



The Comparative Study of The Handmaids' Tale, The Testament, and Leila for Understanding Culture and Performative Gender Roles

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Introduction :

The society we live in is divided on multiple levels. The most primeval and basic is gender. The creation of feminine and masculine genders was meant to assign the roles and identities. This served the purpose of division of economic tasks and family responsibilities. Initially role was divided into household chores, gardening and hunting, fishing. In the Indian society, gender roles were divided as household chores, looking after the offspring and providing food, shelter. These acts with time started to classify the genders. As sex is specific and gender acts are not, it creates a space for discussion and understanding of creation and modulation of gender roles. For centuries, these roles were part of the identities and an individual is supposed to assimilate these acts as a part of their identities to be accepted in the society and are denied acceptance in case of any variation from them. Since the beginning masculine gender was kept in a superior position for power because of their physical strength, and the female gender obeyed and abided by the ideologies because of they didn't have physical strength like male.

Judith Butler in her Essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory* mentioned how no individual could be defined on the basis of the body they are born in. Their body does not define their gender as no two humans from the past, in the present or in the time to come act in the same way. There would be a personal choice of performing their role and action. She emphasized on the influence of the ideologies accepted by the society on the humans' gender identity:

One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body, and indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well. (Butler 272)

Butler, in her essay, emphasized the fact that one's identity is based on the actions performed by them. Through their actions, they create an identity that is different from the contemporaries, the predecessors, and the successors. The statement showed how, with time, social expectations of one's body change and the roles defined for them vary. To exist peacefully, one must adhere to the rules and perform the roles assigned to their body.

The act one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act that has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again. (Butler 272)

Butler emphasized in her essay that one's actions form their identity. The identity they create deviates from the identities of their peers, their predecessors and the successors. The gender has been defined as a role which has been repeated for centuries and each individual requires performing it giving a personal touch and repeating and reproducing the gender. This explanation of gender revealed how the society from time to time changes expectations regarding one's body and role defining their identity. In order to exist peacefully one is supposed to obey the rules and carry out their roles assigned to the body.

The expectation and acceptance of the society vary for the genders. A male can use coarse language however a female is expected to be soft spoken and her vocabulary should be decent. The way male and female are supposed to dress is different. A male is supposed to be working and stay focused on work at times ignoring his family while the female as a primary caretaker looks after the family compromising her personal needs and professional goals.

In her essay, Butler talked about the phenomenological theory of 'acts' by Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and George Herbert Mead. They talked about the existence of different language, gesture and symbolic signs created for the genders ensuring that the men and the women stick to them and perform their gender roles. These signs contribute to the substantiality of the society.

Through the influence of social agents, the gender identity is chosen and constituted. It could be concluded that gender identity isn't stable and resulted from stylization of body and hence is the bodily gestures, movements and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.

Gender is social and cultural role performed by individuals in the mode of belief and hence the identity could be altered as it resulted from the repetition of acts. She has also referred to Beauvoir and Merleau who talked about appropriation which results in the creation of socially accepted identities. Appropriation makes one perform the role according to the set social rules.

The human body continually accepts and embodies the possibilities. The humans materialize the notions associated with the body. The body performs the role, do the act which makes the gender. These 'acts' substantiate the gender roles. The body of each individual performs these acts differently

making it unique. The gender could be compared with the theatrical performance constituted by acts. Butler has defined gender as result of the performing the roles and repeating the historical acts giving it a personal touch. Butler defined Embodiment as manifesting of a set of strategies and it is never developed on its own. It has a past influence, a history which conditions it and creates limitations: “To do, to dramatize, to reproduce, these seem to be some of the elementary structures of embodiment” (Butler 521).

In her essay she asked the gender to be considered a corporeal style, an act. According to her it is performative and deviation could lead individual to punitive consequences. She suggested that one becomes its gender resulting from the actions performed over a period of time in which renewal and revision of the old one occurs. She discussed how feminist believe the gender to be result of sedimented acts instead of impact of natural, cultural or linguistic structures.

In her Essay *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir points out that ‘woman’ identity isn’t natural but an idea developed over a long period of time. She pointed out that sex is biological reality on the other hand gender came into being as a result of the defining of the sex on the cultural grounds and linking of the acts with it which signify the gender as reality. The gender draws its meaning from the performance of the acts which align with the historical assumption of the gender. The gender eventuated from the compelled performance of the historical expectation by the women.

Beauvoir claimed woman to be an “historical situation”. She talked about the suffering caused to woman due to cultural construction of the bodily acts as well as the tacit conventions which affect the cultural perceiving of the body. Therefore, the association of gender and sexed body through the cultural significance make it difficult to distinct gender from sex. This significance is determined through the acts and perception which culture has regarding the gender and sex makes it difficult to dissociate both. She talked about the reproduction of the category of gender on large political scale. It takes place when women pursue a profession or attain some rights. The reality of gender is based on the extent to which it’s performed.

Nature, language, the symbolic, or the history of patriarchy doesn’t determine the gender. There is no definition attached to the body. Gender is what body performs being influenced by the social constraints whether under pressure or happily. However, this repeated act leads to the confusion of natural or linguistic resulted which leads to the transfer of power leading to the expansion of cultural field bodily because of the different subversive performances.

The possibilities and identity of Gender is constrained by the historical conventions. Therefore body has no identity of its own and is influenced by how the society expects the role to be and gender roles are considered dramatic.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *The Testament* and *Leila* we saw how the roles were changed and people were affected by Economic Reductionism. As the lack of resources like fresh air and water in *Leila* and in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testament* pollution, lack of resources and reduced birth rate resulted in the unrest among the people. In *Leila*, people became The Repeaters and violently killed any individual whom they found guilty of exploiting the limited resources and disobeying the ancient traditions or sector system. In *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testament* people became The Eye and worked for the Sons of Jacob and the Committee. The Repeaters and The Eye ensured the new order was followed by all so that they could get what their leaders had promised them.

Chris Barker in his book *Making Sense of Cultural Studies: Central Problems and Critical Debates* has talked about the constitutive role language plays in the formation and realization of identity in this world. Language plays an important role in comprehending ideas and a person learns about the society and its own identity. Contemporary Cultural Studies has been marked by its emphasis on the constitutive role of language as the means and medium through which we form knowledge about ourselves and the social world. (14)

He referred to Wittgenstein’s opinion about language and its role in developing a behavior or pattern in an individual. In his book Chris Barker has pointed out that Wittgenstein consider language and practice key element of performative identities. This observation is significant in understanding the manipulation of the genders and humans in altering the identities of the characters of the novels *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *The Testament*, and *Leila*. Language was used in a specific manner to create social barriers and altering the roles and identities accepted by the society. The leaders defined power and duties in a new way. By contrast Wittgenstein holds language to be an integral part of practice or conduct so that, for, example, when we learn the language of pain behavior (Wittgenstein, 89). We learn language as an individual part of learning how to do things. (14)

The novels help in understanding Structuralism in a better way. Humans do actions on the basis of the ideas they think. As humans perceive the surroundings and reality they choose to act accordingly. The novels showed how nature and human are in relation with each other rather than individual objects. In the novels, the human society and individual identities were influenced by the nature and environmental issues. The life changed and roles were altered because of the pollution and adverse effect it had on the economy and human health.

The novels presented acculturation. The leaders in the novels promoted the acquiring and language, values and norms through imitation of experimentation. The Handmaids were an experiment to overcome the issue of infertility in the society. The learning of use of language in new ways and new symbolic signs took place created new culture.

Cultural materialism culture and economic aspects play an important role in the framing of the society the culture of division of society in sectors and making sure women don’t cross the boundaries set for them by the ancient beliefs. The economic aspect lack of money to afford potable water led to the unrest and violence in the novel *Leila*. The culture of the Handmaids and the Marthas came into being due to the result of new culture Sons of Jacobs formed due to repeated statements. The language played an important role in the framing of ideology and the culture. As men wanted women to be eliminated from the economic race and wanted the property, education and liberty to be available only to them; they supported the exploitation of women and creation of new identities.

Both the novels presented the Indian and Western society respectively which was affected by Cultural Politics. The identities related to race, caste and gender were fighting for their rights. The totalitarian regime terrified women and poor and make them to obey. However, they kept trying to be free and assert their identities.

Cultural hegemony led to the existence of the power in the hands of ruling class. This led to the drastic change in the society and drastically changed the identities of the people from different class as this ruling class redefined culture and normalized new culture resulting in the questioning of existing values and beliefs. Using the power gained through the supporters they curbed the Resistance and ensure the creation of a new society where the culture, beliefs and identities where their monism.

Subjectivity of each individual was taken away and all were compelled to opt the way of living described the ruling class. They were not allowed to have any taste of their own but supposed to follow the behavior declared appropriate by the ruling class. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *The Testament* women were not supposed to have any taste of Literature, Music and Art. They were brainwashed or compelled to focus on household chores. The only choice of recreation they had was gardening, home decoration and embroidery. On the other hand, in *Leila*, women had no right to question. They weren't supposed to question beliefs and they couldn't deny from following. In the novels, people faced severely harsh consequence in case of disobedience.

The Handmaids' Tale and The Testament: Performative Acts and Gender Identity

In the dystopian society of her novels *The Handmaids' Tale* and *The Testament*, Margaret Atwood presented the suppression of women by men to eliminate competition, along with that, they controlled them to resolve the issue of decline in the birth rate of the society. A group of religious fanatics named The Sons of Jacobs caused the downfall of the existing government and established The Republic of Gilead. They blamed the actions of the women for the increased infertility.

The independent and working women were criticized. The role of woman as primary caretaker and homemaker was promoted in contrast to the role of career oriented working woman. Therefore, the Sons of Jacob declared that the acts of the women were not feminine and were derogatory of their gender. They used religion to manipulate people into believing that the lifestyle of women was sinful and caused the environmental problems and the decline in the birth rate. They defined the identity of women by referring to the biblical stories of Rachel and Leah, the sisters who were the wives of Jacob. The part of the story where Rachel took the help of her handmaid when she couldn't bear a child for Jacob was used by the Sons of Jacob to justify the turning the women into the Handmaids.

They divided the women of society, making sure that the women fulfilled all the needs of the men of society. The women were classified as: i) Wives who obediently looked after family and performed their duties which pleased their husbands. The Wives couldn't look for employment. She couldn't leave home without her husband. Doing anything without her husband or against her husband's wishes was a punishable offense. ii) Daughters were supposed to go to school and get trained to be good wives. They were brainwashed into believing that the social order of Gilead is holy and that it is the right way to live. They were sent to schools but no formal education was provided to them. These young girls could not read or write. In the schools they were taught skills like embroidery and marital obligations to be a good wife to the Commanders. These tasks kept them occupied in maintaining the household. iii) Marthas were the housekeepers, and they worked for the elite families. They served their masters and their families. Only the elite class had Marthas, and they were not supposed to be friendly with the handmaids. They cooked and cleaned for these rich families. iv) Econowives were the wives of middle-class men who were supposed to do the household chores and obey their husbands. v) Aunts were the women who brainwashed the women caught by the Sons of Jacob when they established Gilead into becoming the Handmaids. These women were powerful, influential and well informed. Aunts as they had access to books, and even the Commanders listened to them. These women had control over the Handmaids, and they ensured that the Handmaids were not ill-treated in their families. Their job was to help the normal delivery of the Handmaids. vi) Handmaids were the women caught when the Sons of Jacob established a totalitarian regime in the state of Gilead. They were blamed for leading a sinful life. They were told their acts were against the religious beliefs of the Gilead. These women were compelled, using violence, to be Handmaids and to bear children for the rich, childless couples. The Sons of Jacob, with the help of the Aunts, tried to brainwash the Handmaids into believing that these acts would purify them making them angels, and they are blessed to have this opportunity for the society.

The protagonists of the Handmaids' Tale and the New Testament mentioned the change in the narrative that influenced the mindset of the people and made the change in roles and actions socially acceptable and punishable for women. They narrated how any deviation was brutally punished. The men and women were supposed to abide by the religious beliefs; otherwise, they were executed so that others wouldn't dare to do anything like them.

The education and professional growth to which the feminine gender had equal claim earlier became prohibited for women. The Sons of Jacob changed the mindset of the people and justified the oppression and exploitation of the feminine gender. This repetitive discourse resulted in acceptance by the young girls. The majority believed it is how women should lead their life. Homosexuality wasn't acceptable, and homosexuals were brutally punished. The liberty and equal rights that both gender used to enjoy before, the people started to question them. They were dubious about which way was right. Many of them accepted them to be wrong and abided by the instructions of the Aunts to survive in Gilead. This way gender identities were redefined and

Leila: Performative Acts and Gender Identity

Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* is a dystopian novel set in India in the 2040s. The futuristic novel represented a shift in the society and the role of women in the Indian society. Shalini, the protagonist of the novel and one of the victims, narrated the story of political and social change that led to the tragic deaths of her husband Rizwan and the separation of her daughter Leila. This started when a political leader, Joshi, convinced people that environmental issues could only be resolved if society discarded the old ways and chose to purify the clan. He believed the present ways of society, ill practices and financial inequality were the causes of the sufferings of the poor. Joshi got the support of Dr Iyer, a group called The Elders, The Repeaters and The Tribune who supported his policies. The youth called The Repeaters followed their instructions and used violence to punish every person whose actions went against Joshi's principles.

Shalini from the Arora sector decided to marry Rizwan, who was from the Muslim sector, and to live peacefully, they decided to shift to the East End and live with their daughter Leila. Their happy family was destroyed when The Repeaters reached their home after receiving the complaint against their interfaith marriage and bribing for the water for the pool party. The Repeaters killed Rizwan, and Shalini was sent to the Purity Camp. The Purity Camp or Tower was a place for the women who were lustful according to the Elders. These women were kept here for the cleansing of their soul and the atonement for their actions, which were counted as sins by the council. The women were confined in the tower and were given pills by Dr. Iyer. The Council wanted to purify the bloodlines by promoting same-faith marriage and punishing the couples who had interfaith marriage.

Over the period of time, the society was divided into sectors based on religion and caste. Those who weren't willing to follow this system were forced when received hate from the neighbors. The entrance to every sector was restricted and who wanted to live freely decided to move to the East End. But gradually the Repeaters enforced the segregation of the society and the East End was under the control of the government. Nobody lived there and the sector system was strictly followed. The women who married men of other castes or religions were sent to the Tower. The council labeled them as women of low character and they decreed such women should be punished and needed to be purified for giving into their carnal desires. The Tribune took decisions on the basis of the ideologies of the Council. They believed controlling women was important and they should act in accordance to the ancient culture.

'When women give in to carnality...'... 'Imagine if all women gave in. You know what will come? Utter confusion. Bedlam. We are a society that needs rules. Boundaries. The ancient lines are there for a reason.' (172)

They believed the character of women was the basis of pure bloodlines. The women are supposed to be of ideal character. Their decision to marry a person of another caste or religion was considered a terrible mistake. The society felt contempt for Homosexuals. They were sent to the Tower for their soul cleansing. Women were supposed to obey their families, and choosing interfaith or consanguine marriage was a punishable offence. They punished men to death and sent women to the Tower.

In the Tower, women were given drugs in the name of treatment, which caused hallucinations and made the women disable to distinguish imagination from reality. Shalini kept looking for her daughter. She looked for her caretaker Sapna as she believed Sapna had escaped with her daughter. She couldn't recall any of the incidents properly due to the effect of the drugs. She started to forget the face of her daughter. The Tower had women who were punished for their liberal choices and disobedience of the ancient culture.

On the other hand, men who claimed to be the flag holder of purity molested women sexually. Tribune member Mr. Vijaya molested Shalini for arranging her transfer to another sector, which she quietly endured as she wanted to find her daughter Leila. Dipanita's husband had an extramarital affair with his secretary and fought with her whenever she complained about his secretary's disobedience. The rules of purity were applicable to women. The hypocritical leaders exploited the power and punished men who married women and respectfully made a part of their lives.

The novel depicts a futuristic Indian society where water and fresh air are luxuries. The government has put up Skydome to separate the sectors, and big air conditioners were put up to provide cool air. The vents of the sectors produced hot air on the other side, causing fire and blasts, leading to the deaths of poor people. The society followed their leader, Joshi, who promoted the subjection of women and the control of men over the society.

Through the novel, Akbar has shown how the narratives and roles could be altered. A democratic society was turned into a society run on religious grounds. The novel, narrated from the point of view of a woman, describes the blind faith of the people in their leader, Joshi. The interfaith marriage was frowned upon, and the men were murdered and the women were sent to the Purity Camp. There they faced a very difficult life and bore humiliation.

The novels presented how common beliefs and general narratives affect an individual's gender role and identity. The masculine gender was violently compelled to obey their religious practices. Only a handful of men of the elite class had access to facilities like pure water and fresh air. The poor were dying and surviving with great difficulty. The women were supposed to be the followers and couldn't be questioned. They were supposed to be demure, and if their family complained about their behavior, they would be confined to Purity Camp for purification of their polluted thoughts.

The Handmaids' Tale, The Testament, and Leila: Immersion of New Culture due to deviation in the perspective

Authors Akbar and Atwood have presented the turning of a free and independent society into a dogmatic one. In a society where no religious tolerance existed and people were supposed to abide by the beliefs of the society, they were brutally eliminated. New Culture used the old religious framework and influenced the perception of people. This culture generalized segregation of people and genders. It made people to embody the roles defined by the policy makers.

The society was influenced by their leader and his supporters' religious discourse. They started to believe that the right way to live a peaceful life is to follow religion and segregate society into communities. They believed that the problems society was facing could only be eliminated if they followed the rules created by their leaders and punished the nonconformists. They believed God created only two genders, i.e., masculine and feminine, and any deviation was a punishable sin.

In *The Handmaids' Tale* and *The Testament*, the Sons of Jacob convinced the people that the root of their suffering lies in the lifestyle they had opted for. They were convinced that women were supposed to be subjugated and obey men. According to them, women had no right to education, freedom, or employment. After bringing down the existing government, they created the Republic of Gilead, where women were not free and were supposed to follow men. They couldn't be employed except for the Marthas. They couldn't leave home without a man accompanying them. The authorities replaced the names of the shops with signs in order to ensure that women didn't need to read and could easily identify the shops.

In *Leila*, Joshi, his Tribune and the Repeaters ensured nobody broke the rules of society and didn't dare commit interfaith or same-sex marriage. They divided society into sectors and compelled them to live within their community in order to feel safe. They promised the people potable water to drink and fresh air to breathe. Women were scared of the opinions of their neighbours and couldn't dress up or behave in any manner in which their neighbours could complain to the repeaters.

Depiction of male-centric society in the science fiction of The Handmaids' Tale, The Testament, and Leila

The Handmaids' Tale, *The Testament*, and *Leila*, the science fiction novels, presented a dystopia where society is facing environmental issues. *The Handmaids' Tale* and *The Testament* presented a society where infertility was a major issue for couples. The Sons of Jacob convinced the people that women were scared of being sent to the Tower, and smoking and consuming alcohol have led women to infertility. They accused women of being immoral. The live-in relationship, pregnancy by in vitro fertilization, employment of women, and their living independently were declared sins, and

women were sent to the Rachel and Leah Centre to be trained as the handmaids. Women were not allowed to lead the singlehood life. They were supposed to subjugate to a man to survive in the Gilead.

Leila is a tale of Indian society, where people are losing their children. They obeyed their husbands as they could send them to the Towers complaining of their loose character or inappropriate actions, creating the wrong example for the children. At the Tower, the women were given pills, because of which they were disoriented and complied with the rules. They were made servants and were harassed. The incident at the tribune with Shalini showed how members like Mr. Vijaya molested women as they needed their favour for their work to get done. Women were scared of disobeying their husbands even if he cheated on them. They were concerned with how their neighbors and the society think about them, as they were scared of being sent to the Tower.

The society had rules for women, and the problems had an impact on the existence and lifestyle of women. In *The Handmaids' Tale*, the wives who were labeled barren, the handmaids were sent to their house for the childbirth. However, men were not called out for their infertility. Serena Joy took the help of Nick so that June could give birth to a child and not be punished. Fred Waterford was a powerful commander, and they both didn't want him to be enraged. In *Leila*, many husbands had extramarital affairs and mistreated their wives. Even after strict rules were implemented, men continued to act in promiscuous ways. The women let this happen for the favors they received in return, and wives quietly endured this as they didn't want to risk the safety of their children.

Both novels showed that science and technology were used by men as weapons to control society and gain power and control. They differentiated society on the basis of gender and race the way Beauvoir had described in *The Second Sex*, creating an *Other*, gained a dominant position, and ensured their commands were obeyed. Other men supported these ideologies and formed a totalitarian regime in which people were not free. Whether the problem was infertility or the lack of potable water and pure air, the women were the victims and oppressed. In order to gain control, violence was used to establish the power of the governing forces. They terrified society by targeting women whom they considered weak and delicate. The problem had most adverse effect on the feminine gender. Their liberty, financial security and equality were taken away. The society had domination of men. Some of the men gained power and began to rule the society; while the rest gained authority over women. Masculine gender had better opportunities and facilities even in the science fiction dystopia.

Conclusion :

Culture could be altered through the repetition of certain dialogues and actions. Through repetition, beliefs are generalized and fed into the mindset of common people. The people accept it as the way of living and stop resisting, resulting in the acceptance of an ideology as culture. Then culture defines the roles and identities of people accordingly.

In *The Handmaids' Tale* and *The Testament*, people from within and outside Gilead kept resisting the government and kept trying to get the Handmaids free. They kept trying to make the daughters realize they weren't born to be subjugated to men, ended up in the liberty of women of Gilead, and ended the totalitarian government. The culture of handmaids which started from the repeated discourse and compulsion over the people came to an end because of the repeated verbal disagreement and protest. The women returned to schools, colleges, and universities and were employed again. The idea promoted from the language made the women to question their identity in the Gilead and later they chose to perform identity differently.

Joshi and Sons of Jacob could be defined as Revolutionary Politicians for making abrupt, rapid and drastic changes replacing the status quo. Their methods were aggressive and they advocated only changing the existing ways would help the citizens in overcoming the issues society faced. They used these methods to ensure that using this narrative they could make women embrace the role and identities which would eliminate competition. Such drastic and rapid political changes led to the confusion among the people. The terror these leaders used to gain power also stopped the gender from expressing themselves.

The gender roles draw meaning through the perception of the society. Masculine and Feminine gender are the dominant genders of the society as the ruling class give meaning and acceptance to these genders. The factors like Religion, Economic and Culture play an important role in the classification of the society.

The changes in the roles of feminine genders in the novels *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testament*, and *Leila* showcased how the ruling class targeted the women ensuring that they could control the society. The acceptance of the new gender roles and its generalization helps in understanding how with time the roles are altered by the dominant culture. Feminine gender has been fighting to overcome the stereotypes the society creates and fight for their liberty and end for subjugation. The study of these novels showcased how the language and symbolic signs create different identities and cultures. The change in culture with the change in language and symbolic signs bring changes in the meaning of the ideas associated with the culture and acceptance of gender identity.

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