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Body and Gender Performativity in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*

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Letter of Recommendation

Devika Chemjong has completed her thesis entitled “Body and Gender Performativity in Margaret Atwood’s Cat’s Eye” under my supervision. She carried out her research from November 2018 to April 2019. I hereby recommend her thesis be submitted for viva defence.

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Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled “Body and Gender Performativity in Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye*” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Devika Chemjong has been approved by the undersigned member of the Research Committee:

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Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of Margaret Atwood's novel Cat's Eye based on the idea of gender identity as performance. This research focuses on social construction of power, femininity and gender roles. The central character of the novel, Elaine Risley demonstrates the gender roles assigned to her through dress code and symbolism. Using Judith Butler's theory where everyday action, speech, utterances, gestures and representations, dress codes and behaviors produce what is perceived as an essential masculine and feminine. Elaine rejects the conventional notion of gender roles assigned by her family and society and succeeds in achieving her dream as an artist. Cat's Eye accounts the journey of Elaine from a girl to mature woman who revolts against the societies values and proves herself as the capable one to live her life freely. In this journey, she encounters hardships but her perpetual courage and confidence takes her to desired life. Elaine, by rejecting the conventional notion of gender roles, proves that gender and identity are socially and culturally constructed. By performing gender not according to conventional behavior, the performer can change the social ideas about gender.

Key Words: Gender, Identity, Performance, Conventional, Feminine.

Introduction

This research paper deals with body and gender performativity in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*. It explores how conventional notion of body or gender has been challenged by female characters with the theoretical idea of Judith Butler's 'gender performativity'. The notion of performativity suggests that there is no natural body or gender that pre-exists, it is cultural inscription. It is something one does, an act, performance. By performing gender not according to conventional behavior but as an individual exploration of roles, the performer changes the structure of language and the social ideas about gender. Traditionally, females are identified as weak, objects of four walls, listening, emotional and so on. However, this novel can be regarded as Atwood's redefinition of those traditional concepts about body. More specifically, the major characters like Elaine Raisley and Cordelia challenge the conventional notion of female body. Atwood presents female character of this novel as an income source of family and dealing with societal problems. Elaine is a famous painter and independent character who spends her life by working outside instead of becoming a typical housewife. Her body is not only an object of entertainment but it is surviving tool of the society. The female characters of this novel act out their negative feelings and frustrations which has traditionally been seen as un-feminine. Therefore the protagonist of the novel confirms that gender is a socially constructed phenomenon which can be constructed and also reconstructed depending on the view of the society.

Cat's Eye by most prominent Canadian writer Margaret Atwood was published in 1988. The novel unfolds in Canada of the mid 20th century from World War II to the late 1980s. It includes many cultural elements of that time, including feminism and various art movements. It also coincides in dates with the roots of the third significant transformation in feminism and the rise of poststructuralist concept of

gender and sexuality. Atwood's text offers a vast field for a discussion of the discourses that constitute gender. The novel focuses on the life of Elaine who is trying to cope with her insecurity and complexes in order to develop her independent identity. It is a disrupting tale of female cruelty. Atwood views the process of women victimization from a different angle in this novel. Elaine has been emotionally crippled by her own friend Cordelia and Mrs. Smeath. Therefore, Elaine makes her turn to the opposite gender for support. She feels much more comfortable with boys whom she considers her secret allies.

Atwood focuses on the point that there should be no question of dominance and submission from any genders rather every individual should be given freedom to determine their lives. She does not extend the gap between men and women but gives a way to develop a healthy and balanced human relationship between these two opposite genders. Indeed, the primary object of this research paper is to examine the understanding of traditional and modern views about gender identity and how the modern view of gender identity is relevant in the *Cat's Eye*. The premise of this study is not only to determine the extent to which gender performativity determines the character's identity but also to illustrate how gender identity is unstable and constructed socially and culturally.

Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* has been analyzed by various critics. For instance, Laura Gronewold analyzes the female stereotypes in Atwood's *Cat's Eye*. She advocates a literary canon which embraces the evil women archetype as a sign of feminine strength and complexity, instead of rejecting it as a threat to the social norm. The female characters in Atwood's novels, she believes, embrace their Evil Woman as a source of strength which eventually becomes a constructive, rather than a destructive force within them:

Atwood's evil women are smart, shrewd, cunning, and aggressive- traits that when proposed by a women are often characterized by both men and women, as malevolent, manipulative, overzealous, and cruel. But Atwood's evil women may also be scared, loving, confused, or lost; they are multifaceted characters who do not succumb to archetypes and become stock characters with negative stereotypes stamped on them. (Gronewold 2)

Hence according to Gronewold, Atwood's women characters challenge stereotypes by showing both negative as well as positive traits. The evil women in *Cat's Eye* are thus evil for a reason and by embracing their Evil Woman they also learn to forgive and let go of their controlling. In *Cat's Eye* the archetype of the evil woman is evident and can be regarded as a source of power in relation to the female characters, which challenges the stereotyped ideal female traits.

Furthermore women characters of this novel challenge the assumption that individuals have a stable identity. In this regard, Charlotte Beyer in the article, "Re-imagining Metropolis and Wilderness: Margaret Atwood's *Life Before Man Cat's Eye*, *Death By Landscape*" presents her view in relation to her exploration of places post colonial marginal identities in Atwood's novel. In her reading of *Cat's Eye* she sees a symbolic connection between the differences in Canadian locals and spaces, such as the metropolis and wilderness, to the complexity and differences between the female postcolonial characters. She argues that Atwood's use of localities shows a "resistance towards a monolithic 'truth' and identity, by the very marginality and diversity which these localities represent" (73). According to Beyer, identity is always multiple and dynamic. Our authentic self can be replaced by socially constructed self.

In *Cat's Eye* there is competitive relationship between women. Another critic Molly Hite argues that this competitive relationship between women can be seen as a

consequence of patriarchal norms causing feelings of frustration within women. She claims that “to be object of the look is to look like, the trope of simile instantly invoking stereotypes of women who have aged past the point of being rewarding to the acquisitive gaze. Women look like, while in general men only look” (139). In Hite’s understanding, look makes women the object and victim of patriarchy. But what I want to study is that competition between women is not necessarily a product of patriarchal repression in this novel because women are more cruel to each other than men characters. Elaine Raisley has been emotionally crippled by her girl friend Cordelia and Mrs.Smeath but not by men. Women have done the damage more than a man could.

Gender performativity is also reflected in the way the female characters identify with dress and fashion. According to Hite, the female characters in *Cat’s Eye* are also slaves to fashion due to repressive patriarchal norms but Elizabeth Wilson on the other hand opposes the feminist idea that fashion is repressive by placing importance on the playfulness that dress and fashion represents for the individual. She asks: “Is fashionable dress part of the oppression of women or is it a form of adult play? Does it muffle the self, or create it” (231)? In addition, she states that feminists have made the assumption that nature is superior to culture and therefore regard fashion as a lower form of identification. Hence fashion, according to Wilson is just another form of self expression which creates the individual and she thus positions herself in line with Butler’s theory of Performativity.

Thus there are several critics who have worked on Margaret Atwood’s novel *Cat’s Eye*. Laura Gronewold talks about the representations of evil women in the novel. According to her, to accept the evil women is to reject gender norms that take the evil women as wholly negative. Furthermore, Charlotte Beyer shows how our

identity changes along with new place and concludes that identity is always in the process of change. Another critic Molly Hite argues how patriarchy causes aggressive nature and competitive relationship between women. In her view patriarchal norms are the reason of frustration within women. Similarly, Elizabeth Wilson focuses on fashion and dress. She claims that fashion should be regarded as an art form, since human beings are social creatures and fashion and dress display one's individuality.

These are the some critics who analyzed *Cat's Eye* from different perspectives. In this paper, I will investigate modern view about gender and identity by looking into the novel's representations of socially constructed power roles between women and the challenge of patriarchal norms. The women characters of this novel explore and re-invent their gender roles. Indeed, this thesis argues that this novel, *Cat's Eye* subverts the traditional representations of gender or body by showing post modern identity of female. The above research articles on this novel have mostly concentrated on feminist issues such as suppression of female characters and patriarchal domination but this research paper not only deals with the domination of women by patriarchal society rather it deals with the levels of manipulation and betrayals that women are capable of meting out each other. I will study women relationship and the complexity between them. So, this paper shows how gender performativity determines the character's identity and also illustrate how it is matter of imitation and constructed socially and culturally. It also investigates how society and culture impose certain things on women to perform in order to be accepted in her society.

I will analyze this novel in the light of Judith Butler's concept of gender construction. The concept of gender came into common discussion within the early 1970. Butler's idea of gender performativity can be adopted to analyze Atwood's

Cat's Eye. Studies of gender identity show how gender and sex are not natural but they are the products of the working of power in societies such as institutions, discourses and practices. Stereotypically, gender is a social construct and this applies to norms, beliefs and values that are made up by the powerful groups. The beliefs, norms and values are reinforced and perpetuated by social institutions which include religion, media, education and workplace among others. These social values shape gender roles, personality and identity. Butler argues that those gender roles personality and identity are socially constructed and fluid in their interpretation and expression.

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler states that “periodic practices based on performative theory of gender acts that disrupts the categories of the body, sex, gender, and sexuality and occasion their subversive resignification and proliferation beyond the binary frame” (33). These lines prove that instead of sex and gender being predetermined, it is something that is performed, something we become, not something we inherently are. According to Butler, gender roles can be modified. By performing gender roles in modern way and acting out feminine difference, women characters in this novel not only challenge the traditional notion of body or gender but also to some extent challenge the dominant discourse of female. Therefore, Judith Butler’s influential work has contributed to the development of the postmodern concept of a socially constructed identity in relation to women’s experience and gender identity.

I will also bring theoretical insights from Judith Halberstam’s concept of female masculinity. Halberstam studies the social, literary, historical and political position of masculine women. She studies women who could be considered to fall into the category of the unthinkable. Female masculinity is a way of representing

oneself in manner that challenges the dominant discourse of female. She proposes the new concept of alternative masculinity. For Halberstam, female masculinity is “about women who feel themselves to be more masculine than feminine” (21). In other words, female masculinity can be described as female born persons feeling more comfortable behaving or looking masculine. In this sense, female masculinity is a specific gender with its own cultural history rather than a derivative of male masculinity in which women embody qualities that are usually associated with strength, authority and independence. Female masculinity relies heavily on symbols, such as clothing, way of speaking and body language through which we communicate.

Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye* is a story of middle-aged painter, Elaine Raisley. The story is presented by alternating between two narratives. The first narration is that of young Elaine, a young girl, growing up in Toronto. The second one is of an older Elaine who visits Toronto for exhibition of her paintings after living many years in Vancouver. By bringing two narratives Atwood presents Elaine’s both past and present life simultaneously because her childhood memory with Cordelia and Mrs. Smeath remain important part of her present identity in negative and positive ways. So, it is important to remember that we are seeing the world of young Elaine through the eyes of older Elaine. Therefore, Atwood is rich in mirroring the upheavals of feminine gender from different levels of narrations.

The novel opens with a scene from Elaine Raisely’s adolescent years, when her brother Stephen tries to explain time as a dimension that can be manipulated the same as space, if we know enough. Stephen explains that “ Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space. If you can bend space you can bend time also, and if you know enough and could move faster than light you could travel

backward in time and exist in two places at once” (1). These lines describe the changeable nature of time that it is not linear. If you can change your space you can change your time. It can be distorted according to space. There is no fixed boundaries in this flow of time. Therefore, time is shaped by space as if gender is shaped by some cultural practice in the society. In this regard, Judith Butler explores in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, “when the relevant ‘culture’ that ‘constructs’ gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology but culture becomes destiny” (8). Butler argues that gender is product of various cultural laws. Gender is not something fixed from our birth but it is the construction of our society and culture. In this way, gender identity is constructed through different multiple discourses and interactions so the definition of identity produces different meanings in different times and locations.

Cat's Eye examines the gender and social as well as cultural politics using characters activities to problematize assumed gender roles of the late 1950s and 1960s in urban Canada. At that time women were confined to follow the traditional roles given by society. In the novel, Elaine and her childhood friend Cordelia go against traditional notion of gender roles. They are both adolescents, riding on the streetcar, going downtown. While they are in the streetcar, their activities are quite different from those conventional teenage girls. “Cordelia sits with nonchalance, nudging with her elbow now and then, staring blankly at other people with her gray-green eyes, opaque and glinting as metal” (4). These line shows that Cordelia is challenging the traditional notion of girl. Traditionally, young girls like Cordelia and Elaine are supposed to stay calm and Cordelia is not supposed to stare at other people. In this way this novel shows the point of departure from those conventional notion of gender.

Traditionally, it's un-feminine for a girl to sit nonchalantly, nudging with each other and stare blankly at other people. This incident illustrates that Elaine and Cordelia are challenging the existing norms and values of the society.

As teenagers, Cordelia and Elaine observe people who dress differently and those come to represent an escape from social convention:

They have a certain gaiety to them, a power of invention, they do not care what other people think. They have escaped, though what it is they've escaped from is not clear. We think that bizarre costumes, their verbal tics, are chosen, and that when the time comes we also will be free to choose. (5)

These lines give a clear picture of women who have a dream to be different. Based on this observation, it is clear that both Cordelia and Elaine, in their teenage are partly aware of the woman's action as a sense of escape from social conventions. They admire those women who escaped from traditional social conventions and they wish to become like those women. At this point, they are not consciously aware of the existing patriarchal hierarchy and its limiting impact on their lives however, they are partly conscious of some socially constructed gender roles. Therefore they are not completely free to choose their gender roles.

The setting, in the beginning of *Cat's Eye* is Canada in the post World War II period. Elaine, at the age of nine, moves to Toronto after having lived most of her life in the North Canadian wilderness with family. In her teenage years and young adulthood she struggles to succeed as an artist. Therefore, this novel also addresses to the issue of women who choose between family and career. Elaine refuses to play the traditional role of a stereotyped housewife, inspired by her mother who also rejected such traditional roles assigned to a woman. Her mother's indifference to social ideas about gender is shown by Elaine's saying: "My mother did most of the cooking but it

was not her favorite thing. She was not fond of housework generally” (178). Elaine is encouraged by her mother’s idea and she chooses to her career.

The painting is a work of art where females were not given much value at that time. So, in the chronicles of art, a women painter is very rare to come by. For women and girls there was restrictive social roles and somewhat ambivalent position caused by narrow hierarchical structures. Women are presented as subjects and society to some extent forced to conform to stereotypical gender images imposed upon them by patriarchal norms. However, Elaine establishes her status as a well- reputed artist. “I am a painter, I even put that on my passport, in a moment of bravado, since the other choice would have been housewife. If you say you are a painter, you will be looked at strangely” (16). Elaine enlarges the definition of woman from household to the world of where she stands as an independent. She creates her identity as a famous painter.

During that time in which the early part of the novel is set, a postwar return to peacetime status dictated that women restrict themselves to traditional roles centered on home and family. The woman chooses exactly that role which makes her community happy. But the role constructed by society is not accepted by Elaine. She spends her life by working outside instead of becoming a typical housewife. She used painting as the way of breaking silence for the people who are the survivors of mistreatment like her. Clearly, Atwood identifies and disapproves the given assumptions about male and female roles. Elaine’s character questions received dominant gender paradigm of her society, time and place.

Elaine’s art had an enormous influence on the development of her personality. Her life changes when she decides to be a painter and she makes this decision as she learns to stand up for herself. She joins the Toronto Night College of Art where she takes on a course called ‘Life Drawing’ which opens a new era in Elaine’s life. In art

class there are only three female students and the teacher is Mr Hrbik in his mid-thirties. At the very beginning classes Elaine tries to wear the same clothes and tries to talk about the same things as other girls do but later she confesses. She says that “I feel ill at ease with them, as if I am here under false pretenses” (324). Elaine tries to imitate other girls costumes and behavior but it does not ease her. Then Elaine begins to dress like the boys do, wearing black clothes: “I switch to what the boys wear, black turtle necks and jeans. This clothing is not a disguise, like other clothing, but an allegiance, and in time I work up to courage to wear these things even in the daytime...I wear black skirts” (325). These lines clarify that Elaine is attributed with masculine characteristics as she feels herself more masculine than feminine. Here, Elaine accordingly explores dress to show and create her identity. She uses dress to differentiate herself from the group of girls and to reject the values and norms of traditional girl represent.

In this regard, Judith Halberstam in his book, *Female Masculinity* mentions that “Masculinity, one must conclude has been reserved not only for male bodies and has not been actively denied to people with female bodies” (119). These line explore that although appearance is very important in female masculinity, masculinity does not need only male body but female body can turn into masculine by showing masculine characteristics. Halberstam rejects the notion of reserving masculinity for people with male bodies and denying it to those with female bodies. In other words, there does not have to be a relationship between body and gender, the body can be female but it does not have to display feminine traits. Here, Elaine’s body shows more masculine characteristics than feminine. Her masculinity relies on her clothing, way of speaking and body language through which she communicates. Her performance shows that one cannot achieve supposed natural look of femininity, she exposes that

to a certain extent you can choose your gender. thus, Elaine's both possession of both female and male characteristics makes her a person in her own right.

In traditional sense, woman usually wear pink dress but Elaine shows some masculine characteristics by wearing black clothes and not behaving like other girls. She is not fond of making gossips like other girls. She states that "they discuss clothes, or talk about the boys they are going out with, I feel ill at ease with them (324). Those Elaine's performance shows that once she cannot achieve the supposed natural look of femininity. She exposes that gender identity is not to be innate, it can be changed. Since Elaine seems to be in perpetual flight, unable to find a sense of contentment or wellbeing, her paintings provided her with an opportunity to revisit her past and reassess her life stories. Moreover her art represents the memories of unhappy childhood. Significantly, Elaine's paintings become important mirrors of the past and in many ways symbolize her ambivalent and often contradictory relationships. By painting series of images Elaine takes art as surviving tool. It is her income source of family and she becomes independent by established her identity as a successful painter.

The narrator's self-exploration involves an examination of social pressures she has suffered in different periods of her life. Elaine remembers her early childhood, when her family lived in the wild, she considers it as a period of happiness and freedom. She reveals that "until we moved to Toronto I was happy. Before that we didn't really live anywhere" (23). The given lines suggests the innocence and freedom life of Elaine, particularly freedom from social divisions of body or gender. Before moving Toronto, Elaine's parents distribution of work is not strongly structured. Her father and mother divide their work along roughly traditional lines but with significant blurring of the physical differences, as Elaine describes: "We're used

to seeing our father in windbreakers, battered grey felt hats, flannel shirts with the cuffs tightly buttoned to keep the blackflies from crawling up his arms, heavy pants tucked into the tops of woollen socks. Except for the felt hats what our mother wore wasn't all that different"(38). The given excerpt describes the Elaine's parent's dress code. There is no difference between her father and mother except her mother lack the felt hats. Her mother's costumes are unfeminine and her roles are ungendered.

Elaine's parents are flexible, caring and liberal in their communication with the children. In this period, Elaine and her brother Stephen participate equally in all the chores, play, learn and explore the wilderness in great union. They mostly play the war games and also hunt in jungle: "Sometimes, instead of war, we hunt through the forest, turning over logs and rocks to see what's underneath"(28). In every game they participate equally. Stephen is a co-conspirator in a sibling relationship that is careless of gender distinction.

However, everything changes while the family moves from the former rural area to suburban Toronto. The former flow in life is transformed into a contrived existence in the city. All of them discover or learn their socially accepted roles:

Now, however our father wears jackets and ties and white shirts, and a tweed overcoat and a scarf. He has galoshes that buckle on over his shoes instead of leather boots waterproofed with bacon grease. Our mother's legs have appeared, sheathed in nylons with seams up the backs. She draws on a lipstick mouth when she goes out. She has a coat with grey fur collar, and a hat with a feather in it that makes her nose look too long. (39)

It shows how the city changes person's identity and makes clear that identity cannot be stable. In this section Atwood examines the construction and function of femininity in society. Elaine's unconventional mother transforms herself into a conventional

woman by applying lipstick on her mouth and wearing a hat with a feather. Before entering Toronto, she never had such costumes. Elaine's father also changed his dressing sense. He starts to wear shirts instead of flannel shirts and galoshes instead of leather boots. Elaine's parent start to learn the culturally and socially constructed gender roles after family settles down to Toronto. In this regard Judith Butler argues:

Gender is not something that one is; it is something one does, an act... a 'doing' rather a 'being'. There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results. If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all. (26)

These lines explain that gender identity is something that is performed, something we become, not something we inherently are. According to Butler, there is no original gender identity rather it is determined by various kinds of acts and expressions.

Therefore, there is no sex and gender which being predetermined. It is the matter of performance, an act and doing but not being. So, sex is also culturally constructed as gender. After entering Toronto, Elaine's parents follow socially and culturally constructed gender roles and it includes their clothing, speech and even food items and eating system.

Cat's Eye addresses gender issues through Elaine's life. The narrator verbalizes the sexist tendencies of time, occasionally analyzing them with a cynical tone that conveys her attempted detachment. The Toronto of the 1950s has an elaborated system of education based on patriarchal worldview. When Elaine and Stephen attend Queen Marry Public School for the first time, they are immediately

separated and sent to join an isle of girls and isle of boys respectively: “At the back are two grandiose entranceways with carving around them and ornate insets above the doors, inscribed in curvy, solemn lettering: GIRLS and BOYS” (53). Thus Elaine is not able to follow her brother as she used to before. So, Elaine enters to the building through the girls door and which is different from the boys door. Elaine has never seen such bias on the basis of gender. This confuses her and leaves her wondering, “How is going in through a door different if you’re a boy?” (53). One more difference between girls and boys in school is that girls hold the hands but the boys do not. In this way, Elaine becomes conscious of the society’s gender restrictions for the first time while joining the school in Toronto. She notices culturally constructed differences between girls and boys. Therefore, in order to understand the progression and development of Elaine Raisley’s character and personality in Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye*, it is important to know the influence of cultural factors, discourse and power structures on Elaine’s character.

At school Elaine makes with friendship with Carol Campbell, Grace Smeath and Cordelia. She has to fit in with them. Among them Cordelia is leader of a group. In order to gain Cordelia’s friendship, Elaine gets several punishments from her friends. Elaine faces difficulties to develop friendship with other girls because she was raised in boyish environment, she knows things about boys more than girls. “So I am left to the girls. But I’m not used to girls, or familiar with their customs. I feel awkward around them, I do not know what to say. I know the unspoken rules of boys but with girls I sense that I am always in the verge of some unforeseen, calamitous blunder” (54). Elaine expresses her fear of growing up within the group of girls. She feels like an alien from another planet among other girls because she is not familiar with girls and she is unknown to what girls should wear and do. Therefore, she finds

herself caught up in a trap of society's expectation of what a girl should be and act like, and her own way of expressing herself. In this context, Earl G. Ingersoll in his article, "Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*: Re-viewing Women in a Postmodern World" states that "Through the move to Toronto, a backwater of civilization in the 1940s, but still civilization, Elaine as a child is suddenly forced to confront femininity" (20). Ingersoll argues in the name of socialization Elaine loses her own self of boyish nature and some cultural factor forced her to embrace feminine quality. Until Elaine starts school in Toronto, she is unaware of what being feminine. With the help of her friends, Elaine learns the rules.

Due to Elaine's difficulties to fit in the group of girls, she observes her classmates activities and learns their codes of behavior. She starts imitating their life styles. "I start to wanting things I've never wanted before: braids, a dressing-gown, a purse of my own" (62). By doing so she starts to assimilate a foreign language. Here, Atwood illustrates the instability of gender and how the gender is artificial and socially constructed. Elaine stops following her instincts and instead she starts imitating the girl's low tone of voice, delicate movements and quite games.

Therefore, Elaine demonstrates how playing with girls was not natural for her instead it was something she had to learn to do. She states that "playing with girls is different and at first I feel strange as I do it, self-conscious, as if I'm only doing an imitation of a girl. But I soon get more used to it" (60). It clarifies that gender identity is constructed through repetitious behavior and imitation of others. Thus Elaine's self-conscious awareness of the artificial situation turns into habit as it is frequently repeated. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler extends a reinterpretation of Simone De Beauvoir's well-known claim from *The Second Sex* that "one is not born a woman but, rather, becomes one" (12). In this phrase, Beauvoir claims that one becomes a

woman but always under a cultural compulsion to become one. Elaine is made compel to become a woman by society and culture of Toronto. In this stage, the role constructed by society is accepted by her.

After many unconscious attempts to fit into the group of girls, she eventually becomes aware of the social power structures. Since Elaine's behavior is learned and not innate, so it is a clear example of how socialization determines behavior. She learns what it means to be feminine and to socialize with members of her own sex. What Elaine illustrates at this point is Judith Butler's theory of performativity. In Judith Butler's point of view, gender identities are doing and imitating act not being:

Acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally constructed, are performative in the sense that essence or identity that purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.

(185)

These lines describes that our identity is performatively constituted by different kinds of expressions. Indeed, Butler claims that these expressions of gender appear on individuals bodies and the movements, gestures and enactments. These expressions are the performances which result in the belief that gender is innate and natural. Thus, gender is performative in this sense that it has no separate status form the various acts which constitute it's reality. To Butler, gender performances are produced by the patriarchal society which trains the body to follow its ideal disciplinary practices and

conform to these regulatory norms. At first, Elaine cannot resist against traditional female roles and social limitation. While Elaine recognizes her gender differences, her body is presented as socially and culturally determined. So, society made her to the function of being feminine.

In the course of developing a friendship with Carol Campbell, Grace Smith and Cordelia, the trio of girl impose their ideas upon Elaine. They never respect her but abuse her for two years. In this sense this novel subverts the traditional notion of female that they are emotional and soft hearted. Elaine's girlfriends always suggest her to improve her activities. They continuously dominate her and force her to do what they want and she suffers in their hands as well as at their homes and school. Elaine states that "on the window-ledge beside mine, Cordelia and Grace and Carolin are sitting, jammed in together, whispering and giggling. They aren't speaking to me. It's something I said wrong, but I don't know what it is because they won't tell me" (135). These girls are very cruel to Elaine. As a result, she always feels as if they are not her friends but her enemies. Although Elaine is oppressed and abused by her three friends, Cordelia is worst among them who takes away Elaine's self-confidence and identity. Cordelia assigns Carol and Grace to observe Elaine's day to day activities carefully. They observe Elaine not only at homes and school but also on the way of school. These trios of girls force her to walk ahead and they follow behind her so they can find her fault. In this way, once Elaine allows herself to be shaped by her friends and she loses her own self identity. Thus, novel shows cruel and oppressive nature of women and traditionally women are not supposed to be cruel and aggressive.

Elaine's identity crisis begins at the moment in which she loses both her power and identity. One incident illustrates how Elaine loses her power. It occurs when the girls play the burial of Mary Queen of Scots in which Cordelia, Carol and

Grace bring Elaine who impersonates Marry Queen into a hole. At first Elaine deals with it as a game but when they put her into the hole, she recognizes that it is not a game. Describing this horrible incident Elaine says “when I was put in the hole I knew it was a game; now I know it is not one. I feel sadness, a sense of betrayal. Then I feel darkness pressing down on me: then terror...the point at which I lost power” (125-26). Due to oppressive treatment of three girls, Elaine loses her power and her own self. The moment she enters the world of these girls, she loses her ability to rationalize and they take away her own independent decisions. In this issue Carol Osborne in her article “Constructing the Self through Memory: *Cat’s Eye* as a novel of Female Development” states that “when Cordelia and other girls bury her, Elaine has no image of herself in the dark hole, just a square of blackness...at this point she essentially loses her identity” (104). Thus effect of this harsh treatment upon Elaine leads her into deep depression, self-hatred and even self-mutilation. At this point she loses her both identity and power.

In this sense, Atwood presents the reversal of the traditional notion of safe girl and dangerous man. Cordelia is more dangerous than man for Elaine because she is oppressive and harshly judgemental. Cordelia and her two friends always pointing out Elaine’s failings, her weakness, mocking the way she walks, the way she eats, the way she laughs. They torment her own image, reject her and worse thing is that they bury her alive. At last Elaine cannot tolerate it and finally, she becomes conscious of the fact that she does not need Grace, Carol and Cordelia. She learns that she has a choice and as result, she takes action and becomes stronger. Elaine remarks:

I am still a coward, still fearful; none of that has changed. But I turn and walk away from her. It is like stepping off a cliff, believing the air will hold you up. And it does. I see that I don’t have to do what she says, and, worse and better,

I have never had to do what she says. I can do what I like...I feel daring, light-headed. They are my not my best friends or even my friends. Nothing binds me to them. I am free. (229)

In this way, ultimately, Elaine decides to not playing with those abusive girls and she develops her own self. Elaine realizes that if she fits the stereotypical representations of women she is controlled by her friends. After realizing this, she accepts her otherness and starts to follow her own instinct. Elaine found the strength to stand up to the girls and broke off her friendship with them. Slowly Elaine started to forget all the cruelty done by them. She felt stronger every day. Thus with reference to Butler's idea of performativity, Elaine perform roles that show variation rather than stereotypical behavior.

Atwood does not hold one-dimensional view of male domination and refrains from one sided denunciation of patriarchy in her novel *Cat's Eye*. Traditionally feminist issues such as female repression and patriarchal oppressions were given focus but Margaret Atwood views the process of women victimization from different angle in this novel because women are themselves victimizers. Power games are mostly played out between women characters. Atwood holds women characters like Cordelia and Mrs. Smeath who are responsible for the suffering of Elaine. *Cat's Eye* is a disrupting tale of female cruelty. Elaine is not only oppressed by her girlfriends but also by other women's like Miss Lumley and Mrs. Smeath. Miss Lumley is a harsh school teacher who often beats Elaine in classroom. She is devoid of virtues such as generosity, sympathy and sensitivity which are generally associated with women. She forces Elaine to take all the steps in order to get accepted into feminine world of Toronto.

Similarly when Mrs. Smeath comes to know that Elaine does not belonging to

any religion, she invites her to attend church with them. Elaine takes it as an opportunity to get mixed up in their society and she attends church with Mrs. Smeath. But in fact Mrs. Smeath brings Elaine to church to make herself look religious, generous and sympathetic in the society. Furthermore, she is also aware of ill-treatment that Elaine receives by her friends but she does nothing instead encourages it. She rather believes that this ill-treatment is “God’s punishment to Elaine. It serves her sight”(213). Thus, through this statement Mrs. Smeath tries to justify the terrible way Elaine is treated by her friends. So Elaine begins to hate Mrs. Smeath. Her hatred is expressed through following statement: “I hate Mrs. Smeath, because what I thought was a secret, something going on among girls, among children, is not one. It has been discussed before, and tolerated. Mrs. Smeath has known and approved. She has done nothing to stop it. She thinks it serves me right” (213). By knowing Elaine’s all situations, Mrs. Smeath does nothing to help her. In this way, we see that most of the protagonist’s victimization occurs at the hands of women. Elaine suffers at the hand of her own gender. In this sense this novel subverts the conventional notion of women that they are soft hearted and emotional to each other.

Therefore, Elaine makes her turn to the opposite gender for support. Elaine Raisley is Atwood’s protagonist who feels uncomfortable with universalizing feminist discourses. She feels much more comfortable with boys whom she considers her secret allies. She says “sisterhood is a difficult concept for me, because I never had a sister. Brotherhood is not” (404). It proves that how Elaine feels uncomfortable with feminine discourses and she feels comfortable with boyish relationship. Further, these words which point to a learned rather than an instinctual response to gender debate and it is the position that Atwood begins to open and explore in the novel.

The ideas of women’s liberation that spread with the second wave feminism

settle in the protagonist Elaine's mind. The issues of gender roles were of particular interest in the 1980s when women of Canada began to make up a significant portion of the professional world and achieved high-ranking positions for the first time in significant numbers. During that time, women in the North America began to challenge stereotypical definitions of how women should behave and to question the traditional roles assigned to them. In the novel Elaine identifies herself as different from the other women. She says:

At parties they start to ask leading questions...I avoid gatherings of these women. They make me more nervous than ever. At times I feel defiant: What right have they to tell me what to think... do not boss me around. But also I envy their conviction, their optimism, their carelessness, their fearlessness about men, their camaraderie. (445)

Elaine is aware of the binary polarization and the repression of women, the objectification and the demonization of those who try to find a voice. However, she finds herself different from them because she had a privileged life. She had never been beaten up, raped and gone hungry. To support this point she takes the example of her husband Ben, she does not feel overmatched by him. Whatever he did to her, she did back and maybe worse. Therefore, Elaine distances herself from prejudicial, sexist communication by judging the men as ridiculous or immature.

Furthermore, in *Cat's Eye* Elaine is not only oppressed by women but men also contribute to her oppression. She has affairs with two men, but both failed. From the time when Elaine begins to her first love affair with her art teacher Josef, he is the one who has the power over her. Gradually Josef starts to control her life in the name of improving her art skill. Once, he suggests to her that she should wear purple dress: "you should wear purple dresses, it would be an improvement" (385). These lines

give a clear picture of ownership of patriarchy upon woman who has dream to become different. Josef feels women should live for him. Elaine follows Josef's advice. Although Elaine does not want to perform femininity she does it in order to please Josef. This shows that gender identity is constructed through power relations as Judith Butler argues:

The masculine/feminine binary constitutes not only the exclusive framework in which that specificity can be recognized, but in every other way the 'specificity' of the feminine is once again fully decontextualized and separated off analytically and politically from the constitution of class, race, ethnicity, and other axes of power relations. (6)

The society creates binary opposition as masculine and feminine. In patriarchal society, males are in power and through this binary opposition they dominate females. So, gender identity is constructed by persons who are in power. The family, society teaches women to follow different roles such as being submissive, nurturing etc. the rules and regulations are often made to dominate women in many aspects. Here, Elaine is conscious about her role and that exposes gender identity is not natural rather it is a construction.

In addition, Josef sexually exploits his art students and treats them as an object to fulfill his erotic desires. Elaine comes to understand Josef's reality in persecution of Susie, her fellow art student. Furthermore, Josef shows no respect, he does not give her any credit as an artist. He regards her as his property. So, Elaine excludes Josef from her life as he is considered as a threat to her identity. In this way, Elaine stands for herself and she also raises her voice every time when there is the remarkable questions come under the identity and women's right. Elaine stands out as bold woman who does not fear of conventional norms and values which are only

meant to break the confidence and vibes of a woman.

Furthermore, *Cat's Eye* unfolds the life of Elaine where different shades are reflected regarding the struggle of maintaining her position and identity. Elaine's instructions of leading her life and the atmosphere around her are different than her own principal of living life. She contributes in the women's consultation that she realizes how female painters are repressed by male painters: "if you are bad, you're a lady painter. Otherwise you're just a painter" (328). It shows how badly women are treated in the field of art. When she is good, the male painters call her a painter and when she is bad, the very male painters call her a lady painter. In her affair with Jon, Elaine found out her pregnancy and she is trapped into marriage. She realizes that her husband also does not take her interest as an artist seriously as well as he never supports her. Jon asks her to not paint at night and he prefers to her to stop painting as well. She says:

Jon does not like me painting at night...He does not say what he thinks of my paintings, but I know anyway. He thinks they are irrelevant. In his mind, what I paint is lumped in with the women who paint flowers. Lumped is the word. The present tense is moving forward, discarding concept after concept, and I am off to the side somewhere, fiddling with egg tempera and flat surfaces, as if the twentieth century has never happened. (405)

This speech symbolizes the conservative male view towards women artists. Elaine recognizes her individuality and creativity are violated by her husband who himself is a painter. This clarifies how male artists are indifferent towards female artists due to their gender-based attitude.

As a result, Elaine resists against her husband. Finally, she gets courage to leave Jon and she divorced him. She takes her daughter Sarah and moves to Vancouver. She

explains:

In the morning, after he leaves, I bundle Sarah into the stroller and take some of my money out of bank. I don't know where to go. All I think of is away. I buy us tickets to Vancouver, which has the advantage of being warm, or so I suppose, I stuff our things into duffle bags, which I've bought at Army Surplus. (422)

In this way, in order to survive, Elaine does not depend on her male companions for her identity and attain a distinct identity of her own. These lines seem the bold and courageous decision about Elaine. Being dissatisfied with her routine life, she breaks away from it and escape to another place. The confident of Elaine proves her feminine character as masculine. She takes her daughter Sarah along with her and she has played the role of father too.

In this context, Judith Halberstam also raises the binary opposition between male and female. In his own words, he questioned, "why are we comfortable thinking about men as mother, but we never consider women as father?" (269). This is the main problem in the contemporary society too. Halberstam's argument proves that the binary between male and female is created by men themselves. In conventional society, people think a father can play the role of mother but mother cannot play the role of father. However, Elaine challenges the binary between male and female roles. She takes all responsibilities of her daughter and she successfully played the role of both mother as well as father. Thus, Atwood's protagonist rebel against the socially constructed gender roles and she denies to be confined within four walls of her house.

In patriarchal society, a woman is not allowed to leave home and is not allowed to second marriage but Elaine is against the traditional norms and values. In Vancouver she meets Ben and marries him. There are of course, laws and restrictions

within a society, culture or family that may determine how you are allowed to present or perform your gender but Elaine goes beyond the boundaries of these restrictions. She acts out different roles from those traditional good women. It can be seen in Elaine's relationships with Jon, her first husband and Josef, her lover and art mentor. By dating both of them she acts out different roles as a sort of experiment. Thus, performing different roles Elaine goes beyond the conventional notion of gender roles and questions patriarchal norms.

Therefore, the novel narrates the story of a woman who has set her journey to live alone in order to fulfilling her dreams and achieving her goals of life. She wants to become a painter. For this, she goes against her family. She narrates that "As my father, he thinks my talent for drawing is impressive, but wasted" (338). Her father knows Elaine's talent but he does not want to see her as a painter so he thinks it is waste of time. Her parents want to make her a college teacher. She leaves her parents to establish her own independent identity. Elaine proves herself as a strong woman who has freedom whether to become artist or not. After lots of struggles throughout her life, finally, Elaine emerges as a successful painter. Hence, she makes her career in the field of art which is so far dominated by the males and where women artists are not taken seriously. Eventually, she is able to achieve a new identity for herself.

Cat's Eye narrates the story of a woman who fights almost every day to become who she is. The draw line created by the society, Elaine's family has been challenged by her. The ups and downs in Elaine's life made her unbreakable. She enlarges the definition of woman from household to the world where she stands as an independent. So, Atwood proves that a woman can successfully play the roles of a wife, mother and artist. By becoming a successful artist, Elaine disrupts the stereotypical images of women. She breaks the boundaries of a traditional patriarchal

society.

This paper has investigated how gender identities of female characters are unstable and socially and culturally constructed. Atwood emphasizes the social and cultural construction of gender through the protagonist of *Cat's Eye* Elaine Risley. During her school days, she becomes conscious of gender construction for the first time. As she notices the culturally constructed differences between boys and girls, she exposes that gender identity not to be innate and this is the main focus of Judith Butler's theory of performativity. Elaine's gender roles and identity are also constructed by power relations while having affair with her teacher as she performs femininity merely to please him. But after knowing that gender is construction, she performs gender not according to conventional behavior and she challenges the social ideas about gender.

The roles of men and women are differently defined and have been followed since the ages but particular roles which confines women inside the four walls are rejected by Elaine. As Butler argues, gender roles are not something from our birth rather it is repeatedly followed by men and women in society but Elaine proves herself beyond the limited definition of women in the society. Her husband expected her to live a life as a house wife and as a mother but she divorces him by going against him. She lives far away from her family, continues her study and establishes her identity as a professional artist. In this way, Elaine proves that by performing gender roles not according to conventional way, the performer can modify the social ideas about gender identity. So, one can bring changes in his/ her identity by challenging socially and culturally constructed gender roles. This novel challenge the basic assumption regarding the existence of identity only in the social context.

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