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Beyond Fixed Binaries: Exploring Gender Performativity in Geetanjali Shree's *Mai and the Empty Space*

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Abstract

This paper explores gender as not fixed but performed and fluid, emphasising that identity is not predetermined but constantly constructed through human interaction and social engagement. It examines how our sense of gender is shaped by family, culture, and society, showing that these institutions powerfully shape behaviour, expectations, and self-perceptions. Drawing on feminist and cultural studies, the analysis explores how characters navigate restrictive family, cultural, and social environments, highlighting the diversity of gender experiences. Rather than viewing gender as a stable trait, it emphasises its performative nature, showing how it is shaped by relationships, daily actions, unspoken emotions, and acts of resistance within ordinary routines. The study highlights the complexities of gendered life, demonstrating how conformity and defiance can coexist. It explores themes of secrecy, endurance, change, and solidarity, examining how personal identities are shaped within the evolving contexts of tradition and modernity. While domestic and relational spaces are often seen as limiting, they can also serve as sites for negotiation and quiet empowerment, allowing for new definitions of gender roles and identities. This paper also examines how diverse expressions of identity challenge traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. It offers valuable insights into the social and cultural expectations that shape people's experiences.

Keywords: Gender, Performative, Identity, Empowerment, Femininity.

INTRODUCTION

Society judges people according to gender roles, assigning them masculine or feminine identities and reinforcing the norms they are expected to follow. Women are expected to be nurturing, quiet, emotionally controlled, and responsible at home, whereas men are encouraged to be decisive, authoritative, and emotionally distant. These cultural expectations function as social scripts that individuals repeatedly enact through gestures, language, behaviour, clothing, emotional expression, and interpersonal interactions. Such performances often determine social acceptance and belonging, revealing gender as a socially regulated process rather than a natural essence. These socially prescribed roles reveal that gender operates less as an innate reality and more as a repeated social performance.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity explains how gender is shaped by repeated actions rather than by biological determinism. Butler argues that gender is not an innate identity but a "stylised repetition of acts" that is continuously produced through social behaviour, cultural expectations, and institutional regulation. Repetitive actions such as speaking, caregiving, emotional conduct, bodily movement, and social interaction create the appearance of stable masculinity and femininity. Within this framework, gender identity becomes dependent upon repetition and social recognition rather than biological certainty.

Participation in oppressive expectations depends on repetition; however, it is never entirely secure. Every performance contains possibilities for hesitation, disruption, reinterpretation, and resistance. Gender, therefore, emerges not as a biologically fixed identity but as a fluid cultural performance shaped by repetition, power, social pressure, and interpersonal negotiation. Such performative structures become particularly

visible in societies where family, ritual, and social honour strongly regulate behaviour.

In contemporary Indian literature, Butler's framework is particularly relevant because gender roles are still deeply linked to family hierarchy, caste systems, ritual duties, social honour, and the conflicts between tradition and modernity. People continually navigate these pressures as they develop their identities within family and community settings.

These tensions between social expectation and individual identity are powerfully reflected in contemporary Indian literature. In this context, Geetanjali Shree's novels, *Mai* and *The Empty Space*, offer significant literary explorations of gender performativity. Her narratives depict characters whose identities are continually shaped and redefined by domestic routines, emotional labour, memory, silence, grief, and social expectations.

In *Mai*, women's roles are shaped by silence, sacrifice, caregiving, and familial duty – performances that sustain patriarchal expectations even as characters such as Sunaina question and reinterpret them. *The Empty Space* further complicates the understanding of gender by exploring emotional fragmentation, absence, displacement, grief, and unstable relationships. Across both novels, Shree foregrounds how gender identity is shaped through emotional negotiation, social surveillance, and subtle resistance.

Rather than presenting masculinity and femininity as fixed categories, Shree portrays them as unstable, relational, and continually negotiated processes, shaped by cultural expectations and emotional experience.

Theoretical Framework: Gender as Performativity

Judith Butler's core idea of gender performativity questions the typical belief that gender is inherent, unchanging, or biologically fixed. Instead, Butler suggests that gender is a

social construct shaped by repeated actions, which over time foster the appearance of a consistent identity. This includes speech styles, bodily gestures, emotional expressions, clothing choices, domestic tasks, and social interactions, all of which work together to create the notions of masculinity and femininity.

These performances are governed by social expectations and institutional power. The implications of Butler's theory become even more complex within culturally layered societies such as India. However, Butler also argues that the repetition of maintaining gender norms can also open up possibilities for disruption. Hesitation, silence, emotional withdrawal, fragmented behaviour, or deviations from expected conduct can subtly undermine dominant gender norms.

This framework is particularly relevant in the Indian socio-cultural context, where gender identity intersects with caste, class, religion, kinship systems, and community surveillance. Gender performance unfolds in emotionally charged social spaces such as joint families, rituals, marriages, neighbourhood networks, and domestic environments. Consequently, feminist cultural studies emphasise that gender cannot be separated from emotional, historical, and cultural realities.

Feminist cultural studies build on Butler's theory by stressing that gender is inseparable from historical and cultural contexts. As a result, gender identity is seen as relational, contextual, and constantly negotiated.

Geetanjali Shree's narrative technique reflects this instability of identity at both thematic and structural levels. Her fiction vividly illustrates these theoretical concerns. Her novels show how gender is reproduced through everyday domestic labour, emotional conduct, silence, ritual performance, and interpersonal relationships, while also exposing moments when these structures begin to fracture.

An important aspect of Shree's writing is her narrative technique. Fragmented narration, pauses, symbolic silences, emotional discontinuities, and shifting perspectives reflect the instability of identity and mirror the fragmented process of gendered subjectivity.

Household Dynamics and Gender Performance in *Mai*

In *Mai*, the joint family serves as the primary site where patriarchal norms are internalised and reproduced. Femininity is constructed through repetitive acts of caregiving, silence, domestic labour, emotional restraint, and self-sacrifice.

Mai's everyday routine ritualises femininity through repetitive embodied practices. "When we opened our eyes in the morning, she would be freshly bathed in a clean cotton saree, making parathas in the kitchen" (Page 9). These acts show how cooking, cleaning, serving family members, mediating conflicts, and preserving household harmony embody socially sanctioned performances of ideal Indian womanhood. These acts are not merely practical responsibilities but cultural performances that reinforce expectations of silence, nurturance, obedience, and emotional endurance. These repetitive domestic performances are further reinforced through constant familial observation and social correction.

Domestic spaces such as kitchens, courtyards, rooftops, and bedrooms become symbolic sites where gender roles are enacted and monitored. These spaces regulate movement, emotional expression, authority, and interpersonal relationships, transforming the household into a disciplinary structure. This disciplinary function becomes vivid when surveillance joins performance. Continuous regulation gradually transforms women's labour into an invisible yet expected aspect of domestic life. "Mai did all the work, and Dadi made all the comments. Not directly critical, but oblique and indirect" (Page 23). Dadi's indirect

commentary functions as the regulatory gaze ensuring Mai's kitchen rituals conform to patriarchal expectations, demonstrating how gender performativity requires constant social monitoring.

The novel portrays how women often become invisible within patriarchal domestic systems. Mai's labour sustains the family emotionally and physically, yet her individuality is continually erased beneath relational identities such as mother, wife, and daughter-in-law. However, Shree complicates this portrayal by foregrounding Mai's inner consciousness. Mai's silence is not merely passive submission; rather, it becomes a complex strategy of endurance, emotional withdrawal, negotiation, and subtle resistance.

Within such restrictive environments, silence itself acquires multiple emotional and performative meanings. Her silence serves multiple functions simultaneously. Sometimes, it embodies patriarchal suppression; at other times, it acts as a performative refusal to conform to oppressive norms. Through strategic silences, emotional withdrawal, and quiet disengagement, Mai crafts limited spaces of agency within restrictive domestic environments. Mai's silence is closely connected to the emotional responsibilities she carries within the household. Her efforts extend beyond physical chores to include emotional labour, where she absorbs familial tensions, suppresses personal desires, mediates conflicts, and maintains emotional harmony. This psychological burden highlights the often-unseen emotional demands faced by women in patriarchal families.

This sacrificial femininity extends beyond domestic labour into ritual and religious practices. Mai's sacrificial performativity extends to religious ritual, where her fasting body becomes familial currency: "When Mai offered a sacrifice, others got fruits. There was a long list of fasts that she kept".(Page-63). This exhaustive ritual calendar transforms bodily

deprivation into gendered devotion, completing the triad of kitchen labour, social scrutiny, and religious sacrifice that constructs Indian femininity.

However, younger generations increasingly begin to question these inherited performances of ideal womanhood. Sunaina's viewpoint is crucial in highlighting the constructed nature of femininity. Her observations uncover the generational conflict between traditional patriarchal expectations and rising feminist awareness. Sunaina observes the emotional strain behind Mai's portrayal of perfect motherhood and questions the cultural norms that justify women's sacrifices.

While the novel critically examines femininity, it simultaneously exposes the pressures imposed upon masculinity. The novel also critiques patriarchal masculinity. Male characters are expected to embody authority, emotional restraint, rationality, and control. Yet beneath these performances lie insecurity, emotional repression, vulnerability, and anxiety. Patriarchy, therefore, restricts men as well as women by demanding performances of dominance and emotional suppression.

Through these layered portrayals, Mai demonstrates that gender identity is neither stable nor natural. Instead, it emerges as a negotiated process continually reproduced and challenged within domestic structures.

Social, Emotional, and Gender Instability in *The Empty Space*

The Empty Space extends the discussion of gender performativity beyond domestic enclosure into broader emotional, psychological, and social landscapes. Unlike Mai, where gender performance primarily unfolds within the household, *The Empty Space* examines how identity is shaped by grief, memory, emotional absence, displacement, trauma, and unstable relationships. The novel's concern is emotional fragmentation and psychological instability. This instability becomes especially visible during moments of

collective trauma and emotional rupture. Gender identity emerges through emotional relationships, silence, memory, trauma, and interpersonal disconnection. *The Empty Space* reveals the fragility of performativity when crisis ruptures social order. After the bomb explosion, the police called the parents for the summons. They usually call the father for every piece of paperwork and for the signature: "Ma recognised her son. God knows how. Where her finger pointed, there lay his remains" (page 20). Even in moments of crisis, public institutions and communal rituals continue to regulate emotional behaviour. This scene powerfully illustrates maternal love and the emotional bonds that form between mother and child. Despite the body being severely damaged and nearly unrecognisable, the mother instinctively extends beyond her son. Her recognition goes beyond physical appearance, emphasising the deep emotional connection through which a mother understands every facet of her child's being. The scene underscores the emotional sensitivity, care, and silent strength tied to motherhood. Simultaneously, it reveals the social expectation that men handle public duties, legal formalities, and institutional authority, while women are emotionally confined to the private sphere. Although the father is depicted as the official authority responsible for signatures and legal processes, it is ultimately the mother's emotional insight and recognition that are crucial in the crisis moment.

Cultural ceremonies, family gatherings, social rituals, and communal interactions still function as public stages where gender norms are enacted and monitored. Women are expected to perform modesty, emotional control, patience, and social decorum, while men are expected to embody authority, rationality, and emotional discipline. Yet public religion reveals this restoration's fragility. "The priest, the maulavi, the pandit, the saint, the ascetic in tunic, the turban, the beads, and the mantras, the sermon, the bhajan, the song, the melody—erasing the world up to the next"

(page 26). This line shows that religious restoration becomes a collective spectacle rather than Ma's individual recognition of crisis. Yet beneath these outward performances lie unresolved emotional tensions and psychological fractures. However, Shree repeatedly reveals emotional tensions beneath these performances. Characters outwardly conform to social expectations while internally struggling with loneliness, grief, emotional emptiness, alienation, and suppressed desires.

These emotional disruptions are symbolically reflected in the novel's central image of 'empty space'. The title *The Empty Space* symbolises emotional voids, fractured relationships, unstable memory, psychological absence, and fragmented identity. "Empty space", therefore, becomes both an emotional and symbolic condition reflecting the incompleteness of socially constructed selves.

Amid emotional distress and psychological turbulence, women in the novel often forge silent emotional bonds through shared suffering, empathy, and mutual understanding. Instead of openly confronting patriarchal systems, they support each other through quiet conversations, emotional presence, silence, and shared experiences of loss and loneliness. These subtle emotional connections act as indirect resistance to social isolation and control. Shree demonstrates that gender identity is fluid, shaped and reshaped through emotional bonds, grief, silence, and daily human interactions. By exploring these emotionally rich experiences, the novel reveals the constraints imposed by societal expectations of masculinity and femininity.

The instability produced by grief and emotional fragmentation also disrupts conventional masculinity. The novel also destabilises traditional masculinity. Male characters struggle to sustain performances of authority and emotional control. Their vulnerability, grief, emotional dependency, and

confusion reveal masculinity itself as fragile and performative rather than naturally dominant.

Shree reinforces this psychological instability through her fragmented narrative technique. An important aspect of *The Empty Space* is its fragmented narrative structure. Shifting memories, emotional discontinuities, symbolic absences, pauses, and fragmented narration mirror the unstable psychological condition of the characters. The narrative form itself reflects the fragmentation of identity.

Public visibility and private suffering intersect throughout the novel, demonstrating how gender shapes not only external behaviour but also emotional and psychological life. Through these portrayals, Shree deepens Butler's theory of performativity by connecting gender with emotional instability, grief, and fragmented subjectivity.

Gender Fluidity and Resistance Across Both Novels

In both novels, Shree depicts identity as an ongoing process influenced by societal norms, emotional experiences, family duties, and personal pain. The characters do not stick to a single fixed role; instead, their behaviours, feelings, and relationships evolve based on different social and emotional contexts. In *Mai*, she shifts between the roles of mother, wife, daughter-in-law, and an emotionally repressed individual struggling against patriarchal demands. Similarly, in *The Empty Space*, characters navigate grief, loneliness, emotional confusion, and unstable relationships that continually redefine their sense of self. Through these evolving experiences, Shree illustrates that gender identity is not fixed or innate but is consistently shaped by emotional circumstances, social pressures, and human connections.

In *Mai*, Mai shifts between obedient daughter-in-law, emotionally exhausted wife, nurturing mother, and reflective individual. Similarly, characters in *The Empty Space* adopt different gendered performances depending

upon social rituals, emotional contexts, and personal relationships.

As identities remain unstable, resistance also emerges through fragmented and indirect forms. Resistance in these novels often appears through subtle rather than overt acts. Silence, emotional endurance, hesitation, coded communication, strategic compliance, withdrawal, and relational solidarity become performative forms of resistance. These fragmented performances reveal identity not as unified or stable but as shifting, emotionally unstable, and continually reconstructed through social interaction and personal negotiation.

The contrast between *Mai*'s domestic enclosure and *The Empty Space*'s broader emotional and social environment demonstrates how context shapes gender performance differently while still reinforcing Butler's argument that identity remains unstable and iterative.

Tradition, Modernity, and Hybrid Identity

Across both novels, gender performance is deeply shaped by the tension between inherited traditions and emerging modern identities. Shree situates gender performativity within the tension between tradition and modernity in Indian society. In *Mai*, traditional structures manifest through arranged marriage, domestic expectations, elder authority, and patriarchal hierarchy. Yet *Mai*'s quiet questioning and Sunaina's growing awareness suggest the emergence of modern selfhood within traditional familial systems. While *Mai* portrays this tension primarily within domestic structures, *The Empty Space* reflects it within fragmented urban and emotional realities. *The Empty Space* portrays a more fragmented modernity shaped by urban influence, emotional alienation, mobility, changing social values, and unstable relationships. Modern ideas coexist uneasily with inherited traditions and ritual conservatism. Characters, therefore, perform hybrid identities that combine inherited cultural expectations with emerging

forms of self-awareness and modern individuality. These hybrid performances reflect transitional social realities in which continuity and change coexist. Shree's narratives therefore portray gender identity as adaptive, unstable, and continuously renegotiated within changing social environments.

Challenging Masculinity and Femininity

Shree challenges traditional notions of femininity while depicting masculinity as emotionally burdensome and socially constricted. In both novels, men are often expected to appear emotionally resilient, authoritative, and in control, even amid grief, confusion, and personal pain. Yet, Shree exposes the underlying vulnerability, silence, and insecurity that lie beneath these social masks. Conversely, women are not simply portrayed as passive or submissive; rather, through emotional endurance, caregiving, silence, and quiet acts of resistance, female characters gradually forge their own forms of strength and agency within restrictive societal norms. By presenting both genders as emotionally nuanced individuals shaped by social pressures and personal struggles, Shree questions rigid stereotypes of masculinity and femininity.

Similarly, femininity extends beyond passive sacrifice and victimhood. Women demonstrate resilience, emotional intelligence, endurance, relational agency, and subtle forms of resistance within restrictive structures. By pluralising gender experiences, Shree challenges essentialist understandings of masculinity and femininity and emphasises identity as socially constructed, emotionally negotiated, and culturally contingent.

Empowerment and Constraint

Across both novels, oppression and agency coexist within the same domestic and emotional structures. Domestic and relational spaces in Shree's novels function simultaneously as spaces of oppression and agency. Women remain constrained by

patriarchal expectations, emotional labour, and social surveillance, yet they also negotiate agency through silence, endurance, emotional solidarity, strategic withdrawal, and interpersonal resistance.

This nuanced portrayal complicates simplistic victim-oppressor binaries by demonstrating that gendered agency often emerges within structures of limitation rather than outside them.

CONCLUSION

Through emotionally layered narratives and fragmented identities, Geetanjali Shree redefines gender as a dynamic and socially negotiated process. Geetanjali Shree's *Mai* and *The Empty Space* present gender not as a stable or biologically determined reality but as a fluid, performative, and continuously negotiated process shaped through emotional experience, social expectation, memory, and cultural practice. Through domestic routines, silence, caregiving, grief, fragmented relationships, and interpersonal negotiation, the novels reveal how masculinity and femininity are repeatedly constructed within patriarchal structures yet never fully secured.

Drawing upon Judith Butler's theory of performativity, the paper demonstrates that gender identity in Shree's fiction emerges through repetitive social acts and emotional performances rather than essential or natural characteristics. However, Shree's narratives also show that these performances are unstable and vulnerable to disruption. Silence, hesitation, emotional withdrawal, endurance, and fragmented communication become subtle yet significant forms of resistance that challenge dominant gender expectations.

Her fiction demonstrates that performativity operates not only through visible behaviour but also through silence, memory, grief, and emotional endurance. A major contribution of Shree's fiction lies in its nuanced portrayal of emotional labour and psychological

fragmentation. In *Mai*, domestic spaces become sites where women's identities are disciplined through sacrifice, caregiving, and invisibility. At the same time, *The Empty Space* expands this discussion by exploring grief, absence, memory, displacement, and emotional instability. The fragmented narrative structures of both novels further reinforce the instability of identity itself, reflecting the fractured and negotiated condition of gendered subjectivity.

The novels also depict gender as an emotionally complex continuum rather than fixed social roles. Male characters often struggle to sustain the façade of authority and emotional restraint expected of them, especially during moments of loss and helplessness. Similarly, women are portrayed beyond sacrifice and silence—they navigate their identities through emotional resilience, caregiving, personal suffering, and subtle acts of defiance. Shree underscores that gender identities are fluid, continually moulded by emotional experiences, familial bonds, and societal expectations rather than predetermined cultural templates.

Through her portrayal of family life, grief, silence, caregiving, and societal norms, Shree illuminates the intricate ways gender operates in modern Indian society. Her narratives reveal how individuals struggle to balance traditional social roles with their authentic emotional realities. Ultimately, her layered storytelling portrays identity as dynamic, emotionally shaped, and in perpetual negotiation within evolving social and cultural landscapes. Her novels foreground the complex realities of identity formation in contemporary Indian society, where inherited patriarchal expectations coexist with emerging forms of selfhood and resistance.

Ultimately, *Mai* and *The Empty Space* challenge rigid binary understandings of gender and demonstrate that identity remains relational, unstable, and continually evolving. Shree's fiction, therefore, offers a powerful literary exploration of gender performativity

that not only deepens feminist theoretical discussions but also illuminates the emotional and cultural complexities of lived experience in modern Indian society.

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