

Unfolding Nan Astleys Gender Performance In Sarah Waters' *Tipping The Velvet*

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Abstract

Victorian era is considered to be the most phenomenal era of literature. Several scientific discoveries took place in this era. It was a period of high moral values. In domestic life male-dominated the family members. The role of the female was to serve male members of the family. Education was the closed book for most of the woman. Sarah Waters' novels represent queer gender identities of the Victorian era. Allan Hamilton wrote in the American Journal of insanity that a homosexual woman (class of gender) was usually of a masculine type, or if she presented none of the 'characteristics' the male was a subject of pelvic disorder with scanty menstruation and was more or less hysterical or insane. Some genders occur out of the cultural constructs, that do not confirm their sexuality and their sexuality is considered after the repetitive acts of sexual stylization, cross-dressing, and impersonation. *Tipping the Velvet* is written by Sarah Waters in 1998 and the main protagonist of the novel is Nancy Astley, a submissive, soft oyster girl who lives in Whitstable. Nan challenged the cultural norms of Victorian society and with repetitive gender performance, she creates her own gender identity which is objectionable in a Victorian patriarchal society.

Keywords: Victorian society, Gender, Identity, Performativity.

Paper

Sarah Waters is contemporary prolific writer born on 21 July 1966 in Neyland, Pembrokeshire, Wales. She completed her B.A. from the University of Kent, M.A. from Lancaster University and Ph.D. from the Queen Mary University of London. She is awarded several awards. Her works are based on lesbian themes and she depicts Victorian and Neo-Victorian era in her works. Her name has become synonymous to the best of historical fiction. She has written six novels out of which three are set in Victorian-era and the rest of three are designed in post-world war Britain. We can visualise trauma, fear, and pain through which people suffered. In this article, concerns are shown towards the gender which do not come within the margins of binaries of masculine and feminine. Waters is listed in prestigious *Granta* 'Best of young British novelist' in 2003. The guardian proclaimed *Fingersmith* as 'the most popular booker contender with the book-buying public'.

Sarah Waters reinvestigated particular events of the Victorian age. She has recreated the music hall of 1890. The main protagonist of the novel *Tipping the Velvet* is Nancy Astley who is an oyster girl and lives in Whitstable. "Nancy Astley an oyster girl while working in the kitchen of her family restaurant continually moving to the words of some street singer's or music hall song" (4). Nan's gender identity instincts rose when the first time she acquainted Kitty Butler-a male personate in the Victorian music hall. Immediately

her sexuality awakened, she felt inclined towards Kitty Butler's charm. Nan appreciates her impersonation and regarded her to be, "the most marvellous girl- I knew it at once! -that I had ever seen" (12). Nancy feels attracted to Kitty Butler. She starts visiting theatre night after night to grasp the kitty's attention. Kitty notices Nan's frequent presence and calls her backstage. Nan is thus appointed as her hairdresser. She had started murmuring the melodious tunes of the Music hall. She enjoyed her theatrical duties assigned to her by kitty's manager Walter: "I would wipe her little table, and empty her ashtrays, and dust down the glass; I would tidy... They were acts of love, these humble little ministrations and of pleasure-even perhaps of a kind of self-pleasure, for it made me feel strange and hot and almost shameful to perform them"(38). After working as a kitty's dresser, she soon becomes her lover.

As we know, in the Victorian period people followed patriarchal rules. Homosexual relations were considered to be taboo and such relations were considered a crime. The power of constructing gender was held by the phallogocentric members of society. So Judith Butler, an American philosopher and gender theorist views in her famous work *Gender Trouble*

If sexuality and power are co-extensive and if lesbian sexuality is no more or less constructed than other modes of sexuality, then there is no promise of limitless pleasure after the shackles of the category of sex have been thrown off. (Butler 158)

Nan desired a place where she can live with her female lover, Kitty Butler and enjoy her sexuality. She could now feel the emotional and physical changes that indicate that she has crossed the boundary of gender-normative behaviour. She becomes courageous in representing her sexuality and can cross any obstacle of patriarchal society.

Kitty's manager persuades Nan to join her on stage. He feels that it can increase their stage popularity and they can become famous. The music hall is set with two male impersonators- Kitty and Nan. Everyone appreciated their performance and loved their act. In Victorian age acts performed on cross-dressing were so entertaining. Butler refers to cross-dressing: "The notion of original or primary gender identity is often parodied within cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing and sexual stylization of butch and femme identities" (174). The love they displayed on stage was appreciated by the audience, but it doesn't mean they accepted these gender performances.

The sexual stylization of Nan allowed her to stay in the company of kitty. This created a sexual ambiguity in the age of moral and reason. The new woman of contemporary society aspires to become equal to males, but Sarah Waters the protagonist did not wish to become male at all. She wants to create her own gender identity. Nan was exploring a new world where she can live a satisfying life. She wants to get rid of this dominating society, where her gender identity might be questioned in the future.

Nan and Kitty went to London theatre to perform their acts and Nan accompanied Kitty on stage. They displayed their inner sexual feelings in front of the audience. Nan notes, "making love to kitty and posing at her side in a shaft of the limelight, before the thousand pairs of eyes, to a script I knew my heart, in an attitude I had labored for hours to perfect-these things were not so different" (128). The drag performance according to Judith Butler is

the performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of performer and gender that is being performed. But we are in presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of performance, then performance suggests dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender and gender and performance. (175)

The butch and femme relation of Nan and Kitty continued both on stage and off stage, they often share a private language. Kitty suggested Nan that society will never accept this homosexual relationship and it was offensive, so they had to keep their relationship a secret affair. Here, we can see that Victorian society is suppressing their gender roles, they can't act according to their whim. They are liable to perform under cultural restraint of society and according to their anatomical sex. In this relationship she has to, masquerade

her sexuality and feelings, “walking with her through the city streets, I felt as though I was bound and fettered with iron bands, chained and muzzled and blinkered” (127). Nan Astley realizes that her gender is constructed by the phallogocentric community and she can’t exercise her gender performativity freely.

In Victorian society, there were only two intelligible gender identities: Heterosexual male and heterosexual female. These genders were represented by the clothing and manner they behave. Waters have elaborately discussed the stylization of gender in disguise. Nan on stage disguised herself as male i.e. Drag performance, while cross-dressing she feels, “as though I had never had legs before-or,rather, that I had never known, quite, what it really felt like to have two legs joined at the top” (140). Nan until now has learned to hide her sexuality. The turning point comes in their relationship when some Victorian patriarchy audience started objecting to their lovemaking scenes. They were feeling uncomfortable and finally, a drunken man among the audience went up to the stage. He mocked their relation by addressing the audience, "you call them girls? why they are nothing but a couple of – a couple of Toms!" (140). In the Victorian age, this drag performance signified lesbian identity. Nan and kitty felt insulted by this harassment. After this incident, Kitty escaped from the stage and went into the arms of Walter, her manager. The frustrated and depressed oyster girl went to meet her family in Whitstable.

To get social security, kitty masks her sexuality and deceives her same-sex lover Nan. She knew that homosexual relation will not be accepted in this society so she gets married to Walter with compromising her lesbian identity. When Nan comes back, she comes to know about her partner’s wedding and she feels to be betrayed and in the rage of aggression she warned Walter, “I should like to kill her! Had I only a pistol on me now I will shoot her through the heart -and myself as well! And leave you to marry a corpse” (172). She is a heartbroken lover now and can hardly overcome from that situation: There was a darkness, a stillness at the very centre of me a sign of comfort. My breast felt tight and sore-but I didn't writhe, or sweat beneath the pain of it, rather I crossed my arms over my ribs, and embraced my dark and thickened heart like a lover" (190). She has now realized emotional relations and sexuality in this society are worthless and unstable. Her knowledge of theatre performance, her prior experience helps her to earn economic stability. She decides to trade her sexuality for her financial support.

She identifies her gender, she feels free to articulate her gender performance which is different from her anatomical sex. From the London theatre, she went to Leicester square and lived as a 'renter'. She is now embodiment of homosexuality

when the constructed status of gender theorized as radically independent sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine can easily signify a female body as a male one and woman or feminine a male body as easily as a female one. (Butler 10)

After several troubles and mental trauma and a long period of betrayal she has now learned the art to manipulate her sexuality. She remains a single woman in the day and by the night she reveals her gender performance. She disguises as a gentleman in the night. She flaunts her sexuality openly. The drag performance which she used to perform on stage, is performed on Leicester streets now. One fine day she went through an advertisement- “Respectable Lady seeks Fe-male Lodger... there was something very appealing about Fe-male. I saw myself in it in the hyphen” (211). This can be considered as the fourth phase of her life. Nan accepted the accommodation and becomes a kept tenant to wealthy Diana Lethaby.

In the Victorian era, the strict behavioral normative rules were only for the middle-class community. The high class to which Diana belonged, every impossible thing was possible. She assigned Nan a duty to entertain her and her lesbian friends. Her Sapphic circle often demands Nan's drag performance. Here we can see a contrast in ideology, on one hand, kitty butler compromised with her sexuality and married Walter, on the other hand, Diana took advantage of Nan and forced her to perform duties assigned to her. We can refer to another contrast that kitty was a coward and she always persuades Nan to hide their relation, while Diana and her Sapphic class didn't feel shy and openly articulated their gender performativity. Diana and the group started exploiting Nan physically, she is forced to exhibit her beauty and to dress in a different

costume. She is compelled to perform roles of Perseus, cupid or Salome. Nan felt molested now in such acts, it was like a mental trauma for her, "it became a kind of sport with her (Diana), to put me in a new costume and have me walk before her guests, or among them, filling glasses, lighting cigarettes" (280). Eventually, her gender performance was becoming stale in front of her guests. She gets fired from her job, in an attempt to defend a poor servant from Diana's remarks.

She attempts to mend her shattered reputation and becomes a part of a social activist team. The other team members were Florence and Ralph Banner. This is the most contended phase of her life. Now she is not obliged to hide her identity. She can perform her sexuality in the way she wishes. She begins to dress and behave that expresses her real sexuality. She wears formal trousers and on some occasions, she wears beautiful female costumes. She cherished her individuality and sexuality. With her theatrical experience, she motivates and encourages Ralph, to deliver a speech at the social rally. After betrayal and exploitation, the novel finally ends with a happy note and Florence became her eternal love. During the social rally, she had a brief encounter with Kitty. She apologised her mistake and said, "I feel ashamed to even talk to you. I am so sorry for what happened" (465). She didn't move on with Kitty, she replied her, "I have a new girl now, who's not ashamed to be my sweetheart" (466). Nan remained faithful and loyal in relationship with Florence.

Conclusion

So as title emphasize on gender performativity, I would like to quote Judith Butler's notion of performativity- "gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gender stylization of the body" (Preface xv). Gender trouble is one of the founding texts of queer theory. The main protagonist Nan of Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* passes through five major phases in this novel, where she repeats her gender performance. The first phase is of innocent oyster girl, she performs her household duties. In the second phase, she becomes Kitty Butler's companion in theatre and through drag performance, she realized her sexuality, she was betrayed in this phase. The third phase is of a 'renter', she performed her sexuality to earn financial stability, where she learned to manipulate with sexuality. The fourth phase is rather scary when she was physically assaulted by Diana and her Sapphic class. The last phase is the happiest, she ultimately finds her true love in Florence and she lived her life peacefully.

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