individual's birth. In the traditional understanding of gender, the infant is assigned their gender identity based on their biological sex and then linked to their respective gender norms/roles, as shown in Figure 1 below.

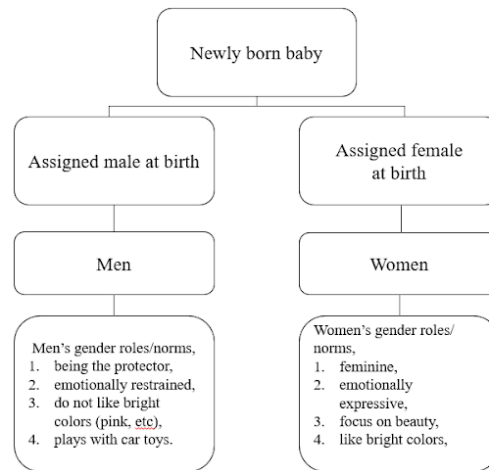


Figure 1. Traditional Ideas of Gender and Sex (Butler, 1990)

This concept changed the idea of someone “is” to someone “does” through repeated acts. The media also plays a crucial role in determining and promoting these gender roles. Therefore, this understanding of gender norms and roles allows scholars within the literature field to examine narrative strategies, character development, and symbolic structures in literature that serve as a powerful tool conforming or performing the traditional views, or it may open up a conversation about the modern perception of gender identities (Sedgwick, 1993; Thomas, 2000). This conceptual paper explores major queer theoretical frameworks, including Judith Butler’s gender performativity, Raewyn Connell’s hegemonic masculinity, and Jack Halberstam’s female masculinity.



These frameworks offer different yet interconnected ways of rethinking gender as something we do rather than something we are. Hence, this conceptual paper contributes to literary research that aims to challenge fixed ideas of identity and highlights the transformative potential of understanding gender through a performative lens. This conceptual paper contributes to literary research that aims to challenge fixed ideas of identity and highlights the transformative potential of understanding gender through a performative lens.

Findings and Discussion

This section explores the elaboration of gender as a performance from three experts: Judith Butler, Raewyn Connell, and Jack Halberstam. The idea of gender as a performance was first introduced by Butler under the concept of “Gender Performativity”, claiming that gender is not a natural identity, but rather learned and taught by the people around us. Then, Connell explored how masculinity itself is a performance, and can be divided into several categories: hegemonic, subordinate, marginalized, and complicit masculinity. Lastly, Halberstam investigated whether masculinity is a performance, which means females may also obtain such characteristics. The following section elaborates on the concepts, as seen below.

Butler’s Gender Performativity

Judith Butler’s concept of “Gender Performativity,” introduced in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), represents a critical turning point in how scholars and activists understand gender. Drawing from post-structuralist theory, Butler challenged the idea that gender is a natural identity tied directly to one’s biological sex. She argued that gender is not something we are but something we do— based on a series of repeated acts, gestures, expressions, and behaviors that are shaped and regulated by culture.

Butler quoted the claim from a book titled “On the Genealogy of Morals,” in which he stated that “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, acting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction imposed on the doing—the doing itself is everything” (Nietzsche in Salih 2007: 56), meaning that what we do define who we are. We are nothing before we do something; for example, we are not students before we enter schools, we are not robbers before we rob, and we are not liars before we lie. So, our actions define who we are. Butler added her own gender understanding to this idea by stating that “there is no gender identity behind gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, 1990). To simplify, Butler argued that we do not act like a man or a woman because we are one, but we become recognized as one because of how we act. Please see the following Figure 2.

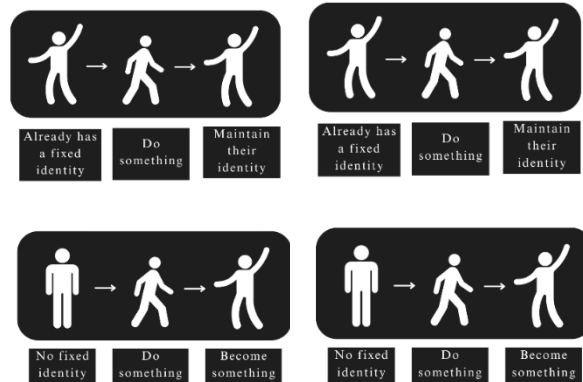


Figure 2. Traditional View of ‘Doer’ Behind the Deed and Nietzsche’s Explanation of the Illusion of the ‘Doer’ Behind the Deed (in Salih 2007).

She also explained that humans do not have pre-existing “identity” waiting to be expressed, but we have been shaped by the way we speak, act, and refer to in a third-person conversation, like. Butler also gathered influence from Foucault, a French philosopher, who argued that people are not shaped by internalizing rules in their minds, but society shapes us by “writing” or inscribing rules on our bodies. For instance, a child learns not to lie. It did not come from a rule that they then internalized and unlocked a moral revelation in their head, but a child learning not to lie based on how people treat them on the outside, like when teachers correct them, parents give them advice, or observe how others behave. In this view, our identity is not something we find deep inside ourselves, but something formed by the world around us. This means the body becomes the vessel where social norms are made visible. To relate this to gender, Butler believed that we do not simply act like a boy or a girl because we are born that way, but because we have been taught and shaped to behave that way by our parents, friends, and the general society, as can be seen in Figure 3 below.

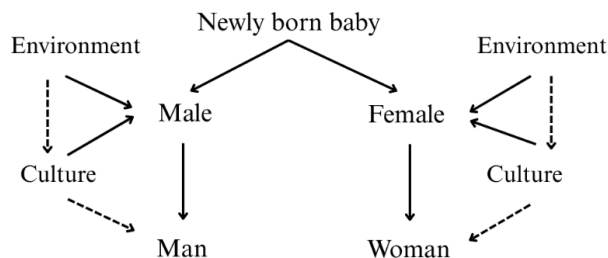


Figure 3. Butler’s Concept of Gender Performativity (Butler, 1990)

Butler talked about drag and parody as examples that show how gender is constructed. Drag performers, by dressing and acting in exaggerated "feminine" or "masculine" ways, make gender itself visible as a performance — something that can be copied, exaggerated, or subverted. Butler argues that drag does not imitate a real or original

gender. Instead, it exposes the fact that all gender — even what we think of as "normal" masculinity or femininity — is itself a copy of a copy. We are not born with knowledge of how to act like a man or a woman, instead we copy people we believed to hold on to that role the best to us, like our father and mother. There is no "true" gender behind the performance. For example, a drag queen performing femininity shows that "being a woman" is not tied to biology, but to repeated acts (makeup, clothing, voice, gestures) that are socially understood as feminine. By doing this, drag can destabilize the idea that gender is natural and reveal its artificial, theatrical, and imitative nature.

Butler also warns that not all drag is subversive. Some drag performances, especially in mainstream media (like *Tootsie* or *Mrs. Doubtfire*), can end up reinforcing traditional gender norms rather than challenging them. These forms of drag often make people laugh without questioning why masculinity and femininity are seen as opposites. They serve as entertainment that keeps the heterosexual system in place. Butler emphasizes that for drag to be truly subversive, it must draw attention to the constructed nature of gender and disrupt the norms, not just play along with them. This is why drag is often seen as a form of gender parody: it mimics gender roles in ways that can make us see how fragile and performative those roles really are.

Butler's theory of gender as a performance allows us to unlearn how we understand gender identity. Her view challenges the traditional belief that gender is a natural thing known by humans the minute they are born, or even requires unlocking. Rather, it is produced through repeated cultural acts. Ultimately, Butler's concept invites us to understand gender as an ongoing process.

Connell's Hegemonic Masculinity

The concept of "hegemonic masculinity" by Connell takes Butler's understanding of gender as a performance one step higher. While Butler (1990) believed gender is a series of repeated acts that construct the illusion of a fixed identity, Connell advances this idea by going deeper within men's gender roles, particularly masculinities, and demonstrating how these roles offer privileges to certain groups over others, creating power imbalances not only between men and women but also among men themselves.

Hegemonic masculinity was first proposed from a field study report on social inequality in Australian high schools. This report correlated to the conceptual discussion of the making of masculinities and the experience of men's bodies (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Connell explained that hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed biological fact but a socially constructed and performed ideal that legitimizes male dominance.

In the early days, this concept was used in education studies, particularly to examine the dynamics that happen within a classroom, which include patterns of bullying, social exclusion, inclusion among students, etc. This concept also had a crucial role in criminology as it helped to understand why men and boys commit more crimes, particularly serious and organized forms of crime, than women and girls. This concept offers a framework to examine how different forms of masculinity relate to crime. It helps theorists connect masculinity norms, such as dominance, control, and aggression,

to specific criminal behaviors. In addition, this concept had an important role in studying media representation of men in movies, commercial sports, and war imagery. It reveals how dominant images of masculinity in media are repeated, celebrated, and normalized. This shows how media representation of men can influence how men behave and how society perceives them. It can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Categories of Masculinities (Connell, 1995)

Categories of Masculinities	Meaning	Example
Hegemonic Masculinity	The dominant and culturally idealized form of masculinity in a society	The “Alpha Male” ideal, such as successful, physically strong, and emotionally restraint.
Subordinate Masculinity	Masculinity that is oppressed in relation to hegemonic masculinity	Gay men, emotional men, or men who reject traditional masculine norms.
Marginalized Masculinity	Masculinity that doesn’t have access to hegemonic power due to race, class, or disability	Black men and other men of color.
Complicit Masculinity	Men who don’t fully embody hegemonic masculinity, but benefit from the system it creates	A quiet or non-violent men that never challenge sexism, and enjoys the unspoken advantages of being a man.

As seen in Table 1, she also stated several categories within masculinities, such as subordinate masculinities, marginalized masculinities, complicit masculinities, and the dominant one, hegemonic masculinity. Out of all the types of masculinity, hegemonic masculinity is agreed to be what is expected from men, with specific characteristics, such as being straight, physically strong, emotionally challenging, and in control. This type of masculinity was perceived as things done by men to be defined as the most honored way of being a man, and in a way, it is a normative performance.

This domination not only affects women (external hegemony) but also dominates other men who are deemed to be excluded from hegemonic masculinity (internal hegemony). For instance, gay men are often socially treated as "less manly," and men who do not show traditional masculine traits are often made fun of. In a family, a man who fits the hegemonic masculinity is often expected to be the provider, the authority figure, and the protector. Those men who do not fit are often forced to fit. This role enforces power dynamics within the household, reinforcing traditional gender roles. Moreover, Connell also believed that media representation plays a critical role in normalizing hegemonic ideals by showing what men should be like.

Beyond its social dominance, hegemonic masculinity has significant psychological and social costs for men themselves. Connell has noted that the pressure to follow this restrictive and often aggressive norm can negatively influence men's mental health; for



instance, the way men should be "tough" could restrict them from expressing their emotions and lead to mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, and risk-taking behaviors. In addition, hegemonic masculinity also controls how men should behave, from the way they talk, walk, and live their lives, which creates a limitation on how they can function as human beings in their daily lives for themselves or even with others.

However, in later work (2005), Connell stated that "hegemonic masculinity" is often a product of historical change. She explained that older beliefs of masculinity could be replaced by new ones in the future. Men who are compassionate, sensitive, and less oppressive may become the ideal belief of what being the most honored man should be like.

In general, hegemonic masculinity is what being a man is supposed to be like, as perceived by society according to its culture. This belief offers privileges and social dominance to those who can conform, often at the expense of women and men. In addition, those men who are unable to conform often face scrutiny and challenges because they are perceived as deviant. On the other hand, this belief creates limitations for their self-expression. Connell's concept expands Butler's understanding of Gender as a Performance indirectly. Ultimately, Connell's "hegemonic masculinities" examined how presumed, constructed, and performed gender roles could build power imbalance between men and women, also among men.

Halberstam's Female Masculinity

Female Masculinity (1998) is a book written by Jack Halberstam, which became a landmark work in queer theory, redefining the concept of masculinity. Halberstam challenged the culture-based assumption that the concept of masculinity is a trait exclusive to males, and argued that there are many different ways to be masculine, including through female-from-birth bodies. This concept becomes an extension of Butler's, as it was first focused on how gender is a performance, and we are being taught what to do and who to be. Halberstam took the concept of gender as performance, and proposed that gender roles are an act, meaning it is not exclusive to one gender only. Hence, female masculinity was born.

The core concept of female masculinity aimed to validate forms of masculinity that appear in bodies that are not perceived as traditional male or male-identified bodies. According to Halberstam, this concept has existed historically, culturally, and politically but has been largely ignored in dominant discourse. It shows that gender expression is policed based on who performs it, not just what is performed. Halberstam also highlights the visibility gap: whereas male femininity is often hyper-visible, female masculinity is often erased. This double standard actually adds another layer between the power hierarchy of men and women, as fluid gender roles could not even help to offer equality, because male dominance still exists either way.

In examining the genealogy of female masculinity, Halberstam explored a wide range of historical and cultural texts, from Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness* to Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*, and from early 20th-century butch-femme bar



culture to contemporary drag performances. She highlighted how butch lesbians, tomboys, drag kings, and transmasculine individuals embody forms of masculinity that disrupt heteronormative understanding of gender. These examples were used to shed light on how masculine women have always existed, though often not in mainstream media.

Halberstam believed that masculinity has become detached from the male body, meaning that masculinity is not linked exclusively to a male assigned at birth. Moreover, she believed that female masculinity is not simply the opposite of female femininity. She believed that it is a different gender expression entirely and one that reveals a crack or a loophole within the traditional system of gender.

“The bathroom problem, in fact, stands in for the larger issue of gender legibility: if you can’t tell what someone is, you may ask them, or worse, you may harass them, or even assault them” (Halberstam, 1998:20).

Halberstam also introduced the concept of “bathroom problem” as a social crisis that occurs when someone does not appear to fit with the available gender-based space they are entering. For instance, masculine women might be stared at, or even kicked out of the female bathroom, because others assume they are in the wrong bathroom. In this way, the bathroom is not just a physical space but a symbolic battleground for gender enforcement, where masculinity in female-assigned bodies is frequently read as threatening or confusing.

Similar to Connell, who brought drag performances as an example for her concept of hegemonic masculinity, Halberstam explored drag king performances as a critical tool for deconstructing masculinity. The drag king performances involved female-assigned individuals performing masculinity on the stage, which often embodied an exaggerated male persona. For Halberstam, if something can be performed on stage, then it is not an exclusive trait, but rather a trait that was learned and then acted upon. She believed masculinity is a series of social cues, gestures, clothing choices, and power relations that can all be duplicated and implemented by anyone, regardless of their gender.

Halberstam’s Female Masculinity offers a powerful rethinking of how we understand masculinity, not as something tied exclusively to male bodies, but as a set of behaviors, aesthetics, and identities that anyone can embody. Halberstam did not just critique the gender binary but offered space for new possibilities and an opportunity for those who have been ignored, masculine women, to be heard. This concept allows us, the reader, to ask what it means to be masculine, who gets to claim that identity, and what happens when we break free from the traditional gender norms. As a reader, we understand new perspectives related to gender expression, gender identity, and the traditional concept of being “normal”.

Conclusion

This paper explores how gender norms and identity are perceived as performance within queer theory through the works of Butler, Connell, and Halberstam. Each theorist contributes an interconnected framework to challenge the traditional view of gender norms and binary understandings of gender identity. Butler offered the foundational view of gender performativity rather than a fixed trait obtained from birth. This performance is shaped by repeated actions and behaviour that were taught from social expectations, culture, and media representations. Connell built upon the existing foundational framework and introduced the concept of hegemonic masculinity. She proposed an internal hierarchy within male masculinity and how it contributed to power imbalance, and social dominance above women, and also other men. Furthermore, Halberstam extended the discourse by narrowing down the focus on masculinity to female masculinity. He built ideas from gender as a performance, and argued that masculinity is another form of acting, which is not exclusively owned by males, and can be embodied by many people from various gender identities. He also stated that, even though there is a power hierarchy within masculinity among men, men who do not conform to the normative idea may face scrutiny. Those men still received more power than women in general. On the other hand, women who do not conform to the traditional concept of femininity often face erasure, ignorance, and judgment. In simple terms, masculine-looking women receive many times harder challenges than women in general, while men, regardless of their level of masculinity, are still put above women.

This paper proposes key concepts, core ideas, and implications of gender as a performance for gender understanding based on Butler, Connell, and Halberstam's perspective. It can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Key Concept, Core Ideas, and Implications of Gender as a Performance for Gender Understanding Based on Butler, Connell, and Halberstam's Perspective (1990;1995;1998).

Theorist	Key Concept	Core Ideas	Implication for Gender Understanding
Judith Butler (1990)	Gender Performativity	Gender is not fixed, rather a series of actions taught by culture and repeatedly acted.	Challenges binary gender norms; shows identity is constructed, not fixed.
R. W. Connell (1995)	Hegemonic Masculinity	Masculinity is a taught concept to male, and Hegemonic Masculinity is more privileged among other types of masculinity.	Reveals internal hierarchies among masculinity in men, which contribute to power imbalance and exclusion to those who do not conform.



Jack Halberstam (1998)	Female Masculinity	Masculinity is not exclusive to male, and can be adopted by anyone regardless of their gender, including cis-women.	Expands masculinity beyond men, and highlights how men regardless of their level of masculinity still obtain more power than women, especially masculine looking women.
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These concepts become a crucial tool in examining literary work through queer theory lens to dissect gender-based phenomena within characters. Because researchers in the field can examine whether contemporary entertainments (movies, books, etc) conform to the traditional view of gender norms through their characters or not. Moving forward, these frameworks provide opportunities to maintain the conversation about gender identity. In real life, understanding gender as a performance allows us to question what is considered "normal," who gets excluded, and how we might create space for identities that defy the binary altogether. Ultimately, these concepts allow us to open up conversation about representations and implementation of gender norms, identity, and fluidity within literary works, or in real life, and redefine what "normal" means through a gender lens.

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