



RESEARCH PAPER

Gender Identity Construction in Akhtar's *Melody of a Tear*

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PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Received: August 03, 2021</p> <p>Accepted: November 05, 2021</p> <p>Online: November 06, 2021</p> <p>Keywords: Cultural Norms, Femininity And Identity Confusion Gender Performativity, Masculinity, Social Construction</p> <p>*Corresponding Author: doctorsaeed111@ gmail.com</p>	<p>This study aims to discuss the notion of gender in terms of performativity and social construction. It also draws upon the idea of gender identity construction and how it relates to the society, performativity and biology. As its theoretical framework, the study relies upon the Performative Theory of Gender and Sex (1990) presented by Judith Butler and studies the gender identity construction in the female protagonist of Akhtar's <i>Melody of a Tear</i>. Zara is a girl who is raised as a boy from his father and there is a kind of dilemma in Zara's personality related to being masculine and feminine. The cultural norms of a particular gender are also a cause of this dilemma. Throughout the novel, she is in a conflicting state whether she should behave feminine or masculine. She is being depicted as an incomplete person until she finds and resolves this issue of gender identity. The paper discusses the gender performativity, social construction, cultural norms and identity as these are all contributing to the confusion and construction of the protagonist's identity. Character analysis is used as the methodology of analysis.</p>

Introduction

This research paper aims to discuss the construction of gender identity that entails ideas related to performativity, social construction and cultural norms. It brings out the notions related to the cultural norms of gender and performativity and how these cultural norms and performativity lead to the social construction of gender. Our society constructs our gender by the repetitiveness of certain acts and our identity is created through our gender. However, the clash between one's gender and sex can lead to the identity confusion as it is seen in the chosen text. For the purpose of highlighting the issue of gender identity construction, the novel *Melody of a Tear (2019)* by Haroon Khalid Akhtar is analyzed. The writer of the novel is an indigenous Pakistani writer. He is the son of famous Urdu literary figure Muhammad Khalid Akhtar. He was born in Lahore and raised in a house filled with books. His collection of articles and short stories is published in a book named Threadbare. *Melody of a Tear* is his debut novel published in 2019.

This novel is a 'first-person account of a woman chasing a tear'. Zara, the protagonist of the story, is struggling with her identity as a human being and a woman, and this has driven her to the point of suicide. The ambiguity about her gender due to her father

treating her as his son has snubbed her ability to cry like a normal person. No matter how ambiguous her identity is, Zara has been living like this until one day a tear rolling down of Zaid's eye ignites her curiosity. Her inability to cry pulls her to that mysterious brood crying in a public space and thus begins the journey of chasing a tear. By the time, Zara finally begins to solve the mystery of Zaid's tear and in doing so she counters her dilemma as well. The story tackles with several significant themes such as; identity crisis, gender crisis, father-daughter relationship, depression, suicide, compassion, love, poverty, society's indifference and class difference.

Theoretical Framework

The present research paper takes its theoretical ground from Gender studies. Gender studies emerged in late 1960s from second wave of feminism. It is basically linked with the studies of men, women and sexuality. "Gender studies have as their foundation an engagement with the sexed body and with the interrelationship between sex and gender, which at times are inextricably entangled." (Woodward & Woodward 2015: 2). This research paper talks about gender because the analysis entails both the concepts of femininity and masculinity. Gender studies are not only related to one gender i.e. male or female rather this area of study discusses the problems related to males, females and transgenders; hence the notion of gender is important here. The paper also talks about the gender as a cultural norm because it relates to the analysis of the text.

The analysis relies on the Performative theory of Gender and Sex presented by Butler (1990). This theory stresses upon the performative nature of gender which is defined as repetition of certain acts that leads to the social construction of gender. The theory also suggests that gender constitutes one's identity.

Traditionally, gender and sex are taken as binaries. However, Butler (1990) critiques this notion and takes gender and sex in relation to each other. She poses a very different perspective of gender and claims that gender is performative and socially constructed. "If sex and gender are radically distinct, then it does not follow that to be a given sex is to become a given gender; in other words, 'woman' need not be the cultural construction of the female body, and 'man' need not interpret male bodies." (142). According to her, gender and sex are not two distinct categories. "The distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed." (Butler 1999: 9). Moreover, she suggests that "sex is as culturally constructed as gender" (Butler 1999: 10). She takes sex as a cultural norm. (Butler 2011). In this case, sex and gender are the same. This distinction argues that gender is not as stable as sex and that gender is socially constructed (Butler 1999: 9).

According to Rubin, social interventions cause differences between genders. People are told to behave in a particular way that matches their gender. (Mikkola, 2017: 1.2). Similarly, Mikkola (2017: 1.1) says that behavioural traits that are associated with men and women are culturally learned. For Butler (1999), it is impossible to view gender separately from cultural intersections because these cultural intersections produce and maintain gender. This is the reason of the instability of the gender. She says that people are socially constructed into particular genders. (Butler, 2011). She states that repetitiveness of the acts is an important aspect of performativity. For her, gender is performative and it "is real only to extent that it is performed." (Butler, 1988: 527)

"When Simone de Beauvoir claims, "one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman," she is appropriating and reinterpreting this doctrine of constituting acts from the phenomenological tradition. In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time-an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts." (Butler, 1988: 519). Butler claims that nobody is born with gender entailed with them. It is an illusion and comes in fluid substance. Taking this idea further, she claims that a person can construct their identity by performing certain acts. It means that gender is not something you are but it is actually something you do. "The body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time." (Butler, 1988: 23). Therefore, according to Butler (1988), "gender is an act which has been rehearsed" (526).

West & Zimmerman (1987) also support this idea by defining gender as something we do in our daily routine. Therefore the concept of 'doing gender' is important here. "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"-Simone de Beauvoir's formulation distinguishes sex from gender and suggests that gender is an aspect of identity gradually acquired (Butler, 1986). Here, gender is related to identity. Our identity is created by our gender. It is the gender which defines us as man or woman in a society and we are known by this difference between identities.

The performative view of gender gives an explanation of how gender identity is created through a series of acts. Butler says that no one is a gender prior to doing gendered acts. Butler (1999) states, "Identity is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender and sexuality." (23). She further states, "Gender proves to be performative- that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed." (33). This means that gender is a part of our identity and particularly, it shapes our identity. But this identity is formed through gendered acts. Butler (1990) also talks about this, "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" (33)

Butler (1999) says that gender "ought not to be construed as a stable identity... gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (179). She states that "being a man" and "being a woman" are "internally unstable affairs." (Butler 2011: 86). Since gender is performative, it is clear that the gender is unstable. "If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity." (Butler 1999: 174). It can be said that for Butler, gender identity and gendered acts exist at the same time. Gendered acts continuously constitute gender as an identity.

Lorber (1994) talks about gender as, "As a process, gender creates the social differences that define "woman" and "man". In social interaction throughout their lives, individuals learn what is expected, see what is expected, act and react in expected ways, and thus simultaneously construct and maintain the gender order." (60) People keep on learning the behaviour that is considered appropriate for their gender. This learning is basically done through social interaction and then the repetition of appropriate acts makes one's gender and distinguishes it from the other. However, sex is always important in defining one's gender and its importance cannot be denied.

Material and Methods

The study is qualitative in nature and character analysis has been done which includes analyzing the specific traits of a character and the role they play in the story. Moreover, it also includes the conflicts, experiences and the development of characters throughout the story. Barnet (1988) states that characters play a crucial role in any literary work which includes a novel, drama or a play. Characters can be of many types such as protagonist, antagonist, major, minor, flat, round etc. The present research paper focuses on the character analysis of the protagonist. According to Handayani (2017), Koesmobroto differentiates between major and minor characters. Major characters are also known as protagonists which play a key role in the fiction; whereas minor characters which are also known as antagonists do not have a vital role in the fiction. The protagonist of Akhtar's *Melody of Tear* is analyzed through Murphy's (1972) character analysis model. She presents different ways such as the personal description of the character, the character as seen by others, the speech of the character, his/her past life, conversation of others, his/her reactions, thoughts and mannerism and the author's comments on the character through which a character can be analyzed in a literary text. In this paper, the analysis is focused upon the personal description of the character, the character as seen by

others, the speech of the character, conversation of others, his/her past life, reactions and thoughts under the *Performative Theory of Gender and Sex* by Butler (1990).

Analysis

Sex is generally taken as the biological categorization of male and female whereas gender is defined as the societal categorization of male and female. Gender basically refers to our roles in society being male and female. When we talk about gender studies, it deals with the problems related to both men and women. Gender is a phenomenon that is socially constructed and performative in nature. Hence, an identity is attached to us regarding male and female. This identity sets forth the idea of appropriateness. For society, different things are appropriate for different genders. Society generalizes different gender roles and this concept is known as the cultural norms of a society. Gender identities are defined as 'masculine' and 'feminine'. These notions are socially constructed and therefore vary depending upon individuals and societies. The analysis of the chosen text is done in the light of these notions.

Gender Performativity and Social Construction

Zara is a female protagonist who deals with the gender identity confusion. The gender performativity and social construction neither allows her to be fully feminine nor masculine. At times, she reinforces her different identities through her repeated actions. In the very beginning of the novel, we find evidences of how Zara's father plays his role in her gender construction and performativity by stating:

"My boy, look what I brought for you! A cologne... I am a proud father of two strong lads... Stop sulking and do some push-ups for me." (Akhtar, 2019: 12). The words 'boy', 'cologne', 'lads' and 'push-ups' are important here as they are used to instill this idea of masculinity in Zara's mind and rejecting the fact of her being a female according to biological characteristics. As Butler (1988) states, "Gender is an act which has been rehearsed" (526) Asking her to perform certain acts and the reinforcement through these words is a way of constructing her gender as a male. Furthering on this idea, the novel is written in first person narrative where we find Zara stating everything, she says, "I was barred from shedding tears no matter how painful the injury or tragedy was" (Akhtar, 2019: 12). Tears are closely related to masculinity and femininity. Men are not allowed to shed tears because the society does not approve this behaviour. Crying is something that is closely taken as feminine. Therefore, the upbringing of Zara that is aimed at shaping her into a masculine being does not allow her to shed tears as they are the sign of weakness. She is expected to control her feelings and emotions. Therefore, she never cries in her life

and depicts the masculine gendered acts. Similarly, she doesn't allow her voice to sound feminine and states,

To please him, I contrived a gruff voice for myself in my teens, played cricket and climbed trees amid a shrinking circle of friends and an emptying soul. As the years wore on, fixing pipe leaks and fuses and paying utility bills became my sorry sources of fulfillment. (Akhtar, 2019: 13)

The idea of gender performativity is reinforced in these lines. The adaptation of masculine behaviour and its performance through different acts also give a clear message on how the gender is performed through certain acts. Besides, the lines also provide an evidence of socially constructed gender identity. The protagonist performs certain acts just to please her father who wants her daughter's gender as male. Butler (1988) claims, "My suggestion is that the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time." (523)

Gender as a Cultural Norm

While Akhtar (2019) deals with the notions of gender performativity and social construction in his novel, there are also evidences found related to the cultural norms of gender. These cultural norms play a crucial role in Zara's gendered identity. These norms stir up her dilemma and struggle between masculine and feminine gendered identities. When Zara comes back from the journey which is also the outcome of her confused identity, the text discusses the importance of a female body and how it cannot be neglected behind a masculine gendered identity. It states, ".....terming my cherished outing a shameful elopement" (Akhtar, 2019: 11). This sentence is a reinforcement of the cultural norms of our society associated with women. Although Zara is raised as a boy but she can never deny her identity as a feminine being. The cultural norm related to women that they cannot go outside and stay all alone somewhere is evident here. Similarly, "To further satisfy my parents who now viewed me as a full-fledged woman, I confirmed that the company was providing an all-female accommodation" (Akhtar, 2019: 102). The cultural norm of women not being able to stay alone or with males is again highlighted here. Regardless of Zara's upbringing that asks her to behave masculine, her femininity cannot be neglected that is there in the form of her body. Her parents who are basically responsible for her dual identities also take her now as a woman, not as a boy.

The idea is further elaborated in the following lines, "He looked at me and his lips moved, not for a word or a smile but to spurt out his displeasure... my dear aunty Bilquees had already spread the rumour that Saeed's daughter had run away with a loafer friend" (Akhtar, 2019: 112-114). The idea of honour related to women is referred here. Zara's

brother is always acceptable even when he betrays his parents but, she becomes unacceptable even when she doesn't do any wrong. Her mistake was to lie with her parents. She is never allowed to say anything to prove her chasteness. The preconceived notions regarding women that they are the upholders of family's honour are shown here. Her father hates her because he thinks that she has brought shame and disgrace to the family.

The concept of marriage also shows the cultural norms related to a specific gender, "But he, my god, suddenly chose to withdraw the privileges of a son once I entered the marriageable age" (Akhtar, 2019: 113). The text is conforming to the cultural norms where Zara, suddenly, starts appearing a full-fledged female being to her parents once she enters the marriageable age. She is not taken as a son anymore and cannot enjoy the advantages that were provided to her as a boy. "I was now a whore to most, a depraved daughter who ran away with a paramour who used her to amuse his friends" (Akhtar, 2019: 115). Although she is raised as a boy, her female body is a big reality. Her gender that is constructed as masculine cannot deny the fact of her being feminine based on biological characteristics. Her one month journey turns her into a purely female person who can use her body to benefit his friends. The negative connotations that are related to females are depicted here.

Another cultural norm is related to the crying of a man. The text states, "However, a man's tear falling in the midst of the crowd was exceptional, precious and worth exploring" (Akhtar, 2019: 25). Men are not allowed to cry; otherwise they are taken as weak. This is a general perception related to masculinity that has been prevalent in our society. Zaid's tear shocks Zara and intrigues her to find out the reason behind it as she was never allowed to shed tears because of her upbringing as a boy. Therefore, when she sees a male being shedding tears in public; she finds it fascinating and unrealistic.

Gender Identity

The masculine and feminine performativity, social construction, cultural norms and clash between Zara's gender and sex raise a question mark on Zara's gendered identity. Throughout the novel, she has been struggling with her two gendered identities. At times, the masculinity in her personality dominates her and at times, she wants to be a purely feminine person. The novel is full of these kinds of evidences that are being discussed here.

In my case, a chic, low-neck attire and some loud lipstick in order to make me appear a complete woman at last, un-conflicted and easy on the eye, truly dressed to 'kill (herself)'. 'A tidy end at least, a curing death to a diseased existence', they'd murmur. (Akhtar, 2019: 5)

These lines in the opening of novel give an idea of identity struggle. (Herself) written in parenthesis is referring to the confusion regarding her gender. "A curing end to a diseased existence" is a very strong sentence giving a glimpse to Zara's shallow personality that is caused by the clash between her gender and sex. Butler (1988) states, "gender appears to the popular imagination as a substantial core which might well be understood as the spiritual or psychological correlate of biological sex". (528) Furthering this idea, the novel contains some one-liners that are striking to readers' sensibilities. "Spiritless, genderless and tearless... In order to die, I needed to live first" (Akhtar, 2019: 6). These sentences are really hitting the point of shallowness that is there in Zara's personality reinforcing the idea that the clash between Zara's gender and sex is not a petty issue. 'Spiritless' referring to the emptiness that is there in her personality, 'genderless' because she doesn't know whether to believe her body or her father; whether she should perform masculine gendered acts or feminine gendered acts and 'tearless' because tears are something that are related to emotions; emotions make human beings different from other living beings and they are taken as a symbol of liveliness but 'in order to die, I needed to live first'; she hasn't tasted the true essence of life yet, the liveliness is somewhere succumbed under her confused gendered identity. She further states, "Yes, it was going to be a low-neck pret wear with loud red lipstick, an agreeable combination to make me appear deeply feminine to my lifelong detractors" (Akhtar, 2019: 7). Here, Zara's dilemma and her confusion regarding her gender are highlighted. These lines can be taken as Zara's rejection to her upbringing as a masculine person and she does not want to behave like a man.

At another point, Zara again mentions her dilemma and struggle, "... but I lost the sense of my very gender in toiling to mold myself as baba's second son" (Akhtar, 2019: 12). Her personality is split between two parts and therefore she is not able to be a complete man or a complete woman. This gendered identity dilemma affects the protagonist severely. "My botched upbringing took its toll on every facet of my life including academic performance" (Akhtar, 2019: 12). She states that the confusion regarding her gender has affected everything in her life including her education. The text is posing the idea that this conflict between one's gender and sex is not something to be neglected. Before long, my grades also starting slipping as I grew more confused about myself. (Akhtar, 2019: 13).

"All along, I was supposed to believe him and not my body" (Akhtar, 2019: 12). Zara's father neglected of the fact that how this clash between gender and sex can affect the personality of her daughter, upraises her as a son. On the other hand, the femininity within Zara compels her to think about her personality as a woman. This confusion grows strong by the time she crosses her puberty and teenage. "The dangerously extended tomboy run was disrupted in my twenties when mama gave me my first pep talk on marriage" (Akhtar, 2019: 13). She gets more conscious about her identity when it comes to marriage as she

never being able to feel the woman within herself. Here the concept of patriarchy also comes where her father raised her as a boy without thinking about the consequences. Her body cannot be denied being a female. She has to marry because society has set these standards for men and women. "Forever deprived of tears, courtesy baba's purposeful 'upbringing', I was in furtive awe of them" (Akhtar, 2019: 25). "In an astounding about-turn, baba too stood convinced that my future was in marriage. Reality had dawned on him too late when his daughter was already moth-eaten, reduced to half-human, half-nothing" (Akhtar, 2019: 59). The protagonist is really confused when her father also starts treating her as a girl. The notion of female body is also reinforced here. The society doesn't let a woman live alone whether her identity is repressed or not. The idea of gender as performative and social construct cannot stand deviate from the biological factors. "Given my upbringing, becoming something of a wife was out of question for me. My parents were conveniently forgetting that for a large part of my life, I was not allowed to identify a woman within myself" (Akhtar, 2019: 60). The novel throughout the story is making a point that gender identity is a big issue and it has extreme effects on individuals' lives. When Zara's parents start acknowledging the fact that she is a female and she cannot live her life as a male, Zara goes into gender conflict on a major basis. Although her identity is repressed already, the conflict grows strong when it comes to marriage.

When Zara sees the tears rolling down on Zaid's face, she gets shocked because her upbringing doesn't allow her to feel any of these kinds of emotions. She is not happy with her being a masculine personality and she mocks her upbringing that has suppressed her womanhood. "It was a site where life had flirted with me for a year, pushing me into a blind alley where I could undress and come out wearing a persona to go with my body and repressed identity" (Akhtar, 2019: 14). The tear that Zara sees on Zaid's face becomes a reason to find out her true personality that matches her body. She sets on a journey because the tear reminds her of her shallowness and emptiness. Her dilemma regarding her gendered identity comes to resolution during this journey. "Beware of gays when you visit me. You may take a liking" (Akhtar, 2019: 77). This remark by Zara's brother is also something that gives reader about the intensity of gender identity that has been inflicted upon her by her father, clearly ignoring the fact that she possesses a female body.

"The months that followed reinforced my upbringing to such an irretrievable extent that I decided never to wear womanly clothes again, never to come out alive from such incidents again" (Akhtar, 2019: 82). These evidences taken from the text provide the situation where Zara herself decides to be masculine. When her family counters an accident, she shames herself not being able to save her family from that shame. She decides to continue her life with being the man of her family. Butler (1988) supports this idea as, "Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety

and pleasure.” (531) “With every reading, my voice gained more of a feminine resonance that I pretended to ignore” (Akhtar, 2019: 89). The femininity cannot be denied even if the gender is constructed as masculine.

Zara tries to neglect this confusion but ends with being a proper woman at the end of the novel. “My embroidered shalwar kameez was declaring me as a person completed and resolved----- for whom femininity was now persona of choice. The extra yards of clothing and matching bangles were giving me the strength to feel desirably weak.” (Akhtar, 2019: 102). When Zara comes back from her journey to find out the reason of Zaid’s tear, she turns out to be a complete woman. Her clothing and persona matches her feminine gender and she feels relaxed and fulfilled. Her gendered identity issue gets to resolve. “How much of gender resides in clothes alone!” (Akhtar, 2019: 106). The text makes the point that gender is also important in terms of clothing. When Zara wears womanly clothes, she feels more comfortable and fulfilled than ever. The concept of gender performativity also comes here. As Butler (1988) states “Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed. It seems fair to say that certain kinds of acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity, and that these acts either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way.” (527)

Conclusion

Akhtar’s *Melody of a Tear* provides a brief account of how gender is performative and how it is socially constructed. It also discusses the importance of gender in one’s identity construction. Moreover, the text also poses the idea that sex and gender are in relation to each other and they cannot be taken as binaries. Judith Butler also defines gender as something which is socially constructed and performative in nature, but she doesn’t deny the fact of sex; rather she takes gender and sex in relation to each other. For her, these are not two distinct categories. The analysis of the text proves that the confusion of gendered identity can cause serious harms to a person’s personality causing them to be insecure in their life. It can drive a person to suicide as it is stated in the novel. The study will be helpful for those who want to explore the relationship between gender and sex. The gendered identity problem is a serious social issue as it can affect an individual’s life severely. Therefore, further research in this area can prove beneficial for society as well as for academia.

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