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Negotiating Norms: Performative Sexuality, Precedential Influences, and Power Politics in Select Malayalam Short Stories

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Abstract: The paper aims to make a rereading of the Performative Theory of Gender and Sexuality by Judith Butler, foregrounding the liaison among performativity, the precedents in sexual roles, and the intricate power-play inherent in them, in the light of select Malayalam short stories written by Pramod Raman. Instead of spotlighting on how individual choices about sexuality and sexual roles become more or less conditioned, influenced, colored, negotiated and reinforced with performativity, the paper underscores how such performative roles are sometimes imposed on the powerless and the vulnerable, and suggests there is power dynamics inherent in the choice/lack of choice of performative roles. Thus, every sexual relationship implicitly becomes a relationship of power. How performative roles become subordinated to the linguistic, discursively constructed nature of sexuality norms is also emphasized. The paper also tries to throw some light on the ontological nature of gender and sexuality where they get superscribed on the very nature of being and existence. It also describes how sexuality complements the regulatory mechanism of sex in creating the bodies it controls. Thus, creation of bodies and the regulation of them become simultaneous processes which go hand in hand, where the performative process itself becomes the product. Remarkably enough, the narrative and linguistic strategies in these stories self-reflexively emphasize the role of power in constituting precedents in sexual roles; the role of precedents in deciding performativity; the role of performativity in affirming/reaffirming sexuality; and the role of sexuality in creating the bodies it controls. How this process goes on in a continuum is also highlighted in this paper. The material aspect of sexuality, and how class plays a decisive role in defining relationships and assigning sexual roles are also probed into. The paper also analyses the power play underlying sexual roles using the Foucauldian trio of power, knowledge and discourse.

Keywords: Performativity, Sexuality, Sexual Roles, Precedents, Class and Discourse

The concept of performativity is often defined and understood with the focus falling on the reiterative nature of it, ignoring the underlying precedential, citational and discursive elements.

This paper makes a rereading of Judith Butler's definition that "performativity should be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act', but, rather as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names"(xii) foregrounding the liaison among performativity, the precedents in sexual roles, and the intricate discursive power-play inherent in them, in the light of select Malayalam short stories written by Pramod Raman. The paper tries to bring about the phenomenological aspect of sexual vulnerability and the absence of choice in sexual orientation for some people. The paper argues that precedents and power reciprocate and mutually constitute each other, thus deciding performativity, and it also tries to unravel the entangled relationship of power and class in propelling precedents. Thus, agency in choosing performative sexual roles becomes unaffordable to some people. The paper spotlights on how every sexual relationship implicitly becomes a relationship of power.

Pramod Raman's story "*Napumsakarude pathu padavukal*" ("The Ten Steps of Eunuchs") sets an illustrative example of the performative nature of sexuality and the role played by precedents in fixing the sexual roles. The writer who declares in the preface that for him story writing is the political expression of his individual choice, or story writing is all about the politics of individual choice, expresses in the story how the choice itself becomes more or less influenced, colored, negotiated and reinforced with performativity. The story is a first-person narrative, made in the point of view of the nameless narrator cum protagonist who is retrospectively enumerating the incidents taking place in his childhood and adolescence spent at the ancestral home, where sexual roles are seen to be performatively imposed on him. The story begins with the arguments taking place between two adolescent cousins about the sex roles they are going to take up while simulating 'what takes place between a man and a woman' as narrated to them by a male servant of the household.

"I am the boy/ You are the girl", thus goes the dispute between the two boys where Nathan who is more powerful, physically, culturally and class wise, always wins. According to the nameless narrator, who is forced to take up the role of a girl always and who reflects on the attitude of Nathan, "I am" or "*njananu*" in Malayalam can also be read as "*njan anu*" or I am a boy (Raman 14). Thus, the story also throws some light on the ontological nature of gender and sexuality where they get superscribed on the very nature of being and existence. Judith Butler makes it clear in *Bodies that Matter*:

Sex not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls. Thus, "sex" is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this

materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices. In other words, "sex" is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. (xi-xii)

This story, on the other hand, describes how sexuality complements this regulatory mechanism of sex in creating the bodies it controls. Thus, creation of bodies and the regulation of them become simultaneous processes which go hand in hand, where the performative process itself becomes the product. The narrator enumerates many instances from their childhood vacation days spent together in the ancestral home where the city bred Nathan always outsmarts the narrator, a rustic lad. The story has many such recurring episodes which illustrate how performative and habitual sexuality is and how each performative act becomes a precedent in the forthcoming act, thus creating a continuum.

Remarkably enough, the narration self- reflexively emphasizes the role of performativity in constituting a continuum of precedents and it is not for the critic to unravel it. For example, the narrator himself says how Nathan forcibly puts on the best clothing that the narrator has kept for himself when they go for watching *Theyyam*. The superiority that he demands on each occasion is underscored by the relatives with discouraging comments on the narrator, like he is not like Nathan implying his inferiority (14). Another instance is when the narrator desires the three - tiered balloon at the festival market, which is the last and single piece left, it is Nathan who gets it, because of his fluent English. According to the narrator, had he listed down all the concessions he had been forced to make for Nathan, he would have been found at the bottom of a pit. Though he brings tooth brush and Forhans paste when he comes for vacation, he adamantly demands for the mango tree leaf, that too the bigger one, for cleaning his teeth to belittle the narrator. The crispier dosa, the tail piece of the fish, the letter from the postman, the first turn of crossing the wooden bridge, keeping the coin for buying fish, the side seat in the bus; the priorities snatched by Nathan ignoring the narrator go on like this (15).

During each dispute the inferiority ascribed to the narrator follows a precedent and becomes another one later. Thus, gradually their sexuality also becomes a performative game of precedents. Sexuality and sexual roles become a continuum of performative roles which have more to do with power dynamics than with individual choice. Butler argues that even the materiality of one's body has to be conceived as an effect of power:

What will, I hope, become clear in what follows is that the regulatory norms of "sex" work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative. In this sense, what constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements, will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power, as power's most productive effect. (xii)

The process of identity formation based on a lack, and the binary system of meaning making and existence is emphasized by the writer. The narrator, for example, states it was only when he was watching a romantic movie in Nathan's absence that he realized that his identity becomes next to nothing in Nathan's absence than in his presence. He was not able to share his adolescent curiosity regarding sexuality with his aunt who sat next to him in the theatre, in Nathan's absence, during one vacation (16). The power dynamics in the binary of sexuality is maintained where the inferior one is always defined by some absence or lack in Derridean terms. As Todd W. Reeser states: "A key aspect of power's normalizing effect is the construction of an abnormal other. For, in order to create a norm, discourse must invent or create an anti-norm, which implies that the norm is the norm by opposition" (31).

The childish imagination of the narrator as well as the linguistic discourse that takes place in his childhood world seem to be full of metaphors denoting sex, gender and sexuality. The story works like a meta-narrative drawing attention to the constructed nature of all these concepts. To cite examples, the maternal aunt of the narrator is pregnant in his childhood memory and the doctor has prescribed scanning for her. When Nathan tells the narrator that fetal sex determination is done on a regular basis in Kochi, he wonders whether there are so many pregnancies in Kochi. The narrator is seen to brood over the names of places in Kochi like Menaka and he wonders if places also have sex and gender. Later when he is permanently fixed to the female role in love making and when he goes to Kochi to live with Nathan, he finds that Kochi has a lot of places bearing female names like Menaka, Padma, Saritha, Savitha, Sangeetha, Kavitha, Deepa, Lisy etc. He assumes this seems to be the reason for Nathan's masculinity. He is always surrounded by women. Kochi is a female city (29). Nathan's alpha male characteristics are attributed to the proximity of the female city to him. How the binary works very subtly in formation of selfhood is suggested here.

Nathan's full name is Tharanathan and it is only his father Balan who calls him by his first name Thara, which is a female name in Malayalam. Obviously, Nathan does not like to be addressed so, but he does not oppose it as it is done by his father who is more powerful than him (19). Hence there is a hierarchical order in patriarchy where vulnerable masculinities are sidelined. The narrator sadly remembers that in fact, it is Nathan who has a female in his name (19). He continues to critically analyze the past asserting that uncle Balan calls him by the female name not for fun. Precedents need not necessarily be about games only. This is a precedent that has started from the day he was named (21). Unfortunately, the narrator is not able to inscribe the precedential femaleness in Nathan's name onto his sexuality because of his superior hierarchical position. It is noteworthy that the narrator remains unnamed throughout, implying his fluid self, which is forced to take the form of the vessel it is poured into.

Though the narrator is a brilliant student and an avid reader of Malayalam literature, he feels inferior and vulnerable before the English fluency of the city bred Nathan. Here language also becomes a tool of power in the formation of sexuality choices. Foucault brings about the alliance between knowledge and power when he states: “We should admit rather that power produces knowledge ...that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations (27)”. Elsewhere he highlights the intricate bond between knowledge, power and discourse: “Indeed, it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together. And for this very reason, we must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable” (100). Here, Nathan’s better command of English, and his exposure to city life and refinement give him a superior power position reflected through discourse. His superiority is discursively forged by the servants, relatives and acquaintances in an irresistible way.

The narrator is emotionally blackmailed into his vulnerable and submissive sexual role in the love making game by Nathan who threatens not to participate in it unless and until the narrator agrees with his terms (21). The narrator acquiescently agrees on condition that in the next turn they change roles. But the precedents never change. He wishes if only one of the loops of precedents was with him too, it being a mark of freedom. He wonders if the decision to change sexual roles alternatively belongs to the same family of precedents, what is wrong with that (21).

Such dialogues very clearly indicate the imposed nature of the sexual self and the fluidity of sexuality. Later the narrator also suggests that it was a contract only for a one-time exchange of sex roles (21), but this one- time contract becomes a repetitive precedent in the chain of sex/sexuality games and role playing, and becomes a permanent position. When the boys were hugging each other in a simulation of love making, the narrator feels that he is hugging a rock. He also says that his first experiment with sex left only solidifying darkness and heat in him, without any scope for imagination, tactile ingredients and mysteries to explore (22). Obviously enough, he too has a male self and experiences the world from a male perspective, contrary to the position and the role imposed on him. It is Nathan who attributes the female self to him. He moulds a woman out of him with his tactile imagination and hugs. The narrator realizes that Nathan is not hugging a rock. That makes him feel ashamed of himself (22). But he finds some potential and scope in that. That means if he can take the male role in the love game next time, he can have emotions. He blames himself that he need not have taken the female role this time as well (22).

These lines clearly point out how badly he wanted to take the performative role of a man at an early age itself because of his realization that it is all about power. The last line also shows how much unwanted is the female role imposed on him. Butler states that sex is not a “static description of what

one is” but one of the norms by which a person’s materiality is constructed. She opines that such a rework on the materiality of bodies will imply a recasting of the matter of bodies as the effect of power dynamics. It will also mean that performativity is that repetitive power of discourse to produce the phenomena it regulates. It includes a new understanding of sex as a cultural norm that governs the materialization of bodies. It also deals with the formation of the subject, the speaking “I”, by having undergone such a process of assuming a sex. It links the act of identification with that of assuming the sex and of the discursive ways in which the enabling and disavowal of certain sexed identifications are made possible by the hetero-sexual imperative (Butler xii).

Ironically, the female sexual role imposed on him becomes his permanent role in life because of its reiterative performativity. When Nathan is aroused what he whispers in the narrator’s ears is “Thara, I love you,” which is his own first name. He is addressing the other half of himself which he tries to find in the narrator, completely ignoring the narrator’s male identity in a narcissistic way, indicating the hierarchical nature of power play inherent in any kind of gendered sexual relationships. The female selfhood of Tharanathan, on the other hand, never gets a forceful reiteration, except by himself, when done for the purpose of highlighting his egoistic male self during love making. Hence, it remains hidden and never comes to have a material existence.

When the chickens are killed for hosting Balan uncle, the boys see the slaughtered chickens defeathered and headless. The narrator ironically mentions that the chickens exhibiting complete nudity did not have heads (23). When the narrator asks Damu which is male and female, Nathan interferes and answers sarcastically that the one with more softness is the hen, underscoring the narrator’s entitlement only to womanhood and providing yet another instance of the constructed nature of sexuality (23). When the chicken curry is ready to serve, he again establishes his right to masculinity by taking the boneless flesh pieces against the narrator’s wish, scornfully saying that the soft chic is reserved for the cock (23) which has very strong sexual connotations.

In the second turn of the love game, the narrator demands to take the male role, and Nathan seems to agree silently. But ironically enough, the narrator gets totally confused how to confront him. He says he felt heavy-hearted thinking of confronting Nathan who had agreed to confer male-hood on him, which was absent in their relationship so far, and was given to him for the first time (24). But when the time comes Nathan uses a different strategy of begging for the male role. He silently seduces the narrator with touches and romantic hugs. The narrator confesses that Nathan disabled his voice and he became vulnerable to touch everywhere (24). Here the speaking self becomes synonymous with men and the tactile self with women in a stereotypically performative way. The narrator is seen to be gradually getting trapped into a female self which is revealed from the way he describes the experience. Nathan addresses him using his own first name Thara in a narcissistic way during the act. He asks if Thara does not love him back. His voice becomes more private when he keeps on asking as

if the voice wants to touch the first half in Thara Nathan. In the unity of the hug, the narrator feels he is that half. He needs to respond to it. But at the same time, he is not Thara. It is Nathan who is Thara. The conflict caused by this contradiction goes on. Finally, Nathan switches to a compelling tone as if he is trying to save the narrator from a disaster. He became different ‘Nathans’ each time (24).

The narrator is talking about the trembling, pleading and stuttering tones used by Nathan to seduce him. At the third time, Nathan uses all his physical strength to tame the narrator and asks dominantly who wants to be the boy and the narrator vulnerably agrees that Nathan is the boy and she is the girl. The narrator describes the experience by saying that he made a body for him by touching. The sex tissues that were not named so far were invited by Nathan’s tissues for sex. He ironically continues that the name cannot be decided and chosen by the one who is addressed by it. The one who is led does not own the path. In the same way, the one who receives has to yield. The one who yields has to be a subordinate (27-28). This is how he explains the precedential chain which is determined by invisible power mechanisms.

All these instances throw light on the politics of domination and subordination inherent in the formulation of sex, sexuality and gender. When the narrator introspectively reviews the past at Nathan’s apartment in Kochi, he realizes he has already become a ‘housewife’ for Nathan. The story ends with the thought-provoking question asked by the narrator rubbing the ‘mustacheless face’ of Nathan that who a girl is. Fingering the mustache of the narrator, Nathan answers in a riddle: “The girl is a boy who yields a girl” (31). The narrator’s face with mustache and Nathan’s mustache-less face imply that the gendered physical signs showing masculinity and femininity have nothing to do with one’s sexuality which is purely performative and defined by the discursive flow of power.

Gill Valentine discusses those desires which do not fit into the categories of heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality in his article “I Went to Bed with My Own Kind Once: The Erasure of Desire in the Name of Identity”. He states that such “unintelligible desires” points to the complex nature of erotic desires whose expression in language and other practices remain beyond categorization. He also opines that “the troubling nature of desire- beyond -sexual identity” deserves further exploration (408). The desire that exists between Nathan and the narrator is not purely based on their sexual identity. The narrator insists on regaining his male identity as well as masculine self, though he fails in the attempt each time. The decisive interplay of discursive power in defining one’s sexual self and desire is reflected in the use of language by every character in the story. The story elucidates very clearly that the vulnerable masculinity of the narrator is constructed through discourse.

The story “*Chedamsa jeevitham*” (“Fractional Life”) which begins with the authorial epigraph that for him stories are his own silenced voice and they are not truly created by him, traces the hushed-up voices of the dumb Manjit Menon, an IT professional in a start-up company owned by Chandran,

his self-avowed lover. The story is built around the conflicting experience of Manjit as he undergoes a sexual reassignment surgery at the behest of his boss-lover, for the fulfilment of their love. The love has descriptively been bloomed in the start-up IT company owned by Chandran where Manjit Menon is working as a software developer. A major portion of the story is dedicated to the portrayal of incidents leading to the surgery including the mental, medical and material preparations done for Manjit by the couple's friends and colleagues Neha and Rustam. The story throws multiple exemplary instances showing how bodies are formed by norms, like capitalism, performativity and the hetero/homosexual binary.

The story is told in the first-person point of view of Manjit Menon, who in an internal monologue reveals that the day after he is going to have the surgery done, not because he is unable to live without Chandran, his so-called boss-lover, but for the sake of Chandran, who would not be able to live without him as a female partner. Chandran has proclaimed his love saying that Manju is his girl and he will live only if 'she' is 'given' to him (Raman 33). Later only, it comes to the knowledge of the reader that Chandran is the employer of the other three characters, Neha, Rustam and Manjit. Manjit even says that Chandran is their 'life'. He has given them "Image" (which is ironically the name of the company), the freedom to work at their pace, and bank accounts full of money (34). The material aspect of sexuality, how class has a decisive role in limiting and delimiting it, is elucidated in the story. As Rosemary Hennessy states:

In order for capitalism as a mode of producing social life to persist, this basic material inequality has to be agreed to and legitimized. This legitimation process takes place through the array of beliefs, norms, narratives, images, and modes of intelligibility loosely referred to as culture-ideology. Culture-ideology consists of a variety of different practices or ways of making sense (i.e., discourses) that displace, condense, compensate, mask, and contest the basic inequality of capitalism. Sexuality is one of them. So is gender, and so is race. (11)

Hennessy argues that the norms of sexuality are constructed discursively to mask the unequal social relations of wealth and power created by capitalism. Though she speaks about sexuality in a general, universal context here, the argument can be used to underscore particular examples from the story. Manjit's status of an employee and Chandran's status of the employer contribute to the material power relations in the story which culminates in Manjit's newly assigned sexual role and the consequent internally ruptured identity of him. He doesn't have much of an option to choose his sexuality here, as the sexual roles are persuasively imposed on him.

Though Rustam and Neha revel in a progressive ‘unhomophobic way’ in Chandran’s gay identity and Manjit’s partnership in a gay relationship, Chandran declares to Manjit that he is not gay. Indirectly he is proposing the possibility of a so-called heterosexual marriage whereas he will be married to the surgically accessed hyperreal femininity of Manjit. Elsewhere, Chandran responds to Rustam’s suggestion that he love Neha by saying that he would rather have Manjit as his lover, who is visibly more feminine than Neha (37). So Chandran is seeking a conventional heterosexual relationship where his masculinity can be set off and endorsed by the hyper femininity of Manjit alias Manju. As Judith Butler argues, “Heterosexual genders form themselves through the renunciation of the *possibility* of homo sexuality, as a foreclosure *which produces a field of heterosexual objects* at the same time as it produces a domain of those whom it would be impossible to love” (21).

On the other hand, what Manjit expects is a gay relationship is revealed again from his interior monologue. He says when Chandran stands behind him after the declaration of his love, he was waiting for the commencement of a two-man relationship (35). Then only Chandran makes the second declaration that he is not gay. Manjit says that if the hands firmly gripping his shoulder (i.e., Chandran’s hands) are providing bread to a school teacher and wife (obviously his parents) at Pattambi in Kerala, he can believe those words (35). Rather his vulnerability of being an employee of Chandran makes him believe it, since the bread giver has to be believed even at the cost of his sexual identity.

Manjit’s humble origins are connoted with the mention of the employment of his school teacher father, whereas Chandran’s aristocracy is indicated with a mention of his dad’s call from Germany, the shifting of his business from Singapore to Germany and the huge Bangalow where Chandran stays with a lot of servants (35). In this social/ sexual ladder of inequality Manjit falls at the bottom end which leaves him with no options including the one to choose his sexual orientation. Ellen Meiksins Wood’s concept of class as relationship rings true here. He argues that the access people have to the means of production is instrumental because it generates conflicts and struggles. Such conflicts inadvertently produce social experience in “class ways”. Though these relations do not produce class consciousness in direct visible ways, gradually their impact on social processes becomes discernible (82).

The social/ sexual experience of Manjit is decided by his class. Furthermore, his social vulnerability is again reflected in the female role he is covertly forced to adopt in the marriage. Butler throws some light on how gay marriage becomes an extension of heterosexual marriages rather than contesting them. The politics of such marriages would offer “straight” inclusivity to some queer people, those who can afford to have marriage and family while keeping some other queers at bay (18).

Obviously, being a Capitalist, Chandran wants to sustain the institutions like marriage and family in his own idiosyncratic way. It is also noteworthy that he resists all the possibility of himself undergoing the sexual reassignment surgery for 'marrying' Manjit because his patriarchal ideology would not let him be a woman. Hence patriarchy and Capitalism are seen to be mutually inclusive, always seen in complementary distribution. Hennessy points to the nature of unequal relations created by the fatal combination of Capitalism and patriarchy when she states:

Some men have more patriarchal power than others, sometimes power over and at the expense of other men. This difference means that not all men benefit the same from patriarchy... Consequently, the white gay psychiatrist or lawyer is not in the same patriarchal position as his white straight colleagues, nor is he in the same patriarchal position as a black gay man of the same class. Some white women, lesbians among them, can claim patriarchal power over other women and men by virtue of their institutional privilege or relative class position. (24)

How sexual orientation itself can be performative by "directing one's desire toward certain others and not other others" and how bodies take shape in such a process of leaning onto certain people is explained by Sara Ahmed (86). She elaborates: "Bodies take the shape of norms that are repeated over time and with force. Through repeating some gestures and not others, or through being orientated in some directions and not others, bodies become contorted: they get twisted into shapes that enable some action only insofar as they restrict the capacity for other kinds of action" (91).

Thus, both Manjit's body and his sexual orientation are performatively taken shape by his proletarian leanings on to the capitalist for survival. Chandran himself agrees that his love started from the words of love which slipped off from his tongue and not vice versa. He says he made Manju his female lover with the utterance of words (37). His love is textually, performatively constituted in a speech act where he declares that Manju is his girl (33). Remarkably enough, Manjit is the youngest in the group, hence pampered, patronised and made powerless by all others. His disability of dumbness intersectionally contributes to his marginality.

How silence is as powerful as speech in the politics of the closet is mentioned by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. She says: "The fact that silence is rendered as pointed and performative as speech, in relations around the closet, depends on and highlights more broadly the fact that ignorance is as potent and as multiple a thing there as is knowledge" (4). When Chandran tells Manjit alias Manju, who is dumb, that he has shopped women's garments in advance for him, thus anticipating the consent for surgery and the marriage that follows, Manjit thinks in an interior monologue about his silence. He admits to himself that his silence to that revelation was the two-fold silence of a person unable to speak and the one who is silenced (37). He is silenced by his proletarian class needs for survival. The role of

the female in the parody of a conventional marriage is superimposed on him performatively because of this silence.

Another episode exemplifying the performativity of silence enacts when Manjit is taken to psychologists and surgeons for counselling before the surgery. When the doctors are told that he is dumb, they ask him to write down why he has chosen to undergo sexual reassignment surgery. Manjit tells the readers he simply transcribed down on the note pad the voice of a transexual he had heard from the heart of Chandran that asked whether they can change only the armour of his body, as one changes dress. Each time the doctor reads out his written words to a new doctor and a counsellor, it is getting performatively reiterated. Manjit says, in that way, every time he was exposed to his own words, the ownership of those words got underscored in an irreversible way. It culminates when the doctors finally declare the verdict in a speech act that says “Manjit Menon is a transexual who is dumb” (40).

How silence is as performative as speech is elucidated by also Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* when he states: "There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things. . . There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses. (27)". How silence also acquires the performative power of a speech act in “closetedness” is also brought to light by him. He continues: “closetedness” itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence —not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it” (27).

The climactic moment of the story revolves around the phenomenologically performative nature of sexual orientation where Manju Menon in his surgically accessed female body gets oriented towards Neha during his three months initiation period in her company. The story culminates when Manju gets oriented towards Neha who has ushered her into the new body, female roles and sexuality, and symbolically flies away from her new corporeal existence in search of the old one. This is the very phenomenological aspect of sexual orientation and queer identity formation that is laid stress by Sarah Ahmed because of its focus on lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the importance of what is near and what comes handy, and the role played by habit and reiterated actions in the formation of bodies and their worlds (2). The intriguing climax of the story also echoes the Marxian maxim “it is not consciousness [or signification] that determines life, but life that determines consciousness” (37).

Both these stories problematize the role of agency supposedly conferred on to the sexual subject by Butler’s theory of performativity, by revealing the hidden dynamics of power inherent in the choice/lack of choice of performative roles. Thus, every sexual relationship implicitly becomes a relationship of power.

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