

CHAPTER FOUR

SEXUALITY, AGENCY, IDENTITY

‘If human existence is always gendered existence, then to stray outside of established gender is in some sense to put one’s very existence into question.’ Judith Butler, ‘Variations on Sex and Gender’¹

What constitutes identity, the presumption of an essence that persists through time and appears as internally coherent and supposedly gives off the impression of a unified core of attributory quintessence? In the previous chapter we have discussed how the mundane little acts, the performative acts that, without an agent behind the enactments of those acts, create one’s gender. But how does this enactment of gender relate to a gendered identity? Judith Butler contends that it is not tenable to assume that a discussion of a ‘core’ identity must precede gendered identity, i.e., an essential and transcendental identity does not exist prior to the gendered identity, because the intelligibility of a subject is ordered into the grid of heteronormativity only through the process of ‘becoming gendered in conformity with recognisable standards of gender intelligibility’.² If the process of becoming a gender with the consequence of falling into an intelligible pattern of identity formation within regulatory discourses is theoretically justifiable, then the concept of a core identity loses its significance as pre-existing any gendered identity. The first section of this chapter will focus on this necessary correspondence between identity, agency, and gender, in order to highlight the interdependency of each term.

Conventional notions of the conceptualisation of identity claim an ontological primacy of agency that assumes its confirmation through various socially and culturally approved roles and functions. For Butler, though, the question of identity centres on the internal characteristics

of a subject that consolidate and perpetuate the self-identity of a subject through time. ‘To what extent’, she asks, ‘do regulatory practices of gender formation and division constitute identity, the internal coherence of the subject, indeed, the self-identical status of the person?’ (p. 23) Is identity a normative ideality that remains forever out of bounds, or is it merely the sum total of experiences that define a subject? If identity is formed through the regulatory principles of sex, gender, and the discourse of sexuality, then the consistency and comprehensibility of this essence of identity and the preservation and continuance of this consolidated foundation ‘are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted maintained norms of intelligibility’ (*ibid.*). She further argues that, ‘[i]nasmuch as “identity” is assured through the stabilising concept of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of the “person” is called into question by the cultural emergence of those “incoherent” or “discontinuous” gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fails to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined’ (*ibid.*).

The intelligibility of a socially and culturally conformable gender adhere to the strictures and regulations of existing structures of discourses that prohibit and, at the same time, produce through rules and regulation those very forms of non-normative discontinuities and incoherencies of identities. What Foucault called the ‘truth’ of sex is produced and confirmed through the juridical discourses that stipulate the formations of intelligible identities through the relational matrices of those discourses.³ As Butler points out, the imposition of binarising desire, i.e., the heterosexualisation of it, engenders the production of instituting ‘discrete and asymmetrical opposition’ between what is perceived as feminine and masculine, and this perception materialises into the descriptive attributes of a female identity and a male identity. As discussed in the previous chapter, Butler contends that certain formation of identities cannot exist within the norms of cultural matrix through which gendered identity acquires its intelligibility, simply because the existing juridical structures maintain the possibility of those

flawed identities as ‘developmental failures or logical impossibilities’.⁴ But the very possibility of their appearance and existence, ‘[t]heir persistence and proliferation, however, provide critical opportunities to expose the limits and regulating aims of that domain of intelligibility and, hence, to open up within the very terms of that matrix of intelligibility rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder’ (p. 24).

Critical theories on the purported fabrication of identity as an *effect* of discourse through the regulatory regimes of hegemonic power take divergent routes to posit a formulation of what Butler calls ‘the identity concepts of sex’ (p. 25). Luce Irigaray, for example, recognises the claim of only one sex, the masculine sex that expresses itself through the production of the ‘other’ which is not a neutered identity without any definition, but the complicated production of an idealistic and abstract appropriation of a single masculine subject reflecting the preternatural illusoriness of its unique attributory propensities.⁵ Foucault, as elaborated in Chapter Two, formulates it as the production of a regulatory economy of sexuality marked by dispersal and diffusion. Monique Wittig, on the other hand, argues that the category of sex under the hegemonic regime of heterosexuality is always feminine where the masculine eludes the signification of marks to defy deterioration and degeneration into an absence, and therefore aligns itself with the self-evident universal.⁶ Irigaray’s theorisation of sexual difference points out that the feminine can never be articulated as a ‘subject’ or an ‘identity’ through the conventional representational systems of cultural modalities because, as Butler indicates, ‘they constitute the fetish of representation and, hence, the unrepresentable as such’.⁷ In this Butlerian exegesis of Irigaray’s theoretical position, ‘[w]omen can never “be”, according to this ontology of substances, precisely because they are the relation of difference, the excluded, by which that domain marks itself off [...] [and] [w]omen are also a “difference” that cannot be understood as the simple negation or “Other” of the always already masculine subject’ (p. 25).

Butler contests the notion inherent within these variant ideas of the constitution of identity through the concept of sex, that sex is formulated within the discourse of language as something substantive: ‘as a *substance*, as, metaphysically speaking, a self-identical being’ (*ibid.*). This manoeuvre occurs, as she maintains, ‘through a performative twist of language and/or discourse that conceals the fact that “being” a sex or gender is fundamentally impossible’ (p. 26). In other words, Butler agrees with Luce Irigaray that, because grammar or linguistic conventions cannot accommodate gender differentials as it can only support the binary model of the representational aspects of sex and the attributions of sex, the grammatical connotation of gender, and its subsequent formulation or constitution of identity that appropriates the male and female identities, only recreates the paradigm of this restrictive binary ‘that effectively masks the univocal and hegemonic discourse of the masculine, phallogocentrism,⁸ silencing the feminine as a site of subversive multiplicity’ (p. 26). This might also be reconstrued as a reformulation of the Foucauldian paradigm where he maintains that the enunciative modalities of sexuality imposes an artificial binary relation to demarcate sex rigidly as male and female, and this inflexible regulation of sexuality essentially suppresses the potential of subversive multiplicity of sexuality that might disrupt the existing heterosexual, reproductive, and juridical discourses. Butler clearly states that ‘[g]ender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylised repetition of acts*’ (p. 191). Thus, if gender is constituted and substantiated through this repeated set of discrete acts, then this constitution and substantiation of corporeal embodiment is a constructed identity, which, according to this strand of theorisation, is ‘a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief’ (p. 192). It can, therefore, never be a concluded and consummated identity, as embodiment is always in the process of further resignification and reinterpretation. The

gendered self, structured through the ‘repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of reality’ can suffer the multifarious possibilities of transformations that are to be found ‘precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction’ (*ibid.*).

If the assignments of gender are performative, as Butler resolutely maintains, then these attributes produce the semblance of identity that they are allowed to articulate and display. Butler also marks a crucial distinction between the expressions of gender and its performativeness. ‘If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender’s performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restrictive frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality’ (pp.192-193).

The politics of identity expresses itself through the reasoning that there has to be a pre-existing identity around which political elaborations can be constituted in order to initiate subsequent relevant action. Butler denies the subjecthood and agency of this pre-existing identity because, as has been explained earlier in Chapter Three, her argument, reformulating Nietzsche,⁹ is that ‘there need not be a “doer” behind the “deed”, but the “doer” is variably constructed in and through the deed’ (p. 195). She is careful to distinguish her theoretical position from that of existentialism where, although the self is constructed through its acts, there is a ‘prediscursive structure for both the self and its acts’ (*ibid.*). The positioning of an

agency is generally associated with the construction of a subject; and this subject is generally taken to be pre-existing the cultural and social domain with a stable existence. If the subject is assumed to be culturally constructed, it is yet again endowed with an agency that is capable of instinctive reflection that remains stable in its cultural implantation. Butler contests this model of the agency and subject embedded into culture and discourse by postulating that culture and discourse merely ‘ “mire” the subject, but do not constitute the subject’ (*ibid.*). This need to prefigure a subject that precedes the cultural and discursive domains to establish an agency that cannot be entirely determined is, according to Butler, the example of a naive reasoning that erroneously presupposes that ‘agency can only be established through recourse to a prediscursive “I”, even if that “I” is found in the midst of a discursive convergence’, and that ‘to be *constituted* by discourse is to be *determined* by discourse, where determination forecloses the agency’ (*ibid.*). In other words, the semblance of an agency can only be recreated with an identity that stands before discourse, but that identity is a construction through the relational aspects of different discursive domains; and, also, that identity, the ‘I’, is entirely embedded into the discourse that maintains its conditioning and regulates its determining aspects, therefore negating the possibility, the viability, the autonomy, and the sovereignty of any agency whatsoever. Through the negation of this agency, Butler postulates that the embedded subject cannot ‘negotiate its construction’ (*ibid.*), because these constructions are always already asserted and maintained by the discursive fabrication of the very identity of the subject.

As a test case for the instability of the construction of agency, Butler puts forward the example of Simone de Beauvoir’s theorisation of gender,¹⁰ where ‘there is an “I” that does its gender, that becomes its gender, but that “I”, invariably associated with its gender, is nevertheless a point of agency never fully identifiable with its gender [...] [t]hat *cogito* is never fully *of* the cultural world that it negotiates, no matter the narrowness of the ontological

distance that separates that subject from its cultural predicates' (pp. 195-196). Thus, if identity is established by an ongoing process of signification, as Butler further elaborates on this project of negating the agency, 'if identity is always already signified, and yet continues to signify as it circulates within various interlocking discourses, then the question of agency is not to be answered through recourse to an "I" that preexists signification [...] [i]n other words, the enabling conditions for an assertion of "I" are provided by the structure of signification, the rules that regulate the legitimate and illegitimate invocation of that pronoun, the practices that establish the terms of intelligibility by which that person can circulate' (p. 196).

To posit an identity with its substantive qualifications is to negotiate a rule-bound existence, because the appearance and establishment of an identity is structured by the persistent and continuous invocation of social and cultural strictures, and the pervasive conventions and conditionings of a dominant linguistic structure that constitutes as well as restricts the cultural intelligibility of the procedures and practices of identity formation. As the subject is constituted through the eventuality and implication of regulatory discourses that determine the intelligibility of identity, in a strategic move to renegotiate and rethink the possibility of a contingent agency for a critical intervention, Butler suggests that the subject is not *entirely* determined by the rules and regulations that engender the possibility of the formation of the subject because social, cultural, and linguistic signification is '*not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantialising effects' (p. 198). As all signifiatory processes are engaged within the ambit of an obligation to repeating acts, the stylised recurrence of acts that are constitutive of gender, agency could be 'located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition' (*ibid.*), i.e., in the possibility of enacting an act that differs from the mundane repetition. Continuing in this mode of critical intervention, Butler further asserts that '[i]f the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains

of cultural intelligibility, i.e., new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible [...] [and thus] [t]he injunction *to be* a given gender produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated' (p. 199).

To the question that what constitutes this subversive repetition within the representational practice and economy of gender, or what critical intervention is possible in the off-formulaic repetition of an act, Butler answers that the ritual of a parodic enactment can 'serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between a privileged and naturalised gender configuration and one that appears as derived, phantasmatic, and mimetic — a failed copy, as it were' (p. 200). The parodic repetition of gender acts uncovers the apparitional quality of gender identity that appears as immutable, intractable, and substantive. 'As the effect of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an "act", as it were, that is open to splitting, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of "the natural" that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status' (*ibid.*). For Butler, then, identity politics is a critical intervention from the perspectives of gender criticism that must be understood 'as generative political structures rather than naturalised foundations' (p. 201). A critical engagement with the concept of identity as something that is produced, something that is an *effect*, admits the possibility of an agency that a foundationalist conception of identity forecloses, thus, 'for an identity to be an effect means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary' (*ibid.*). In this framework, constructionism is not at odds with agency, but it is 'the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible' (*ibid.*). The task of this interventionary politics, as she sees it, 'is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, *to displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself' (pp.

202-203). She also denies an ontology of gender through which one might fabricate a politics, because ‘gender ontologies always operate within established political contexts as normative injunctions, determining what qualifies as intelligible sex, invoking and consolidating the reproductive constraints on sexuality, setting the proscriptive requirements whereby sexed or gendered bodies come into cultural intelligibility [...] [thus] [o]ntology is [...] not a foundation, but a normative injunction that operates insidiously by instating itself into political discourse as its necessary ground’ (p.203). In other words, the destabilisation of identity does not amount to a dissolution of politics, but rather, ‘it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated’ (*ibid.*).

Judith Butler’s performative subjectivity postulates itself as a radicalisation of Foucault’s discursive bodies, as the previous chapters try to explain, to extend the possibilities of proliferation by moving beyond the binary of gender and sex to expound through the philosophical conception of obliterating the presupposition of subjecthood, the dissolution of the regimented categories, and also moving away from a theorisation of gender as a category that the body submissively falls into in a process of cultural subjectification towards a theory of gender as a series of parodic acts that constitutively produce the gendered body. Notwithstanding Butler’s strategic redressal of the question of agency for a political intervention, other critics have subjected this notion of the reducibility of the subject to dissolve the critical ideas of self-reflexivity, intentionality, and autonomy to question Butler’s formulation of the subject.¹¹ Butler’s ‘earlier accounts of subjectivity transcend the linguistic domain by considering how particular gestures, individual habits, concrete bodies, and social rituals serve the performance of gender’, her later texts, *The Psychic Life of Power* and *Excitable Speech*,¹² ‘suggest a subject thoroughly vulnerable to the impositions of language — a subject reducible to the discursive effects of interpellation and naming’.¹³ While denying agency — her notion of performativity precludes the agency of the subject — Butler cannot

satisfactorily explain how the performatively constituted gender allows the corporeal and material body to volitionally adopt and adapt an identity within the dominating discourse of heteronormative sexuality to determine its intensity of desires and purposes. For Butler, if agency eludes self-reflexivity, autonomy, intentionality, and choice, then it is entirely conceivable to *reconceive* the agency as not being fundamental to subjectivity.

As Magnus points out, it is better to grasp the concept of subjectivity as the artefact of various discourses, and, as such, it is a domain with proliferative possibilities amenable to interpretive freedom that celebrates its resignifiability. The gendered subject might fight for its status and conditioning within the grid of internecine networks of power-knowledge-sexuality-language, but it does not follow that it is entirely, completely *determined* by such discourses. ‘Eschewing the language of choice and self-determination, Butler proposes an understanding of agency in terms of the process of resignification: the subject who is produced in and through discourse can act by articulating words in contexts’ — one might also add the gestures that exceeds linguistic convention — ‘that invest them with new meaning [...] [and] [t]hrough such linguistic performances, the subject can “resist” the reestablished social order that not only circumscribes her, but which penetrates her very being’ (p. 83). If the cumulative deeds produce a gender, without an agency, so that the deeds are open and free to adopt, then a subversive act of gender can be conceived to produce an agency, a material identity that is *flawed* with respect to the contemporary hegemonic discourses, because it has the disruptive and proliferative potentiality for a dissolution of restrictive binaries and resisting the politics of heteronormativity. This identity can be conceived to possess the power of intervention to reconceive and reconstruct the deed to produce the semblance of an opposition to the hegemonic matrix of heteronormative discourse. This is indeed a negative formulation of agency that nevertheless has the potential of proliferating political resistance, and it does allow for a certain sort of creativity.

Butler's notion of performative subjectivity's resistive potential is thoroughly negative as she fails to engage with the moral and political subjection, and the creative and disruptive capability of social subjugation. She also associates, as Magnus says, 'dependence with subordination and thus underestimates the productive, liberating dimensions of intersubjectivity' (*ibid.*). In the *Psychic Life of Power*, Butler contends that the interiority of psychic space is determined by the regulatory structure of discourse, thus, the distinction between the private and the public domain is maintained through the restrictive norms of, and internalised through, hegemonic regimes.¹⁴ Magnus objects to this theorisation of the psychic space because of what she sees as Butler's failure to distinguish between 'a sense of moral obligation that may *condition the possibility* of a subject coming into existence' to live communitarian life productively, and the 'unjustified forms of social/political domination that *destroy* human subjectivity and community' (p. 84). She admits, though, that it is essential to agree with Butler that 'the interior psychic space which serves to constitute subjectivity is produced in the context of social and political circumstances' (*ibid.*), but objects to the notion that these circumstantial productions of subjectivities and their accompanying formation of identities are always necessarily repressive. For Butler, then, '[a]lways already subjected to the discourse that conditions her being, the subject may perform linguistic acts that contest her social position, but she cannot define this position for herself. The subject can protest her situation and "talk back" to socially constructed authorities but she cannot escape her situation of fundamental subjection' (*ibid.*).

The Butlerian agency, then, revitalise the domain between enunciation and its effects and 'use language to counter the offensive call',¹⁵ although this subjectivity remains firmly in the grip of discourse that regulates the very structure and resistive potential of this 'countering'. Magnus points out that, for Butler, 'the subject or agent is formed within the parameters of a discourse that conditions her existence and commands her very presence', i.e., this subject

‘quite literally is “called” into being by an authority whose interpellation locates her in a subordinate position’.¹⁶ In both *The Psychic Life of Power* and *Excitable Speech*, Butler deliberates on the formation of agency to explore how the subject might resist the regulatory regime that constitutes the subject. The subject is constituted against the condition of her own being, in other words, the Butlerian subject is without choice, but it is a subjectivity that repeatedly contests, in a calculated process of becoming, her own constitution within heteronormative law.¹⁷ As Magnus sums up the Butlerian paradigm: ‘Drawing on her earlier claim that act is by definition a repetition, Butler emphasises that the subject’s capacity to resignify the terms given to her means that she always has a foundation outside herself. The subject has to begin with the terms given to her, and she can only make her mark through changes or resignifications, which necessarily move against the status quo that previously defined the given terms’. In other words, ‘Butler provides a fundamentally negative notion of agency [as] she defines the subject’s power in terms of her ability to repeat, recite, or recontextualise her inaugurating call and thereby reduces agency to resistance and action to reaction’ (p. 87).

Magnus notes that a word with dissentient intimation can be appropriated in a positive manner and, with reiteration over time, it can be consolidated with the attainment of a concurrent meaning, which suggests ‘that the act of performative resignification constructs new discursive realities *in the very process of resistance*’, because ‘Butler’s reduction of agency to the performance of subversive speech acts implies that creativity may only be exercised *in the form of resistance*’ (p. 88). Butler does not take into consideration of the interventionary power of non-linguistic speech acts and gestures as performative acts of subversion, and does not elaborate on the constituents of subversive rituals and practice. More specifically, ‘her delineation of subjective agency in terms of linguistic performance excludes consideration of actions that transcends the linguistic realm altogether [...] [as a] whole host

of actions through which subjects are both constituted and abjected — touching, looking, learning, hitting, naming, shaming, stealing or depriving, lending and giving support — cannot be simply subsumed under this rubric’ (pp. 88-89). Thus, while it stands to reason to dispel the mythical essence of the sovereign subject as the originary source of desires, intentions, and actions, the relegation of the subject, to deny its material and corporeal identity that it can creatively appropriate through the interstices of the relational aspects of other corporeal beings, even within pervasive discursive networks, into *only* the effect of discourse merely impoverish the subject of its range of creative power and possibilities.

This seeming uncertainty over the subject creatively forging an identity also extends to the question of choice. Butler’s dissolution of traditional metaphysical subject induces her to ‘propose a subject who comes into the play of language without any choice’, but she ‘fails to articulate the possibility of the agent asserting herself’ within the discursive field of regulatory constraint (p. 90). As Magnus pertinently observes: ‘On the one hand, her dismissal of the notion of choice seems to imply the subject cannot even make choices within the discursive field [...] [b]ut if the subject literally has “no say in the matter” of what is said, the idea of resignifying words in order to resist given structures hardly makes sense. On the other hand, Butler’s notion of performative agency seems to allow that the subject may choose how, when, and where to resignify words. Yet if the subject does choose her words strategically and those words “perform” actions, then she seems to have a kind of agency that is not wholly distinct from rational choice’ (*ibid.*).

Thus, as the Butlerian conception of agency interdicts everything but the reiterating linguistic acts suggesting performative opposition, in this context it might be suggested that the subject enveloped within the linguistic discourse performatively enacts the variant, resistive acts that can performatively bring about an eventuality, the possibility of an event of a *flawed* subject that over-spills, the regulatory discourse of an event that exceeds its cause, instead of

conceiving the subject entirely constructed by a discourse that uses the subject as an instrument to legitimise its rule through its enunciative modalities. It might also be suggested that for a subject becoming conditioned by discourse is not a complete foreclosure of its conditioning as the performative enactment of gendered subjectivity is always in the process of becoming, and it is not mutually exclusive to *affecting* the discourse with whatever little, mundane, yet resistive potential the subject carries internally, even though the performative acts must work within the regulatory regime using the linguistic and gestural tools to confront the conventions to creatively perform an intervention. A creative agency can then be located within and through the relational aspects of the eventualities of the flawed subjects that actively reconfigure the process of resignification. This performative agency necessitates the resistive and flawed subject that reformulates and resignifies the dominating linguistic convention for subversive enunciation to manoeuvre the statements and gestures to be recontextualised and redeveloped to initiate a *process* of political intervention that could signify a crucial break within heteronormativity.

Moving beyond the binary of sex and gender to ponder the concepts of subjectivity, agency, and identity, it seems advisable, in an effort to proliferate the possibilities of situating the self within the various strands of gender theories, to further queering the already muddled theoretical groundlessness to offer a few details on the politics of ‘queer’ movement itself. Queer theory — although it will be denied that this radical political movement that originated with the activist politics of radical groups like Queer Nation in New York in the 1990s has any consolidated, authoritative *theory* because of its suspicion of overarching, patriarchally sanctioned, phallogocentrism of the dominance of theory itself — rejects the binarism inherent in the categories of gay, lesbian, and straight to emphasise the deterritorialisation of sexual and gender politics to celebrate the plurality, instability, and fluidity of identity labels. In Diane Richardson’s words, ‘We are, it is suggested, post such identities: post woman, post man we

are transgender; post lesbian, post gay, post heterosexual (perhaps?) we are queer'.¹⁸ The name, itself a celebratory appropriation of the derision and insult latent within the invective of queer, has been tagged with Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Monique Wittig, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Adrienne Rich, among others, the theoreticians whose critique of heteronormative sexuality these chapters have been working with. As Judith Butler commented on the term itself: 'When the term has been used as a paralysing slur, as the mundane interpellation of pathologised sexuality, it has produced the user of the term as the emblem and vehicle of normalisation; the occasion of its utterance, as the discursive regulation of the boundaries of sexual legitimacy. Much of the straight world has always needed the queers it has sought to repudiate through the performative force of the term'.¹⁹

Michel Foucault's works on discourse, sexuality, power, and knowledge have been a lasting influence on the movement, especially his conception of power that can be grasped more comprehensively and accurately not as an unconnected and inapposite outward influence but as a relationship of forces that is at the same time constitutive of, deployed in, and emerging from the incessant interplay of multitudinous force relations. Adopting Foucault's analysis of the intricate link between the discourse of sexuality and the discourses of power and knowledge, and positing a resistive challenge to hegemonic heteronormativity, the queer movement of the 1990s has as its political agenda to bring sexuality's subversive potential out in the open. As Bertholde Schoene points out, '[p]icking up on the distinction Foucault himself makes between the different *modi operandi* of an *ars erotica* ('art of love'), on the one hand, and a *scientia sexualis* ('science of sexuality'), on the other, the queer movement is perhaps best described in terms of a politically inspired eroticism — a libidinal politics, or as a politics of desire — whose celebration of sexual diversity proliferates in defiant disrespect of the intellectually retentive, pathologising parameters of Victorian sexology's *scientia sexualis*'.²⁰

The queer movement also directly confronts the homophobic slur, 'queer', and has appropriated the insult, as has already been mentioned, to celebrate, revitalise, and encourage the inducement of an exclusionary pariah existence.²¹ As a marker of this rebellious attitude, a defiant denial for conventional categories of sex and gender, and as a desire to move beyond the regulatory compartmentalisations of heteronormativity, 'queer designates the new democratic virtues of nonconformity, civil disobedience, and political defiance' (p. 285). To be queer, then, is to transgress and trespass, with the overt political aim of exposing the artificiality of constructionism, to overcome the rigid taboos, and sanctions imposed by regulatory regimes. As David Halperin notes, queer represents 'whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant [...] [and] [t]here is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers [...] [as] [i]t is an identity without an essence [that] demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative'.²² Schoene, too, points out that, as the movement resolutely distances itself from any definitional agenda, 'it not only circumvents what Judith Butler describes in *Gender Trouble* as feminism's foundational paradox — namely "that it presumes, fixes, and constrains the very 'subject' that it hopes to represent and liberate" — it also successfully avoids the apparently inevitable pitfall of "every single theoretically, or politically interesting project of postwar thought", which, according to Eve Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet*, "has finally had the effect of delegitimizing our space for asking or thinking in detail about the multiple, unstable ways in which people may be like or different from one another"'.²³

Thus, the movement seeks to destabilise the constraints of heteronormative discourse through theoretical and political manoeuvres, and refuses labelling as constrictive gestures that are the necessary hegemonic stratagems for further exploitation, but this form of activist theoretical deployment of confrontational strategy for anti-labelling and a diffusion of identity categories is, at the same time, resistive of self-annihilating, non-discursive evacuation of

subjectivity. As Schoene writes, ‘presented only with signifiers that are perceived as oppressive’, proponents of the queer movement choose not to display or express their identities unconditionally in a definitive way, and, ‘by thus deliberately eschewing tangibility, they make a virtue out of their categorical homelessness, which suspends their agitated mode of being somewhere halfway between the visible and the hidden’ (p. 290). Echoing Butler’s understanding of gender as the ritualistic enactment of performative acts, queer theory regards the conventionality of the normative terms of identity as domineering and oppressive assignments that, disregarding and erasing the differences between individual specificity, allocate everyone to a conformity that is subject to the regulatory exigencies of incontrovertible cultural intelligibility. ‘The queer argument is that since no two individuals are ever perfectly alike, identity as we know it often distorts rather than illuminate individual difference, thus rendering queer theory the only epistemological approach intent upon accommodating “difference” without discriminating against it by inevitably freezing it into a definitional cluster’ (p. 297).

Butler’s conception of the parodic enactments of *doing* one’s gender is the obverse of the cultural connotation of gender implantations on a malleable, ever-so-willing body that somehow stands outside discourse and culture, and as such, it is a significant theoretical and strategical tactic that emphasises a radical reorganisation and reconstruction of the concept of gender and subjectivity with an engaged focus on the disruptive potential and politics to confront hegemonic heteronormativity in the ongoing debate of gender criticism and queer politics. When these parodic acts seem derived and mimetic, they *act* like *flaws*, producing flawed copies of corporeality that revel in fissures, omissions, insufficiencies, and incoherence; and as the production of derivative deficiencies they create the theoretical and political possibility — a certain kind of metaphorical ground — of exposing the construction of the very groundlessness of the fabricated constitution of the originary form. In an effort to contextualise

how the repetition of signifying acts that are deviant in the sense that they do not conform to the normative injunction to be a given gender, a coherent gender, and how through the enactments of such subversive acts that engender the incoherence of subjectivities, the following section of this chapter will focus on two literary texts, namely, Ismat Chughtai's 'Lihaf' or 'The Quilt', and the remarkable frame narrative of *The Arabian Nights*, to explore the possibility of certain creative enactments of a variety of normatively unintelligible gender configurations that, in their proliferation through performative and interventionary politics of these repeating acts, can constitute non-compliance to the very injunctions that condition the formation of socially and culturally approved gender identities.

Born as the ninth child in a Muslim middle-class family in Badayun, Uttar Pradesh, in 1915, a doyen of Urdu literature alongside Sajjad Haider, Rashid Jahan, Krishan Chander, and Saadat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai exposes through her bitter-sweet stories and novels the complacency in bourgeois middle-class sensibilities, the uneven morass of closeted familial and sexual life. Because of a segregated purdah-driven exclusion that permeated the conservative families around Chughtai, her texts explore the effects of, '[a]s was only inevitable, excessive restrictions, segregation of sexes, grossly incompatible arranged marriages etc [that] gave rise to another set of social malaise like illicit and adulterous liaisons, social and sexual exploitation of girls and widows, homosexual and lesbian tendencies and so on'.²⁴ Like Saadat Hasan Manto, she, too, was eventually dragged to the court for her stories, especially for the story under discussion, 'Lihaf', 'The Quilt'. She later remarked, 'In my stories I've put down everything with objectivity. Now, if some people find them obscene, let them go to hell. It's my belief that experiences can never be obscene if they are based on authentic realities of life. These people think that there's nothing wrong if they can do things

behind the curtains [...] All of them are half-wits.’²⁵ ‘Lihaf’, indeed, ‘created a lot of heat and dust and Chughtai was taken to the court at Lahore on charges of obscenity’ (p. 85); and she spent quite a lot of time with Manto in Lahore who, too, was tried for his story, ‘Thanda Ghost’ (‘Cold Meat’). She was acquitted after two years, and, according to her own accounts, the narrative was based on the actual life story of the wife of Nawab Swalekhan of Aligarh who was gay.²⁶ Chughtai later commented in an interview that ‘I thought that men always went to prostitutes, but because girls can’t go to prostitutes, they do this [...] So as soon as I wrote this, oh, it really was like an atom bomb exploded. People started calling me bad names [...] ‘Lihaf’ was first published in *Adab-i-latif* (‘belles-lettres’). People said that it was a very, very dirty story, and that I was a very dirty person, coming from a very dirty family.’²⁷

The exploration of homoerotic desire in Ismat Chughtai’s ‘Lihaf’ contextualises the secular, nationalist, and the nascent reformist climate of India on the verge of independence, and it also bears the imprint of the social imperatives of the Marxist All India Progressive Writers’ Association of which she was a member. Immediately after the publication of the short story, the colonial judicial machinery pulled her up with the charge of obscenity.²⁸ She later recalled that she won the case because ‘the obscenity laws prohibited the use of four letter words [...] In those days the word ‘lesbianism’ was not in use.’²⁹ One might call this a strategic non-enunciation, a kind of elision of unambiguous articulation, that is able to eventually elude the colonial juridical apparatus by not strictly naming and therefore not defining the alignment of a female homoerotic desire.

The text of the story concerns itself about a rebellious, prepubescent girl, working through the metaphor of an elephant in the room, a shadow of the quivering quilt on the wall of the room that take on eerie animals’ shape. She is a rebel because she is always fighting with her ‘brothers and their friends’; while the other sisters acted and re-played their gender according to the regulatory norms of society by adorning themselves and ‘were busy drawing admirers’,

our rebel narrator fought with ‘any boy or girl’ all the time.³⁰ When her mother went to Agra, she was banished to the place of Nawab Saheb and Begum Jaan, the latter an adopted sister of her mother’s where the narrator would be unable to put up a fight with anyone. A rebel loses her stature when she cannot find anything to rebel against. That was her mother’s injunction, and ‘it was a severe punishment’ (p. 13) for the narrator. The prepubescent narrator is supplanted from a transgressive, cross-gendered identity to the care of Begum Jaan who is supposedly the embodiment of an elite version of normalised femininity. The narrative begins at a moment in the mature narrator’s life when she feels the incident of the quilt in Begum Jaan’s household has etched a scar in her mind, the stigmata of a mark, a signature imprint of a ‘blacksmith’s brand’ (*ibid.*).

The Nawab Saheb is considered to be a virtuous man by everyone, having performed hajj, and showing disdain for sports like pigeon-fighting and cock-fighting that happen, at the time, to be the normal practice and prerogative for a well-endowed nobility like him. He, however, had a ‘strange hobby’, keeping ‘an open house for students — young, fair, slender-waisted boys whose expenses were borne by him’ (*ibid.*). He married Begum Jaan, set her aside like his other possession inside the household, and promptly forgot all about her. So, when did Begum Jaan’s life begin, because ‘[o]ne did not know when Begum Jaan’s life began’ (p. 14)? Or, to configure the question differently, when and how did the normative assignments of gender identity begin for her, and what did those eventual allocations mean to her? And what sort of parodic acts she could possibly performatively enact to creatively dislocate the socially sanctioned gender roles assigned to her? There are several possibilities offered by the text: a) When she was born, in a supposedly pre-gendered state? b) When she was married to Nawab Saheb, fulfilling the regulatory injunctions of compulsory heterosexuality masked as connubial bliss? c) Or, ‘when she watched through the drawing room the increasing number of firm-calved, supple-waisted boys’ (*ibid.*), the horde of young students the Nawab Saheb nurtured?

d) Or, when she resorted to the rituals of black magic and superstitions, of amulets and talismans, to retain the ‘love of her *straying* husband’? (p. 14, *emphasis added*). She recognises the futility of her gender assignation in a compulsory heteronormative existence, as the text points out, more for her secluded, closeted, abandoned, and wasted mode of being, than her husband’s preference for young, nubile boys, and their ‘perfumed, flimsy shirts’, which makes her ‘feel as though she [is] being hauled over burning embers!’ (*ibid.*). She turns to religion, romantic books, but all in vain. ‘She began to spend sleepless nights, yearning for a love that had never been.’ (*ibid.*) Is this longing for a ‘love’ a natural constituent in a compulsory and regulatory heterosexual bonding, or is this desire indicates the intervention of the possibility of a sort of ‘love’ that emerges as a rebellious strand of power through the relations of other forces that subversively tries to counter, to initiate a resistance to, the culturally sanctioned naturalness of Nawab Saheb’s association with the adolescent students? The Nawab Saheb was ‘too busy chasing the gossamer shirts’ but she ‘remained a prisoner of the house’ (*ibid.*). But then her life begins: ‘Begum Jaan started living’ (p. 15), always already with a series of ‘beginnings’ in a signifying chain, as indicated earlier, so that an originary beginning loses its significance, with the paradoxical affliction of a malady of a terrible itching in her body. She ‘was afflicted with a persistent itch’ (p. 16). It is Rabbu, her personal maid, who rescues her with an oil massage whose *recipe cannot be found anywhere*, as if to counter the heteronormative injunctions of linguistic discourse, to ease her itching. Rabbu and Begum Jaan use the discourse of medicalisation of the female body to their own end to produce a counter discourse that uses and abuses the discursive formation to intensify their bodily pleasure. The Begum Jaan’s corporeal flaw, the medically undiagnosed affliction of an itch, is used as an advantage, for an intervention that challenges the hegemonic heteronormative discourse.

As far as descriptions go, Rabbu’s attributions are representationally the exact opposite of Begum Jaan’s. ‘She was as dark as Begum Jaan was fair, as purple as the other was white [...]

Her face was scarred by small pox. She was small, stocky and had a small paunch' (p.16). The other maids weave a network of discursive gossip about their ritualistic performativity of 'a special oil massage' (p. 15) to relieve Begum Jaan's constant itch, but 'Begum Jaan was oblivious to all this [...] Her existence was centred on herself and her itch' (p. 17). The young narrator is infatuated with Begum Jaan. Her pale white face, her significant and regal stature, and the severity of her attitude fascinated her imagination. In the first night of the elephant, she 'woke up at night and was scared. It was pitch dark and Begum Jaan's quilt was shaking vigorously, as though an elephant was struggling inside' (*ibid.*). This struggling elephant inside the quilt, the *soixante-neuf* position of a mutually satisfying erotic encounter under the quilt that vibrated with 'the slurping sound of a cat licking a plate' (*ibid.*), will become conditionally visible for the narrator only through a subversive chink, a breach of the unmentionable gap, that reveals only part of this proverbial elephant whose entirety can only be revealed as a shadowgraph on the wall. The same enunciative silence, one that ironically acquitted her from the charge of obscenity from colonial juridical law, a strategy of dissimulation is observed when the quilt is lifted slightly, and the chink reveals what it can and cannot reveal. The shadowgraph of this erotic performativity is not the distorted reality of the straitjacketed prisoner of the Socratic cave who can only helplessly see the spectral shadow-dancing of a puppet show;³¹ it is the metaphor of a difficult replication of a particular force field, a specific sort of performativity, that has the power of intervention by opening itself up for interpretation. The upheavals of the blanket emit the sound of not the proverbial two-backed beast of a compulsory heterosexual union, but that of the more transgressive bicephalous beast,³² the fictitious phantasm of a non-productive union that directly affronts our sensibility as readers who might skim through the dalliance of the virtuous Nawab Saheb with the seminary of thinly clad, supple-limbed male students as a similarly non-allocated, non-signified erotic congress.

Trying to locate homoerotic desire in ‘Lihaf’, Indrani Mitra writes that the ‘public visibility of the male homoerotic space in the master’s drawing room and the simultaneous invisibility of his wife, who must glimpse through a chink in the door the site of pleasure, makes clear the patriarchal double standards.’³³ Extending this deliberation on the chink in the door to glimpse through the exteriority of the *zenanamahal*, and relating it to the slight opening of the blanket at the final moment of the text, the public visibility of male homoeroticism in the guise of philanthropic religious fervour versus the invisibility of its supposedly oppositional binary, the female homoeroticism that occurs inside the blanket, it might be pointed out that as the latter is blanketed forever in this patriarchally defined linguistic medium of the text, the former, too, elide the explicatory descriptiveness by working only through suggestive hints, thus, rendering the binary untenable. Through this very similarity of a linguistic refusal to label, or name, or even culturally allocate both these performativities, that of the Nawab Saheb’s and of Begum Jaan’s, into distinctive domains of desire, the very oppositions of the ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ binary is called into question and the dissolution of the binary opens up proliferative interpretive possibilities.

Mitra also notes that ‘[h]aving failed within the register of heterosexual desirability, the Begum mobilises her class power to the limited extent she can by pressing into the service of her insatiable ‘itch’ the labour of her compliant maid’ (p. 317). Mitra’s simplistic rendition of this mistress-slave dichotomy, and a mimetic explanation of the reactionary retaliation of Begum Jaan’s rejection within compulsory heterosexuality, can be avoided as the text makes it clear about Rabbu’s power over the household, and Begum Jaan’s discomfiture when she leaves for a few days, and the eventual transfer of Begum Jaan’s desires on the narrator. To a great extent, the quilt represents a microcosm of the site of power relations, but even so, it does not display univocal domination as it hides the relationships of the exertions of power and desire, and the intervention of the chink offers the possibility of the corporeal identities to

resist, extend, and proliferate the restrictive structural binary of two oppositional versions of homoeroticism. The initiation of the narrator into this sexually charged encounter of the itch-relieving massage induces a predatory focus on the corporeality of the narrator. Her ribs are counted; she is pressed like a clay model until she wants to throw up in consternation. All this happens when Rabbu is absent from the household. The Begum Jaan seemed possessed, '[h]er eyelids had drooped, her upper lip showed a black shadow and tiny beads of sweat sparkled on her lips and noses despite the cold' (p. 20). This predatory encounter — that later produces an angry response from Rabbu: 'Raw mangoes are sour to the taste, Begum Jaan', hissed Rabbu, burning with jealousy' (pp. 21-22) — masks one end of the spectrum of what happens within the quilt; at the same time, this significant silence also reveals the replicatory possibilities within another end of the spectrum as the text never tells us what occurs in the seminary in the exteriority of the household. It proliferates the possibility of subversive sexual encounters to mark the performative acts as parodic subversions to produce *flawed* bodies that fail to conform to the restrictive economy of compulsory heteronormativity, so that we cannot read the erotic encounters between Rabbu and Begum Jaan, or Begum Jaan and the young narrator, or the Nawab Saheb and his seminary of prepubescent boys, or even the erotic non-encounter between Begum Jaan and Nawab Saheb, as mere counter-gestures oppositionally related, as rejoinders and counter-responses to the different sets of presupposed compulsory heteronormativity and homoeroticism, enacted in self-defence, preserving one's sanity and socially approved sexual identity, as rebellions against oppressive heteronormativity. It is an interdiction, of course, but a flawed interdiction that merely replays and enacts gender-based rituals. A flash of this flawed re-enaction of the ritual of doing a gender role shines conspicuously in the text when the narrator describes Begum Jaan's upper lips — 'a mere trace of down on her upper lip' — when she looks at her face that 'seemed to change shape under my gaze and looked as though it were the face of a young boy' (p. 15).

The reader of *The Arabian Nights* should pay heed to the first utterance of the vizier when Shahriyar, the great Sassanian King of the islands of India and China, asked him to bring the king's younger brother, Shah Zaman, the ruler of Persian Samarkand, to his palace so that the brothers can unite after a gap of ten years: 'To hear is to obey'.³⁴ Hearing a story is sometimes synonymous with agreeing to a command. To hear a story is to obey its form and abide by the rules it imposes on the listeners. *The Arabian Nights* begins with a frame narrative, an overarching plot that contains all the tales, borrowing the form from older Indian and Persians tales, collections like *Kathasaritsagara*, *Hezar Afsaneh*, and it is also one of the finest.

The frame begins with an introduction to the lineage of Shahriyar, how he inherited the large kingdom from his father as he was the ablest elder son. The first deaths in the frame narrative occur before the brothers meet. Shah Zaman sets up tents outside his capital city to prepare for the journey with Shahriyar's vizier, and just before embarking on the journey he goes back to the palace to retrieve the gift meant for his elder brother. He catches his queen in their nuptial bed with a black slave *in flagrante delicto*, and, unable to control his anger at the betrayal, he cut off their heads. Cutting off heads will continue in the frame narrative for three more years. Shah Zaman comes to visit Shahriyar with a heavy heart, feeling sick at what had transpired in his palace, and he is unable to join in the festivities arranged by his brother to amuse him. He refuses to join a hunt arranged by Shahriyar, and stays back in his room. From the window of the room he chances upon the beautiful queen of Shahriyar engaging in an orgy with black slaves and slave girls in their private garden making use of the absence of the king. Shah Zaman considers his elder brother's misfortune and finds it to be worse than his, and that makes him happier again. A little later there will be a third betrayal that will make the brothers re-evaluate their ideas of women as a gendered category from the point of view of hegemonic discourses. This discussion of the frame narrative of *The Arabian Nights* focuses on these three betrayals, and shows how in the frame narrative transgression of the creative enactments of

gendered performativity leads to death, a complete erasure of the flawed subjectivities, and how the outcomes of such transgressions serve as cautionary morals for the listeners to perpetuate, reiterate, and reify the domineering and restrictive regulations within heteronormative discourse for the normalising assignments of gendered identities. Tales told under the shadow of death are marked with different layers of punitive outcomes for each subversive act, and the frame narrative itself contains a typical story that shows the nature of this cautionary moral of why one should not to expose the secret of deviations.

But one must first begin with the betrayals. The first betrayal, Shah Zaman's queen intertwined with her lover in an adulterous bed, reveals a secret that must be spelt out first, and then summarily suppressed to set an example. It is meant not to hint at a historical possibility of what can happen in a Sassanian king's seraglio, but rather emphasising the punitive outcome of such probabilities. The king finds his queen in the embrace of a black slave in his absence, and the outcome is death. The queen subverts her gendered subjectivity by acting out, or doing her gender, in a way that does not conform to the ideality of a Sassanian queen held in captivity in a harem. A miscegenation that involves copulating with a black slave, a point that will be emphasised in a cruder way in the next betrayal, must necessitate their beheading in a laconic fashion, in a matter of fact way that is remarkable: 'So he drew his sword and struck, killing both his wife and lover as they lay together, before going back and ordering his escort to move off.' (p. 3)

One then moves off to Shahriyar's palace to a greater betrayal. Instead of two intertwined bodies subjected to illicit desire, the secret garden reveals masses of bodies, an orgy of mixed races, involving not just the queen and her black slave lover again, but twenty more slave girls and twenty slaves: 'they spent their time kissing, embracing, fornicating and drinking wine until the end of the day' (p. 5). A betrayal of this magnitude, the parodic enactment that replays what happens to be a normalised practice in a harem, in a specific historical conditioning,

requires careful planning of punitive action, since this orgy subverts the familiar idea of what happens inside a Sassanian harem by enacting a pastiche that lampoons the actuality of an orgy where the dominating position is unambiguously held by the king himself. The queen initiates the party where she takes the lead role in it, and it simply imitates other orgies mentioned in numerous tales within *The Arabian Nights* where the king, by right, is the initiator. The acts of gender are not performed by the subjects, because there is no originary act to be performed by a transcendental subject, 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 repetition, a copy of a copy, a parody, that does not presuppose the existence of an original, since it is the very notion of an original that is being parodied. By defining gender as a set of acts, and by pointing out the discursive construct of gender, i.e., gender is not a ‘natural’ fact but something that is ‘produced’, one must envision the discursive category of gender.

Shahriyar’s queen violates the regulatory implementations of gender coherence by enacting the parody of an orgy, and there is nothing laconic about such role-reversals and their outcome. The enormity of this parody is sufficient to make Shah Zaman feel more fortunate than his elder brother. His misfortune is to witness a parody of a lesser magnitude, an illicit coupling of mixed races, whereas Shahriyar becomes the more unfortunate observer of an act that mimics a royal orgy, a proliferation of mixed-race bodies. Enactment of such subversive mimicry will require a reiteration of the sinful nature of women as gendered subjects in order to suppress, erase, and annihilate the imitation. And this is why a shocked Shahriyar says to his brother, ‘Come, let us leave at once. Until we can find someone else to whom the same kind of thing happens, we have no need of a kingdom, and otherwise we would be better dead’ (p. 5).

The two brothers leave the kingdom, and after much wandering come to place where there is a tall tree beside a stream near the seashore. As they are discussing their misfortunes under the tree, a huge *jinni* appears from the sea with a large chest on his head. The frightened brothers take refuge by climbing up on the tree, and the *jinni* puts his chest under the tree, takes out a box from the chest, and from the box, like an ancient Chinese box puzzle, a beautiful woman emerges. The *jinni* has abducted the woman from her wedding night, and when he is not enjoying her he puts her in the box, puts the box in the chest, secures the chest with seven locks, and puts the entire thing under the tumultuous sea. She is a prized possession that must be kept as a secret, a woman who is subjected to a box-prison that is worse than solitary confinement. When the *jinni* falls asleep, the woman notices the brothers up in the tall tree and asks them to come down, and satisfy her sexually, or else she will wake the *jinni* up, and they will suffer the ‘cruellest of deaths’. ‘To hear is to obey’: the brothers conform to the rules set up by the frame narrative. ‘Because they were afraid, they took turns to lie with her, and when they had finished, she told them to get up’ (p. 6). After achieving erotic satisfaction *on her own terms*, she produces a purse that contains a string of five hundred and seventy signet rings, and asks the brothers for their rings. The brothers have finally found someone, a cuckold *jinni*, whose misfortune is greater than theirs. And the brothers have found a woman, a queen of five hundred and seventy-two acts of infidelities, a professional collector of symbols of betrayals, to finally substantiate the foundationalist notions of women’s insatiable sexual cravings, and their deceptive nature. She is herself the symbol of treacherous and fallen woman, and compared to the queens of the brothers, she goes about her business with a professional zeal. It is important to note that such a foundationalist notion of womanhood in a patriarchal culture comes as an exegesis not from Shahriyar and Shah Zaman; the brothers do not gloss or interpret the enactment of her gender; instead, the moral of the story comes from the woman herself: ‘when a woman wants something, nothing can get the better of her’ (p. 6). Unlike the queens

who suffer silent deaths, unlike hundreds and hundreds of women in Shahriyar's Sassanian kingdom who too will suffer silent deaths for three years until the vizier's daughter, Shahrazad, put an end to that by telling her tales, this captive woman has a confident voice that exults in the subversive acts, a voice that is unapologetically assertive in the capacity of a gendered subjectivity. The empowered gendered subject threatens death to the kings, not the other way round, and that problematises the regulatory regime's normalising beliefs about female identity and infidelity.

The *jinni's* secret finds a strange parallel with the secret of a merchant in a tale told by the vizier to Shahrazad to dissuade her from marrying Shahriyar. The Merchant understands the language of animals, but if this secret is revealed he will die. The threat of death always hovers round the keepers of secrets in many of the tales in *The Arabian Nights*, and the merchant silences his wife, who is adamant on learning her husband's secret, by beating her vigorously with mulberry twigs. The vizier's tale has a cautionary moral for Shahrazad: 'I shall treat you as that man treated his wife' (p. 9).

But the narrator of the tales in *The Arabian Nights* is more vocal, scholarly, and erudite than the two queens, the merchant's wife, and the woman in the *jinni's* box. She is a voracious reader, familiar with the 'accounts of past kings and stories of earlier people, having collected, it was said, a thousand volumes of these, covering peoples, kings and poets' (p. 7). She convinces her father, marries Shahriyar, and night after night she exposes secrets of kings, queens, merchants, travellers, and seamen to the king, and the king can do nothing about it. She defers her death by exposing secrets, and the king will only be a mute listener. It should be noted that Shahrazad begins her labyrinthine tales with the story of another merchant who also faces the threat of death from an *ifrit*, an evil *jinni*, because he threw the stone of a date after eating it, and the seed apparently killed the mighty *ifrit's* son. The absurdity of the cause of the threat of death is perhaps laughable from the vantage point of twenty-first century readers

of *The Arabian Nights*, but if one chooses to compare that with the absurdity of Shahriyar's decision to take a virgin every night, deflower her, and then behead her in the dawn to compensate for the deeds of the adulterous queens, it becomes clear why Shahrazad begins her tale with the story of the merchant. Three strangers will narrate three delightful stories to the *ifrit* to save the merchant's life. Likewise, Shahrazad will expiate for the sins committed by Shahriyar: stories told over a thousand nights to compensate the loss of thousand lives of innocent victims. To hear is to obey the rules of the frame narrative, and at the end of the frame narrative, in the beginning of the first night's tale, an obeisance to the storyteller means, again, a subversion of roles: the king is silenced.

NOTES

1. Judith Butler, 'Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig, Foucault', *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies*, eds. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer (New York: Longman, 1998), p. 615
2. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990, 2006), p. 22
3. See Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York: Vintage, 1978, 1990, p. 56. '[The sexology and medical experts] constructed around and apropos of sex an immense apparatus for producing truth, even if this truth was to be masked at the last moment. The essential point is that sex was not only a matter of sensation and pleasure, of law and taboo, but also of truth and falsehood, that

the truth of sex became something fundamental, useful, or dangerous, precious or formidable: in short, that sex was constituted as a problem of truth.’

4. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 24
5. See Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You: Sketch For A Felicity Within History* (London: Routledge, 1996); an extract printed as ‘The Other: Woman’, in *Feminisms*, eds. Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 309-310. ‘[T]he other is not in fact neuter, either grammatically or semantically, and that it is not, or is no longer, possible to use the same words indiscriminately for the masculine and the feminine. Now this practice is widespread in philosophy, religion, and politics. There is talk of other’s existence, love of the other, concern for the other, etc., without it being asked whom or what this other represents. This lack of definition of the alterity of the other has left all thought, the dialectical method included, in a state of paralysis, in an idealistic dream appropriate to a single subject (the male), in the illusion of a unique absolute, and has left religion and politics to an empiricism profoundly lacking in ethics when it comes to respect between persons. For if the other is not defined in his or her actual reality, there is only an other me, not real others: the other may then be *more* or *less* than I am, might have *more* or *less* than me. And so it may represent (my) absolute perfection or greatness, the Other: God, Master, *logos*; it might denote the most insignificant or the most destitute: children, the ill, the poor, the outsider; it might name the one I consider to be my equal. It is not the other we are really dealing with but the same: inferior, superior, or equal to me.’ See, also, Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985)
6. See Monique Wittig, ‘The Category of Sex’, in *Feminist Issues* 2,1 (Fall 1982), pp. 63-68; and Monique Wittig, ‘One is Not Born a Woman’, 1981, in *The Straight Mind* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp. 9-20, reprinted in *Feminisms*, pp. 220-226
7. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 25
8. A portmanteau neologism, coined by Jacques Derrida conflating *phallogocentrism* (privileging the masculinist perspective) and *logocentrism* (privileging language as the

substantive signification to understand external reality), that refers to the prioritisation of masculine phallus as *the* signifier in the production of meaning. Derrida puts forward his own idea of *phonocentrism*, privileging speech over writing, in his essay, ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’. Derrida also notes, and which is relevant regarding Butler’s notion of performative repetition of acts to produce gender, in the same essay, that ‘[t]he disappearance of the Face or the structure of repetition can thus no longer be dominated by the value of truth. On the contrary, the opposition between the true and the untrue is entirely comprehended, *inscribed*, within this structure or this generalised writing. The true and the untrue are both species of repetition. And there is no repetition possible without the *graphics of supplementarity*, which supplies, for the lack of full unity, another unit that comes to relieve it, being enough the same and enough other so that it can replace by addition. Thus, on the one hand, repetition is that without which there would be no truth: the truth of being in the intelligible form of ideality discovers in the *eidōs* that which can be repeated, being the same, the clear, the stable, the identifiable in its equality with itself. And only the *eidōs* can give rise to repetition [...] Here repetition gives itself out to be a repetition of life. Tautology is life only going out of itself to come home to itself.’ See Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 166

9. See *First Essay*, Section 13 of Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 481, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Modern Library Edition, 2000), pp. 437-599
10. See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 1973)
11. See, for example, Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Seyla Benhabib, ‘Subjectivity, Historiography, and Politics: Reflections on the ‘Feminism/Postmodernism Exchange’, in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, eds. Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser (New York: Routledge, 1995)

12. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997)
13. Kathy Dow Magnus, 'The Unaccountable Subject: Judith Butler and the Social Conditions of Intersubjective Agency', in *Hypatia*, Volume 21, No. 2 (Spring 2006), pp.81-103, Wiley Blackwell Publishers, p. 82
14. See Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 19
15. *Ibid.*, p. 15
16. Kathy Dow Magnus, 'The Unaccountable Subject', pp. 84-85
17. 'If we are formed in language, then that formative power precedes and conditions any decisions we might make about it, insulting us from the start, as it were, by its power'. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 2
18. Diane Richardson, *Rethinking Sexuality* (London: Sage, 2000), pp. 38-39, quoted in Véronique Mottier, *Sexuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 111
19. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London: Routledge, 1993, 2011), p. 169
20. Bertholde Schoene, 'Queer Politics, Queer Theory, and the Future of "Identity": Spiralling Out of Culture', in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, ed. Ellen Rooney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 285
21. As Butler notes, '[t]he term "queer" has operated as one linguistic practice whose purpose has been the shaming of the subject it names, or, rather, the producing of a subject through that shaming interpellation'. See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 172
22. David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 62, quoted in Bertholde Schoene, 'Queer Politics, Queer Theory', pp. 286-287
23. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1990, 2008), p. 23; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 149, quoted in Bertholde Schoene, 'Queer Politics, Queer Theory', p. 287

24. M Asaduddin, 'Alone on Slippery Terrain: Ismat Chughtai and Her Fiction', in *Indian Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 5 (157), *Accents of Women's Writing* (September-October, 1993, pp.76-89) Sahitya Akademi, p. 78
25. Chand Gul, ed., *Ismat Ke Shahkar Afsane* (Jheelum Book Centre, 1987), p. 3, quoted in M Asaduddin, p. 78
26. Javed Anand, 'Nanimaan of Forbidden Tale', *Sunday Observer*, August 2, 1990, referenced in M Asaduddin, see Note 9, p. 89
27. Ismat Chughtai, 'Mahfil Interviews Ismat Chughtai', *Mahfil*, Vol. 8, No. 2/3 (Summer-Fall, 1972), pp. 169-188, Asian Studies Centre, Michigan State University, p. 171
28. See Ismat Chughtai, 'An Excerpt from *Khagazi Hai Pairahan* (The Lihaf Trial)', trans. Tahira Naqvi and Mohammed Umar Memon, *Annual of Urdu Studies*, 15 (2000), pp. 429-443, referenced in Indrani Mitra, '“There is no sin in our love”: Homoerotic Desire in the Stories of Two Muslim Women Writers', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Fall 2010), pp. 311-329, University of Tulsa. See Note 17, p. 327
29. Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 151, quoted in Indrani Mitra, p. 314
30. Ismat Chughtai, 'The Quilt', in *Lifting the Veil: Selected Writings*, trans. M Asaduddin (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2001, 2009), p. 13. Although all quotations are from this text, another translation is also consulted: Ismat Chughtai, 'The Quilt', trans. Surjit Singh Dulai and Carlo Coppola, *Mahfil*, Vol. 8, No. 2/3 (Summer - Fall, 1972), pp. 195-202, Asian Studies Centre, Michigan State University
31. See 'The Simile of the Cave' in Plato, *Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee (London: Penguin, 1987), pp. 255-264
32. The obvious mythical example, the *Chimera*, having the front of a lion, the rear of a serpent and the middle of a goat, first mentioned by Homer in Book VI of the *Iliad*, now means, conveniently and lexically speaking, an illusion, a phantasm, a figment of imagination. Jorge Luis Borges remarked, 'With time the Chimera tended to become "chimerical" [...] but the word remained, signifying the impossible.' See Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of*

Imaginary Beings (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 42. cf. ‘Sexual irregularity is seen as belonging more or less to the realm of chimeras’, in Michel Foucault, eds., *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDougall (New York: Vintage, 1980), p. x; and see, also, Nietzsche’s absurd description of Socrates, in a Homeric jest, ‘what is the Platonic Socrates after all if not *prosthe Platōn opithen te Platōn messē te Chimaira* [‘Plato in front, and Plato behind, in the middle Chimaera’, in Kaufman’s translation], in Sec. 190 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, p. 293

33. Indrani Mitra, p. 315

34. *The Arabian Nights: Tales of 1001 Nights*, in 3 Volumes, trans. Malcolm C Lyons and Ursula Lyons (London: Penguin, 2009), Volume 1, p. 3