

Beyond Biological Determinism: Gender as Literary Performativity in Select Transnational Works

Mrs. Kavitha.S¹, Dr. K. Viji²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Vels Institute of Science, Technology
and Advanced Studies (VISTAS), Pallavaram, Chennai.

kavisekarmj@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor & Research Supervisor, Department of English, Vels Institute of
Science, Technology and Advanced Studies (VISTAS), Pallavaram, Chennai

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Abstract

Literature across genres provides fertile ground for examining the intersections of gender and narrative. Writers often deploy gender as a lens through which roles, identities, and experiences are articulated, thereby reflecting and reshaping social perceptions of masculinity, femininity, and non-binary subjectivities. In contexts of migration, literary characters negotiate gender roles within unfamiliar cultural terrains, revealing how transnational identities are performed and contested. This article analyses two diasporic novels—Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*—through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity as articulated in *Gender Trouble*. It argues that gender is not an inherent essence but a series of stylised acts, enacted and re-enacted within cultural scripts. By situating Divakaruni's and Soueif's protagonists within diasporic frameworks, the study demonstrates how gender identities are continually negotiated, resisted, and redefined.

Keywords: Gender performativity, diasporic literature, identity, patriarchy, Judith Butler, cultural negotiation

Introduction

Gender and literature are inseparable, each shaping and informing the other. Literary texts interrogate socially constructed gender norms, foregrounding how

identity, tradition, and autonomy are negotiated across cultural and historical contexts. While gender is often presumed to be biologically determined, Butler's theory of performativity destabilises this assumption, positing that gender is constituted through repeated acts of dress, speech, and gesture that create the illusion of stability. This article applies Butler's framework to diasporic literature, focusing on Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*, to explore how female protagonists reconfigure gender roles in transnational spaces.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: Ritual, Desire, and Performativity

Divakaruni's fiction consistently foregrounds immigrant women negotiating cultural dislocation. In *The Mistress of Spices*, the protagonist Tilo embodies gender as stylised performance. Initially bound by superstition and rigid village norms, she adopts the socially sanctioned identity of a Mistress, defined by ritualised self-denial and caregiving:

"A doxy must sculpt her own wanting out of her casket, must fill the concave left before with the requirements of those she serves" (Divakaruni 45).

This passage exemplifies how femininity is legislated through service and suppression of desire.

Yet Tilo's attraction to Raven destabilises this identity. Her confession, "A desire hops clawed like a barracuda from its retired place in me" (Divakaruni 173) marks a rupture in performative conformity, signalling a shift toward agency and self-authorship. Through Tilo, Divakaruni dramatises Judith Butler's claim 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" (*Gender Trouble* 33).

This reading aligns with Jayanta Mukherjee's observation that Divakaruni's immigrant women "negotiate between inherited cultural scripts and emergent identities, often destabilising patriarchal expectations through desire and agency" (Mukherjee 14). Similarly, Shubha Tiwari argues that Divakaruni's heroines "redefine femininity by resisting silence and ritualised caregiving, thereby asserting the performative nature of identity" (Tiwari 102). Together, these critical perspectives reinforce Butler's proposition that gender is not a fixed essence but a mutable practice, continually reshaped through acts of resistance and negotiation

Ahdaf Soueif: Silence, Agency, and Reperformance

Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* presents Asya as a diasporic figure negotiating marriage, education, and sexual autonomy across Egypt and England. Initially, she performs the role of dutiful wife, suppressing her emotional needs:

"He took her for granted, not like an old fleece in the corner of a dark cupboard, but like the veritably air that he breathed" (Soueif 412)

This metaphor underscores the invisibility of women's labour within patriarchal structures. Asya later critiques canonical literature for silencing female agency:

"All the women in the books you like—Sartre and Camus and all that—they don't live. Not as people. They're only there to stay for the men" (Soueif 527).

Her rejection of these narratives propels her toward intellectual independence. Ultimately, Asya abandons romantic entanglements to pursue a scholarly identity, re-performing femininity not as sacrifice but as self-authorship. Soueif thus illustrates Butler's proposition that gender is a dynamic script, continually reshaped through choice and resistance.

This reading resonates with Ferial Ghazoul's analysis, which argues that Soueif's fiction "foregrounds the tension between female subjectivity and patriarchal expectations, dramatising how women's intellectual and emotional lives resist silencing" (Ghazoul 88). Similarly, Majid Mgami highlights the paradox of female agency in *In the Eye of the Sun*, noting that Asya's journey "oscillates between assimilation into patriarchal norms and the pursuit of liberation through education and self-definition" (Mgami 6). These scholarly perspectives reinforce Butler's claim that gender identity is performative and mutable, situating Asya's transformation as both personal and political.

Comparative Analysis

Despite the cultural differences between India and Egypt, Houston and Cairo, Divakaruni and Soueif converge in their portrayal of women negotiating identity across borders. Tilo and Asya, though situated in distinct diasporic contexts, both confront patriarchal expectations that define femininity as silence, service, or invisibility. Their journeys reveal that gender is neither biologically predetermined nor culturally immutable; rather, it is lived, questioned, and reshaped through acts of resistance.

As Judith Butler observes,

"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" (*Gender Trouble* 33).

This insight underscores how both Tilo and Asya destabilise normative scripts: Tilo through her rupture of ritualised caregiving with desire, and Asya through her rejection of silencing narratives in pursuit of intellectual autonomy.

Both novels demonstrate that diasporic literature provides a critical space for reimagining gender roles. Tilo's desire and Asya's scholarly independence exemplify performative breaks that destabilise cultural conformity, affirming Butler's claim that gender is constituted through repetition but open to disruption.

Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Ahdaf Soueif, though situated in distinct cultural and linguistic traditions, converge in their portrayal of women negotiating identity within diasporic and patriarchal frameworks. Through Tilo's ritualised caregiving and Asya's intellectual resistance, both writers dramatise Judith Butler's proposition that gender is not a stable essence but a performative practice, constituted through repeated acts and open to disruption.

By foregrounding desire, silence, and agency, these narratives reveal how female protagonists resist normative scripts and re-author their identities in transnational spaces. The comparative reading underscores that diasporic literature functions as a critical site where women's voices contest silencing and articulate new forms of self-definition. Ultimately, Divakaruni and Soueif demonstrate that while cultural contexts differ, the struggle for recognition, autonomy, and voice is a shared global narrative, affirming the universality of women's resistance and the continual re-performance of identity.

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