

Topic- Performativity

J.L. Austin in his legendary lecture at the Harvard University in 1955 for the first time spoke about the interplay of speech and performance. This was retrospectively published in 1962 as *'How to do things with words'*, and this work is credited to have introduced the 'Speech Act theory' that later became a touchstone in linguistic and phenomenological philosophy. Austin's ground-breaking postulate that a person barely speaks but "does things with words" offered the framework for understanding words as means and syntax of enactment. Deploying several instances of articulating sentences and contrivances of using words in the form of language, he consolidated the foundations of theorising "performance". J. Searle, who was conspicuously influenced by this theory not only furthered Austin's theories on performance, but on several occasions shielded his propositions on several intellectual facades. Searle anchored his arguments in two examples that later became very popular: One, where a nurse performs a task and assigns roles when s/he declares that a boy or a girl is born; and secondly, when a minister officiating a wedding declares that the man and his wife are a married couple. Both the illustrations elucidate that those pronouncements exist not merely as words; rather, the words embody meanings and consign all the actors in the given situation certain parts to play. The parts played are means of performance that every individual continually performs as per the collective social conventions. Since then, Linguistic philosophy has investigated the ontological foundations of speech, which indisputably has an impact on action. Later, Jacques Derrida, for whom "text is all there is", analysed Austin's work and argued that performance is not through speech but it is the writing that is 'performative' (1988). This cyclic debate persists in philosophical scholarship even today but it is credited to have consolidated the discourses on and importance of 'performativity'. Bourdieu (1972) conceived the notion of "performative" in association with power that is derived from the social institutions, which he theorised in the form of "structures". He noted that individuals are suspended in their respective contexts or "habitus", which provides scope for any element of derivation or deviation. The "doxa" that is translated as the obvious understanding of the world around us is often misconstrued as *natural*; however, we must realise that it is only with the array of continual performance of the norms that the doxa is produced. He tellingly argued that what we perceive as the "social reality" can never be natural; rather, it is the outcome of innumerable performances. In this article, we shall attempt to understand performativity as a social theory, and using two sub-fields in sociology, namely- i) gender and ii) religious rituals and violence, exemplify how it operates as a sophisticated paradigm in offering insights to questions of identity and agency.

Gender and Performativity

Concepts of agency and identity have always intrigued the scholarly acumen since medieval times, and even today, their definitions continue to sit on fuzzy edges. One of the greatest 20th century philosophers, Michel Foucault, in his book *The Order of Things* (1970), engaged in describing the interplay of identity and action by the means of what he called “subjectivised action”. He wrote that, “subjectivization is the procedure by which one obtains the constitution of a subject, or more precisely, of a subjectivity which is of course only one of the given possibilities of organization of a self-consciousness” (Foucault 1970: xiv). Foucault squarely furthered the argument by suggesting that the conception of agency prevalent in the social sciences “places its own point at the origin of all historicity – which in short leads to a transcendental consciousness” (Foucault 1970: xiv). Building on these notions of agency, consciousness, and subjectivity, Butler proposed her version of the theory of performativity in the dictum of gender studies. Her postulates have transformed the way people perceive gender. Initially, there existed a concept of “natural body” in opposition to a social being. Butler questioned this understanding and problematized the notion of “natural body”. She contended that everything there is, is essentially socially constructed. Her ideas are, as she admits are a reflection of Foucault’s writings which propagated that bodies are sites where discourse and power inscribe themselves via prescriptive and repetitive performances. Thus, both the authors negate the existence of a body as “pregiven” (Butler 1989: 661) and emphasise on aspects of performance. Against the conventional understanding in the 1980s, she suggested that, identity is formative, and it can never be static.

Butler expounds on the recurrent performance that one does on a regular subconscious basis by introducing the term “drag” in her book *Bodies that Matter*. In this context she explains heterosexuality should not be prototyped as pivotal in gender description, rather the norms that define heterosexual itself are done through repeated actions- “To claim that all gender is like drag, or is drag, is to suggest that ‘imitation’ is at the heart of the *heterosexual* project” (Butler 2011: 24), and that the notion of gender as inherently binary. Drag is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a prior and original gender, but that hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations. She dismisses the notion of any gender or sexual attribute being considered as “ideal”, and refuted the idea of others imitating it to become one. Contrary to that she elucidated that the most accepted practices and characteristics are inculcated through continual performance. Her model of understanding this drag has been later adopted by scholars who have indulged in studying the “third” gender or/and the blanket of people identifying with queer minorities. Don Kulick (1998), in his phenomenal work- ‘*Travesti: Sex, Gender and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered prostitutes*’ draws on Butler’s gender performativity to elucidate how travesties in Brazil, who are born males, “mimic” the cultural performances of women to defy *being* men, and *become* “not-men” (Kulick 1998: 232). His work with the travesti leads him to postulate that performativity acts as a bridge between desires and acts. For him, performativity is an approach as well as a methodology that allows for fluidity of social statuses and roles, and bestows agency in individuals to *become*. Saba Mahmood (2009) magnifies the ambit of theory of performativity and gendered roles in a society by discussing the character that the veil plays in the lives of Muslim women in Egypt. She asserts that value systems can be symbolised in

tangible forms, and veil signifies modesty. Contributing to the debates of secular and Islamist contested discourses, she argues that “ritual performative behaviour” (Mahmood 2009: 36) helps women in veil to reinstate their role as modest Muslim women, and the attributes that accompany it. Though Mahmood and Butler have conflicting ideas with regards to the degree of the agency residing in individuals in the process of *becoming*, the frame of reference, and the context as being western or otherwise, they concur that by doing and re-doing things, one becomes; and the possibility of something being done can also increase the possibility of undoing and the inverse too holds true.

Religious Rituals, Violence, and Performativity

The aspect of praxis and performativity is not nonreticulated. While *being* continues to be deeply embedded in the curriculum of western philosophy, the questions on *becoming* has gained sustained attention in the postmodern sociological acumen. Religious rituals and violence, like identity, is formative- it is a continual and dynamic phenomenon that forges and influences identities (Feldman, 2003). Performativity is integral to the study of rituals and violence because it is inextricably associated with imaginations that are actualised (and ritualised) into *being* and *becoming*. For Bell (1999), the theory of performativity does not just assume the fluid nature of identities, but it highlights the premise of continual production of social meanings and socio-political consequences. Bell’s “politics of visibility” effectively argues that violence is a visual act, and hence, it is safe to associate it with performativity. In the paradigm of religious experiences, it is epistemologically significant to understand performativity because it offers cues to understand cultural expressions and derive meanings that have inevitable consequences. Performance of rituals during Christening of people, Carlson (2013) writes, is mostly about repeating cultural rhetorics and critical metaphors that subsumes cultural praxis. It is both structurally and visually prescriptive in nature. Similarly, Hill (2016) argues that “Dhikr” in Sufism is one of the many performative aspects that help the adherents to associate themselves with fundamental and implicit religious symbols, and believe in and express their religious identities. These examples feed into Butler’s idea that one does not just perform their personal ideologies, but try and emulate the institutionally conventional norms. This necessitates attention to the production and ritualisation of the effects (and affects) of affiliated identities. It is important to draw parallels with the concept of “mimetic theory” as proposed by Rene Girard at this juncture. While it is perfectly possible for the theories of performativity and mimicking to dialogue and complement each other, Girard’s (1996) propositions are rooted in Christian theology, and he is of the view that religious rituals are the outcome of the mimetic tendencies of human beings where people try to impersonate the one(s) they think are predominant. While this approach accounts for imitation affinities, it turns a blind eye to the aspect of subjectivity and experience. Also, it leans more towards psychology, metaphysics, and philosophy, than sociology, and the role of cultural complex seems to occupy a place only at the fringes of this theory. Performativity on the contrary is anchored in the complexities of cultures and participants. It involves not just the actors, but also the audience or the witnesses. Juris (2005), having been discernibly inspired by Juergensmeyer, propels that rituals and violence are barely direct; they are performance because it embodies “symbolic ritual enactments of interaction with a principal emphasis on

communication and cultural expression” (Juris 2005: 415). For Juergensmeyer, *performative religious ritual or violence* is a combination of ritual or violence, and performance; and structurally and epistemologically, it is more nuanced than what appears at the surface. His arguments are more focussed on the performative aspects of violence, where he explained that like a theatrical play, violence is executed by means of phases: the first he termed as “setting the stage”, second is the “dramatic time to kill”, and lastly “reaching the audience” (Juergensmeyer 2017: 157-174). Analogous to an acting performance, the location and actors are committed for a certain kind of set-up, and prepare a spectacle for a specific audience group. Juergensmeyer (2004) argues that “drama and loud enactments” offer overarching symbolic meanings to religious violence. Realities, both good and vice are essentially lived through performances. They wrote that the interpretations of the performance and the spectatorship too are monitored by socio-political mechanisms. Juergensmeyer (2013) notes that any act of violence is a spectacle designed to create targeted impacts for the victims as well as for those who witness it, where the perpetrators want to “shaken awake the people, and siege their imaginations” (Juergensmeyer 2013: 281). In his investigations, he found that the driving force of religious violence is that it is ritualised and performed with the aid of religiously symbolic tools. For him, there are chiefly two aspects of performativity that are imperative to understand the logic of religious violence- i) Violence as a “drama” where there is a conspicuous angle of “performative acts”, and secondly, ii) Violence as a “ritual” performed quite similarly to the religious rituals. Performing violence as a religious ritual echoes the idea of Girard (1972) where he argued that hostilities are best expressed through the agency of rituals. Violent acts *perform* social functions, and their impacts are transformative. The actors or perpetrators have the objectives to make a change (mostly symbolic), and they ensure the event is a *spectacle* where the witnesses have no problem memorising the imageries from the event. Juergensmeyer argues that the way in which the act is performed and perceived makes all the difference, because it means different things to different people, and at different times. He says that, “an act of terrorism usually implies an underlying power and legitimising ideology” (Juergensmeyer 2013: 156).

Performativity, though it started as a theatrical and fine arts presentation, swiftly emerged as a microcosm social theory post enlightenment for its ability to orient itself and align with the critical metaphor of cultural expressions at large. While it has not yet been protracted across all social disciplines, sociological and anthropological theories and methodologies are continually exploring the means by which performativity derives and adds meanings to social behaviour. There has been a growing interest in this theory since modernity with the increased emphasis on lived and experiential narratives. The notion that performativity is intertwined with the idea of not just doing but also re-doing and undoing embodies contention in terms of past and future identities, that are again subjected to non-conformity, endurance, and negotiations. Performativity also swells the tension between the interaction of individual agencies and societal institutions, and how that mediates and shapes identities. Whether this fairly new theory will stand the test of time is yet to be determined, but it is quite certain that it at least offers a good point of departure for engaging in and advancing several sociologically relevant debates.

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