



BETWEEN GENDER AND RELIGION: LOOKING BACK ON GENDER PERFORMATIVITY IN THE FILM “THE STARLING GIRL” (2023)

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Abstract

Religion plays a significant role in influencing how communities construct and enforce gender roles, particularly in contexts where spiritual doctrine governs social behavior. This study aims to investigate the intersection of religion and gender through a qualitative descriptive analysis of *The Starling Girl* (2023). The purpose of this research is to understand how gender performativity is depicted through Jemima Starling’s interactions with her religious environment. Using Butler’s gender performativity theory, the findings reveal that gender identity in the film is not portrayed as an innate identity but as a socially constructed performance, shaped by repeated acts under institutional and emotional pressures. Jemima Starling’s journey illustrates the tension between conformity and resistance. It highlights the potential for reconfiguring gender norms through personal agency. Furthermore, this study sought to contribute to broader discussions on gender and religion by demonstrating how media can critically reflect and challenge the mechanisms through which patriarchal values are sustained in faith-based communities.

Keywords: gender identity, gender performativity, religion

INTRODUCTION

The Starling Girl (2023) is an American coming-of-age film which follows the story of Jemima “Jem” Starling in her journey of self discovery in a christian community in Kentucky. Jem, a 17 years old girl, finds challenges in her religious belief as she is pursuing Owen Taylor, a young married pastor romantically. Throughout the film Jem is struggling between her religious beliefs and desire, which is considered sin in the community. She develops a crush on Owen because the man supports Jem’s passion in pursuing dancing, being the overseer of the church’s dance troupe he is. However, it all came crashing down when Jem and Owen’s illicit relationship came to light.

In the second half of the film, Jem faces extreme criticism due to her relationship with Owen, while Owen does not seem to be criticized openly by the masses. When Jem was confessing her sin in front of the church, Owen is not expected to do the same. Moreover, Jem is suspected as the sole perpetrator of their affair. Jem needs to restrain herself and brace for punishment. Moreover, even her own mother called her broken for having a relationship with Owen.

To analyze how gender expectations are constructed in this context, this study uses the theory of gender performativity by Judith Butler. Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble* (1999), rejects the idea that sex and gender are separate and stable entities. Butler questions the view that gender is the result of cultural interpretations of pre-existing sexes. According to her, “...gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established.... gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established as “prediscursive, ...” (Butler,1999: 11). In other words, the category of natural gender is also a product of a cultural system that reinforces patriarchal and heteronormative orders.

In Butler’s theory of gender performativity, gender is understood as the result of repeated social actions, not as a fixed, inherent identity. “Gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of freefloating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of

gender coherence." (Butler, 1999: 33). This statement reinforces the idea that gender is not something that is owned or born but rather something that is continually done within the framework of culture and social norms. This gender performativity creates the illusion of an identity that seems natural, when in fact is political and shaped by power. This theory is relevant to the analysis of religious institutions that shape and maintain seemingly sacred gender roles.

From the phenomena above it is interesting how religion shaped a community's views on gender, especially women. Jem as a young girl needs to define her religious belief which contradicts her desire. Her journey of self discovery thus rise several questions:

1. How does the movie *The Starling Girl* (2023) depicts Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, especially in Jem's interaction with her religious community?
2. In what ways does Jem's journey conforms or challenges the established gender performativity in her community?
3. How do religious expectations in *The Starling Girl* (2023) reinforce or disrupt women's gender performance within the faith-based community?

Concerning this study, several studies related to women's gender performativity have been done. One of the studies, a study by Sirait et al., (2025) aims to discover the nature of gender in the film *Clueless* (1995) using Judith Butler's concept. The study results in favor of the concept, which is how gender is fluid and performative. Additionally, the study emphasizes how gender fluidity is shown through fashion. The present study differs since there is no complete reliance on the character's action, but also the environment surrounding them, especially the faith-based community.

Another study three years prior by Mawarni (2022) also analyzed gender performativity in a film, *The Half of It* (2020), using Judith Butler's perspective. The study focuses on one character, Ellie, and her gender performativity. The difference between the present study is that Mawarni (2022) aims to discern how society treats the character, which is discovered that there are two reactions, namely positive and negative treatments. The background of the community is not a main concern of the study, meanwhile the present study considers the faith-based property of the main character as a foundation for analysis.

Another study related to gender performativity was conducted by Kusen et al., (2024), who analyzed the film *Mulan* (2020) and aims to find out how the main character, Mulan, challenges Chinese traditional gender roles. This study reveals how the main character's rebuttal to the existing gender roles blur the line between masculine and feminine traits. Additionally, the study also discerned how *Mulan* (2020) merges both confucian and feminist values. The present study differs because in *The Starling Girl* (2022) the intersection that is aimed to see is with a religion, namely Christianity.

Although all three of the preceding studies above talk about gender performativity in various context and multitude of intersectionality such as fashion, society's response and confucianism, there seem to be none which aims to see how religion, specifically Christianity, affect the manifestation of gender performativity and how the object of the study navigates through the faith-based community in pursue of their identity. Moreover, since the film *The Starling Girl* (2023) is no older than two years old, there has been no preceding published study about the film. Therefore, the novelty in this study mainly lies in the film choice, which is *The Starling Girl* (2023). Therefore, it is with confidence that this study is new and will provide a fresh perspective.

METHOD

This study is qualitative in nature, and uses a descriptive method to elaborate on the findings from the film. A descriptive method is chosen in order to describe findings as accurately as possible, without any personal input (Kothari, 2004:2). First, phenomena which correlates to gender, specifically ones that concern Jem Starling will be identified, then they will be analyzed in order to find out whether religious activity shapes gender expectations as well as stereotypes. Second, the identified phenomena are analyzed to discover whether Jem Starling as a character conforms or challenges the existing gender expectations and stereotypes. Finally, based on the discovery how the religious community affects gender performativity will be analyzed. Additionally, the qualitative nature of this research will make it possible to find a pattern among the findings, which may lead to finding the reason on how religion affects gender performativity.

Using Judith Butler's (1999) gender performativity theory this study will first analyze through what aspects or occurrences are gender performativity established. Which repetitive action, which tradition, and what may affect the formation of gender performativity which paved the way for gender roles and expectations. Then, the main character, Jem, behaviour and journey for identity will be analyzed in whether she conforms to the existing standard or not.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Gender Performativity in The Starling Girl (2023)

The Starling Girl (2023) represents how gender identity is shaped through repeated performances expected by society. Throughout the movie, Jemima Starling strives to conform to the rigid standards of her conservative Christian community, which imposes strict ideals of femininity. Her adherence to norms is not a personal decision, but rather a survival strategy in a community that associates conformity with moral worth. Consequently, even though Jem is trying to internalize such norms, it later makes her feel uneasy. Aligning with Butler's gender theory, this underscores the tension that may emerge between individual agency and institutional control. Furthermore, several external and internal factors may contribute to gender performativity, as shown throughout the movie.

External Factors

Butler's theory of gender performativity highlights that external forces, such as social and religious environments, can shape one's gender identity. In *The Starling Girl (2023)*, Jem's gendered behavior is not merely a reflection of personal identity but a performance compelled by some pressures. These pressures, including religious doctrine, familial expectations, community surveillance, and patriarchal double standards, serve as a mechanism that forces her to be a specific model of womanhood.

The religious doctrine of Jem's community plays a significant role in shaping and upholding gender norms. Jem lives in a conservative Christian community, which expects women to embody modesty, submission, and spiritual purity. One of the scenes in the film shows Jem being reprimanded by her mother because some cream from the dessert was on her face. This scene depicts how women must always maintain their appearance and behavior to satisfy society. They should pay attention to even the slightest details of what they do.

Jem's relationship with her mother represents family dynamics that further reinforce the gender norms. Her mother acts as both a moral guide and disciplinary figure since her father seems to have a drinking problem. Throughout the film, she is closely monitoring Jem's appearance, behavior, and emotional expression, ensuring Jem aligns with the community's ideals of femininity. The proof of this type of control can be seen when she asks about Jem being the leader of the dance group. Her dialogue, "*Is this for God or vanity?*" shows her concern about Jem's dancing, which should not be done if the reason is for personal satisfaction, even though she also knows Jem loves to dance. She keeps her daughter following the norms of the God-oriented community they are in. Furthermore, she also insists that the dance activities should not interfere with housework. This scene also highlights Jem's mother, who indirectly instills in Jem the notion that women's duties are mostly related to domestic work.

Another external factor is the pressure to conform from community surveillance. Jem is continuously observed by peers, elders, and the church leader, fostering a culture of judgment and social control. In such a setting, any deviation from prescribed gender roles, whether through clothes, speech, or behavior, results in shame, correction, and ostracism. One example of this factor happens when Jem is being told that her bra may be visible to others and appear disrespectful. In fact, her outfit is fine and still modest for the community gathering, but because of the rules in the community, she eventually feels ashamed and guilty. Another example would be moments in which Jem had to meet Owen in secret so that no one knew, because their relationship could be considered a sin. This collective monitoring exemplifies Butler's notion that gender is not a private identity but a public performance subject to scrutiny and discipline.

Finally, *The Starling Girl (2023)* highlights the gendered double standards that support patriarchal control. Jem's relationship with Owen reveals the different moral expectations placed on men and women. While Owen's transgressions are treated more leniently, Jem carries the full weight of guilt and societal stigma. She should even go to the King's Valley as a way to atone for her sin. On the other hand, Owen is still freely accepted in society. The church leader pressures Jem to admit her guilt. He also said, "*Jem brought him [Owen] to sin. He [Owen] said that she inhibits his ability to control himself.*" This dialogue underscores that even though the church leader

knows both of them are guilty, he is primarily blaming Jem. This disparity emphasizes the unequal distribution of power and accountability in gendered interactions.

Internal Factors

The Starling Girl (2023) also offers a nuanced portrayal of Jem's internal psychological and emotional processes that contribute to the construction of gender identity. Jem's internal struggles demonstrate how gender performance is sustained and has the potential to be disrupted from within. At the beginning of the film, Jem has a desire to be perceived as a good girl within her religious community, even when these expectations conflict with her personal wishes. This internal motivation reveals individuals' significant psychological interest in performing socially sanctioned gender norms. Such performances are oftentimes internalized, becoming part of one's sense through habitual enactment. Jem's longing for approval shows how gender norms are psychologically ingrained, making any deviation emotionally difficult.

Jem's attraction to dance as well as her romantic involvement with Owen elicit intense feelings of guilt and shame that reveal the extent to which she has internalized the community's moral codes. These emotions serve as internal regulatory systems that reinforce the boundaries of acceptable behavior and discourage transgression.

As Jem begins to feel a rising tension between her authentic self and the role she is expected to play in society, she starts the period of identity conflict, which is one of the keys to Butler's concept of performativity. Her struggle marks a significant moment of resistance, calling the stability of gender identity into doubt. At the end of the film, Jem chose to run with Owen, but she realizes that she is constantly feeling uneasy, even though she has already left her community. Finally, she chose to go by herself to another city, leaving Owen and finding her peace. Jem's dissatisfaction with her assigned role in her strict community implies that gender performance is not seamless or unchallenged, but rather prone to disruption when individuals face the dissonance between societal expectations and personal truth.

Jem Starling's Journey in Perspective of Gender Performativity

Throughout the film, it is visible that there is gender performativity at play, enforced by the religious background of the community which puts one too many restraints on women. Some examples of the expectations which restrains women are directly experienced by Jem, such as being expected to cover up, taking care of her siblings, and constantly being told to restrain herself. From the findings, it is true that the film *The Starling Girl (2023)* portrays gender performativity.

However, as Jem continues on the emotional journey to discover herself, she begins to challenge the existing beliefs and imposed expectations. Her resistance begins when she purposely exhausts the air on her bike-tire in order to ride home together with Owen. The entire rendezvous between Jem and Owen challenges the notion of 'women must not act upon their desire'. Her final and conclusive resistance occurs when she decides to run away from home, dodging the punishment imposed on her (being sent to training camp to repent) and run away from home together with Owen.

Additionally, after running away from home Jem did not lay powerless and was dependent on Owen. On the contrary, the final act of the film depicts Jem grabbing her freedom by stealing Owen's car and leaving Owen for good to travel to Memphis. In Memphis, she seeks out the bar her father told her. There, she expresses her freedom by dancing to the music to her heart's content without being told to hide herself. The powerful message behind this scene is how Jem managed to attain freedom by being alone, in a new place, with no other people to judge her.

All in all, although the christian-founded community supports the idea of Judith Butler's (1999) gender performativity, Jem's journey challenges the notion in order to attain freedom and discover her identity. Jem managed to attain freedom by parting with things that nurtures doubt, namely her hometown and Owen Taylor.

Religious Expectations and Their Role in Reinforcing or Disrupting Gender Performance

Religious Expectations in the film *The Starling Girl (2023)* are not only present as pressure from certain individuals or groups, but as a structural force that maintains the dynamics of gender power in faith-based communities. In the context of the conservative Christian community where Jem lives, religion plays a role not only as a teaching of values, but as a tool that regulates the body, desires, especially those related to women. This role of religion,

when associated with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, shows how religious discourse becomes a means to control women's identities through the pretext of morality

One of the clearest examples is how religious teachings are used to consider women's desires as sinful/ Jem's feelings for Owen are not understood as part of the maturation process, but are considered a form of moral failure. When Jem has to admit his "sin" in front of the church congregation, while Owen does not receive the same punishment, this shows an unequal moral burden placed on women. The church leaders' statement that Jem "led him (Owen) into sin" reinforces religious expectations that tend to blame women for men's actions. These expectations are wrapped in religious teachings that appear holy, but actually support gender inequality. Furthermore, the idea of repentance as a form of self-recovery is also gendered. Jem is sent to "King's Valley", a religious retreat, not to heal himself, but to return to conformity. The primary purpose is not for personal reflection, but to ensure that Jem returns to the gender roles prescribed by religion. In this case, religion functions not to support individual agency, but to eliminate any deviation from the norm.

However, this overbearing religious pressure is precisely the starting point of Jem's rebellion against imposed gender roles. By running away from home and choosing not to return to either his family or Owen, Jem reclaims control over his body and his choices. His final dance in Memphis symbolizes a freedom of self that is no longer bound by religious views, family, or patriarchal morality. The dance is performed without guilt, without fear, and is the culmination of the liberation of identity which was previously only a product of social and religious construction.

The religious expectations in *The Starling Girl* (2023) essentially serve to reinforce rigid and patriarchal gender norms. However, these expectations also harbor contradictions that ultimately open up space for resistance and self-discovery. Jem's journey shows that overly restrictive religious norms can be destroyed by the rebellion of individuals who refuse to continue to live gender performances that do not reflect themselves.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the concept of gender performativity by Judith Butler is very relevant in analyzing the dynamic of gender identity in the film *The Starling Girl* (2023). Through the character of Jem Starling, this film shows how gender identity is not something that is fixed or essential, but is formed and maintained through repeated social actions, which are influenced by established power structures, including religious institutions. In the context of the conservative Christian community where Jem lives, religion functions not only as a belief system, but also as a mechanism of social supervision and control that sets boundaries for women's behaviour, while reinforcing patriarchal gender hierarchies. The religious expectations imposed on Jem are clearly visible in various aspects of her life, from her appearance, behaviour, to social relations. When Jem violates established norms, moral and social sanctions are disproportionately given to her, while men involved in the same violations do not receive similar treatment. This inequality shows how religious institutions help reproduce gender inequality by framing women's desires as a form of moral deviation

However, the film does not stop at the narrative of confinement. Jem's journey also reflects the process of resistance to the norms that bind her. Jem's choice to leave her community and break off her relationship with Owen is an important turning point that represents women's efforts to reclaim autonomy over their bodies and identities. The closing scene, where Jem dances freely in the city of Memphis, symbolizes personal victory over the social and religious shackles that have been holding her back

Overall, this study shows that religious expectations can be a force that reinforces gender performativity in patriarchal societies. However, at the same time, this pressure can create gaps of resistance that allow individuals to redefine their identities. The limitation of this study lies in its focus on only one film and one religious context. Therefore, further research is recommended to explore similar representations in different cultural and religious settings to enrich the understanding of the relationship between religion, gender, and performativity.

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