

CHAPTER THREE

POLITICS OF GENDERED PERFORMATIVITY

‘ “Apart from the fact that you’re not really a dyke. You’re probably bisexual. But most of all you’re sexual — you like sex and you don’t care about what gender. You’re an entropic chaos factor.” “I don’t know what I am,” Salander said.’ Stieg Larsson, *The Girl Who Played With Fire* ¹

The previous chapter has discussed in detail how Foucault advances the notion that the juridical systems of power *produce* the subjects, and the subjects, in turn, represent and constitute the juridical systems of power, to eventually posit his alternative and positive version of power that is not prohibitory in nature, and it is positive in the sense that it is a grid or network of forces that are perpetually in opposition to each other and that the network of forces is inescapable. The productions, negotiations, and regulations of the juridical mode of power are deployed in a paradoxical manner of subjugating the subjects through limitation, prohibition, regulation, and control. Regulated in such a way, the subjects, in this method of exegesis, are formed by the very structure of the systems. According to Foucault, then, the juridical subjects are constituted by exclusionary practices adopted by the system, and these practices are normalised with the establishment of juridical political structure.

Judith Butler maintains, though, that the juridical subjects are even ‘protected [...] through the contingent and retractable operation of choice’.² The first segment of this chapter will focus exclusively on Butler’s conception of the formation of the subject within the juridical mode of power through a theorisation of the performative aspect of gender to problematise this notion of ‘choice’.

Simone de Beauvoir's famous sentence, 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman', apprises us to the idea that not only are our bodies culturally constructed, but, in a major sense, we are able to construct ourselves too.³ For Beauvoir, then, it is a project to create a culturally sanctioned corporeal style and significance. It is a way of fashioning the physicality of the body in a given cultural context. Even if it is not widely sanctioned in a given cultural context, it is nevertheless possible to create the intended corporeality in pockets of subcultural acceptance that the hegemonic culture tries hard to suppress, and subsequently consumes within it to reassert its superiority. Corporeality, the physicality of the body, then, becomes a contested site for cultural imprints of meaning, 'both received and innovated', and 'choice in this context comes to signify a corporeal process of interpretation within a network of deeply entrenched cultural norms'.⁴ For Butler, the question is: 'How can gender be both a matter of choice and cultural construction?' (*ibid.*)

If gender is a cultural construction, *and* if it is also a matter of choice, then how far one can enact and exercise this 'choice' in conformity with the cultural construction, or, is it at all possible to exercise this option of 'choice' in specific socio-cultural loci where nonconformity with socially sanctioned gender roles generally engender a deathly silence, sometimes a literally corporeal erasure, i.e., death?

Continuing her interpretation of Beauvoir, Butler points out that since one *becomes* one's gender, it is a futile endeavour to trace the origin of gender, which is often construed as the exact temporal point of the embodiment of the physical body in culturally accepted forms. She says that in 'an important sense, gender is not traceable to a definite origin; it itself is an originating activity incessantly taking place' (p. 614). Gender, therefore, 'is a contemporary way of organising past and future cultural norms, a way of situating oneself in and through those norms, an active style of living one's body in the world' (*ibid.*). According to Butler, Beauvoir appropriates Sartre's idea of prereflective choice and assigns a cultural meaning to

the abstract Sartrean epistemological structure to ground gender as *always a process of becoming*, an endless series of acts that refines, reconstructs, and reinterprets. If it is a choice-based project to consciously create a culturally sanctioned corporeal style of living one's body — and this is how Butler interprets Beauvoir — then that sort of creation is already available to the body as it has already been sanctioned by the dominant cultural norm. If the creation is already available, then what is new about the creation? Or, is it a new creation that gains cultural acceptance by incorporating the dominant ideologies of a culture, a novel and unconventional formation that is diffuse and frayed round its edges to arrange itself into something different from the culturally sanctioned model? One might also argue, that if the dominant culture has forbidden the sanctity of a particular corporeal style, imposing a social and cultural 'no', exercising the juridical negativity, implicitly or explicitly, to a particular style of living one's body, even then that proscription allows one to adopt the forbidding style in a perverse way. Perhaps this is what Butler has in mind when she prescribes that 'becoming a gender is an impulsive yet mindful process of interpreting a cultural reality laden with sanctions, taboos, and prescriptions' (p. 614-615).

The choice to assume a body, then, 'implies a world of already established corporeal styles' (p. 615). In other words, the gender one takes on, the body one wears, are imitative of already established styles. These pre-existing styles might be subversive, and might appear loathsome to the dominant cultural hegemony, but they are already there. So, the question is: how can one organise these styles to embody one's gender in a new fashion, and what does this new enactment signify, and how does that affect the cultural hegemony? Butler's formulaic definition of gender, if one might call it that, is that '[l]ess a radical act of creation, gender is a tacit project to renew a cultural history in one's own corporeal terms' (*ibid.*). Although she hastens to add that it is not a 'prescriptive task we must endeavour to do, but one in which we have been endeavouring all along' (*ibid.*), we need to question how much inferred and how

much insinuated that project is, and whether one's own corporeal enactment of gender in terms of renewing cultural history effects a strengthening of the dominant ideology itself, as it reiterates its supremacy and itself against such perverse self-fashioning.

For Beauvoir, women are 'other' as they are defined by masculine perspectives. By assigning the identity of 'other' to women, men ascribe physicality to them; as the body suffers decay and as it is transient, men overcome this limitation by assigning themselves a transcendence beyond the body — a masculine a-corporeal soul. What are, then, the extent of possibilities for a lived experience of the body, a living interpretation of the body, a body with a different anatomy? This is determined not as much by anatomy than cultural convention.

In 'One is not Born a Woman', Monique Wittig points out that we create 'sexual difference' when we name it and enunciate about it, i.e., sexual difference is discursively produced, and the range of interpretation is only limited to, and specifically fastens and ascribes onto, those anatomical parts that aid reproduction, thereby rendering heterosexuality as an ontological necessity, and, in the process, institutionalising binary sexual difference.⁵ She exposes the social and cultural practice of prioritising and valorising certain anatomical parts as essential for sexual identity. She argues that sex is 'taken as an "immediate given", a "sensible given", "physical features", belonging to a natural order [...] [b]ut what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, an "imaginary formation", which reinterprets physical features (in themselves as neutral as any others but marked by the social system) through the network of relationships in which they are perceived'.⁶ As a child is born, as Judith Butler puts it, '[w]e immediately ask about certain sexually differentiated anatomical traits because we assume that those traits will in some sense determine that child's social destiny, and that destiny, whatever else it is, is structured by a gender system predicated upon the alleged naturalness of binary oppositions and, consequently, heterosexuality'.⁷ Although Butler criticises Wittig for envisioning, in a 'profoundly

humanistic way', 'a new personal and subjective definition' for embodiment that 'can be found beyond the categories of sex' and thus 'ending the use of them',⁸ she also points out that Wittig's theory 'might equally well lead to [...] the dissolution of binary restrictions through the *proliferation* of genders' (p. 618). According to her, to overcome such binary restrictions, and not creating newer forms of these restrictive binaries, or to avoid structuralist shortcomings, one needs to create newer cultural forms and cultural innovations: 'After all, if binary restrictions are to be overcome in experience, they must meet their dissolution in the creation of new cultural forms. As Beauvoir says, and Wittig should know, there is no meaningful reference to a "human reality" outside the terms of culture. The political programme for overcoming binary restrictions ought to be concerned, then, with cultural innovation rather than myths of transcendence' (p. 619).

As has been explored in detail in Chapter Two, in Foucault's work one sees a strategy of how to subvert the juridical model of power, a power structure constituted with the binary of the oppressor and the oppressed, to proliferate the possibilities so that the simple binary loses its significance in the context of a multiplicity of differences. His 'tactic', as Butler points out, 'is not to transcend power relations, but to multiply their various configurations, so that the juridical model of power as oppression and regulation is no longer hegemonic', and, as such, '[w]hen oppressors themselves are oppressed, and the oppressed develop alternative forms of power, we are in the presence of postmodern relations of power' (p. 619). The same strategy can be applied to the gender hierarchy. The strategy is that of a dissolution of the binaries where the elements are proliferated, thus rendering the binary meaningless where the differentials are multiple and not restricted to a simple binary formation. The rallying cry here is to multiply the configurations of power to the point where the juridical model of power as simple oppression loses its significance. Foucault does not negate the materiality of anatomical bodies,

and shows how the material reality of discrete bodies occupy subject positions dictated by culture specific forces.

A real and concrete example of this imposition of culture-specific forces on a particular material body would be that of Herculine Barbin, a nineteenth century hermaphrodite born in Saint-Jean-d'Angély in France in 1838 and committed suicide in 1868. (The British mathematician and the path-breaking creator of artificial intelligence, Alan Turing, could be a different twentieth century example of this cultural unintelligibility of a different and deviant corporeal body.) For Foucault, Butler writes, Barbin is 'neither here nor there' (p. 620), i.e., outside the established categories of sex and gender. She/he lived in a world where 'grins hung about without the cat'.⁹ Herculine Barbin confounds the orthodox binary system controlling sexuality, and represents an ambiguous *flaw*, an incoherence in sexual identity. Since her sexual identity cannot be located culturally, medically, and legally, she is banished by the church authorities. Her anatomical ambiguity is marked in contemporary medical and legal documents to show an urgent desire to establish the binary model of sexuality. The medico-legal 'construction' of her anatomy is the problem here; it shows 'the societal urge and strategy to discover and define anatomy within binary terms' (*ibid.*). This urgent desire and desperate preference for a univocal sexuality to demarcate, designate, and describe anatomy in binary terms — male anatomy and female anatomy — results in drawing attention to, and establish the primacy of, those particular parts of anatomy that are associated with heterosexual reproductive system.

Butler's critical intention, in her theorisation of the performative aspect of gender, is to create trouble for the imposition of gender categories that reinforce gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality. As Sarah Salih has observed, Butler troubles the preconceived notions of gender and subjectivity by 'calling the category of "the subject" into question by arguing that it is a performative construct [...] and asserting that there are ways of "doing"

one's identity which will cause even further trouble for those who have a vested interest in preserving existing oppositions such as male/female, masculine/feminine, gay/straight and so on'.¹⁰ She undermines the universality and unity of the subject of feminism by pointing out the limitations of the representational discourse that constitute the subject of feminism itself. Butler argues that the language of the juridical systems of power that defines 'woman' as a subject of feminism is itself a discursive formation, and 'the effect of a given version of representational politics'.¹¹ In other words, feminist subjects are formed by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate their emancipatory potential. '[P]olitical construction of the subject proceeds with certain legitimating and exclusionary aims, and these political operations are effectively concealed and naturalised by a political analysis that takes juridical structures as their foundation' (*ibid.*). Again, the important question is, what if there is no subject that stands before the hegemonic system of law/language/representation? The ontological certainty and integrity of the subject is a fabular construction by the juridical system that needs the subject to manipulate, limit, and represent. The normalisation of a subject that stands prior to the juridical system, then, is a fictive enactment that 'guarantees a presocial ontology of persons who freely consent to be governed, and thereby, constitute the legitimacy of the social contract' (p. 4).

Juridical law produces the subject, and then blankets the process of the construction of a subject prior to the law to create a naturalised foundational premise that effectively legitimises the regulatory hegemony of the law. Articulation of ideas becomes hegemonic not through popularity, but through the normalisation of their notion that there is no alternative; hegemonic articulation becomes established as rules which bestow coherence and intelligibility on the notion. It is not just adequate to advance the argument for more representational space for subjects in language and politics, but gender theory must also understand how the category of subject itself is constituted and limited by the same structure of power that delineates space for

the subjects. Since the juridical structure of representational language and politics constitute the discursive domain, and since there is no before or outside the domain, only a critical genealogy of this dominant juridical system exposes the constricting circularity of its legitimising practices. The task, as Butler sees it, 'is to formulate within this constituted frame a critique of the categories of identity that contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalise, and immobilise' (p. 7). Her proposal is to 'trace the political operations that produce and conceal what qualifies as the juridical subject of feminism', and this, accordingly, 'is precisely the task of a feminist genealogy of the category of woman' (p. 8).

Butler upsets the balance of much theoretical work of second wave feminism that centres on assuming the sexed subject as a monolithic category that adheres to the language which is deployed to describe it, by pointing out that the same political system that needs to be changed to accommodate the demands of the second wave feminism actually produces and constitutes the subject of women, female, and feminine. The question for Butler, then, is this: 'This becomes politically problematic if that system can be shown to produce gendered subjects along a differential axis of domination or to produce subjects who are presumed to be masculine. In such cases, an uncritical appeal to such a system for the emancipation of "women" will be clearly self-defeating' (p. 3). It is much safer to assume now that a non-theoretical approach cannot do justice to other variable sexual identities, let alone masculine women. The domains of political and linguistic representation pre-emptively constitute the conditions through which the subjects themselves are constituted. In other words, representation is only applied to what is acknowledged as subjects. Representation of a gendered/sexed subject is marked out by the dominating/hegemonic patriarchal system of language, politics, and culture. Therefore, it will be a problematic approach for gender criticism to counter the exploitative domination by using the same language that the hegemonic system

uses to subjectivise various gendered identities and categorise them into marked arenas sanctioned by the same system.

Butler uses the phrase ‘heterosexual matrix’, which means, as she points out in a note in *Gender Trouble*, ‘the grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalised.’ She uses both Monique Wittig’s notion of ‘heterosexual contract’ and Adrienne Rich’s ‘compulsory heterosexuality’¹² to locate a ‘hegemonic/discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility’ that presupposes the fact that to assume a corporeal existence coherently there must be ‘a stable sex expressed through a stable gender [...] that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality.’¹³

Gender is not constituted consistently or coherently in varying historical contexts. It intersects with race, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. ‘As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained’ (pp. 4-5). One generally invokes the idea of gender most of the time to contest the idea that biology is destiny, and gender is taken to be culturally constructed despite the intractability of biological sex. Because of this distinction between anatomical sex and gender, the latter cannot be taken as a casual result of sex, and also not as monolithic as sex. To distinguish between sex and gender, one assumes a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed gender. If only the anatomical sexual parts are considered, then the construction of male sexual identity on the basis of male anatomical characteristics cannot simply be applied to ‘male’ bodies only; and so, too, for ‘female’ bodies. Also, even if one assumes that the sexed body is an unproblematic binary formation, it does not follow that gender, too, is a binary formation. As Butler points out, ‘[t]he presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it’

(p. 9). In other words, when the idea of gender construction loses its dependency on the idea of anatomical sex, then ‘gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a feminine one’ (*ibid.*). Indeed, Butler goes on to question the inflexible idea of anatomical sex and says that ‘[i]f the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construction called “sex” is 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’ (pp. 9-10). We might go so far as taking the idea of anatomical sex as a variable construction, but this conflation with gender cannot be taken too literally here.

One idea that we can glean from the argument is that sex is perhaps not as monolithic as scientific discourses about it centring mainly on the anatomical distinctions would have us believe. If sex is a construction just like gender, then gender cannot be only the cultural inscription of a pre-given sexed body, as the pre-given sexed body is also a culturally constructed body. And the causality between sex and gender can be broken, since, according to this theoretical exegesis, sexed body does not establish culturally unscripted gender. Moreover, ‘gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established’ (p. 10). In other word, through a theoretical reversal, the concept of gender is postulated by Butler as ‘the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established as “pre-discursive”, prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts’ (*ibid.*). Sex, then, turns out to be the normalising ruse of the regulatory regime and the *effect* of gender, rather than the opposite. But if gender is a construction, does its constructedness exclude an agency and the transformational power of the construction? How can one theorise a construction that does not have a human constructor or creator who is prior to and stands outside of the moment of creation? If we consider the body

as a malleable, passive site where culture writes its inscriptions, then gender becomes monolithic and fixed, and the transgressive power of transformation of gender is denied. As in the case of sex where biology is destiny, here culture becomes destiny.

Simone de Beauvoir's now famous words that have already been referred to — 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' — imply a thinking self, an agent, a *cogito*, who takes on a gender and appropriates it. She does not say, 'A woman is not born a woman, but rather, becomes one', and, as Butler claims, 'there is nothing in her account that guarantees that the "one" who becomes a woman is necessarily female' (p. 11).

Now, the debate on this fabrication of gender can be elaborated like this: one strand of theoretical discussion focuses on the body as a passive medium on which culture writes its will; another strand takes the body as an instrument through which an interpretive will determines a cultural meaning.¹⁴ In either case, the body is a medium where an externality of cultural markings and inscriptions is established. But the body, for Butler, is itself a construction. If the body does not have an interpretive existence before the signifying marks of gender, then how does the 'body come into being in and through the marks of gender?' (p. 12) The question here, therefore, is to reformulate the body as *not* a passive medium receiving cultural markings inertly, but as a *site* capable of transforming its capacity by a volitional will. Does the body have a choice to transform and eventually surpass the variability of sex and gender, while mapped onto a nodal point within the grid of a network of power relations, to eke out an existence by defying hegemonic cultural inscriptions?

Her argument can be summarised as follows. The body is always already sexually differentiated, and gender is a marker, which is biological, cultural and/or culturally differentiated, that inscribes its signature on that variable and sexually differentiated body. The body assumes its signification through the *relational* aspects of the signifying process, i.e., it generates its meaning and interpretation only through the *relations* of the signifying processes.

Therefore, it opposes signification per se, i.e., signification loses its meaning if one or the other relative term is made to disappear. This prompts the view that gender is a relational term instead of a set of attributes. 'A humanist feminist position might understand gender', Butler writes, 'as an *attribute* of a person who is characterised essentially as a pregendered substance or "core", called the person, denoting a universal capacity for reason, moral deliberation, or language. The universal conception of this person, however, is displaced as a point of departure for a social theory of gender by those historical and anthropological positions that understand gender as a relationship among socially constituted subjects in specifiable contexts' (p. 14). This conditionality of the nature of gender suggests that the intelligibility of a person and a gender is 'always relative to the constructed relations in which it is determined', and therefore, '[a]s a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific set of relations' (*ibid.*). Butler also warns about the limits of discursive analysis regarding the construction of gender by saying that the boundaries of hegemonic cultural construction hinder the possibilities of adopting every imaginable and realisable gender configuration. 'This is not to say', as she points out, 'that any and all gendered possibilities are open, but that the boundaries of analysis suggest the limits of a discursively conditioned experience. These limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality. Constraint is thus built into what that language constitutes as the imaginable domain of gender' (p. 12).

Another view of gender would take Beauvoir as its starting point to suggest that only the feminine gender is marked or signified, whereas a transcendental or universal genderhood is imagined for the masculine gender against which the so-called feminine gender is defined in terms of their anatomical sex, specifically those anatomical parts that have a bearing on reproductive ability, thereby extolling the supremacy of the masculine gender. Luce Irigaray

problematizes this by suggesting that this sex is not 'one', keeping in view of the pervasively masculinist, phallogocentric nature of linguistic discourse that perpetually effaces the feminine traces.¹⁵ In other words, women symbolise the sex that cannot be conceived, since it is marked by a linguistic truancy and opaqueness. For Beauvoir, woman is the 'Other', the negative lack against which masculine identity reiterates itself. For Irigaray, this system does not take into account the representational falsity of woman within the dialectical frame of signifying subject and a signified other, and this falsity, this lack of representational medium, puts the entire structure of representation inadequate and suspect. From Irigaray's point of view, the feminine sex is a linguistic absence, and this lacuna exposes, according to Butler, the 'foundational illusion of masculinist discourse' (p. 14). This absence is not marked, and this position is also a departure from Simone de Beauvoir and Monique Wittig who contend that within the patriarchal economy the feminine sex is marked as 'Other' against which patriarchy asserts its dominance. For Irigaray, then, the feminine sex forever defers and eludes the requirements of necessary representation. As Butler puts it, for Irigaray, 'The relation between masculine and feminine cannot be represented in a signifying economy in which the masculine constitutes the closed circle of signifier and signified' (p. 15). This is why the feminine will always elude any relation between masculine and feminine within any given linguistic discourse. Even though this position is reverse to that of what Beauvoir suggested, Butler contends that Beauvoir actually prefigures this position in *The Second Sex* 'when she argued that men could not settle the question of women because they would then be acting as both judge and party to the case' (*ibid.*). So, as the supposed essence or idea of a person is marked within language that is patriarchal, and as the idea of the person is congealed in the patriarchal discourse of subject formation, the construction of the subject is a masculine construction. Since this is a masculine construction, it excludes further elaboration than it deems necessary onto the structural and semantic possibilities of the feminine gender. One criticism that can be levelled at Irigaray's

theoretical model is that it underscores the global diversity of cultural and historical contexts. Its failure to address the contextual cultural modes of gender oppression can be accused as theoretical imperialism.¹⁶ The strategic theoretical move, according to Butler, is to leave the complexity of gender open: ‘Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture of time’ (p. 22).

How do the regulatory practices of gender formation constitute identity? Is it a ‘normative ideal’, or ‘a descriptive feature of existence’? How do the regulatory practices govern culturally acceptable ideas of identity? The very coherence and internal stability of a person are socially constructed and maintained through norms of intelligibility. When identity is defined through the normative notions of sex, gender, and the body, it is obvious that the emergence of those incoherent, asymmetrical, discontinuous, and disruptive gendered beings, e.g., Herculine Barbin, strains the definition of identity itself, because their amorphous existence defies the normative ideal of cultural intelligibility. The cultural norms of intelligibility and the regulatory laws that govern those norms prohibit, and, at the same time, *produce* those discordant identities. Butler writes: ‘The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kind of “identities” cannot “exist” — that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not “follow” from either sex or gender. “Follow” in this context is a political relation of entailment instituted by the cultural laws that establish and regulate the shape and meaning of sexuality. Indeed, precisely because certain kinds of “gender identities” fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain’ (p. 24). Their persevering existence and proliferation essentially contribute to a theoretical analysis to uncover the masked regulatory agenda of the domineering cultural hegemony, to show the frayed boundaries of the domain of intelligibility, and thus, ‘to open up

within the very terms of that matrix of intelligibility rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder' (*ibid.*).

The institution of heterosexuality requires, regulates, and maintains gender as a binary construct where the masculine is differentiated from the feminine. This differentiation is accomplished through the regulatory practices of heterosexual desire. In order to displace this binary relation and the metaphysics of substance that this relation relies on, one needs to presuppose, according to Butler, that each term within this binary of male and female is similarly produced. If these terms are similarly produced, i.e., if they are shown to be as much fabricated concepts as gender is, then the internal hierarchy of the binary loses its significance, rendering the terms as much un-congealed, flexible, and adjustable, and that makes the binary essentially meaningless, paving the way for a politics of interpretation, a genealogical critique of sex and gender, that relies on the fluidity and proliferation of those terms.

In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, and in the 'Introduction' to *Herculine Barbin*, Foucault suggests, as discussed in Chapter Two, that the categorisation of sexuality is constructed through a historically specific mode of sexuality before the categorisation of sexual difference. The production of sex as a binary is concealed by the apparatus of production by postulating 'sex' as the cause of sexual desire and experience. Foucault's genealogical enquiry reverses this cause as an *effect*, where 'sex' is an 'effect' of the production of a given regime of sexuality that controls sexual experience by positing the category of sex as causal and foundational. As Butler points out, 'Herculine is not an "identity", but the sexual impossibility of an identity' (p. 32). Male and female anatomical elements are separately and jointly aligned on a body, and the given linguistic convention responsible for the production of intelligible gender identity finds it impossible to account for this disruptive convergence and disorganisation of the linguistic rules to categorise Herculine Barbin. According to Butler, Foucault's reading of Herculine's memoir suggests 'an ontology of accidental attributes that

exposes the postulation of identity as a culturally restricted principle of order and hierarchy, a regulatory fiction' (p. 33). Butler argues for gender as 'performative': '[W]ithin the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative — that is, constituting the identity that it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed' (p. 34). This claim of a subject who does the deed, but does not pre-exist the deed, is a reformulation of Nietzsche's claim in *On The Genealogy of Morals* as Butler herself acknowledges, in the context of gender and identity. Nietzsche proclaims that 'there is no being behind the doing, effecting, becoming: 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed — the deed is everything'.¹⁷ Butler adds a corollary to this: 'There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results' (p. 34). To hazard an example: there is no gender identity behind a 'manly smile'. The 'manly smile' is not the result of 'male gender'; the expression and representation of the 'manly smile' is a performativity — Butler differentiates this from a performance which has a subject behind the performance — and this performatively constitute the male identity. The male identity does not produce the manly smile; the gesture of the smile that is culturally constructed as 'manly' produces the 'male' identity.

The ontology of gender, the 'being' of gender, is an effect, and therefore it is open to a genealogical investigation that could identify the political stakes involved in its construction and production. This is a construction that is always ongoing, without origin and end. But to say gender is a construction is not to validate its artificiality. Butler's project is this: 'As a genealogy of gender ontology, this inquiry seeks to understand the discursive production of the plausibility of that binary relation and to suggest that certain cultural configurations of gender take the place of "the real" and consolidate and augment their hegemony through that felicitous self-naturalisation' (p. 45). As the construction and fashioning of gender is always in progress,

without conception or conclusion, therefore, ‘as an ongoing discursive practice it is open to intervention and resignification’ (*ibid.*). Even the most ‘congealed’ form of its fabrication is open to critical intervention. In Butler’s formulation, ‘[g]ender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being’ (*ibid.*).

Foucault argues that the singular construction of sex is produced a) to satisfy the need of social regulations and to control sexuality; b) to artificially group together a variety of disparate and unrelated functions associated with sexuality and then conceal their artificial construction; c) and because the production of sex masquerades itself as a ‘cause’ within social discourse, an essence of being, that produces and makes intelligible everything related to sensation, pleasure, and desire.¹⁸ Foucault offers a ‘reverse discourse’ to treat this ‘essence’ of sex as an ‘effect’, rather than a *cause* or *origin*. Instead of sex as a cause or origin for corporeal pleasures, Foucault proposes sexuality as a complex system of discourse and power that produces sexuality to conceal, propagate, and perpetuate power-relations. One of the ways these power relations are concealed is by creating arbitrary and contingent relations between powers that are perceived as repression or domination, and sex is conceived as the real essence of the self waiting to express itself.¹⁹ This juridical model of power assumes that sex is essentially a core of the subject, and that power always works to dominate or liberate a sex. According to Foucault, this juridical model of power is a construction that conceals its mechanism of production. For Foucault, ‘sex’ unifies bodily functions and signification that have a contingent relationship, i.e., their relations are entirely arbitrary. And to be *sexed* is to be subjected to an array of regulations, and these regulations are directed by laws that are intrinsic in both as a mechanism for directing one’s sex, gender, pleasure, and desire, and as a conduit for self-interpretation.

Butler's quarrel with Foucault is this: sex is always produced in the complex interaction between discourse and power, but he does write about 'a multiplicity of pleasure' in itself that somehow stands prior to this discursive formulation of 'sex'. As she points out, 'Foucault invokes a trope of prediscursive libidinal multiplicity that effectively presupposes a sexuality "before the law", indeed, a sexuality waiting for emancipation from the shackles of "sex"'.²⁰ But then, Foucault also argues that sexuality is always situated and controlled within the discourse of power, and its production or construction occurs within specific sociocultural practices, and 'that recourse to a sexuality before the law is an illusory and complicitous conceit of emancipatory sexual politics' (p. 132).

Foucault sees Alexina's/Herculine's²¹ sexuality and pleasures as delineated in the journals as something that resides outside the regulatory regimes, and thus unshackled by the laws governing the discursive fields of power, precisely because her sexuality is still not configured by the authorities. Hanging in a limbo between the sexes,²² male and female, her corporeal pleasures offer a utopian vision of the emancipatory potential of sexual pleasures. But Butler argues, it is just as possible to locate the discursive political and cultural conventions that 'produce and regulate the tender kisses, the diffuse pleasures, and the thwarted and transgressive thrills of Herculine's sexual world' (p. 133). For Butler, Alexina's/Herculine's hermaphroditic body is not the cause of her desires, troubles, affairs, and eventual confession and self-destruction, since this amorphous body is already a construction, a production of 'the juridical discourse on univocal sex' (p. 135). Her own journals can be considered as a particular type of 'a confessional production of the self' (*ibid.*). Foucault does not want to constrict Alexina/Herculine into a category of sex — 'the happy limbo of a non-identity' — because, for him, the category of sex imposes an artificial unity on disparate sexual functions and elements. But the heterogeneous nature of Herculine's 'sex', as Foucault would promote it, 'is itself constituted by the very medical discourse that he positions as the repressive juridical law'

(p. 137). One can surely construe the idea of a naturalised body as a construction because it is the production of the regulating practices of taboos and social and/or cultural injunctions that render the body discrete, that subscribe its outer limits, and thereby defining its boundary where the malleability of it, in the sense of interacting with another discrete body, is strictly controlled. A polluted body, i.e., *a flawed body*, represents a threat not just to the hegemonic social system as Mary Douglas showed in *Purity and Danger*, it is also a threat to the idea of *the* body that has come down to us as *the* naturalised body. As Douglas wrote, a discourse that demarcates the limits of the body through the imposition and eventual naturalisation of social taboos and rules to appropriate specific modes of corporeal attributes and behaviours provides the definition of what essentially constitute the bodies: '[I]deas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created'.²³ Regulations of bodily functions related to the act of sex and bodily orifices occur through various social rites and passages in a heterosexual economy, and the deregulation and diffusions of these rites mean a disruption of the boundaries that determine the very idea of the body itself.

Both the variability and distinction between sex and gender, and the categorisation of each field of connotations presuppose the 'body' to be pre-existing the attainment of its signifying marks. An external cultural source marks the passive body that then takes on signifying role within a regulatory regime. This idea of the passivity of the body and its assumed malleability, along with its formulation as a whole, that supposedly stands prior to any discourse has to be questioned. For both Foucault and Nietzsche, 'cultural values', Butler says, 'emerge as the result of an inscription on the body, understood as a medium, indeed a blank page' (p. 177). But in order to make the signification of inscription on the body, the medium has to be

destroyed, i.e., it has to be annihilated as a pristine body, so that an entirely subjectivised body, with a domain of inscriptions, can take its place that conforms to the values and regulations of history and culture. Butler points out, that '[b]y maintaining a body prior to its cultural inscription, Foucault appears to assume a materiality prior to signification and form' (*ibid.*). Also, in his 'Introduction' to *Herculine Barbin*, Foucault assumes a disruptive source of bodily forces that break through the surface of the body to interrupt and defy regulatory social and cultural practices imposed on the body by an authoritative source of power. 'Most of the time, those who relate their change of sex belong to a world that is strongly bisexual; and their uneasiness about their identity finds expression in the desire to pass over to the other side — to the side of the sex they desire to have and in whose world they would like to belong. In this case, the intense monosexuality of religious and school life fosters the tender pleasures that sexual non-identity discovers and provokes when it goes astray in the midst of all those bodies that are similar to one another'.²⁴ In other words, Foucault assumes a pre-categorical idea of bodily forces or gestures that stands outside discourse. According to Butler, who refutes this idea of pre-existing bodily forces, the marking of the body, the demarcation of it, as it were, is neither the action of history or by the subject; it is 'the result of a diffuse and active structuring of the social field', and this, in turn, allows 'a social space for and of the body within certain regulatory grids of intelligibility'.²⁵ Although Butler does not elaborate on what exactly she means by 'diffuse and active structuring of the social field', she goes on to say, reformulating Mary Douglas, 'the deregulation of [heteronormative fabrication of gendered exchanges] [...] disrupts the very boundaries that determine what it is to be a body at all [...] [and] the critical enquiry that traces the regulatory practices within which the bodily contours are constructed constitutes precisely the genealogy of "the body" in its discreteness that might further radicalise Foucault's theory' (p. 181).

According to Butler, ‘acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produces this *on the surface* of the body [...] [and] such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed as *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means’ (p. 185). These acts constitute the body’s reality, and ‘create the illusion of an interior and organising gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of heterosexuality’ (*ibid.*). Also, to reiterate again what she mentions earlier: ‘[W]ithin the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative — that is, constituting the identity that it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed’ (p. 35). Gender performativity is a strategy for a corporeal style whose goal is cultural survival. This corporeal style is an act that is intentional and performative ‘where performative suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning’ (p. 190). Also, because it is a strategy for survival within regulatory systems, it is a ‘performance with clearly punitive consequences’ (*ibid.*). Those who fail to do their gender ‘properly’ are regularly punished. As the ‘various acts of gender create the idea of gender’, it is ‘a construction that regularly conceals its genesis’ (*ibid.*). The pervasive forms of ‘natural sex’, ‘real man/masculinity’, ‘real woman/femininity’ congeal through historically enacted deeds that finally settle into a corporeal style to achieve those forms. Butler likens the ‘acts’ of gender to other ritual social dramas, an act that is reiterated repeatedly; it is the repetition of a repetition, ‘a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established, and it is the mundane and ritualised form of their legitimation’ (p. 191). For Butler, then, gender is not an essence or a stable identity from which acts follow but the opposite: *the acts together construct, consolidate, and produce gender*. And added to that, there is no doer behind the deed, but the doer is merely constructed by the deed.

Thus, ‘gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being’ (p. 44). She clearly spells out the political aim of initiating a genealogy of gender ontologies — to destabilise the substantiality and apparent naturalness of gender into its elemental acts and ‘locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender’ (*ibid.*).

Femininity signifies an amalgamation of the effects of artifice through enacting gender in a performative way, to produce the material construction effected by the disassociation of sex and gender, thus rendering the concept of a ‘femaleness’ more transferable, mobile, and fluid. Judith Halberstam, while accepting the notion of gender performativity, counters the Butlerian project of complete dissolubility of the categories of gender and sex, and explores the ‘opportunity to recognise and ratify differently gendered bodies and subjectivities’ to argue for the ‘production of new taxonomies [...] classifications of desire, physicality, and subjectivity that attempt to intervene in hegemonic processes of naming and defining’.²⁶ In other words, Halberstam’s specific critical project is to ‘produce a model of female masculinity’ that recognises and engages ‘on its multiple forms but also calls for new and self-conscious affirmations of different gender taxonomies’ (p. 9). These affirmations do not destabilise or stand against masculine power, but evade such power by a refusal to engage with it. She points out that she is not ‘suggesting that we follow the futile path of what Foucault calls “saying no to power”, but asserting that ‘power may inhere within different forms of refusal: “Well, I don’t care” ’ (*ibid.*).

The concept of female masculinity problematises the symmetry of gender assigned roles; it ‘disrupts the contemporary cultural studies’ accounts of masculinity’ where masculinity is prefigured as ‘the social, cultural, and political effects of male embodiment and male privilege’.²⁷ Halberstam’s concept of female masculinity theorises a domain for cross-

identifying women who cannot be appropriated into the communitarian and clinical models of transsexuality. 'Unlike a theorist like Butler', she says, 'who sees categories as perpetually suspect, I embrace categorisation as a way of creating places for acts, identities, and modes of being which otherwise remain unnameable'. Instead of binarising the categories, 'a proliferation of categories offers an alternative to the mundane humanistic claim that categories inhabit the unique self and create boxes for an otherwise indomitable spirit.' She acknowledges her debt to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her endeavour to name the categories and taxonomies of differentiation. As Halberstam points out, Sedgwick's list of those categories and taxonomies enables people to map sexualities and desires as the list refuses the 'banality of the homo-hetero binary and suggests that we are limited not simply by the law but by the failure of the imagination'. She understands the implication of the Foucauldian 'reverse discourse' that exposes and rejects the 'traditional formulation of gay and lesbian political struggles as essentially oppositional', but as specific and apparently liberatory discourses regarding sexuality 'recapitulate the very terms of the homo-hetero binary which oppresses us in the first place, then these discourses become part of the installation of the very sexual hierarchy that they seek to oppose'. She maintains that Foucault is aware of the emancipatory struggles as 'strategically and historically necessary', and the reverse discourse is conceptually different from the discourse it seeks to reverse. 'Indeed', Halberstam says, 'the desire for reversal is a desire for transformation'. She goes on to say, 'Foucault clearly believes that resistance has to go beyond the taking of a name [...] and must produce creative new forms of resistance by assuming and empowering a marginal possibility'. This is the reason Halberstam embraces the reverse discourse to the extent of 'coming out, organising, producing new categories' with the caveat being that these new categories must be seen as 'end points'. This is apparent in the transgendered experience, where it can 'account for the cross-identification experiences of people who may not accept the protocols and strictures of transsexuality' but, at the same time,

realises their freedom to ‘choose among the options of body modification, social presentation and legal recognition available to them’.

If, in the Butlerian project, the core essence or the truth of gender is exposed as merely constructional and fabricatory, and the corporeality of gender assignation is the imposition of regulatory regimes that institute and inscribe their signifying marks on the surface of the body, then the question of gender exceeds the notions of truth and falsity, as the genders are produced as corporeal manifestation of the consolidation of the truth effects of a discursive stable identity. As she points out, ‘[t]he displacement of a political and discursive origin of gender identity onto a psychological “core” precludes an analysis of the political constitution of the gendered subject and its fabricated notions about the ineffable interiority of its sex or of its true identity’.²⁸ She also points out the political stakes involved in revealing the constructional aspect of cross-dressing where the presupposed origin or primary identity is consciously parodied in the cultural manifestation of cross-dressing. The performance of this cross-dressing, according to her, critiques the appropriation of stereotypical gender assigned roles that subversively plays upon the rigid demarcation between the anatomical manifestation of the cross-dresser and the gendered subjectivity that is being performed. The performance of crossdressing enacts a play on the difference between the anatomical characteristics of the performer, and the gender role the performer reveals. Butler mentions three contingent parts of this certain type of corporeality — anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. And the entire performance highlights the superficial constructedness of all three dimensions of this play-acting corporeality. Butler notes that in an imitation of gender, cross-dressing ‘implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself — as well as its contingency’ (p. 187). Through the performance, ‘we see sex and gender denaturalised by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatises the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity’ (p. 188).

This parodic imitation does not have an original; it is, in fact, the parody of the notion of an original. In other words, ‘gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin’ (*ibid.*). For Butler, this disruption engenders a fluidity of identities that ‘suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualisation’ (*ibid.*). And this, in turn, effects a ‘parodic proliferation’ that contests the hegemonic claim to a naturalised or essential gender identity. In this sense, gender identity can be conceived as ‘a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self, or parody the mechanism of that construction’ (*ibid.*). Not all parodic repetitions are disruptive, though, most are ‘domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony’ (p. 189). The following segment of this chapter will focus on a literary text to highlight specifically the constitutive disruptive potential of subversive parodic acts, to deliberate onto those flaws within the constrictive heteronormative arrangement to look for a politics of theorisation that offers intervention within and anterior to the domineering system, and to ponder over the possibility of a liberatory proliferation of rigid gendered assignment of roles.

There is a general consensus that Kamal Kumar Majumdar’s ‘Mallika Bahar’,²⁹ published in the Bengali periodical, *Chaturanga*, in 1951, is one of the ‘first’ Bengali short stories that specifically deals with ‘lesbianism’, perhaps for its so-called explicitness which now seems surprisingly tame though, judging by contemporary standards. The following section will offer a close reading of the text to contest this act of labelling to pre-empt other possible gendered subjectivities and assigned roles of corporeality, and will try to engage with the exclusionary politics that is involved in such an act of labelling that enunciates rigid identity categories, as

well as to argue that locating subversions, *flaws* within heteronormativity, in the text calls for an interventionary politics through the appropriation of these always already flawed discursive bodies.

It is not so much the label itself, but the act of labelling, the complicated process of attaching a name, an identity, a category, to demarcate gendered performativities, that enforces a politics of appropriation by regulatory regimes. Labelling and naming as such is not a statement of fact, but a process of reification with the ultimate aim of enforcing a binary based on the perceived and imposed differences between the noncompliance of heterosexuality and homosexuality to mask the technological apparatus of creating and maintaining such a binary of oppositional terms to perpetuate its hegemonic superiority. The act of labelling, therefore, is not just a neutral act of description, but a performative statement that assigns particular subject positions, situated within the discourses of linguistic conventions and the hegemonic heteronormativity, to categorise repressive identities. The labelling of the story also assumes a linear history of Bengali short stories that can be neatly classified into a group whose chief attribute would be that they deal with ‘lesbianism’. It is a history, in strict opposition to what Nietzsche calls *wirkliche Historie* and what Foucault calls ‘effective history’, that, according to this strategy of labelling, perhaps ‘originates’ with ‘Mallika Bahar’, and makes it special.³⁰ The following section will discuss both these points from the perspective of a reading of the story that emphasises multiple gendered performativities which parodically enact, and therefore problematise, the foundationalist assumptions involved in the production of identity categories. ‘Mallika Bahar’ is special not by virtue of being assigned an imaginary ‘origin’ and a ‘label’ for a particular type of identity category; one can only talk about its speciality in terms of a mode of representation that problematises the process of creating identity categories by pointing towards the performative nature of signifying acts deployed by the characters that eventually exposes their constructed gendered assignments.

In the beginning of the text, Mallika is looking at herself in the mirror in a ramshackle room that reflects her bust. She, as we learn a little bit later, holds an appointment letter the significance of which will be elaborated on shortly. The text mentions that Mallika is looking at herself in the mirror as if from a foreseeable future, but she still finds herself a lateral reflection of her state of being, an imposed corporeality as it were, an identity forged and fabricated along with the act of *doing* her gender performatively — attempting to decorate and embellish her appearance — that, as Butler mentions and has been discussed earlier, is quite non-disruptive in the sense that it falls within the purview of strictly conforming to the congealed essence of the identity of a sexually desirable femininity that the heteronormative axis of intelligibility stipulates according to the norms of regulations; but what she still does not realise is that her corporeality will undergo transformation and will be different from her present state. This transmogrification of her physicality slowly comes to her through the mirror though; her face, it seems to her, is suffused with a ‘manly exhaustion’ (p. 58), a ‘positive’ exhaustion in the matrix of heteronormativity, the tiredness that accompanies a man from working outside home, in the public sphere, a mode of existence specifically associated with ‘manly’ labour. She is contemplating her future within the mirror, and it shows what it has shown, in a completely different context, to a Dorian Gray;³¹ she is subsequently reflected as her future self, a *flawed self*, with that androgynous exhaustion. All the paraphernalia of accentuating her feminine beauty, according to the implementation of a heteronormative arrangement that heightens and reifies the desirability of a ‘feminine’ subject position by drawing attention to those corporeal features that strictly adhere to the aid of conjugality and eventual reproductive ability — cosmetics and beauty products like face-powder, eyeliner, perfumes, oily hair-lace — now seem to her a profusion of futile curative panacea for *dead people*, the ineffectual accoutrements for a subjected feminine subject who, by virtue of the imposition of a flawed physicality necessitated by the acceptance and possession of an

appointment letter which, for all social and cultural mode of acceptability in a specific historical conditioning, is the sole prerogative of the male subject, now finds them ‘sad and ineffectual’ (p. 58). The text, then, begins with a *mirror image* of Mallika with sudden but inevitable distortions that highlight *strategic flaws*, and this image of *lateral inversion* as a metaphor becomes conducive to a theoretical intervention as Mallika contemplates a change in the way how she is going to be perceived by the male members of the community. Men will ‘see’ her differently from the next day, as her cultural interpellation undergoes transformation, because she now holds an appointment letter that, through the utilisation of it, will accentuate her ‘manly exhaustion’ as she is going to be a working woman.

She conjures up this image of the working woman within heteronormativity, and feels terribly depressed by it. She will be a ‘different’ woman tomorrow, and her new gendered subjectivity along with a scripted performativity, she feels, will interpellate her into a pre-ordained subject position, a position that has always already been reinscribed and sanctioned according to the rigid categorisation within the paradigm of a heteronormative grid of intelligibility, a predetermined subjecthood that will not subjectivise her as sexually attractive within the sanctified realm of a familial conjugality in the matrix of heterosexual regulatory regime. Men will no longer ‘look’ at her with the intention of sexually engaging with her, i.e., to find her a suitable woman to fall in love with from a conjugal point of view.

British economy in colonial India, as well as in the early years of independence, after the industrial revolution, effected the significant change of a gradual expansion of an autonomous non-agricultural, proto-industrialist service sector of the economy that necessitated the participation of a large number of women in India. The service sector included wholesale and retail trade, large scale financial, mercantile, and commercial institution, personal and professional services in transport, communication, and public administration. In India, especially in the eastern part it, specifically Calcutta, female workers formed only a minuscule

part of the workforce in these nascent industries, and as such they took part in a fierce competition that proved to be uncharacteristically hostile to their male counterparts who immediately recognised their female competitors as encroaching on the restricted scarcity of viable jobs. '[W]omen's economic activities were relatively more affected in the entire process appears to be the result mainly of the traditionally assigned roles of women in this society which limited their mobility and confined them to skills and occupations susceptible to swift opposition. Moreover, the growth of the modern sector was so fast and so unplanned that its environment became unwholesome for the migration of women whether in families or singly'.³² In a report submitted by Dagmar Curjel, of the Women's Medical Service of India, to the Government of Bengal in 1923 suggested Calcutta to be an extremely dangerous place for the women workers. The report mentioned that '[r]espectable Bengali women do not undertake industrial work and practically all such Bengalis found in the [service sectors are regarded] as degraded women and prostitutes'.³³

But tomorrow being tomorrow, Mallika decides to make most of the present day by visiting two male acquaintances who, it is hinted in the text, have once been romantically attached to her. For most of these two encounters Mallika remains a silent spectator, who merely watches what the other is doing, and through her gaze, the 'other', by *doing* their gender, is made to occupy different subject positions. The text represents Mallika in the final day of her existence as a *not-working-woman*, still sexually desirable in the heteronormative mode of subject interpellation. This is the last day of her interpellated representation as a woman suitable for marriage, desirable because she is not competing in the public domain with others, specifically the male counterparts, therefore she is still considered as chaste. 'Today is the last day' (p. 59). She will be working in an office tomorrow; and the only profound thing she will be able to accomplish is to buy a life insurance policy. Will her embodiment become flawed tomorrow? Or, will she commit something, an intervention, that can be considered as flawed? She is going

to test her sexual desirability on this day of the text. She will actively seek out two heteronormative encounters with two men in their middle-class domesticity.

It is a different Mallika in the mirror, as the text reiterates; not the curvaceous, sexually desirable woman any more. ‘Mallika is in the mirror; or, it could even be that the mirror is in Mallika’ (p. 58). Then the letter comes, in the text, although the textual information suggests that Mallika knows of its impending arrival. The letter always reaches its destination. This is a letter with clear, type-written address that is tragically shorn of ambiguity, a letter that is different from all the other letters that she has received so far. Everything is different about it; the colour, the envelope, the type-written address, and there is no ambiguity in its appearance; but its effects will be equivocal and disconcerting. From the material aspects of it, and the future entailment of its tangible fortune to ameliorate of their impecunious livelihood, the appointment letter represents an elixir of comfortable living — a steady job and financial security that enables one to employ a maid for menial works, nice food, essential goods for home — and yet, at the same time, it also represents for Mallika something poisonous. It is a symbol of hope for better life, but also a social marker on her corporeality, a visible modification of her physicality, for abject despondency. ‘She does not know where this disappointment comes from. Still, it is a disappointment’ (*ibid.*). It is the disappointment of displacement from a pedestal, a normatively constructed essential core of identity, created by contemporary heteronormativity. She will be a working woman, jostling along with other men in public transport, sexless, or with an imposition of a particular manifestation of sexuality reserved for streetwalkers that can be bought in an economic transaction sanctified by the same discursive arrangement within the grid of heteronormative economy; she will be an alien and unappetising corporeality within the constructed realm of romanticism even for people who are jobless and beguiling away their time sinking their noses in newspapers in tea stalls. The young men will not find her sexually alluring any more in the paradoxical mode of sexual exchange

sanctified by the discursive economy of sex during a specific period of historical conditioning. ‘She will cease to be a marriageable woman, she will be a working woman. Oh my god, a working woman!’ (p. 59). These young men, Mallika feels, will never fail to look yearningly at pubescent and marriageable girls, and women, working indoors, doing menial jobs, chores that do not translate into a capitalistic mode of economic viability, in their family and other families. Even if they do choose to condescendingly look at Mallika, it will be the leering gaze of a philistine, as the text ironically observes, lasciviously ogling at the sculpted magnificence of a *Yakshini*. ‘It is the sort of gaze that the country bumpkin engages in while staring at a stone-sculpted *Yakshini*’ (*ibid.*). It will be an overtly sexualised gaze, lingering on her reproductive anatomy; a pornographic gaze, if you will, that subjectifies the object as conspicuously sexual. For Mallika, her sexual desirability transcends this normative gaze; where the philistine’s lascivious look merely objectifies, dispensing the subject into a specific rung in social hierarchy that stands in exteriority to the socially approved conjugal relations, the erotic/romantic gaze assigns her as a suitable, desirable, and sexually fertile woman whom one can marry, and that, according to Mallika, at least for this reflective moment in front of the mirror where she is still in the process of enacting her non-disruptive gender assignment, is an acceptable social position, possibly the only acceptable contemporary social position for women of a certain age in this specific socio-cultural context of certain historical conditioning.

Mallika’s first encounter is with a man called Brojo, who is not yet married and lives with his mother. He ignores Mallika, denies her entry into his room, and having returned from his day job, falls on the bed moaning with a book. He is described as a man who ‘looks like the ticking of a clock at night’ (p. 61). The man has just come back from his office, and is eating a meagre meal, and does not have anything to say to her. He is decidedly thirsting for a novel that lies beside his pillow. When his mother arrives and takes Mallika away from the man, he sighs audibly with relief, and makes himself comfortable with the book uttering a moan of

pleasure. The text uses the word associated with sexual coitus, '*shitkar*', a passionate, frenzied, almost inaudible sound at the height of a sexual congress, an ejaculatory, orgasmic, barely discernible cry for relief, an erotic whimper of release, for that particular moan. This rejection is so complete and devastating that Mallika feels utterly insignificant. 'This defeat is very painful to her.' (p. 63) Brojo is still single; he gloatingly informs Mallika that his mother is looking for a suitable bride, something that amuses him and makes him very happy. In the meantime, he engages in an auto-erotic ritual of a performativity that completely shuns Mallika. From this auto-erotic encounter she moves on to a bustling household, where the dapper Ananda is just applying the finishing touches to dandify himself to go out to visit his in-laws to bring his wife back home. This encounter plunges her into more despair, since Mallika has no idea that the man is married. She 'feels a great anger against herself' (*ibid.*). Mallika's '*bahar*' — beauty, attractiveness, exquisiteness — feels utterly wasted by the impotent and/or auto-erotic grin of Brojo and the debonair Ananda hurrying off to pick up his wife. Mallika slips out, and laden with this double blow of rejection and shock she is beset by a complex of emotions: anger, despair, and grief. And then she is thrust into the third and the most fateful interventionary encounter of the day.

A teary-eyed Mallika, contemplating her misfortune for a moment under a tree in a little park in Amherst Street, is suddenly thrust into the third and perhaps the most singular encounter of the text. She is met by Shovona, a woman already holding a job. She insists Mallika must come to her place. 'A different kind of light has fallen on Shovona's eyes; a *masculine* glow can be seen on her face and eyes; when a woman notices that glow from the confines of home, or purdah, or in a road, she will surely like it' (p. 64, *emphasis added*). The textual accentuation confirms that this encounter cannot be read or construed as the *effect* of the rejection and subjugation encountered by Mallika from her two previous contacts. Her '*bahar*' is finally appreciated by a warmth that is unprecedented for Mallika. '[For Shovona] gazing at Mallika

is so impassioned and fervent that it seems endless' (p. 65). They are on a rectangular terrace in Shovona's home, a theatrical/textual arena, beneath a black sky effulgent with stars and a resplendent moon, and the air is redolent with the fragrance of flowers. It is a conventional romantic setting appropriated by countless novels, poems, plays, and cinematic adaptations, and yet, the text clearly points out, '[Mallika's] mind has become felicitously *real*' (p. 65, *emphasis added*).

They sit close to one another, half-undressed, perhaps because of the warm weather, or perhaps because 'a mythological independence' (*ibid.*) sweeps over them. In such a setting, their nudity, too, is mythological, where the binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality loses its significance, and thus, not 'unruly' or 'indecent'. Shovona offers flowers to Mallika, saying, in 'a voice marked with late-night sleepiness', 'For you, take it, it is for you' (*ibid.*). The concocted mythological setting is in direct contrast with the contemporaneity of their social reality and their interpellated subject formation as sanctioned by the dominant hegemonic sexual matrix; and this is why the text immediately inserts this impish line: 'Although a rude interpretation [of that late-night sleepiness] is also possible' (*ibid.*), even though the text resolutely moves beyond a specific contemporaneous impudence and crassness dictated by the regulatory regime to bound these inscribed bodies into submissive and docile surfaces where the cultural impositions are to be indelibly marked. Mallika's heart flutters, in reaction to this overt show of feeling and the 'rude', erotic possibilities of this encounter. Shovona draws her hands in her own, embraces her, puts on a garland of flowers on her, and showers her with a profusion of kisses. There is a faint sound of broken bangles — a specific ritual that is associated with widowhood — a sound that is so faint and inaudible, perhaps comparable to the whisper of a *shitkar*, that 'it will not gather round a crowd but learned ones will say it is *necessary*' (*ibid.*, *emphasis added*).

The norms of heterosexuality is breached almost inaudibly, and this is a subversion that does not stand exterior to the regulatory regime of the dominant heterosexual matrix as it is subsumed within the hegemonic ritual, mimicking and reiterating it to reify its dominating regulatory discourse; but the following exegesis chooses to see this as a *flaw* and an *intervention*, that is so subtle that it does away with the existing binary of authorised conventions regarding conjugality that involves the corporeality of male and female subjects and a deviant opposition to it, to proliferate the possibility of enacting, doing parodic repetition of ascribed and assigned gender roles by using the same ritualised conventions to interpose these understated and delicate acts for a positive proscription of the sanctioned regulations. The final romantic exchange between them, a tear-jerker from heteronormative perspective, but elaborated as an ironic aside, postulates that Shovona is Mallika's husband, and Mallika her bride. The parodic perpetuation of this intervention exposes the constructed nature of compulsory heterosexuality and shows the proliferative possibilities of subversive gender acts. The final inscription of Shovona's saliva on Mallika's cheek, instead of the mark of vermilion on the forehead symbolising a conjugal heterosexual union, testifies to this. Shovona, a woman who is already engaged in work, fully utilising the appointment letter she herself has received, literally grabs Mallika from the road, and as they end up relaxing on the terrace, the empty, barren terrace, an empty textual field, as it were, that, with the fragrance of flowers and a mythical independence constitutes a theatrical arena to be populated with signifying marks through a volitional act of *doing* their genders, so that these two 'manly' women perform their enactment of a ritualised performativity. They dress each other with flowers, shed excesses of their dress, exchange kisses, and talk about love. But this erotically charged atmosphere is diluted by the final exchange between Mallika and Shovona that is strangely romantic and sentimental. How do we read this sentimentalised, romantic finale that imitates a binary relationship (husband/wife) within heteropatriarchy? How do we see this exchange in terms of

a gendered performativity itself? In what sense can we see this as a gendered performativity that parodies the conventionality of such an exchange? And also, can a case be made against an identity politics that involves, on a practical level, exclusion and exploitation, and on a theoretical level, a naming or labelling that obliterates the possibility of occupying ‘other’ gendered positions?

As mentioned previously, in *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler states that gender is to be seen as performative and that performatively constitutes the identity it is purported to be. Gender is congealed by the enactment of performatively produced parodic acts, but the subject who enacts these deeds does not pre-exist the deeds. According to this view, gender acts are not performed by the subjects, but they performatively constitute a subject, and that is the effect of discourse rather than the cause of it. Gender is therefore a ‘corporeal style’, an act, or a sequence of acts, a ‘strategy’ that has cultural survival as its goal, since those who do not do their gender ‘correctly’ are punished by society. It is a reiteration, a rehash of a copy, an informal lampoon, that, by its very enactment, refuses to presuppose the existence of an original, since it is the very concept of an original that is being parodied.

I propose to consider the final exchange between Mallika and Shovona as a gendered performativity that pre-exists both these ‘manly’ women in the sense that this performativity is always already available to them. The erotic ritual or their conversational exchange at the end of the story is always already a copy, or copy of a copy, a parody, that re-enacts what is publicly available in the dominant discourse of compulsory heterosexuality. But if it is a parody, in the sense that all gendered performativity is parody, then what is so special about this sort of parody? Can we differentiate between ‘normal’ everyday parody that we are engaged in when we do our gender that is entirely subservient and docile to the regulatory regime, and a ‘subversive’ parody that forces a destabilisation of the foundationalist assumptions of heteropatriarchy? In other words, can we think of Mallika and Shovona’s performativity as a

parodic subversion, an intentional and deliberate enactment of a *flaw*, a *flaw* that perversely implants itself within the text, a blemish and imperfection that is imposed on the corporeality of these two material rendition of ‘feminine subjectivity’, namely the ‘mannish’ physicality that defies the discursive arrangement of heteronormativity, that exposes and questions the categories of ‘man’, ‘woman’, ‘husband’, ‘wife’, and ‘marriage’ within the broad framework of heterosexuality by drawing attention to the constructedness of such categories through a genealogical enquiry? Gendered performativities that do not try to blanket their genealogy, that go out of their way to accentuate it, displace heterocentric assumptions by revealing that heterosexual identities are as constructed and as unoriginal as the imitations of them. And if we think in terms of an overt romanticism of Mallika and Shovona’s erotic ritual, the remarkable sentimentality of their final exchange, their gendered performativity undermines the categories they enact by making those categories more ambiguous and fluid and problematic. In other words, this is a subversive gendered performativity that unearths and exposes the production of their implicit *flaws*, that does not reinforce the existing structures of heteronormativity, but implicitly questions the transcendental basis of the assumptions that constitutes the truthful essence of heteronormativity.

As the imposition of flaws subsequently modify the materiality of the bodies, the appearances of immutable cultural flaws are again subsumed within the overarching hegemonic rules and regulations. As a final point, I would like to propose that the act of naming or labelling this particular text as a specific identity category is the effect of this subversive parodic act. The destabilisation of heteropatriarchal categories is apparent in the very desire to inscribe, describe, demarcate, and limit such an activity to categorise it with the intention of normalising it within an oppressive regime. The following chapter will try to explain the nature of the presupposed inevitability of the technological apparatuses that try to maintain such flaws and subversions within the folds of dominating discourses through a critical analysis of the

discursive nature of sexuality, identity, and agency, and to ask whether it is possible to appropriate the proliferation of such existing binaries through a theorisation that attempts to liberate and emancipate the modalities of power, pleasure, sexuality, and the corporeality of bodies.

NOTES

1. Stieg Larsson, *The Girl Who Played With Fire* (London: Quercus, 2010), pp. 107-108
2. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990, 2006), p. 3
3. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 1973, 2011), p. 301
4. Judith Butler, 'Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig, Foucault', in *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies*, eds. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer (New York: Longman, 1998), p. 612
5. Monique Wittig, 'One is Not Born a Woman', 1981, in *The Straight Mind* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp. 9-20, reprinted in *Feminisms*, eds. Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 220-226
6. Monique Wittig, 'One is Not Born a Woman', in *Feminisms*, p. 221
7. Judith Butler, 'Variations on Sex and Gender', p. 618
8. Monique Wittig, 'The Category of Sex', in *Feminist Issues* 2,1 (Fall 1982), pp. 63-68, quoted in Judith Butler, 'Variations on Sex and Gender', p. 618

9. Michel Foucault, eds., *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDougall (New York: Vintage, 1980), p. xiii
10. Sara Salih, *Judith Butler* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 44
11. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 3
12. See both Monique Wittig, 'One is Not Born a Woman', in *Feminisms*, pp. 220-226, and Monique Wittig, 'The Category of Sex', in *Feminist Issues* 2,1 (Fall 1982), pp. 63-68; and, also, Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', 1980, in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B Leitch, trans. Ronald Speirs (New York: W W Norton and Company, 2001), pp. 1762-1780
13. See Note 6 to 'Chapter One' in Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 208. The full note reads: 'I use the term *heterosexual matrix* throughout the text to designate that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalised. I am drawing from Monique Wittig's notion of the 'heterosexual contract' and, to a lesser extent, on Adrienne Rich's notion of 'compulsory heterosexuality' to characterise a hegemonic/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositional and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality.'
14. See, for example, *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan, 1963 (London: Penguin, 2010); Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, 1970 (London: Harper, 2008); Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 1970 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1981); Julia Kristeva, *Revolutions in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); Gayle Rubin, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality', in Carol Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1984)

15. See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992) and Luce Irigaray, 'The Other: Woman', in *Feminisms*, pp. 308-315
16. See Note 23, 'Chapter One' in Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 18 and pp. 210-211
17. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, eds. and trans. Walter Kaufman (Modern Library Edition: New York, 2000), p. 481
18. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978, 1990), p. 154. '[T]he notion of "sex" made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere: sex was thus able to function as a unique signifier and as a universal signified.'
19. *Ibid.*, p. 155. '[T]he notion of sex brought about a fundamental reversal; it made it possible to invert the representation of the relationships of power to sexuality, causing the latter to appear, not in its essential and positive relation to power, but as being rooted in a specific and irreducible urgency which power tries as best it can to dominate; thus the idea of "sex" makes it possible to evade what gives "power" its power; it enables one to conceive power solely as law and taboo.'
20. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 130
21. Herculine Barbin was known in her/his early life as Alexina. See Foucault's 'Introduction' in *Herculine Barbin*, pp. xiii-xiv. 'Alexina wrote her memoirs about that life once her new identity had been discovered and established. Her "true" and "definitive" identity. But it is clear she did not write them from the point of view of that sex which had at least been brought to light. It is not a man who is speaking, trying to recall his sensations and his life as they were at the time when he was not yet "himself". When Alexina composed her memoirs, she was not far from her suicide; for herself, she was still without a definite sex, but she was deprived of the delights she experienced in not having one, or in not entirely having the same sex as the girls among whom she lived and whom she loved and desired

so much. And what she evokes in her past is the happy limbo of a non-identity, which was paradoxically protected by the life of those closed, narrow, and intimate societies where one has the strange happiness, which is at the same time obligatory and forbidden, of being acquainted with only one sex.’ Foucault also points out in a note about the limitation of linguistic convention both in the original and the translated text: ‘In the English translation of the text, it is difficult to render the play of the masculine and feminine adjectives which Alexina applies to herself. They are for the most part feminine before she possessed Sara [the girl she fell in love with] and masculine afterward. But this systematisation [...] does not seem to describe a consciousness of being a woman becoming a consciousness of being a man; rather, it is an ironic reminder of grammatical, medical, and juridical categories that language must utilise but that the content of the narrative contradicts.’

22. See previous note: ‘the happy limbo of non-identity’.
23. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1969, 2002), p. 4, quoted in Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 178
24. Michel Foucault, eds., *Herculine Barbin*, p. xiv
25. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 178
26. Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 8. See, also, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (London: University of California Press, 1990, 2008)
27. Judith Halberstam, *Masculinity Without Men: Annamarie Jagose interviews Judith Halberstam*, University of Colorado, *Genders 1998-2013*, accessed at <https://www.colorado.edu/gendersarchive1998-2013/1999/04/01/masculinity-without-men-annamarie-jagose-interviews-judith-halberstam-about-her-latest>, on 03.01.2019. Subsequent quotations are from this interview.
28. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 186
29. Kamal Kumar Majumdar, ‘Mallika Bahar’, in *Galpasamagra* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers Private Limited, 1990, 1992). All subsequent quotations are from this text, in my translation.

30. This same politics of labelling is at work, one suspects, to the demands of markets dominated by the forces of capitalistic and neoliberal economies of selling books with alluringly neat and sellable labels, in anthologies like *The Penguin Book of International Gay Writing*, eds. Mark Mitchell (London: Viking Penguin, 1995), where the presupposed 'gay' short story, 'Death in Venice', by Thomas Mann, occupies a literally central position; or the inclusion of E M Forster's 'Dr Woolacot' in *The Faber Book of Gay Short Fiction* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991); or the inclusion of Angela Carter's 'Flesh and the Mirror' in *The Penguin Book of Erotic Stories by Women*, eds. Susan Williams and Richard Glynn Jones (London: Penguin, 2012).
31. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (New York: W W Norton and Company, 1988)
32. Nirmala Banerjee, 'Working Women in Colonial Bengal: Modernisation and Marginalisation', in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali For Women, 1989), p. 271
33. Dagmar Curjel, *Women's Medical Service of India: Report of an Enquiry into the Conditions of Employment of Women Before and After Child Birth in Bengal Industries* (Govt. of Bengal, Dept. of Commerce), File No.2R-20/1923, April 1923, quoted in Nirmala Banerjee, 'Working Women in Colonial Bengal', p. 295.