



ACTS OF BECOMING: MASCULINE PERFORMANCE IN THE NOVEL *I AM J* THROUGH THE LENS OF JUDITH BUTLER

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Abstract: What if gender is not something we are, but something we do? This debate-inducing question forms the fundamental basis of Judith Butler's theory of Gender Performativity, which asserts that gender is not an innate identity and is constructed socially through repeated acts. This article examines Cris Beam's novel *I Am J* through this framework of gender performativity and explores the life of a transgender protagonist in traversing the complexities of identity that lies outside the prescribed standards of gender and social acceptance. It analyzes J's assertion of his manliness, as a performance that is constantly produced and performed in a heteronormative society which advocates binary gender system of male and female, rather than an expression of an essential self. J's performance of masculinity reflects and resists rigid gender expectations, showing the tension between authenticity and conformity. On a broader level, it delves into the social implications of gender performativity, emphasizing how individuals are not only influenced by rigid gender norms, but also exhibit the potential to subvert and redefine them. The novel transcends the boundaries of a personal coming-of-age story and remains as a subversive narrative that destabilizes the two gender framework and foregrounds the lived experiences of transgender individuals. Ultimately through close textual analysis, this article shows how performativity can operate as a medium for navigating societal norms and as a way towards personal affirmation and identity formation through the intersection of theoretical framework and literature.

Index Terms – Gender Performativity, performance, transgender, gender identity and masculinity.

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary field of gender studies, gender identity is perceived as performative, fluid and socially constructed identity. The prominent gender theorist Judith Butler questions the typical concept of gender which states that gender is a fixed and innate identity. Butler introduces the concept of Gender Performativity in her 1990 seminal text *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* and argues that gender is not something about 'being' but something about 'doing.' She defines gender as "the stylized repetition of acts through time (Butler 179)." According to her, gender is produced and performed through a series of recurrent actions and gestures like body language, clothing style, vocal modulation, behavioral pattern etc. These actions are influenced by social and cultural standards and are pivotal to the individuals' expression of their identity. This article aims to analyze the concept of gender as performance through Cris Beam's novel *I Am J* using Butler's gender performativity. *I Am J* is an American young adult fiction which features a transgender teenage boy J. J's life is distinguished by continual negotiation of identity that reflects Butler's notion of performative nature of gender. The protagonist's performance of masculine identity explains how masculinity is performed and recognized in the conventional society. This study analyzes how Beam's novel illustrates the performative aspect of gender to the forefront by illuminating J's intentional efforts to construct and perform masculinity.

AN OVERVIEW OF *I AM J*

The novel tells the story of seventeen years old trans boy J of Puerto Rican and Jewish descent. J has been assigned female at birth and named Jenifer by his parents. Despite this, he identifies as a boy at the very early age. As he matures, the genuine identity becomes significant as the emotional weight of masking his masculinity remains intolerable. He prefers baggy outfits to hide his feminine body features, flattens his breast with a hand-made chest binder and gradually detaches from the society. Initially his best friend Melissa misunderstands J and stays away from him. Feeling left out from both peers and family, he decides to work on his trans-masculine identity. J explores the internet and learns about similar people and their experiences, thereby gaining insights into transgender identity. He leaves his house assuming that his parents are ingrained in binary gender system and this escalates his internal and external conflicts. He grooms himself as a boy, assumes a male name J, a shortened form of Jason and takes refuge in a place which exclusively works for LGBTQ+ individuals. He also gets into a special school for queers and gets connected with similar individuals. Channele, a trans girl is one of his friends who eventually emerges as a

guiding figure in J's life. From here, J openly lives as a boy and feels validated, at least by few people around him. Unfortunately he is taken back to his home, creating an awkward situation where he comes out to his mother Carolina. At first, Carolina is unable to accept J's transness and deflects her discomfort by projecting it onto Manny, J's father. She uses Manny as a shield to avoid this harsh reality, claiming that Manny will not accept J with his trans nature. Rather than encouraging J, she insists him to live with Melissa's family, who are very supportive to J's surprise. Simultaneously J begins to lead a life as his authentic self, working on his treatment plans. When Carolina's deception is unmasked, Manny learns about J's masculine identity. Unlike Carolina, he offers support for J's transition, although he remains unconnected with him on an emotional level. The novel closes with J getting an approval letter for a photography program addressed as Mr. Sliver, a sign that his masculine identity is finally recognized and he is being seen by the society as his true self. *I Am J* remains significant for its humanizing depiction of transgender protagonist who navigates the complexities of adolescence and gender identity in a world which honors only male and female categorization.

J'S PERFORMANCE OF MASCULINITY

From the outset of Cris Beam's novel, the transgender boy J turns down the essentialist notion of gender which ties the concept of gender with biological sex. J performs masculinity consistently and suppresses his feminine characteristics deliberately. From his childhood phase, he senses a strong feeling of being packed in a body that does not match his true personal self. This displeasure roots him in a deep conviction that his physique is naturally incongruous with his inner gender identity. This proclamation questions the cultural belief in a natural alignment between gender and sex. Regardless of the discomfort, he experiences moments of validation when people unknowingly addresses him as a 'boy' in his very young age. This misrecognition affirmed J's masculine aspects and depicts his yearning to inhabit the manliness traits fully in a society that often neglects individuals who are at odds with their gender identity.

The Politics of Appearance

Upon realizing his true identity, J consciously refashioned his external look as a definitive step towards presenting his masculine self by switching to conventionally approved masculine clothes. To conceal his feminine body features, he puts on multiple clothes and hides "his hips in the baggy jeans and his chest in two sports bras and all the shirts (Beam ch. 2)." He always opts for outfits that are either gender- neutral ones or traditionally wore by male like baggy jeans, sports jersey, thermal underwear, boxers etc. His clothing preference makes his gender expression visible and provides him comfort and confidence. The outfit helps transgender people to display themselves and society the gender they experience. The past study shows how fashion and clothing choice act as a symbol of affirmation of one's gender identity and writes "their identity is internally reaffirmed through choosing their gendered dress, and externally reinforced through others seeing them wearing that clothing, like a transwoman wearing a skirt (Oberhagemann)." Through these sartorial changes, J passes between the inner identity and social perception, using fashion as a robust tool in the performance of his masculine gender. His refusal to groom in feminine manner is a significant performative act because his action neglects the scripted roles of female and highlights his claim to masculinity. This shows the disagreement between the individuals and institutional regulations which is a key focus in Butler's theory.

J's use of handmade chest binder becomes a game changer in his depiction of manly figure. He learns to sew a binder as it will reshape his upper body to a feature that identifies with male body. This binder actively flattens his breasts, which marks his feminine sex. He wears this binder daily and practices his performance in a street outside his hometown. With no doubts, he successfully passes as a boy among a group of young girls and even develops a romantic relationship with a girl named Blue. This bodily transformation is a continuous, embodied act through which J gains social recognition as male. His continuous practice of male- coded behavior in different places underlines the performative process.

In his journey towards incorporating masculinity, J begins to work out regularly to build his muscles and modify his anatomy that resonates with his sense of self. Furthermore, he notices the fellow males and learns male gestures like the manner of walking, seated posture, etc. This act of learning to pass like a man is not simply an imitation for J but a significant way in manifesting his true identity in every social interaction. This conscious adaptation of manly attributes makes him to negotiate social spaces and avoid misgendering in the cisnormative society. All these attempts are ritualized performance which strongly adheres to social and cultural norms of 'what' and 'how' masculinity looks like. These are the early and visual enactments of masculinity towards aligning his outward appearance with his inner identity.

Naming the Self

J's performance of gender moves beyond the external look to linguistic and vocal markers in order to affirm his sense of self. He signals and asserts his masculinity through his chosen name J, which becomes a symbol for his self- defined identity, thereby more directly subverting gendered assumptions that are tied to his assigned name Jenifer Juana Silver. The article "The Role of Name Choice in the Construction of Transgender Identities" explains how the person's name acts as a constitutive of identity and validation in the society. It highlights how renaming is deeply related to performing one's genuine gender identity in case of transgender individuals and states "names, like clothing and physical appearance, are external representations of gender identity which may be changed during the transition process transgender individuals undergo. These changes...allow them to feel more "natural" in their behaviour rather than self-conscious (VanderSchans)." Butler claims that language is performative and this act of renaming remains as a crucial act in insisting J's gender.

Matching Voice with Identity

J also works on modulating his voice as a part of his gender performance. The clinical focus research article "Transgender and Nonbinary Adolescents: The Role of Voice and Communication Therapy" analyzes the significance of voice which works as a gender marker in all individuals. It says "adolescence and puberty have a profound effect on voice, which is critical in expressing authentic self and affects the way an individual's gender is perceived...leading to voice changes that may become a source of gender dysphoria or be incongruent with gender identity or gender expression (Russell and Abrams)." Here, he purposefully decides to deepen his voice to match masculine voice which is usually deep and low- pitched when

compared with feminine voice. J decides to start testosterone therapy as a performative identity work because it will match his audible presence with his masculinity.

Embodiment of Masculinity

J's actions and behaviors are the iterations that help him move closer to being recognized as male. With Butler's notion of gender performativity in mind, it could be stated that J is 'performing' and 'repeating' masculinity until they adhere into his recognized identity. J's journey shows how masculinity is not an inherent identity but a stylized repetition through which a 'male' comes into being. J's conscious actions and preferences do not simply establish his identity but rather constitute it. His man-coded acts allow him to exhibit manly experiences socially and psychologically, which validates Butler's words, "gender proves to be performance- that is constituting the identity that is purported to be (Butler 33)." Her theory highlights how gender is performed in and through body. Here J's body gets to be a prime tract for gender struggle, thus becoming a source of gender dysphoria- "the distress that may accompany the incongruence between one's experienced or expressed gender and one's assigned gender" (American Psychiatric Association 512) and a medium for gender performance. J's gender experience is in process and his manhood is what he constantly negotiates which actually reflects that gender is never fully achieved but is always in the process of becoming. His bodily practices, linguistic self assertion and social interactions prove J to be a great example of Butler's claim into performative nature of gender.

CONCLUSION

In the present century, trans identities are becoming accepted gradually. The novel *I Am J* becomes an essential work in reconstructing gender beyond binaries and essentialism. In highlighting the journey of J, it depicts the labor involved in 'doing' gender, very particularly for transgender individuals. Through J, it explains how trans people must 'act into being' the very identity that other cis people are taken for granted and visualizes the implications of performing gender in real life. Through this study, it is evident that gender is not something we are, but it is something we do and something we all can, together, do differently.

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