

## The Body as a Text of Culture

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is the thorough examination of one of the most memorable characters of fiction ever characterized in 20<sup>th</sup> century that is Clarissa Dalloway. It aims at exploring Clarissa's multifaceted and labyrinthine self from body studies, which is one of the latest issues in construction of identity, is discussed and related to the body of the study. It dissects Clarissa Dalloway's often contradictory temperaments and the whole process of her cultural body to conclude that she is not able to achieve a stable and fixed notion of identity. This study attempts to demystify those less trampled territories hitherto unknown such as philosophical or linguistic considerations of the construction of subjectivity. In spinning philosophical, linguistic, and sociological webs around feminist considerations, I tend to shed more light on the corners of the problematic of subjectivity and also to stress the complexity of the issue.

**Keywords:** Body, Gender, Performative, Self, Identity

### 1. Butler/ Bordo: The Body As a script of Culture

What is feminine in Clarissa Dalloway? It is hard to say for sure. To open with Butler's, she is a masculine female. Butler refuses to accept commonly held assumption that sex, gender and sexuality exist in relation to each other; for example, if one is biologically female, she is expected to show feminine traits. In lieu of this Butler claims that gender is 'unnatural', so that there is no necessary relationship between one's body and one's gender. If so, it is possible for one to have a female body, and not to display feminine traits. Put simply, one can be a masculine female or otherwise, a feminine male. Clarissa's female body has nothing to do with her masculine gender; gender is socially constructed identity which is distinguished from sex, the biological designation of male or female. This study continues, and hence can be considered as a sequel to the same line of Woolf/De Beauvoir's social constructionism from the view point of gendered identity and body. In this study I have drawn on Butler & Bordo since they can be aligned together in that both of them hold social constructionist view of gender and body. At this point it seems indispensable to attend Clarissa's body and see that how it is represented. When described by Peter Walsh, her girlhood lover, she is represented with masculine traits such as "cold, heartless, prude" (6) "hard; arrogant;" (48). "She was like iron, like flint, rigid up to the backbone". (48). He repeatedly refers to Clarissa's 'coldness' and 'woodenness' throughout the novel. Although these descriptions are heavily influenced and shaded by Peter's patriarchal views, it seems that these masculine representations, to some extent holds true. To quote from Susan Bordo the body is a text of culture. Clarissa is aware of the oppression of women and as a result attends those available resources for resistance. Since her femaleness does not necessarily prescribe femininity, she resists being a feminine female; otherwise she chooses her gender and becomes masculine female; her body now is a produced text constructed socially and culturally. Textuality of her body and the physical shaping of her body are both culturally and socially determined. Clarissa's body does not belong to herself. According to Bordo, prevailing and enforced cultural notions of gender differences are inscribed on the body, as it shapes itself to fit conventions of proper appearance, deportment and physical activity. According to social constructionist position, Bordo argues that the body does not have a fixed and enduring nature; she notes that bodies change in response to the social demands placed on them. And this is what aligns Bordo with Butler's claim that gender is a choice. By choice Butler does not mean that a person stands outside its gender and simply selects it. On the contrary, Butler notes that "[t]o choose a gender is to interpret received gender norms in a way that organizes them anew. Less a radical act of creation, gender is a tacit project to renew one's cultural history in one's own terms." (Salih, 46-7); therefore, in *Gender Trouble* Butler argues that the subject is subject-in-process that is constructed in discourse by the acts it performs, rather than a pre-existing metaphysical one. Also crucial for the understanding of how identity and in particular gender identity is constructed, in Butler's theory, one must know that the subject is a performative construct. To explicate and clarify the concept of performativity, as a crucial stage in construction of subjectivity, Butler notes that:

"All bodies are generated from the beginning of their social existence (and there is no existence that is not social), which means that there is no 'natural body' that pre-exists its cultural inscription. This seems to point towards the conclusion that gender is not something one is, it is something one does, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a 'doing' rather than a 'being'." (Salih, 62).

The emphasis on 'sequence of acts' and 'doing' rather than being inflects and highlights Butlers subject-in-process. Consequently, gender identity is performative. It is constructed by language, which means that there is no gender identity that precedes language. In this continuum Bordo, like Foucault focuses on the discourses through which society produces, understands, defines and interprets the female body. And this is Clarissa Dalloway's point of departure as a quest for gendered identity. She does not display feminine traits but rather

masculine traits as her feminine resistance against patriarchal oppression. If this can be taken as her first 'act' or 'doing' in her performative quest for gendered identity, her seeming lesbian attraction towards Sally could be well judged as her second performance. She never describes her heterosexual relations with Peter, whom she loves dearly, and Richard, in terms of moment which more or less corresponds with Lacan's *jouissance*. Clarissa's kiss with Sally is the most deeply felt expression of the 'moment' in Mrs. Dalloway, and it has very clearly an almost orgasmic intensity. It describes the physicality of emotional feminine experience.

Blurring and troubling sexual and gender identity, Clarissa resists phallogocentric assumption that desire runs from one sex to another (opposite sex). She develops a lesbian relationship with Sally to adopt a new gendered identity other than culturally and socially enforced one. But this is so fugacious and evanescent and soon shattered and subjugated by heterosexuality of patriarchal society as an acceptable substitute for the queer one. To Clarissa, the so called heterosexuality is unquestioned and forced social contract, or in Butler's term, melancholic heterosexuality. Therefore, Clarissa as a term-in-process or subject-in-process defines and redefines her own gendered identity; as Butler writes in *Gender Trouble*:

"If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing destructive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification." (Salih, 45).

Seen from Butler's lens, Clarissa's identity in general and her gendered identity in particular, is in flux and can be characterized as fluid; hence it does not conform to any essentialist and fixed notions of identity. By troubling and blurring gender identity through unfixing and changing representations of herself, Clarissa is also able to trouble and accordingly deconstruct deep-rooted binary oppositions of gender like masculine/feminine, men/women, etc, or other binary oppositions like reason/emotion, active/passive which are superimposed on a biologically fixed sex division between male and female. She destabilizes these established oppositions; and consequently de-hierarchizes hierarchically structured phallogocentric or masculine-centered society by representing herself both with masculine traits like reason and activity and queer feminine traits like lesbian relationship. Bordo opens chapter five of her influential book, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, with these remarks: "The body – what we eat, how we dress, and the daily rituals through which we attend to the body – is a medium of culture. . . . The body may also operate as a metaphor for culture." Therefore, for Bordo, the body is a powerful symbolic form. Attending Clarissa Dalloway's body once more, we see that she is excruciatingly aware of the fact that the limits of her body are the limits of her world. She is overanxious about her body, since it constitutes the very medium through which all subsequent symbolic performances must be undertaken. Clarissa now on the day of the party is fifty-two, "and grown very white since her illness." (3), "her heart, [is] affected, they said, by influenza" (3). We are repeatedly told that she had a 'small pink face'; and Clarissa and Peter both agree that she has grown older. She envies both lady Bexborough and Sally for having bodies she always desired:

"She would have been, in the first place, dark like lady Bexborough, with a skin of crumpled leather and beautiful eyes. She would have been, like lady Bexborough, slow and stately; rather large; instead of which she had a narrow pea-stick figure; a ridiculous little face, beaked like a bird's.... But often now this body she wore (she stopped to look at a Dutch picture), this body, which all its capacities, seemed nothing- nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown;" (8).

Remembering her romance with Sally in their girlhood, Clarissa remembers a very exquisite moment: "But all that evening she could not take her eyes off Sally. It was an extraordinary beauty of the kind she most admired, dark, large-eyed, with that quality which, since she hadn't got it herself, she always envied." (24). Put simply, Clarissa is not sexually attractive, and in a critical moment she ties and aligns both her body and self together: "How many million times she had seen her face, and always with the same imperceptible contraction! She pursed her lips when she looked in the glass. It was to give her face point. That was her self – pointed; dartlike; definite." (27). Here Clarissa relates identity to the body; therefore the body mirrors identity; and since Clarissa's body is to some extent abnormal and 'ridiculous', and she seems to suffer from lack of beauty, it reminds one of Lacan's notion of the primordial fragmented body. Her abnormal body suggests that one's coherent identity is actually a dream-like construction that conceals the fundamentally fragmentary nature of identity. It is society that produces and interprets Clarissa's body. She cannot gain control of her own body. She is oscillating between the physicality of her own feminine body and the repressive demands of society. To sum up, Clarissa, with fragmented body and identity, must appear as a masculine female to survive in androcentric and patriarchal society or otherwise choose to be feminine female and keep silent, and be marginal. Facing this dilemma, she chooses to act, to perform as masculine female so as to be able to speak, to represent herself other than that negative stereotyping of women which patriarchal society has determined and enforced unto them.

As a result, scholarships like that of Judith Butler's view identity as construct. And when it comes to social construction of identity, language is of first significance; all women are oppressed by the overriding force of language; therefore language is responsible for the male dominance everywhere in society. Clarissa Dalloway's identity needs to be constructed socially through language; but this very language is patriarchal and Clarissa

although attempts to resist it, she is unable to fit into its predetermined structures. Butler considers how language mediates between the individual and wider cultural hegemonies. She suggests that selfhood is manufactured through language. Identity is not a category at all for her; instead it is a semiotic activity whereby individuals are made to make cultural sense. Those who resist the dictates of the culture by troubling its categories highlight the constructed nature of these divisions; therefore in her view identity is a practice rather than a category, an actively constructed performance rather than a pre-existing role. Clarissa Dalloway's lesbian attraction towards Sally proves this anti-categorical nature of identity. She is resisting against patriarchal society but at the same time her feminine resistance which is a kind of act she is performing to define a clear-cut feminine identity for herself gets nowhere; because patriarchal society imposes compulsory heterosexuality and Clarissa succumbs to this melancholic heterosexuality and consequently she succumbs to patriarchal language and discourse. The specificity of women's bodies is increasingly becoming important in feminist theory. Butler views the body as the stage on which gender is performed. Such debates over the body have historically been remote from the concerns of language and gender researchers. But today feminist linguists are becoming aware of the importance of the body; that is centrality of language in body studies. In our study we witnessed the direct interaction and relationship between Clarissa Dalloway's body and patriarchal language; that how her body was constructed socially through attending social performances. Numerous social theorists have also recognized the close relation between language and systems of power. A character like Clarissa is a passive victim of male power. Her struggle for autonomy and self-definition in interaction with men results in greater disempowerment and disappointment. Even in her feminine resistance against patriarchal power she is forced to rely on the linguistic tools of her oppressors.

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