

Identity and Performance in Margaret Atwood Novel *Cat's Eye*

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Abstract

Studies of gender identity show gender and sex are not natural but they are the products of working of power in societies such as institutions, discourse, and practices. One of the contributions of recent gender studies is to question the instability of masculine and feminine gender identity. This study is an application of Judith Butler concept 'performative' on Margaret Atwood novel Cat's Eye(1988) relying on Butler's concepts of identity and performance. The novel deals with gender performativity and the role of patriarchal society played on the female characters. Throughout her female protagonists, Atwood raises the question of woman's place in a patriarchal society. 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.

Keywords: gender, identity, patriarchy, performance, performativity.

1. Introduction

The trend nowadays is towards women writing and one of the most celebrated Canadian writers in the west to date is Margaret Eleanor Atwood. According to Banurekaa & Abinaya (2013), Atwood expresses the dilemmas, contradictions, and uncertainties of the late twentieth century with all its difficulties and extremities (p. 24). Throughout her writing, she voices strong feminist themes; in most of her novels the female characters are a representation of "every woman" who is victimized and minimized by politics and gender. Atwood major concern is the issue of gender in which she portrays the suffering of her female character confined to their feminine roles. She is regarded a feminist writer and her novels depict the strength and proactive nature of women as they struggle with inequality (Macpherson, 2010, p. 33-34).

As a young girl, Atwood was exposed to one important lesson of the time –society anticipation of women to choose between family and career. Nevertheless, Atwood overlooked it and refused to play the role of a stereotype housewife, inspired by her mother who also rejected such traditional roles assigned to a woman. This leads to Atwood's disregard for gender assigned roles (Das, 2009, p.10). It is so obvious in her writing that most of her protagonists rebel against the stereotype image of a housewife.

Atwood preoccupation is with the status of a woman in a society which is predominantly male-oriented. Woman is quite universally acted as a willing victim of unwritten codes of conduct laid down by an essentially patriarchal society. Thus, she is a willing victim because she does not see herself as a victim, and continues to be a victim of masculine hegemony. That is to say, society assumes woman to be a good role model. Atwood condemns the notion that every woman needs to be a good role model (Macpherson, 2010, p.35-36). In her books, she proposes that social expectations play a fundamental part in woman's identity construction.

Atwood's protagonists are forced to undergo a varying degree of victimization. Besides, they set out on a journey to rediscover lost part of their self and restore their independent identity. In fact, the woman is a victim of patriarchal forces that suppress and enslave her, thus causing a recurrent threat to her identity. Atwood usually presents two categories of human – the victim (the suppressed female) and the victimizer (the dominating male). She highlights the dominating male power structure. Atwood regularly raises the question of woman's place in a male-oriented society (Macpherson, 2010, p. 38-39), through her women protagonists, who act as her mouthpiece. In *Cat's Eye* (1988), Atwood shows how the characters somewhat imitating or playing a role, which is enforced upon them by patriarchy contributes to present gender's construction.

It sheds light on power politics in inters personal relationships, women relationship and the complexities between them where women often abuse or suppress each other. Preceding researches on *Cat's Eye* has mostly been concentrated on childhood trauma, feminist issues such as repression, patriarchal domination, memory and identity, or the genre of the female *Bildungsroman* and *Kunstlerroman*. There has been little research on gender identity and especially performativity of feminine characters in the novel.

However, Clausen is one critic who is discussed the feminine difference and gender performativity in the novel. She claims that the concept of performativity in Elaine's situation shows to be a means to question patriarchal standards, by consciously reproducing on her own gender role, and by performing and being improved through this performance (2015, p.26). Karásková's study attempts to highlight the identity development of the main character Elaine, and to illustrate the significance of memories in accomplishing individual identity (2012, p.31). Meanwhile, Gregersdotter explore show the female characters are frequently in places of friendship, protectors of the patriarchal system, and as a result, they mainly guard and observe themselves and each other. This act of watching in fact starts during the years of childhood (2003, p.176-180). Accordingly, there were multiple perspectives on the novel due to the different approaches used to tackle the novel. The research attempts to discuss the following objectives; to determine how society and culture imposed certain things on women to perform in order to be accepted in her society; it intends to accomplish a systematic presentation of Margaret Atwood novel *Cat's Eye* in regard to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, and finally to investigate the influence of discourse on women characters in the novel.

2. Theoretical Background

The concept of gender came into common discussion within the early 1970s. Bandura in *Social learning theory* claims that both gender role and gender identity are learned through a procedure involving observation, imitation, punishment, and reinforcement. This model presumes that parents and others outline gender roles for the child and since the boy or girl is continually rewarded for sex-typed behaviours, it turns out to be a rewarding to think of oneself as a boy or a girl. Thus, the adoption of these socially prescribed gender-roles precedes and constitutes the basis for the development of gender identity (1977, p.247). This, in particular, goes in line with Butler's theory of gender performativity. In *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler presents her widely recognized concept of gender performativity. According to Sjögren (2010), in order to develop the performative theories of gender, Butler uses Foucault's ideas on how the self-identity is constructed. The idea of historicizing not only sexuality but also sex and the body, in Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, has extremely influenced Judith Butler (p. 46-47). Actually, Butler develops Foucault's ideas into a theory of radical gender subversion in her classic *Gender Trouble*. Here, she opposes the idea that the biological body has anything *per se* to do with gender, and claims gender to be constructed through repetitious behaviour and performance. For the study of gender, Butler appropriates Foucault's theories: A genealogical critique refuses to search for the origins of gender, the inner truth of female desire, a genuine or authentic identity ... rather, genealogy investigates the political stakes in designating as an origin and cause those identity categories that are in fact the effects of institutions, practices, discourses. (*Gender Trouble*, p. xxxi)

Consequently, Farahbakhsh & Zohari (2016) in their article entitled "Gender Performances" mention that the first thing to remember is that Butler depicts the term 'performativity' from J. L. Austin *How to Do Things with Words*. Butler concentrated primarily on the repetitive nature of gender and applies the term to gender performances in order to elaborate how we perform them (1962, p.149). Besides, Butler in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), observes that "performativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-representation; nor can it be simply equated with performance" (p.95). Consequently, Butler attempts to clarify the misreading of the concepts of 'performance' and 'performativity' arguing that what she means by 'performativity' is different from theatrical performance.

Butler provides theorists of gender and identity with a rich theoretical language with her theory of "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution". The distinction between sex and gender as a social construction, that sex is formed by society and culture is not a new idea since Ann Oakley's *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972), and Anne Fausto-Sterling's *Myths of Gender. Biological Theories about Women and Men* (1985), argued that sex is constructed in interaction with society. Even though Butler's theory of sex and gender as a social construction is not a new idea, her notion of the binary sex/gender enhances our understanding of how we are shaped by the idea of male and female bodies. In which she claims that sex, gender, and sexuality are constrained repetitively and by doing this, it becomes naturalized (Boesten, 2010, p.3).

Butler proposes that gender is a performance acted by individuals and she develops her theory of gender performativity “As a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences...those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (p.522). In her essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” Butler ascribes performativity with philosophy instead of theatre, action theory, and the context of Phenomenological thinking, which claims that social reality is constructed through gestures, language acts, and other symbolic forms of discourse among many other things (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004, 885-88). This supplies the backdrop for Butler’s theory of gender and identity as socially constructed.

She reinterprets the doctrine of constituting act from the Phenomenological tradition discriminates between sex and gender that gender is in no way a stable identity. Instead, it is an identity tenuously shaped in time through “a stylized repetition of acts”. Butler claims that “gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler, 1988, p. 519). Additionally, in *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that “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” (1990, p.33). Indeed, Butler claims that these expressions of gender appear on individuals’ bodies and the movements, gestures and enactments are the performances which result in the belief that gender is connate and natural. 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 (Farahbakhsh & Zohari, 2016, p. 149).

Therefore, gender is performative in this sense that it has no separate status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. In fact, Performances that do not serve to reinforce this law are criticized and repressed. Thus, performativity is not only restrained by cultural factors, but also by discourse and power structures. According to Butler’s attitude, gender performativity is the result of stylized repetition of acts that involves bodily movements and gestures that are culturally approved for masculine and feminine gender. In a specific manner, such acts produce us as men or women in a manner that reinforce the binary system of a heterosexual matrix. Moreover, heterosexual matrix-bound the gender to behave in a binary term (masculine and feminine). Butler emphasizes that these styles are never fully self-styled and have a history (*Gender Trouble*): Sex is not an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of the body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize “sex” and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms. (1990, p. 1-2)

Butler also uses Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir ideas. Merleau-Ponty, in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, claims that “the body in its sexual being” is “a historical idea” instead of “a natural species” which means that the body is not only a historical idea but also set of possibilities to be continually realized. In claiming so, Merleau-Ponty means that the body as a historical idea takes its meaning from a concrete and historically mediated expression in the world. Besides Beauvoir claims in *The Second Sex* that “woman, and by extension, any gender, is an historical situation rather than a natural fact”. That it is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation (Butler, 1988, p. 519-521). In *Gender Trouble*, 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” (De Beauvoir, 1973, p. 301) this phrase reappeared several times throughout Butler’s book *Gender Trouble*. De Beauvoir is obvious on her claim that one “becomes” a woman, but always under a cultural compulsion to become one. And obviously, the compulsion does not come from sex. In her account, Butler claims that there is nothing that guarantees that the one who becomes a woman is essentially female: “There is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a prediscursive anatomical facticity. Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along” (Butler, 1999, p. 12).

Additionally, in “Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics” Butler points out that gender performative signify that the “appearance” of gender is frequently mistaken as a sign of its internal or inherent truth; gender is motivated by obligatory norms to be one gender or the other, which means that: Norms are acting on us before we have a chance to act at all, and that when we do act, we recapitulate the norms that act upon us, perhaps in new or unexpected ways, but still in relation to norms that precede us and exceed us. In other words, norms act on us, work upon us, and this kind of ‘being worked on’ makes its way into our own action. (2009, p. xi)

Moreover, the reproduction of gender is thus always a negotiation with power; as a result, there is no gender without this reproduction of norms that risks undoing or redoing the norm in unexpected ways, accordingly, that opens up the probability of a remaking of gendered reality along with new lines (Butler, 2009, p. i).

3. Discussion

3.1 Performativity as Enforced by Cultural Process

In order to comprehend the progression and development of Elaine's Riskey character and personality in Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, it is essential to consider the influence of cultural factors, discourse and power structures on Elaine's character. Chudějová also suggests that Elaine becomes conscious of the society's gender restrictions for the first time when she starts going to school (2005, p.34). At school, Elaine follows the rules where she has to wear skirts and "the girls hold hands; the boys don't" (CE, p.50-51), as well as to enter the building through the girl's door which is different from the boy's door. This confuses her and leaves her wondering, "[h]ow is going in through a door different if you're a boy?" (CE, p. 46). On the other hand, Gronewold states that by questioning the gender norms at a young age, Elaine notices the culturally constructed differences between boys and girls (2004, p.76-77). Atwood, here, illustrates the instability of gender and how the genders of both sexes are artificial and socially constructed. Consequently, as Butler proposes in "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" (1998) "gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original" (p.722). Therefore, Elaine demonstrates how playing with girls was not natural for her instead it was something she had to learn to do. Elaine states that: "Playing with girls is different and at first I feel strange as I do it, self-conscious, as if I'm doing an imitation of a girl. But soon I get more used to it" (CE, p. 57). Macpherson also clarifies that since Elaine's behaviour is learned and not innate, so it is a clear example of how socialization reifies behaviour or makes what is constructed appears natural (2010, p.60-61). Grown up with a male mate, her brother, she does not feel comfortable to play with girls.

So I am left to the girls, real girls at last, in the flesh. But I'm not used to girls, or familiar with their customs. I feel awkward around them, I don't know what to say. I know the outspoken rules of boys, but with girls I sense that I'm always on the verge of some unforeseen, calamitous blunder. (CE, p. 52)

Accordingly, Butler's theories on performativity are what Elaine illustrates at this point: that gender is a performative and an imitating act. One justification to this point is given by Osborne (1994) who argues that "the customs and rituals of little girls seem strange to her because she has grown up playing with and freely emulating her closest companion, her brother, without worrying about society's gender restrictions" (p.101).

Elaine's life changes once 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 (Karásková, 2012, p. 22). As other girls in the course, Elaine tries to wear the same clothes and talks about the same things they do, but she confesses that: "I feel ill at ease with them, as if I am here under false pretenses" (CE, p. 294). Then, Elaine begins to dress like the boys do, wearing black clothes, in an effort to escape her gender (Gregersdotter, 2003, p.76). Elaine's performance, here, shows that once she cannot achieve the supposed "natural" look of femininity, she exposes that gender identity not to be innate and this is the core of Butler's theory.

3.2 Performativity as Enforced by the Same Sex

At Queen Mary Public School Elaine makes a friendship with Carol Campbell, Grace Smeath and Cordelia. In order to gain Cordelia's approval and friendship, Elaine becomes a scapegoat for her three friends. On account of her family's travelling as well as because of her earlier lack of girlfriends, she feels somewhat different from her classmates. In fact, Cordelia, Carol, and Grace not only impose their ideas on Elaine and never respect her but abuse her for two years with the excuse of improving Elaine's ways of living as well. 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 at school. As a result, Elaine always feels as if they are not her friends but her enemies. Although Elaine is oppressed and abused by her three girlfriends, nevertheless Cordelia is Elaine's worst victimizer, who takes away her self-confidence and identity. Actually, Cordelia assigns Carol and Grace to observe Elaine's day to day activities carefully. These trios of Cordelia, Carol, and Grace force her to walk ahead and they follow behind her so as to perceive her shortcomings. Accordingly, once she allows herself to be shaped by her girlfriends, Elaine loses her own identity (Mehta, 2012, p. 182-183).

Karásková argues that two events illustrate the oppressive treatment of Elaine by Cordelia. The first incident occurs when the girls play the burial of Mary Queen of Scots in which the three girls bring Elaine, who impersonates Mary Queen; into a hole which Cordelia digs in her backyard. 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 (2012, p.17). 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 the darkness pressing down on me: then terror... the point at which I lost power” (CE, p. 115-116).

Thus, Elaine identity crises begin at the moment in which she loses both her power and identity. On the other hand, Osborne indicates that “when Cordelia and the 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” (1994, p.104). Along similar lines, Gregersdotter argues that Elaine willingly slips into the role of a girl-among-girls for three reasons: First, she yearns for girlfriends whom she has only read about in children’s books due to her nomadic lifestyle. Secondly, she does as society expected her, since the reward is acceptance, and she has not discovered any optional behaviour yet. Thirdly, if she does not perform what is expected of her, the punishment will be very harsh (2003, p.69). What Atwood hints to in this novel goes in line with Butler’s theory of gender performativity. Butler’s attitude is that gender performativity is the result of stylized repetition of acts that involves bodily movements and gestures that are culturally approved for masculine and feminine gender. In a specific manner, such acts produce us as men or women in a manner that reinforce the binary system of a heterosexual matrix. Accordingly, the performances that do not serve to reinforce this law are criticized and repressed and this is so clear in this novel.

Another disturbing incident happens at the ravine – a zone the girls were advised not to go nearby as it is full of connotations of death, evil and dirty men. One day in March, while the girls on their way home from school, abruptly Cordelia slides and falls. Once Cordelia sees Elaine laughing, she throws Elaine’s hat into the frozen ravine and forces her to bring it. Then, she promises Elaine that she’ll forgive her if she brings the hat back (Mehta, 2012, p.84-185). Elaine states that “I don’t want to go down there. It’s forbidden and dangerous; also its dark and the hillside will be slippery, I might have trouble climbing up” (CE, p. 206). It is winter, however, the ice is not very hard and it cracks open under her. As a result, Elaine approximately freezes to death and when she lifted her eyes to the bridge for help, the trio of Carol, Grace, and Cordelia abandoned her.

Consequently, Elaine becomes conscious of the fact that she does not need them and they simply used her for their cruel plays (Karásková, 2012, p. 20). Elaine states that: “It’s a game. There was never anything about me that needed to be improved. It was always a game, and I have been fooled” (CE, p.229). Afterwards, she manages to climb out of the ravine and begins stumbling home, meeting her frightened mother, who has been looking for her. Many years later, Elaine discovers that Carol, Grace, and Cordelia went to her mother and told her that Elaine had been kept at school so that her mother would not go searching for her (Webb,2015, p. 94).

Lloyd furthermore, argues that Cordelia indeed is a victim of an abusive family structure. Cordelia has two older sisters, Perdita and Miranda, or Perdite and Mirrie as they are called and they stay together since they are almost the same age (2012, p.7-9). Chudějová states that since Cordelia cannot compare to her attractive and talented older sisters, she makes great effort to keep up appearances in fear of being considered “disappointing” (CE, p.73). As Cordelia cannot adjust to the social expectations required in her family and in an attempt to liberate herself from the constant surveillance performed over her, she refocuses her gaze to Elaine. Elaine presents an easy outlet for Cordelia’s frustrations because she is completely unaware of gender restrictions (2005, p.43-44). When Elaine meets Cordelia as an adult, Cordelia remembers the hole and claims that her aim was never to bury Elaine. Cordelia states that:

“Remember those holes I used to dig?” she says...

“What did you want it for?” I ask.

“I wanted to put a chair in it and sit down there. By myself.”

I laugh. “What for?”

“I don’t know. I guess I wanted some place that was all mine, where nobody could bug me. When I was little, I used to sit on a chair in the front hall. I used to think that if I kept very still and out of the way and didn’t say anything, I would be safe.”

“Safe from what?” I say.

“Just safe,” she says. “When I was really little, I guess I used to get into trouble a lot, with Daddy. When he would lose his temper. You never knew when he was going to do it.” (CE, p. 277-278)

Even though the novel never openly states that Cordelia is abused, but it is suggested that she does not feel secure in her family and this speech indicates Cordelia’s own alienation (Webb, 2015, p. 89). Osborne claims that “[i]n tormenting Elaine, Cordelia is simply acting out the loneliness and rejection she feels within her own family, even echoing her parents’ words in her reprimands of Elaine” (1994, p.102).

3.3 Performativity as Enforced by other sex

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 her first love-affair with her art teacher Josef Hrbik, he is the one who has the power over her as he starts to control her life with the excuse of improving her. He is actually in a similar situation to Cordelia, who was also very powerful. Once he suggests to her that she should wear her hair loose or that she should wear purple dresses, Elaine follows his advice (Karásková, 2012, p. 25-26). In her relationship with him, she lets him choose her dresses: “You should wear purple dresses ... It would be an improvement” (CE, p.331). Although Elaine does not want to perform femininity, she does it in order to please Josef. Hence, Elaine is conscious about her role and that exposes gender identity as unnatural but a construction that she says:Josef takes me to the Park Plaza Hotel Roof Garden, in my new purple dress. It has a tight bodice, a low neck, a full skirt; it brushes against my bare legs as I walk. My hair is loose, and damp. I think it looks like a mop ... I recognize the style: late nineteenth century. Pre-Raphaelite. I should be holding a poppy (CE, p. 332).

In addition, Josef sexually exploits his art students and treats them as an object to fulfill his erotic desires as he does with Susie and Elaine. Elaine comes to understand Josef’s reality in the persecution of Susie, her fellow art student, who commits suicide because of her illegitimate pregnancy. Furthermore, he shows no respect Elaine’s individually and regards her as his property. Thus, he does not give her any credit as an artist so Elaine excludes him from her life as he is considered as a threat to her identity (Mehta, 2012, p. 188). Ahern in “Meat Like You Like” pointed out that, “Her art teacher Josef is a walking catalogue of patriarchal myths of femininity: he feels women should live for him only and has an objectivizing, pre-Raphaelite vision of women as helpless flowers, or shapes to be arranged and contemplated” (1993, p.12).

Adding, one can see the impacts of patriarchal ideology once Elaine gradually gives up the art school and begins her career as a free-lance painter. She contributes in the woman artist’s consultation that she realizes how female painters are repressed by the male painters and are restricted within the four walls of their houses. Despite the intrinsic merit of their work, they are underpaid for their works and their status is deteriorated by the male artists as second-rate (Mehta, 2012, p.188). In her essay “On Being Woman Writer” in *Second Words* Atwood pointed out this kind of discrimination against the female artists where she remarks on the gender-based attitude of the male artists: “Good equals male and bad equals female. I call it the lady painter syndrome When she’s good, the male painters call her a painter; when she’s bad; the very male painters call her a lady painter” (1982, p.197). Furthermore, in her affair with Jon, Elaine is trapped into marriage when she found out her pregnancy. She realizes that her husband also does not take her interest as an artist seriously as well as he never supports her. Actually, he believes that she is mad since she is a woman. Jon not only does not ask her to paint at night but he even prefers her to stop painting as well. She says: Jon does not like me painting at night... He doesn’t 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... as if the twentieth century has never happened. (CE, p. 376)

This speech symbolizes the conservative male view towards women artists. Elaine recognizes that her individuality and creativity are violated by her inconsiderate husband, who himself is a painter. As a result, the readers can see how male artists are indifferent towards female artists due to their gender-based attitude (Mehta, 2012, p. 189). Tandon & Chandra argue that this novel questions and challenges the gender prejudice of male art history which condemns a woman painter to a passive character on account of her femininity (2009, p.159). Lloyd also remarks that Elaine also observes that the fathers of her childhood friends are also oppressive and violent against their families. In Cordelia’s household, Elaine perceives that owing to his contempt and his habit to criticize his family, Cordelia’s father turns the house into a divided one. As soon as he is at home, the family sits down at the dinner table and everything has to be arranged. The table is perfectly laid and the family members also have to be appropriately dressed. But when her father is not there things are much more spontaneous (2012, p.7-8).

Carol also declares the power of her father in her home, saying that if she is making a note wrong “her mother spans her with a hairbrush or else a slipper. When she’s really in for it she has to wait until her father comes home and whacks her with his belt, right on the bare bum” (CE, p.54). One can illuminate the way Cordelia and Carol treat Elaine due to their father oppressive behaviour, therefore, it is crystal clear that their reaction is a kind of conversion of their own oppression.

3.5 Elaine’s identity

Elaine undergoes identity crises in her relationship with her husband as he not only repressed her artistic creativity but he is also unfaithful. Thus, she divorces Jon and travels to Vancouver with her daughter, Sarah. Elaine rebels against the gender-based attitude of her husband and rejects to adapt to the socially approved role of mother and wife. Elaine decided to live an independent life with her daughter. She completely dedicates herself to painting and joins in several women meetings and art shows. Subsequently, Elaine adopts painting as a full-time career and draws a series of painting including, “*Falling Women*”, “*Life Drawing*”, “*Cat’s Eye*” as well as a series of paintings about her mother. In her painting “*Falling Woman*”, Elaine displays the true character of Jon and Josef who are responsible for her victimization. Her next painting “*Life Drawing*” draws attention to the gender politics - the sexist behaviour of male painters and presents the patriarchal ideology of Josef and Jon, the male painters. Elaine’s other painting entitled “*Unified Field Theory*” portrays one of the most disturbing events from her past. In that picture, she exposes a description of the winter evening when she fell through the ice into the ravine (Mehta, 2012, p. 189-190).

In Elaine’s self-portrait entitled *Cat’s Eye*, she states that: “At a distance ... there are three small figures, dressed in the winter clothing of the girls of forty years ago. They walk forward, their faces shadowed, against a field of snow” (CE, p. 446). As a reader, one can see that in that portrait she is still haunted by the memory of Cordelia, Carol, and Grace when they abandoned her at the river.

Furthermore, in that picture she articulates her fragmented self since in this portrait; she has painted only half of her face. Thus, *Cat’s Eye* is a portrait of Elaine’s inner turmoil and it symbolizes her search for identity. Her paintings make her recognize the fact that she is a fragmented self. For Elaine, painting is not only a means of escape but also to conjure people and events from her past to life throughout her paintings and by this time she perceives them differently (Mehta, 2012, p. 190-192).

Once Elaine returns to Toronto for a retrospective show of her paintings she thinks about Cordelia and expects her to come to that art gallery as she wants to understand why she was tormented: “Really it’s Cordelia I expect, Cordelia I want to see. There are things I need to ask her. Not what happened, back then in the time I lost, because now I know that. I need to ask her why” (CE, p.450). But Cordelia does not come and Elaine is disappointed since so many questions are not answered and Elaine has to accept the past by herself: “I’ve been prepared for almost anything; except absence, except silence” (CE, p. 452). So distraught at not seeing Cordelia and in order to find her way, Elaine had to cross the same bridge whereas a child she had that horrible incident with her. Elaine remembers Cordelia, in a nine-year-old incarnation and realizes that she is no more afraid of Cordelia as she asserts her superiority over Cordelia and says: I know she’s looking at me, the lopsided mouth smiling a little, the face closed and defiant. There is the same shame, the sick feeling in my body, the same knowledge of my own wrongness, awkwardness, weakness; the same wish to be loved; the same loneliness; the same fear. But these are not my own emotions any more. They are Cordelia’s; as they always were...I am the older one now; I’m the stronger. (CE, p. 459)

At this time, Elaine comprehends that she is responsible more for her victimization than Cordelia and other girls because she permitted them to treat her that way and dominate her life. She declares that “Whatever has happened to me is my own fault, the fault of what is wrong with me” (CE, p.367). Her fear of being without girlfriends and her weakness indeed made her an escape goat for Cordelia. Concerning Cordelia, Elaine adopts the strategy of role reversal and becomes the stronger one so as to complete her survival. By the end of the narrative, Elaine has excluded Cordelia’s memory from her mind. Thus, by accepting her past and confronting her old traumas, Elaine finds her identity which is completely different from her earlier fragmented identity (Mehta, 2012, p. 194). In this regard, Osborne points out that: Unlike the male protagonists of bildungsroman who separate themselves from earlier experiences, Elaine finds her identity through consciously going back to and accepting her past and the people in it, and embracing herself as she was and is. In this way, Atwood privileges the relational needs of the female protagonist; although Elaine’s childhood makes it difficult for her to form actual relationships with other women, her inner concerns reflect a desire for connection rather than separation from others. (1994, p. 97)

Consequently, *Cat's Eye* seems to support Butler's concept of performance and identity as socially constructed. This is characterized by the female characters and their imitative behaviour in the form of gender Performativity, which becomes a conscious means to achieve agency in patriarchal society. The novel illustrates the complexity which encounters the female characters throughout the course of the novel in order to gain an independent identity. The protagonist of *Cat's Eye* Elaine Risley underwent identity crises in her early childhood she lost her self-due to the conservative value of male-dominated society. It is only by accepting her past memories and confronting her old childhood traumas, Elaine finds her identity. Atwood proves also here that a woman can successfully play the roles of a wife, mother, and artist. She shows that by becoming a successful artist, Elaine disrupts the stereotypical images of women through breaking up the boundaries of a traditionally patriarchal society.

4. Conclusion

The researcher has attempted to investigate that 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, Elaine 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 essence of Butler's theory. Her gender identity is also constructed while having affair with her teacher as she performs femininity merely to please him. Elaine does not restrict to the social and cultural factors and by performing in such a way, she exposes that gender identity not to be innate but a construction made by the patriarchal society and this is the essence of Butler's theory.

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