

## Gender Performativity: Reading Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi and Luisa Valenzuela's Other Weapons

**Ranita Chakraborty Dasgupta**

Assistant Professor in English, Amity Institute of English Studies and Research  
Amity University, Kolkata, India.

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In this paper I propose to read and discuss two short stories, Luisa Valenzuela's Other Weapons and Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi under a comparative spectrum. This apparent unlikely comparison from two distinct social, political, linguistic and cultural paradigms, as diverse as Latin America (Cuba?) and Bengal, is the result of my curious attempt to decipher Laura and Dopdi on the lines of Judith Butler's notion of 'gender performativity'.

In these two stories, quite distinct and diverse from each other in terms of the story line, the plot and the construction of the characters, I am more than intrigued on coming across this subtle yet compelling similarity between the ways in which the two female protagonists conduct their selves. I do suspect that both the authors from their given cultural positionings are carrying out a premeditated purposeful experiment. They make Laura and Dopdi/Draupadi render their individual resistance and protests in coherence to the world in terms of the body, its performance and their gender. I am yet to articulate this somewhat uncanny link that I can feel is there but have to discover it through a very careful process of unlayering.

Judith Butler coined the term "gender performativity" and first used it in her book **Gender Trouble** in 1990. She characterizes the category of gender as direct result of restated acting. This then produces the effect of a normal or static gender while eliminating all contradictions and instabilities of any single individual's gender act. The final result is what can be considered to be "true gender". The concept of true gender is a narrative that stands rigid and upright on '*the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions – and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them.*' (<http://www.theory.org.uk/but-int1.htm>, 9/12/2013). It is this idea of a "true gender" and a collective social reasoning surrounding its credibility is what, I think, both Luisa Valenzuela and Mahasweta Devi plays with, only to overturn and present a counter narrative.

In Valenzuela's Other Weapons we come across Laura's grey, shady world that is all that is situated in a couple of rooms and a window in a small locked-up flat. Her only accomplices are her maid Martina (whose name she often can't remember), the unknown yet very constant presence of two watchful guards One and Two outside the door of the flat she has never dared to open and ofcourse her non-existent flashy dementia-stricken memory and her persistent grappling with naming and wording so that she could render the world around her a little more meaningful. Interestingly, this process of trying to arrive at some legible meaning and cognition is a journey as much for Laura as it is for the reader. While she tries hard to remember things, fit the pieces of her flashy rememberings into an eternal jigsaw puzzle, we meander through the discreet sections of the story trying to understand what is happening, or what happened, that Laura is trying to remember and the Colonel is punishing her for. The two most noteworthy elements amidst all the maze is the innumerable love making scenes coupled with the wild, sadistic, beastly approach that Colonel has to it and the deep scar on Laura's back. The reader is more than curious to know the origin of the wound and also the reason behind the inhuman display of love making, the many name callings and the occassional bouts to remind her of something erstwhile, on the part of her "lover" (?). But what is most relevant to the subject matter of this paper is how Valenzuela is dealing with a passive Laura's gender and her psyche as elements of performance characterised by drag which there on results into 'subversion' as Judith Butler suggests.

According to Butler the analysis of sexuality can never be separated from the analysis of gender.

I quote,

"One of the interpretations that has been made of Gender Trouble is that there is no sex, there is only gender, and gender is performative. People then go on to think that if gender is performative it must be radically free. And it has seemed to many that the materiality of the body is vacated or ignored or negated here - disavowed, even. So what became important to me in writing Bodies that Matter was to go back to the category of sex, and to the problem of materiality, and to ask how it is that sex itself might be construed as a norm. Now, I take it

that's a presupposition of Lacanian psychoanalysis - that sex is a norm. But I didn't want to remain restricted within the Lacanian purview. I wanted to work out how a norm actually materialises a body, how we might understand the materiality of the body to be not only invested with a norm, but in some sense animated by a norm, or contoured by a norm.

It is important to understand performativity - which is distinct from performance - through the more limited notion of resignification...It is important to distinguish performance from performativity: the former presumes a subject, but the latter contests the very notion of the subject.

I begin with the Foucauldian premise that power works in part through discourse and it works in part to produce and destabilise subjects. But then, when one starts to think carefully about how discourse might be said to produce a subject, it's clear that one's already talking about a certain figure or trope of production. It is at this point that it's useful to turn to the notion of performativity, and performative speech acts in particular - understood as those speech acts that bring into being that which they name. This is the moment in which discourse becomes productive in a fairly specific way. So what I'm trying to do is think about the performativity as that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names. Then I take a further step, through the Derridean rewriting of Austin, and suggest that this production actually always happens through a certain kind of repetition and recitation. So if you want the ontology of this, I guess performativity is the vehicle through which ontological effects are established. Performativity is the discursive mode by which ontological effects are installed."

(Extracts from *Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler*. Interview by Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal, London, 1993. <http://www.theory.org.uk/but-int1.htm> , accessed on 10/12/2013)

Drawing from Butler and coupled from my reading of this very complex story, if I may say so, I think Valenzuela takes up a very complicated yet planned out job. She locates in the character of her protagonist the performance of gender on the lines similar to what Butler is suggesting. On many instances in the story we find Laura performing to alienate, alienate from her body...the female body that is raped and wronged, caressed and beaten, alienate from her psyche, the 'female' psyche which is unable to remember yet refusing to believe the apparent obvious and alienate from the female self that is called the bitch, the slut, the whore. She holds on to something prior that is forgotten but strangely not erased. So it seems through her passive unmindful self Laura is actually performing an act. This act happens to be one that helps her dissociate the woman within from the womanly body that she can see being pounced at and beaten at clearly in the mirror at the ceiling, the body that is by the parameters of social reasoning termed and subjected to be the 'female'. In a way in that passivity and unmindfulness Valenzuela embeds the agency of gender performativity for her character whereby Laura chooses to be a woman by her own terms, who is owned and made captive yet can never be captivated. No wonder the concluding lines of the story are

*"Did you hate me? Better still, I'd force you to love me, to depend on me like a newborn baby, I've got my weapons, too, and their, with her, a dried droplet of tenderness and beyond, the smooth, impenetrable wall and he, unmoved, repeating: I've got my weapons, too."*

Well, though he says he has got his weapons it is actually some other weapons that Laura has got, on a psychological and psycho-sexual level that helps her show her silent refute. She holds on to herself, and the magic with Valenzuela is we don't even see the character realising that, it is a spontaneous process. That in a way is surely an extremely bold and convincing stake from feminist critical standpoint.

On the same note if we look at Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi, the author here gives her protagonist the agency to perform, perform consciously when it comes to be seen, located and wronged within the purview of gender. Draupadi is a guerilla informer on the run, christened to the cause of her mission and the well being of her compatriots and an ardent soldier at heart. When captured and taken to the

army camps she fears the worst at heart but is a conscious calculator on guard, gauging every other move she is going to make, her mind is at work. Draupadi is “made”, she is gang raped continuously on the go for two nights and two days and then she is ordered to be brought to the Senanayak’s tent. Once her tied hands and legs are let loose she reacts, she starts performing. The body that till then was the marker of her gender, her “femaleness”, which was to be wronged in particular ways of violation to conform to the ideas of “true gender” and its code of celebrated respect, she uses it in a different way. She refuses to be clothed. She steps out in to broad daylight proudly exhibiting the raw and bloody wounds of the repeated rapes and the masters of social reasoning are left flabbergasted. If ‘gender’ is an element that is performed then Draupadi performs her “female gender” with codes of conduct that disturb the androcentric bullet points of how “female-ness” is defined in the first place. Her haunting reply to a petrified Senanayak is,

*“What’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? ...There isn’t a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, counter me-come on, counter me?”*

*Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid.*

Devi manages to initiate a solid jerk to the patriarchal, androcentric, state sponsored notions of gender and social acceptance.

In addition to our discussion, if we bring in the element of impregnation and its constant reference to the female gender, Judith Butler’s take on it might lead us further into our curious research.

I quote Butler,

“Why is it pregnancy by which that body gets defined? One might say it's because somebody is of a given sex that they go to the gynaecologist to get an examination that establishes the possibility of pregnancy, or one might say that going to the gynaecologist is the very production of "sex" - but it is still the question of pregnancy that is centering that whole institutional practice here.

Now, it seems to me that, although women's bodies generally speaking are understood as capable of impregnation, the fact of the matter is that there are female infants and children who cannot be impregnated, there are older women who cannot be impregnated, there are women of all ages who cannot be impregnated, and even if they could ideally, that is not necessarily the salient feature of their bodies or even of their being women. What the question does is try to make the problematic of reproduction central to the sexing of the body. But I am not sure that is, or ought to be, what is absolutely salient or primary in the sexing of the body. If it is, I think it's the imposition of a norm, not a neutral description of biological constraints.”

Holding on to Butler’s take, on impregnation, pregnancy and procreation as a marker of the feminine gender and how women do exist and are credible otherwise, in mind, now if we re-visit these two stories once again we will find how interestingly something ground breaking is happening.

Often in times of communal rights, situations of crisis, attempts to punish or for purposes of forceful investigation or state sponsored inquiry, penetration of the woman’s body, impregnation of it by the seed of the overpowering other is widely believed and celebrated to be the most effective method of disrespecting the “female gender”. In these cases the biological attributes of the woman’s body become symptomatic with the notion of the gender of the female subject. However, both Draupadi and Laura, though under different conditions and via variant means, refuse to be seen as just a body for penetration and impregnation. Though the body in these cases is wronged the feminine gender, the state of psyche that it is seems to remain intact, in fact not just intact but assumingly powerful and

unreachable. And that is what I think Butler was talking about when she said “*women of all ages who cannot be impregnated, and even if they could ideally, that is not necessarily the salient feature of their bodies or even of their being women*”. Neither Laura nor Draupadi come off as feminine figures who identify or whose gender lies enmeshed within their vulnerability to be impregnated or capacity to procreate. In fact, that’s the least of the elements of their construct that is of any question at all.

Butler doesn’t deny peculiar biological differences. But she questions the institutional as well as discursive conditions under which these biological differences qualify as the salient features of sex. She goes on to support Monique Wittig’s critique of sex as a political category. She says “I still very much believe in the critique of the category of sex and the ways in which it’s been constrained by a tacit institution of compulsory reproduction.”

It would be very interesting to bring in the question of “subversion” here to further proceed with the discussion. Alan Sinfield suggests that the problem with the subversive representations of gender is the fact that they are almost always recuperable. Those who are dominant can always find a way to dismiss them and there on re-affirm themselves.

To this Butler adds that any single attempt at subversion has the potential to recuperate. So much so that there is no such way in which it can be safeguarded against that. It is never possible to plan or calculate subversion. As a matter of fact Butler suggests that subversion is in precise sense an incalculable effect. And that is exactly how it becomes subversive. Butler further adds that subversive practices have to be overwhelming to the capacity of the readers and thereby break new grounds which will demand new possibilities for reading all together. In my opinion both Other Weapons and Draupadi does that for me. Both the stories create a subversion, a subversion to the idea of how the feminine gender can be performed in ways that are beyond the notions of the givens of social reasoning. Both the stories overwhelm my capacities as a reader- whether it is the confusion and hatred enmeshed with lust and despair amidst the oscillation of memory and fading nostalgia in the former or the outright, on the face, deliberate ululation and indomitbale laughter of Draupadi, both the stories create the possibility of a counter reading for me, at least when it comes to re-thinking gender, understanding it as a performance, rather performativity.