Chapter II

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This chapter attempts to discuss and define the compulsory binary structure of gender or gender essentialism and its impact on individual existence being placed within this rigid normative structure. What happens to individuality or selfhood when it is pitted against the backdrop of essentialism? Due to the rigid categorization of gender and the strict imposition of social norm that tends to regulate or structure human life; selfhood/individuality has to encounter intense repression. The self seldom has any other choice but to submit itself to the social order, in order to earn some space in the social world. From the theoretical perspective also, we could take into account the regressive journey of selfhood from a state of supreme power to a state of powerlessness. The concept of the Cartesian “Cogito” provided enormous power to the self. But in the later theoretical developments, the deconstruction of the self could be seen. The self or the “I” has been exposed not to be the owner of personal tastes, temperaments and choices. It has been exposed to be a construct, constituted by the normative designs of the particular socio-cultural milieu in which one is entrenched. The “I” become extremely powerless, since it cannot be itself, rather it has to be what others want it to be or what the normative structure permits it to be.

Along with the discussion of gender essentialism and its impact on individual identity, this chapter takes into account the social constructionist approach to gender by foregrounding the theoretical works of thinkers like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler.
among others. Their innovative ideas have enabled us to rethink about the age old concepts, beliefs, practices related to gender and the social structure at large. Gender as a concept has confronted immense challenge in the contemporary theoretical domain. Gender Essentialism has very often encountered counter arguments regarding its tendency to generalize or to measure everyone by the same yardstick, irrespective of individual tastes and temperaments. But in the practical domain it could often be seen that it is very difficult to transgress the binary or to act against the prevalent gender norm. While confronting the fixed and arbitrary nature of the binary structure that demands uniformity of behaviour from all the subjects belonging to a specific socio-cultural matrix, individual existence has to encounter several problems. The denizens of a particular society internalize the norm to such an extent that it is often desired that the norm should be maintained even at the cost of causing harm to the life of an individual or their near and dear ones.

In the existing system, the concept of natural or normal is associated with gender and as such difference needs to be corrected. But the concept of normal or natural could also be questioned, since ‘natural’/’normal’ does not seem to be natural but a constructed concept because they refer to those signifiers that are handed down to us as taken-for-granted signifiers of normalcy or naturalness. So normal or natural is that which has been presumed as fixed signifiers of human anatomy. The idea of normal human identity is so rigorously imposed that a natural body created by nature is also not regarded as natural if it cannot fulfill the norm of what qualifies to be normal or natural.

As a textual illustration of such issues related to the compulsory binary structure of gender, the concept of normal human anatomy or identity and the predicaments of
individual existence, I have analyzed the play *Tara* written by Mahesh Dattani. The play suggests among other issues, the power of the compulsory binary that celebrates its victory in the anatomical dissection of the conjoined twins Tara and Chandan. The societal norm has been internalized to such an extent that in order to fulfill the prescription of the social norm, the mother of the conjoined twins, do not hesitate to cause fatal harm to her girl child. The play *Tara* shows the process of re-naturalization imposed on an otherwise natural body, the body created by nature very much like the anatomies of man and woman created by nature. The social dissection of gender into discrete categories male/female gets articulation in the separation of the androgynous body of the conjoined twins to attain the shape of male and female. The anatomy of the conjoined twins Tara and Chandan which is also a natural creation are subjected to a surgical separation only because the androgynous anatomy of the Siamese twins does not fulfill the dominant idea of ‘normal’ human anatomy. Thus it could be seen that the concept of ‘normalcy’, prevalent in a particular social environment seldom allows any space to the ‘deviants’. The deviants or those who are born with a difference are compelled to conform to the ‘ideal’ or in other words what is accepted to be normal. In this regard, we may refer to Foucault. In his work *Discipline and Punish* Foucault critiques the concept of normalcy. In Foucault’s opinion, the term, normalization involves the construction of an idealized norm of conduct – for example, the way a proper soldier ideally should stand, march, present arms, and so on, as defined in minute detail – and then rewarding or punishing individuals for conforming to or deviating from this ideal.
As stated earlier, this chapter takes into account the theoretical background of gender essentialism and the social constructionist point of view of gender that subsequently attempts to deconstruct the essential structure by foregrounding the inherent paradoxes and the unjust suppression of individuality and intends to analyze the influence of the factors like language, society, religious, legal and medical codes in the fabrication of the gendered self. For this purpose, the theoretical inputs of thinkers like Foucault and Judith Butler amongst others are discussed which are perhaps necessary to prepare the ground for a fruitful discussion of gender and identity--- the towering binary structure and the consequent subjugation of individuality. This chapter tries to analyze how gender identity is a social construct, subject to language and 'discourse' of a particular culture. The chapter concludes with the stress on gender as a matter of social construction that stands upon the act of performing the existing norm of gender prevalent in a particular socio-cultural milieu.

Compulsory Binary or Gender Essentialism

At the very outset I would like to discuss the use of the term compulsory binary or gender essentialism. The compulsory binary structure of gender rules the social domain with an air of despotic supremacy and compels all to either conform or vanish from the world of 'human' being. The term compulsory binary structure has been used in this context to signify the binary structure of gender that centres on the existence of gender binary- male and female as the only two valid categorizes of gender. Certain behavioural patterns or character traits are distributed among each head that goes to constitute masculinity or masculine behavioural patterns for male and femininity or feminine behavioural patterns for female. One of the characteristics of the human world
is that this binary structure of gender is mandatory for all who hope to be referred to as
human beings. This is the compulsory binary structure of gender that lays down
certain rules and regulations of set fixed behavioural patterns and it is compulsory for
all to abide by these rigid rules irrespective of individual differences. Being located
within the compulsory binary structure of gender, the act of performing gender becomes
an intricate issue, since everyone is required to perform within the space allotted as
normal or natural. Foucault's ideas challenge the concept of 'normal' and Butler's
theory of 'gender performativity' nurtures the opinion that gender is a matter of
performing the acts assigned to the gender categories rather than expressing some
'natural' 'inner' essence. Such ideas would be given an ample discussion in the body of
my thesis.

The compulsory binary structure could be regarded to be another name for gender
essentialism that rests on the belief that gender is the expression of some inner essence
that inherently accompanies a human anatomy. Since gender essentialism believes in
the existence of an inner essence, it draws on the concept of 'normalcy' and stigmatizes
those that are different from the essentialized structure. The behavioural patterns
sanctioned by the essential structure are shared by the majority and therefore it becomes
the yardstick of 'normalcy'. On the other hand, those who are born with a difference are
branded as 'abnormal'. In the essential structure, difference is often labeled as
'abnormality'. Thus while confronting the binary, individuality and the concept of
liberty associated with it is often relegated to a claustrophobic background.

The fixed and arbitrary nature of the binary structure demands uniformity of behavior
from all the subjects belonging to a specific socio-cultural matrix. The binary structure
of gender is so firmly consolidated that it seldom allows space to any kind of deviation. As such, gender does not remain a personal or individual matter. It rather largely depends upon social sanctions and prescriptions. An individual can perform his gender in his own way but at the same time he has to adhere to the societal norm or perform his gender within the arena of the gender discourse provided/designed by the socio cultural milieu in which he is situated. Here we may refer to Judith Butler’s statement:

Surely, there are nuanced and individual ways of doing one’s gender, but that one does it, and that one does it in accord with certain sanctions and prescriptions, is clearly not a fully individual matter (1988:525).

In the existing social structure, binary structure of discrete gender categories is strictly imposed on gendered life of individuals as soon as one enters the arena of the social world. The moment, one is born, the question needs to be answered—is it a boy or a girl? The answer will bring in several connotations that immediately starts tailoring the self in accordance to the pre-designed notion of the gendered self and as such one gets caught up in the web of existing gender roles without being aware of it. A normalizing tendency prevails in the society that exerts pressure on individuals to subscribe to a certain gender role.

It is almost mandatory for all to conform to the dominant idea of gender roles or discrete gender categories irrespective of individual tastes, desires or aspirations. Certain codes pertaining to the mode of dressing, walking, talking behaving and such other aspects of everyday life, prevails in the world of gender and everyone needs to follow these pre existing codes of conduct. The gendered identity of a human being needs to match with the definitions of ‘male’/ ‘female’ that exhibit ‘masculine’ and
'feminine' traits respectively. It is never taken into account whether the behavioural patterns sanctioned for 'masculinity' for instance suits an individual or not. To be a part of the social world, one has to conform or else will be banished as an outcast, and since there is practically no world outside the social world there is no other option except maintaining an obliged existence amidst a hegemonic social structure.

The essentialist notion of gender that predominates the 'human' world believes that gender categories remain unchanged or constant for all individuals inhabiting all ages and places. Human identity is thus delimited to mean diamorphic, discrete gender categories only. The categories or groups to which people belong will provide their members with the definition of who they are and how they should behave in the social sphere. There are certain codes of conduct specific to masculinity / femininity and these remain inviolate. 'Human' society which is almost invariably essentialist, believes that there are unambiguously male and female human beings who behave as 'man' and 'woman' 'naturally' do. Essentialism characterized by biological determinism assumes that gender resides within the individual in the form of personality traits and hormones. An essentialist position for instance, views men as strong, brave, violent, logical and women as weak, passive, and emotional. But this might not be applicable to all individuals placed within the category called 'man'.

**Philosophical Background of Gender Essentialism**

While discussing issues related to gender essentialism and its impact on an individual's gender identity, let us have a look at the philosophical background of gender essentialism.
Classical essentialism nurtures the belief that there are underlying true forms or essences. There is discontinuity between different forms rather than continuous variation, and these true forms are constant over time. To look at the concept of essentialism as such, we will have to refer back to Plato who opined that the phenomena of the natural world were simply a reflection of a finite number of fixed and unchanging forms or “eide”, as he called them. The “eide” were renamed as ‘essences” by the Thomists of the Middle Ages. The property of an ‘essence’ is that it does not change and is categorically different from another essence. Essentialism dominated the philosophical and scientific thought in the Western world. It believes that certain phenomena are natural, inevitable, universal and biologically determined. The essentialist approach to gender presumes that gender is something that is ‘naturally’ present in human body in the form of essence.

Essentialism has a long history in Western philosophical tradition starting from Aristotle. It was Plato who actually devised the philosophy of Essentialism and his “Allegory of the Cave” from Book vii of The Republic is the most famous early manifesto of Essentialism. According to Plato, true knowledge is the knowledge of the essence of the things, and not of the varying individual things themselves. Plato said that there were two different realities to the universe—the essential universe and the perceived universe. Essential universe was the perfect universe and all the imperfections were only part of the perceived universe. This notion was carried over to all facets of the universe including species of living beings.

According to Plato’s philosophy, all living creatures also had two realities—the essential and the perceived. In their essential reality, all members of a species are same
and the variation among the individuals is only a part of the perceived reality of the individual. The offspring of the members belonging to a species would inherit the exact same species identity (essential reality) as their parents. As such the possibility of change and difference is totally ignored. The Naturalists before 19th century also favoured the same notion and Kant and Locke also did almost the same thing. The essentialist thought process proffers the view that all things of the same kind share a common essence. For instance, a ‘table’ possesses an essence like “tableness” and it is that property that makes them table. Similarly all human beings either possess maleness (masculinity) or femaleness (femininity).

Essentialism is a way of representing or constructing the objects of the world and when applied to human beings, it is regarded to be constructing their subjectivity. When applied to gender, essentialism is the belief that all men and women belong to two discrete biological categories, and as such men and women exhibit absolutely different character traits known as masculinity and femininity. Essentialism rests on the presumption that all members belonging to a specific category shares the essential properties of that category which confers the categorical identity on them. But literally speaking, the term ‘essential properties’ may lead to controversy. For example an essential property of a plant is leaves, but there are some plants that do not have leaves. Will they be disqualified because they are unable to represent one of the essential properties of the category to which they suppose to belong? Again, if they are disqualified from the category, then where would one place them? At this point we may refer to Locke’s way of distinguishing “real” essence from “nominal” essence. In his work “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding”(1689), Locke says that the real
essence determines the nature of things of a particular kind, while nominal essences are properties that can be used to recognize distinguished/specific members of a particular kind.

But Charles Darwin’s position can be viewed as an early contrast in this regard. He is of the opinion that there is no essential or perceived reality of creatures. Diversity is an intrinsic aspect of all population and as such creatures that deviate from the norm really exists. And their existence cannot be denied. Darwin is of the opinion that the process of “natural selection” needs variation. One of Darwin’s major achievements was to change this view and make biologists think about individuals (having individual differences) rather than about populations or species as a whole having universal essential properties.

Along with the socio-cultural matrix, the theoretical and philosophical domains, dominated by essentialist constructs believe that gender is the expression of some inner essence and as such there exists two discrete gender categories. Even Feminism which is supposed to give voice to the oppressed and the unarticulated—speaks in terms of two genders. Feminists like Luce Irigary and Beauvoir seems to be constructing categories. Transgender studies and alternate sexuality have come up only in the recent years, and they occupy a meagre space in the theoretical domain. Thus the essentialist notion of gender dominates the socio-cultural as well as the conceptual matrix. Moreover, medical science is also entrenched in the conceptual confines of binary gender normativity which is articulated through the ‘corrective’ surgery or sex re-affirmation surgery undertaken by medical experts with an aim to correct anatomical
'deformities' unsuitable to the world of gender. I would be elaborating on this elsewhere in the chapter.

Identity/Subjectivity as Subordinate to the Essential Binary: Powerful Cartesian Cogito and the Socially Constructed Subject-

Gender essentialism which is mostly found to predominate the social world, compels all to conform and thereby renders the "I" or the subject incapable of asserting itself. Thus identity or subjectivity could be visualized as powerless entities living at the mercy of the towering 'power structure of the society. Consequently, the powerful Cartesian 'Cogito' could be deconstructed and exposed to be a construct tailored by the social norm.

"Identity", "selfhood" or "subjectivity", the important aspects of an individual's existence are some loaded concepts that are often found to occupy space amidst lofty philosophical discussions. In the context of my work, I have used them in a narrow sense by applying it to the domain of gender. At the very outset, the terms "identity", "selfhood" or "subjectivity", entail the question -- "Who or what one is?" Our existence depends on the act of our identification with one of the two available gender categories. Selfhood or subjectivity is an intricate concept since it gives voice to various debatable issues and constantly conceals its genesis. Several opinions have been postulated by various thinkers regarding identity and subjectivity or selfhood. Among such thinkers, important names relevant to my area of discussion could be Descartes, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Freud, Kristeva, Lacan, Foucault and others.
Let us have a look at different thinkers’ stance on the issue of formation of subjectivity. To begin with, Rene Descartes’ statement, “Cogito ergo sum”, “I think therefore I am”, entails that the thinking subject reigns supreme as it precedes existence and lends meaning to the external world. Descartes’ philosophy becomes the science of thought. Earlier, it was being that conditioned thought, but with Descartes it is thought that conditions being.

Descartes’s opinion of the “thinking subject” that precedes existence can be objected on the ground that there is existence prior to the development of the process of “rational thinking.” The pre-natal and post-natal existences are perhaps such existential conditions where Cartesian “rational thinking” does not seem to exist. A subject is identified and defined according to the available linguistic gender categories—boy or girl, it is given a name accordingly and there seems to start the process of making a self before the subject is aware of what it is or what it wants to be. Moreover, as soon as the subject enters the already structured social world, it immediately enters the hegemonic arena of language where meanings and definitions are already working in full swing. The “I” has to be what the prevalent socio-linguistic norm permits it to be. Amidst such a situation, it does not seem to be possible for the “I” to express its “inner” essence even if it possesses something called ‘inner’ essence. Thus ‘subjectivity’ does not seem to be some free and spontaneous expression of our interior truth. It is in fact the way we are made to think about ourselves, so that we will present ourselves in a correct or socially acceptable way, and not as perverse individuals.
The subject’s gender identity is determined; it is given a name, and then starts the process of bringing it up according to the gender norm of that particular socio-cultural matrix into which it is born. The subjects do possess the capacity to think as Descartes has said but this position becomes problematic because the subject can think and express thoughts only through the pre-existing language which is always already structured. The process of acculturation gathers momentum before the “I” could think or take any decision on his/her part. Perhaps it would be relevant here to quote Kristeva:

Let us assume that it is legitimate to speak of a subject as long as language creates the identity of a speaking agency and ascribes that agency an interlocutor and referent (1987:8).

Kristeva is defining here a “subject” which is a construct of discourse unlike the knowing, producing Cartesian subject. Here the term “agency” suggests that it is a product of discourse, something that language provides us in discursive formations, and not an “innate” quality located in some “inner space”. Kristeva is of the opinion that the constitution of subjectivity is much like the acquisition of language. Speakers who acquire a language are constrained by the available vocabulary of that language and the rules that govern its use. Yet part of learning a language is acquiring the ability to be creative within those constrains. A competent speaker is one who can create unique sentences in that language. Similarly subjects are constituted by multiple and sometimes contradictory discourses. Individual subjects resist, change and revise these discourses from within them.

The Cartesian subject which is now referred to as the ‘cogito’ is often criticized as a being in crisis. We can begin with Heidegger’s critique of Cartesian subjectivism.
Heidegger is engaged in de-centering the subject. One of the major features of Heidegger's thinking is his criticism of Cartesian subjectivity. According to Heidegger, in regarding the "ego cogito" as the guarantor of its own continuing existence and as the basis of all things, Descartes reduces all entities to ideas or representations whose validity is determined by the rules imposed on them by the subject ego. Heidegger's opinion regarding subjectivity is that, the most fundamental aspect of our life is "Being" — we are. His model of subjectivity is represented by the German Dasein which signifies existence or being there. The earlier models of subjectivity assumed that there is a separation from the external world. In other words, the subject has an interiority which is separate from the exteriority of the objective outside world. But Heidegger argues that there is no such simple separation of the self from the world. Dasein refers to the fact that the subject is within the world and belongs to it. The subject is not a secluded entity having 'interiority'. He rejects the existence of an inner essence that constitutes the subject. In his major work, *Being and Time* (1926), Heidegger writes:

In the course of this history certain distinctive domains of Being have come into view and have served as the primary guides for subsequent problematics: the ego cogito [I think] of Descartes, the subject, the 'I', reason, spirit, person. But these all remain uninterrogated as to their Being and its structure, in accordance with the thoroughgoing way in which the question of Being has been neglected (1962: 44).

With the advent of the post-modern concept of meaning as the interplay of sign within the discursive formations of language, the subject began to be decentered as the origin of meaning and truth. It favours the perspective of subjects being constituted within
discursive formations. Some other thinkers like Sigmund Freud, Julia Kristeva, Simon de Beauvoir, Foucault, Lacan and other have also critiqued the Cartesian subject. In the contemporary feminist critical jargon, the Cartesian subject has been criticized for being hegemonic since it ignores the semiotic element in language and subjectivity. As a contrast to the fixed, knowing, empowered Cartesian subject, Kristeva favours a subject in process which is constituted by various forms of discourse.

Kristeva and Lacan exhibit a tendency to see Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis as having decentered a subject commonly known as Cartesian. Here emphasis is given to the social identity of the subject – an identity that is there before anything else. So there seems to be practically no scope for making free and rational decisions. The linguistic theories of Saussure and Roland Barthes prepared the ground for the criticism of the Cartesian subject. The new definition of meaning as an arbitrary relationship between sign and signified suggests that the transcendental subject cannot be defined as the origin or ultimate source of meaning.

To begin with Freud, we may say that regarding subjectivity, Freud in his famous views on psychoanalysis, postulated an interior life split between what he termed as the “conscious and the unconscious”. The term “conscious” signifies the socio-culturally integrated processes of the conscious mind, whereas the threatening or unconfessable impulses, inexpressible desires and aspirations are located in the domain of the “unconscious”, which the conscious mind tries to keep in control by a quantum of mental force called “repression”. These repressed elements often seek to express itself through dreams, neurotic symptoms, slips of the tongue and so on. According to Freud dreams usually function as a tool for what he calls “wish-fulfillment” that allows the
repressed material an adequate expression or outlet, so that it need not interrupt the functions of the conscious mind in a subject’s everyday life. In his seminal work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud says:

> The dream is not comparable to the irregular sounds of a musical instrument, which, instead of being played by the hand of a musician, is struck by some external force; the dream is not meaningless, not absurd, does not presuppose that one part of our store of ideas is dormant while another part begins to awake. It is a perfectly valid psychic phenomenon, actually a wish-fulfillment; it may be enrolled in the continuity of the intelligible psychic activities of the waking state; it is built up by a highly complicated intellectual activity (—:25).

Freud stands as a significant turning point for an intellectual domain subjected to Descartes’ identification of the self with the rational process of the conscious mind. Instead of valorizing the Cartesian ‘rational’, conscious subject, he stressed the existence of the unconscious (the irrational forces) that exercises a great influence on subjectivity. Freud seems to give an early blow to the notion of gender identity as the expression of some inner essence which the subject carries with it. According to him, one is not born with one’s subjectivity intact. It is instead, produced in us as a consequence of our interaction with the gendered bodies or subjectivities present in our immediate family environment, especially our parents. This encounter generates a crisis that awakens our interior life and makes us feel ourselves to be separate from those around us. This crucial realization gives rise to an intricate, dynamic and sometimes obscure psychological structure where the subject splits into two halves—the conscious and the unconscious. Freud does not find it comfortable to accept the notion that our
subjectivity or gender identity has come into the world along with us by birth. We are not born into an undetermined world that we later structure according to our own needs and priorities. It is instead a topsy turvy situation, where we are made to learn the ways of the world and subsequently structure our subjectivity in order to maintain a meaningful social existence. In other words the social world outside is not subordinate to us. We are rather subordinate to this mighty structure that claims everyone to exhibit only acceptable subjectivities or identities.

Freud explains his views on the construction of subjectivity, gender or sexual identity through his concept of the Oedipus complex.

The Oedipus model understands that the key contributing factors to the production of subjectivity are the gender relations and sexual identifications of the child’s environment. Subjects are not born into an undefined world that they then order according to their own priorities. The world we enter is already structured according to cultural traditions and a civil politics laden with significances and imperatives with which we must deal. For example, although the child only has its gender stabilised after the Oedipus complex, it arrives in a world where certain biological attributes are read as naturally and necessarily connected with the particular set of behaviours, feelings and appearances we call gender (Mansfield 2000:31).

Freud’s views on subjectivity critiques the Cartesian subject that was supposed to be a powerful entity that lends meaning to the external world. Thinkers like Freud, Lacan, Derrida, Foucault and others have thrown light on the power of the social structure that subjugates the “I” and allows it only to make use of the meanings that are already

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present in the social world. Derrida’s way of decentering the subject, Lacan favouring the “subject in process” instead of a fixed subject and Foucault vehemently favouring the idea that subjects are constituted by powerful social forces, tends to threaten the Cartesian subject and connotes a dichotomy between the “constituting subject” of the Cartesian fashion and the ‘constituted’ subject – a subject manufactured by social forces or factors. The constituting subject is transcendent, rational and autonomous whereas the constituted subject is determined and free – a social dupe. Lacan in “Psychoanalytic Drives” suggests that “language subordinates the subject to its own orders. Instead of asserting self-sufficiency, the “I” within language can only know itself in terms of the other that recognizes the “I” (in Bristow 1997:88).

Although it seems that the subject exists in the world and then use language as its tool for self expression and establishing communication with fellow human beings, it does not represent the complex relationship that we have with language as individual subjects. The situation is instead designed in a reversed position. Language precedes our existence and we must locate ourselves in the field of language in order to occupy a place in the human world. As the post-structuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida (b. 1930) has pointed out in his influential work Of Grammatology (1967), that it is impossible to isolate a moment that could be called the origin of language. Nevertheless we continue to think of it as a tool under our control that we use for our own purposes. Lacan also shares the view that our subjectivity has had to emerge in a world in which language is always already present.

The word ‘I’, for example, provides an image of the self, but only when that selfhood concedes its meaning and definition to the system of signification, of which the signifier
‘I’ is a part. The imaginary unity it seems to provide is sucked away by its alien nature, the fact that it is part of a system that pre-exists the subject that other subjects also use, and over which no individual subject has control. The subject’s sense of itself is lost in the very field of signs that seemed to provide it in the first place. It is this paradox that governs human subjectivity (Mansfield 2000:43-44).

Lacan (while sharing Freud’s opinion) also supports the view that subjectivity is not automatic or spontaneous. It is not as simple as saying that there is always a subject where there is the biological entity called human being. Subjectivity is attained only at the end of a process that has to undergo many complex procedures. Subjectivity is therefore highly problematic. According to Lacan, the subject is shaped by the shared, autonomous field of language.

Kristeva begins with the psychoanalytic stance of Lacan and accordingly defines the subject as a product of the play of signs within the chain of signifiers. Unlike the Cartesian subject, she supports the idea of plurality of the subjects – subjects and not the subject. She further attacks the idea of the subject as the master by putting forward an argument that the Cartesian subject itself is a product of a specific culture and language. The subjects are produced and not producers. They are products of discourse and as such do not exist in a “pre-given sense”. Nevertheless Kristeva does not regard the subject as passive. It has the potential to dethrone the subject that precedes it. Kristeva says:
The subject never is. The subject is only the signifying process and he appears only as a signifying practice, that is, only when he is absent within the position out of which social, historical and signifying activity unfolds" (Kristeva1984: ...).

In Simon de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1972), we find that the constituted subject — a subject who is determined rather than determining is gaining the upper hand. A large portion of the book provides an account of how the category called ‘woman’ is constituted by an array of social, political and economic forces. The power structure, that envelopes the social world, takes an active part in the formation of subjectivity. The act of categorizing an individual as a man or a woman is to subject it to the approved set of signifiers rigorously and arbitrarily imposed by the power structure.

Thus the ideas of all these thinkers discussed above and especially the Lacanian and Foucauldian perspectives, which I discuss in the next few pages, critique the model of the subject as a free and autonomous individual. They consider the subject to be a *construct*. According to them the subject does not come into the world equipped with all the signifiers that constitutes its subjectivity (that he has to exhibit in the social world) within itself in embryonic form. Subjectivity according to psychoanalysis is rather made by one’s interaction with the family and the social world at large. For Foucault, subjectivity is constructed by the complex relationships of power and subordination to the power structure. The primary idea of Foucault’s argument derived from Nietzsche is that ‘subjects’ only come into existence through the complex interplay between power and language. In his famous work, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Nietzsche writes:
A quantum of force is equivalent to a quantum of drive, will, effect—more, it is nothing other than precisely this very driving, willing, effecting, and only owing to the seduction of language (and of the fundamental errors of reason petrified in it) which conceives and misconceives all effects as conditioned by something that causes effects, by a ‘subject’, can it appear otherwise. For just as the popular mind separates the lightning from its flash and takes the latter for an action, for the operation of a subject called lightning, so popular morality also separates strength from expressions of strength, as if there were a neutral substratum behind the strong man, which was free to express strength or not to do so. But there is no such substratum; there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything (1989: 45).

According to Nietzsche there is no autonomous subject. It is rather the deed shaped by the social force and language which is misconceived to be the subject or the doer. This idea of the subject subordinate to the relationship that exists between power and language is discussed at an ample scale by Foucault. Foucault talks about a power that determines everything in the human society and regulates or even manipulates human life, as Mansfield Nick points out:

According to Foucault, pre-modern modes of power, which relied on a religious obedience and vicious force, by the late eighteenth century, could no longer cope with the mobile and fractured nature of the human population. A new type of power arose, one invested in systems of social administration rather than lodged in individuals and titles—in other words, a power built around institutions (prisons, workhouses, schools, factories, hospitals, barracks) rather than around kings and aristocrats. In order that
human populations could be better organised, new mechanisms of power needed to be developed” (2000:60).

In order to explain his notion of power that exercises immense control over human life, Foucault takes the help of the liberal economist and social reformer Jeremy Bentham’s (1748–1832) design of a model prison—the panopticon—as an image of how the criminal subject is managed. In Bentham’s prison design, tiers of cells where criminals are confined, are open to a central courtyard, in the middle of which is a guard tower. With the cells open at the front, a single guard placed in the tower is able to keep vigil on dozens of cells more or less simultaneously. Prisoners will never know whether they are being observed or not. Since they may be under observation all the time, the prisoner becomes responsible for appearing to behave in an acceptable manner. Thus such institutions aim at correcting or changing subjectivity in order to confer acceptable subjectivities on the social subjects. The power that Foucault talks about is an anonymous and impersonal power that tries to be in command of our personal lives, insisting that we be what we should be.

Foucault is of the opinion that where there is power, there will be resistance. But in case of subjectivity and its resistance to the societal power structure, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. One is always located ‘inside’ power and there is no escaping it. In other words there is no outside to the power structure. Foucault opposes Rousseau’s model of individuality or subjectivity. Rousseau’s model of the self posits that the self is a self contained entity which is oppressed by the societal power that stands outside of it. In other words, the subject/individual comes first and
then comes power that attempts to delimit individuality. Foucault opposes this perspective and says that there is no outside to the power structure. According to Foucault, power comes first and the individual is actually an effect of power, a medium through which power finds its expression. Foucault writes:

The individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom, a multiple and inert material on which power comes to fasten or against, which it happens to strike, and in so doing subdues or crushes individuals. In fact, it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals. The individual, that is, is not the vis-à-vis of power; it is, I believe, one of its prime effects. The individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation. The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle (1980: 98).

Being situated within this pattern of social structure, an individual seldom enjoys space to take free decisions and formulate oneself according to its own choice. Gender identity is a matter of social sanction and it is the societal norm that determines how the members of a specific gender category belonging to a specific social structure, would have to behave or represent himself/herself before the social world.

**Gender Identity**

The term “gender identity” refers to the socio-culturally approved options available to members of a society to choose from a set of social identities, and represent oneself as
an acceptable member of the social world that one inhabits, regardless of one's individual tastes, desires or aspirations. Within the four walls, people may behave or do whatever they like but their public appearance or their identity as human beings in the outside world invariably needs to adhere to the available and acceptable gender roles. The very idea of a human being is invariably followed by the two gender identities. There are two main gender roles that are socially approved—masculine (male) or feminine (female). To be a part of the human society, one needs to perform the gender roles 'properly'.

A gender role refers to the set of behavioural patterns socially expected from the members of a particular gender identity. Gender roles are culture specific and are regulated by norms that, within a specific culture, are widely considered to be socially appropriate for individuals belonging to a specific gender identity. The properties associated with the categories that confer specific gender identity on us are regarded to be extremely necessary for earning category membership.

A meaningful social existence or gender identity for a human being or in other words to qualify oneself to be a human being requires the act of representing masculine or feminine traits or signifiers that are sanctioned by the socio-cultural matrix, specifically for the two categories and thereby adhere to the heteronormative structure. The choice of sexual partner is often regarded to be the single most important index of who one is and thus sexual choice becomes the marker of one's identity.

Foucault draws our attention to an important issue that since the 1960's, people have sought the truth about themselves in their sexuality. He suggests that if one is sexually
liberated and freed from the socio-sexual norms, one will be more "truly" oneself. The "disciplinary structures" of a particular culture or society imposes rigid set of rules which are internalized to such an extent that they begin to seem part of the individual. Femininity for instance is achieved through a process of forcing the body and behavioural modes into compliance with a feminine ideal. A body has to fulfill certain criterions in order to be known to the world as a male or a female body. As such gender identity becomes something that people assemble from existing 'discursive practices', rather than something they possess.

The power structure is always at work and it prescribes and inscribes 'femininity' in a female body and 'masculinity' in a male body and it results in the stigmatization of the ambiguous body like that of a eunuch or another ambiguous body like that of the Siamese twins that tend to violate the norm of a socio-culturally or linguistically intelligible body. Such bodies are therefore taken to be a 'defective' piece of body that needs either to be corrected (through corrective surgery) or banished from the socio-cultural domain as it is different from the dominant concept of the human body. Such individuals have to pay a heavy price for confronting the essentialized binary structure as non-conformists. Living thus becomes intensely problematic for those who are anatomically unintelligible to the existing socio-cultural matrix.

Foucault applied a social constructionist paradigm to human sexuality and claimed that there is no "pre-social" sex drive, and that gender seems to be a construct formulated by interactions among people, language and discourse of a particular culture rather than by some inner essence. In *History of Sexuality*, he focuses on the views of sexuality and the consequent conceptualization of the self since the Greeks. The characteristics associated
with masculinity and femininity varies with respect to variation in time and place and it seems to strengthen the cause of the social constructionist point of view. Foucault’s investigation reveals that the concept of perversity or abnormality ascribed to the world of gender are 19th century constructs.

The act of stigmatizing those who are different from the majority is actually the significance of the terms—abnormality, perversity. ‘Normal’ behavioural patterns of gender are those that are shared by the majority and the tag of abnormality is vested upon minority practices. One who is different from the majority is regarded to be abnormal. During the 19th century, homosexuality began to be seen to constitute a particular short of individual who would engage in those acts and no other. They were regarded to be inverts or biologically perverse individual. Foucault analyses the process of confession which is a part of the religious ritual of the Christians and finds that homosexuality was seen as a sin which needs confession and redemption.

In the ancient Greek society, homosexual acts were not seen as something that defines one as a particular type of individual. For the Greeks, what differentiates a man from another is not exactly the type of sexual practice he/she prefers. It is the moderation of sexual practice and control of lust that defines a “moral self”. Until the 18th century there was a concern with the ‘control of desire’. But since the 19th century, the sexual preference or sexual behaviour (i.e. homosexuality or heterosexuality) of an individual started to determine the identity of an individual. Individuals are obliged to recognize themselves as subjects of their sexuality. Foucault analyses the stereotypical image of the homosexuals portrayed in the 19th century texts.
Although thinkers like Foucault and others have tried to expose the constructedness of gender identity and human sexuality, yet in the practical domain, the binary structure is strongly functional which is very difficult to defy within social structures. Here gender is often viewed as a matter of inborn essential identity and as such regardless of an individual’s personal tastes; it should be possible to classify everyone unambiguously as either male or female, that exhibits ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ respectively. Thus being situated within the social structure that powerfully reinforces the binary structure of gender; one needs to define oneself in terms of discrete gender categories, in order to attain the identity of a ‘human being’.

The essentialist approach to gender thus renders the “I” or the subject incapable of being what it is or what it wants to be and it results in the subsequent stigmatization of those who are different from the others or who fail to represent the socially approved signifiers of gender categories. In the essentialist system of society, the existing ideas of gender categories structure human life and as such those who ‘belong’ to the acceptable gender categories and those who do not, are equally subjected to the hegemonic structure – no one is in a ‘better’ position. Those who possess culturally unintelligible bodies like the hermaphrodites are compelled to adhere to the codes of gender structure or else they will be left ‘nowhere’ in the arena of human world.

But at the same time, the ‘norm’ (that determines what will ‘qualify’ as man or a woman or a ‘human’ being), is equally oppressive for one who possesses a sociolinguistically intelligible body, a ‘male’ for instance, who “fits” into the concept of a socially acceptable body, but may not be able to come to terms with all the signifiers that constitute masculinity. For example, masculinity often signifies ‘courageousness’;
and while in some cases it may be so, all individuals who are put under this category may not possess courage.

The fear of being denied human identity compels one to hide behind the mask of an acceptable identity. The process of putting on an acceptable identity, may lead to self alienation that perhaps create inconvenience for the self and this inconvenience has to be tolerated as a survival strategy for the sake of managing a space to live amidst the normative structure. The very survival of a social subject demands conformity to the norm.

The desire to kill someone for not conforming to the gender norms by which subjects are supposed to live means that 'life' itself requires the norm, while living outside the norm involves placing oneself at risk of death- sometimes actual death, but more frequently the social death of delegitimation and non-recognition (Butler Reader 2004:11).

Thus, it seems not to be an easy task to confront the binary. One has to 'perform' gender, keeping in view the requirements of the social structure. When individuality confronts the binary structure, its very existence is threatened and the towering binary structure wins the game. Individuality or selfhood can never dare to assert itself since a meaningful social existence rests on the act of performing gender roles sincerely or on conformity to the dominant ideology of gender. It could never be overlooked that human beings do possess a biological body, but gender identity seems to be more a matter of imbibing and representing the socio-cultural script of gender identity bestowed on him or her at the time of his/her entry into the human world. And the
socio-cultural script of gender identity is a complex power structure constituted by factors like language, law, religion, medical science etc.

Role of Factors like Language, Law, Religion, Medical Science in Constructing the “I”/ The Subject

The essentialist notion of gender demands uniformity and closes the door to difference. A social constructionist point of view seems to allow some space to those born with a difference. The social constructionist perspective, in contrast to essentialism, believes that reality is socially constructed. It is used more appropriately to refer to a specific theoretical paradigm, which has its roots in the philosophy of human experience, in the writings of Alfred Schutz. When applied to the world of gender, social constructionism visualizes gender not as a trait of the individual (as essentialism do) but rather as a process external to the individual. Gender is constructed by interaction among people, by language and by the discourse of a particular culture. Social constructionists endeavour to analyze how language and culture in which an individual is entrenched determines the appropriate behavioural patterns for discrete gender roles/identities.

In the construction of gender, language plays a significant role because both the social structure and the individuals inhabiting it are entrenched in language. The subject is entrenched in language and the very consciousness of the subject or its existence itself is constituted by language. The identity of a human being rests on an individual’s ability to perform oneself sincerely in terms of discrete gender categories and should be able to perform oneself according to the definitions available in the given language into which
one is born. To be human thus essentially means to be able to represent oneself as one of the two linguistic categories ‘he’ or ‘she’. Consequently, the identity of a hermaphrodite becomes problematic since it cannot be defined by the nouns of man or woman. Language delimits the definition or description of a ‘human being’ and identity, subjectivity, or sexuality seldom seems to have any existence prior to or outside of language and representation.

For instance, in the existing social system, language provides set fixed definition of human beings as ‘male’ and ‘female’ having certain attributes and exhibiting certain behavioural patterns specific to the two discrete gender categories. Accordingly, amidst such a situation, there seems to be seldom any space for the hermaphroditical identity since it does not have a place in language.

Since identity of a ‘human’ being, within the socio-linguistic domain, rests solely on the act of being able to identify oneself with either of the two gender categories, does one cease to be a human being if one fails to acquire and represent the signifiers that constitute masculinity and femininity? Gender is often thought to be the expression of some inner essence but as I have mentioned earlier, this notion is compelled to face various challenges since the external factors or the social determinants like language, societal norm, religious, legal and medical codes are seen to take active participation in constructing the infrastructure of the socio-culturally intelligible gender categories on which stands the grand structure of the gender binary that confers ‘human’ identity on ‘acculturated’ bodies.
A human being is solely referred by either of the two pronouns 'he' or 'she'. A hermaphrodite is deprived of the identity of a human being since it fails to adhere to the gender norm prevalent in the society. In the existing system, individual difference is often stigmatized and this kind of stigmatization sometimes bring in severe consequences for those who are different from stereotypical notions of 'man' and 'woman'. For instance, a hermaphrodite who possesses a socially unintelligible body, and therefore cannot be placed in the acceptable gender categories, is denied legitimacy within the 'human' world. The identity of a hermaphrodite becomes highly problematic since it cannot be defined by the nouns of 'man' or 'woman'.

The 'norm' (that determines what will 'qualify' as man or a woman or a 'human' being), is equally oppressive for one who possesses a socio-linguistically unintelligible body, and one who is a 'male' and fits into the concept of a socially acceptable body, but may not be able to come to terms with all the signifiers that are socially sanctioned to constitute masculinity. For example, masculinity often signifies 'emotional strength'; and while in some cases it may be so, all individuals who are put under this category may not possess courage. 'Human' society which is almost invariably essentialist, believes that there exist unambiguously male and female human beings who behave as 'man' and 'woman' 'naturally' do. As such those who are different from the socially intelligible format of a human being is often regarded to be a 'misfit' and pushed towards the fringes.

A set-fixed definition of human anatomy and appropriate behavioural patterns for discrete gender categories are found to predominate the socio-cultural milieu, in which all human beings are expected to have an obliged existence. In The Phenomenology of
Perception, Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests that the body is a historical idea—"man is a historical idea and not a natural species" (1962:198). A set fixed definition of the body has been handed down to us and medical science too attempts to 'correct' a body in order to satisfy this "historical idea" of the human body.

The culturally unintelligible bodies are either forced to acquire desired shape and perform gender in a 'correct' way or pushed out of the 'human' world. Corrective surgery is imposed upon individuals in order to restore anatomical 'normalcy'. Thus 'medicalization' becomes an extension of the socio-cultural normative system. Foucault's memoirs of the 19th century French hermaphrodite, Herculine Barbin demonstrates how Barbin was raised as a woman but later on medical experts recognized him as "really" a man. Unable to adapt to this new identity, Barbin committed suicide.

While penetrating into the world of gender, the role of external factors like language, religion, law, medicine have to be taken into account because gender identity does not limit itself to the anatomical level. It instead seems to be constructed largely by such socio-cultural elements. The essentialist notion of gender as the expression of an essence present in individuals in the form of hormones and character traits is challenged by the influential roles played by some external factors like 'language', medical science, legal system, and religion. The identity of a subject is censored by these institutions immersed in the power structure and ultimately the "I" has to be what it is allowed/taught to be. An essential notion of the human anatomy holds good in the world of medical science and it acts as an extension of the socio-cultural structure by carrying out the sex re-affirmation or corrective surgery.
As I have mentioned earlier, language is perhaps the most important factor in constructing the gendered self. The act of defining oneself needs the aid of language and language offers set fixed accurate definitions of gender categories. Consequently there arises the difficulty of locating the selves with difference, since, due to lack of option; language pushes deviants into the category of “abnormality”. Language preceeds the subject or “I” and so the “I” has to operate within the boundaries of language if it wants to acquire a meaningful social existence. The “I” that makes itself known to the world as a male or a female is subject to language and representation.

Many languages have a system of grammatical gender, a type of noun class system—nouns may be classified as masculine or feminine (for example Spanish, Hebrew, Arabic and French) and may also have a neuter grammatical gender (for example Sanskrit, German, Polish, and the Scandinavian languages). In such languages, this is essentially a convention, which may have little or no connection to the meaning of the words

Monique Wittig⁷ tries to look at the place in language where gender begins: the personal pronouns like ‘he’, ‘she’ put us within ‘discourse’ as male or female and impose specific gender identities on us. In other words language prescribes the acceptable boundaries of gender identity. One who differs from the accepted norm enjoys no place in language and falls into the category of a non-human linguistic category – ‘it’, not he or she. Similarly, Lacan in “Psychoanalytic Drives” suggests that:

Language subordinates the subject to its own orders. Instead of asserting self-sufficiency, the “I” within language can only know itself in terms of the other that recognizes the “I” (in Bristow 1997:88).
Moreover religious and legal codes also take active part in constructing the gendered self. Religion prescribes behavioural patterns for gender roles. In Hinduism for instance, there are certain norms for the category of woman. To attain the identity of a woman, one will have to represent the idea of woman prescribed by the religion to which she belongs. Dress codes, modes of behaviour, duties towards family and so on are prescribed by religion.

Legal codes too regulate human life. A person's gender identity (or ‘sex’ as is mostly written on official forms), as male or female, has legal significance. While issuing the birth certificate, it has to be stated clearly whether the new born is a male or a female. Sex is indicated on government documents, and laws provide differently for men and women. Many pension systems have different retirement ages for men or women. Marriage is usually only available to opposite-sex couples. Moreover in India, there is a law specific to the third gender or hijras (eunuchs as they are called in India) and homosexual communities—section 337 of the IPC which criminalizes ‘carnal intercourse against the order of nature’. This law also renders the eunuchs incapable of acting as a guardian or adopting a child. Such kinds of laws are there to take forward the system of stigmatizing difference and claiming uniformity of gender roles. The hijra community is deprived of several rights since Indian law recognizes only two genders. They do not have the right to vote, marry or claim employment and health benefits as a specific community, without submitting to being categorized within the male/female genders. Religion and legal system are two indispensable organs of the operating system of the society.
More than being what it is or expressing its inner essence, the “I” has to be what others permit it to be. Most importantly the “I” has to be what language defines it to be and not what “inner essence” would like it to be (if there is anything like inner essence). Everyone is caught up in the web of language and one who slips out of it will have to face social exclusion. The hermaphrodite for instance cannot be defined by the language provided pronouns ‘he’ or ‘she’ and therefore will be referred to as ‘it’—‘it’ which linguistically does not refer to a human being. The term ‘it’, is often used to denote inanimate objects or entities other than human. Since gender is often thought to be a linguistic or cultural given, those gender performances that follow the given pattern are often marginalized and stigmatized. Butler is of the opinion that gender should not be taken to be a linguistic or cultural given. It should rather be seen as an act of daily performance.

Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds (Butler 1988:531).

**Performing the Societal Script of Identity**

Thus from the above discussion, it could be said that the “I” or the gendered subject would have to be what it should be according to the instructions of the societal norm that comprises of elements like society, culture, language, religion etc. Since the
societal script of gender precedes the “I”, it has to re-enact the existing script of gender. In other words, the “I” has to perform its gender identity according to the available format of gender.

The fact that one is born into a world of gender which is already structured and that one has to fit into the pre-existing format of that particular socio-cultural matrix and articulate oneself (or should be able to define oneself) through the language available, tends to problematize the concept of gender as the expression of some inner essence, and brings in the notion of a body immersed in the hegemonic gender structures that arbitrarily puts a series of signifiers that go to formulate the gender categories. If we take these points into account, gender does not seem to be simply a matter of expressing some biological essence. The association of fixity with gender closes the possibility of difference and every individual is expected to perform their gender identity in a ‘socially’ desirable way.

But it is perhaps the most difficult task to reject ‘difference’ because individual difference may often make its appearance as an obstacle in the way of categorizing all individuals as the possessors of the behavioural patterns sanctioned for the discrete gender categories. Individual differences relating to issues like how one thinks, what one desires and how one’s body is, tends to challenge the idea of gender as something fixed and uniformly applicable to all. Human beings are subject to the dominant ideology of the gendered world and as such the human subject or self seems to be more a product of the social determinants or external factors like language, religion, and legal system than the expression of some inner essence. Therefore the notion of gender identity as a construct and individuals as performers engaged in performing the socially
sanctioned roles carries more weight than the idea of gender as solely the expression of some inner essence.

With this, I would bring in Judith Butler's notion of gender as a performance of the social script. Butler, who, following the path of Foucault has suggested that gender identity is subject to the power structure of the society, and so instead of considering it to be the expression of some inner essence, gender could more conveniently be considered to be a contemporary way of organizing past and future cultural norms, a way of locating or performing oneself within aid through the existing norms. It is the performance that constitutes our gender more than some essence. If a 'boy' for instance dresses or disguises himself as a 'girl' by imitating the appropriate behavioural patterns sanctioned for a girl in that specific cultural context, as is the case in drag performances, then the 'boy' could perform the role of a girl in front of others and can easily switch to a gender performance other than his usual performance. So it is the imitation of the behavioural patterns, or the performance that is important for one to exhibit before others who one is. Here the idea of gender as the expression of some fixed essence gets deconstructed.

There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results (Butler 1990:31).

The Butlerian perspective offers a different way of visualizing the operational mode of gender. As I have mentioned earlier in the introductory chapter, Butler finds it somewhat uncomfortable to reconcile with the idea of the fixity of the gender structure that categorizes all under two discrete categories without paying heed to individual
differences. Butler reads gender in terms of performance and, the very idea of performance itself rules out the possibility of any kind of fixity. Performance suggests the idea of representing and when applied to the world of gender, it tends to reshape gender by suggesting the very idea of gender to be the re-presentation of the existing idea of gender categories that confers ‘human’ identity on us. Butler uses the concept of “drag” that suggests the idea of dressing up as a member of the opposite sex and performing a given role by which drag artists are subverting the ideas of gender fixity and challenges the “constitutive categories”. The idea of ‘putting on’ gender or wearing an acceptable gendered identity relates to everyday life because we dress up or behave in a way that will be able to cater to the expectations of the existing idea of either of the two discrete gender categories and thereby try to be a part of the existing structure. We are always in a performance or “drag” while engaging our self in walking, talking, dressing and such other activities of day to day life. It is the representation of certain “acts and gestures” (which are regarded to be the signifiers of specific gender categories), that locates us in the world of gender and enable others to identify us through the idioms of gender.

‘Human’ beings or human bodies are expected to exhibit the signifiers allotted to masculinity and femininity respectively. One is expected to behave in a way that adheres to the given/historical idea of either of the two gender categories. The acts that a body performs to attain a specific gender identity is an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene much like an actor performing a pre-existing role.
Gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors, who make use of it, but which requires individual actors, in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again (Butler 1988: 528).

The pressure of expectations, from a culture or society where one grows, makes one perform the idea of a stereotyped 'man' ('masculine' in nature) or a 'woman' ('feminine' in nature), since a contrasting way of performing oneself may bring in unpleasant consequences. In this context, I have used the term 'stereotype' to signify an image or idea of a particular type of person or thing that has become fixed and even legitimate through being widely held. It is often found that ambiguous bodies or beings are seldom given a place in the society. A meaningful social existence demands one to perform one's life or body in a socially approved way. Bodies are made to acquire desired shape and function in a desired way. Since difference is often labelled as 'abnormality', surgery is often imposed on bodies in order to 'restore' 'normalcy'.

If we think from a logical point of view, Butler's argument that supports gender as a construct rather than the expression of some inner reality carries weight. The compulsory binary structure that rules the world of gender, is constructed around the belief that gender is the expression of some inner essence and as such 'male' and 'female' must exhibit 'masculinity' and 'femininity.' Masculine and feminine behavioural traits are the only two 'natural' / 'normal' options of gender and as such, it could be envisaged how difficult life will be for deviants situated within this 'essentialist' socio-cultural matrix. At this point certain questions arise: if gender identity is a matter of some 'essential' then where would we place those who differ from...
the socially approved ‘essential’ subject? Does the very existence of difference is not enough to question the very concept of ‘natural’ or ‘normal’.

The gender identity (or the expression of essence) of a hermaphrodite for instance, can also be considered to be equally “real”. And the undeniable existence of variations within the socially approved pattern tends to question the concepts of ‘normality’ or ‘naturalness’ associated with gender. Moreover the appropriate behavioural patterns determined for a male or a female may not be the same across cultures and also gendered description of a man for instance may not fit all individuals placed in this category. Personality traits, tastes or desires may vary from person to person. So the important question is what constitutes “maleness” and “femaleness”? As an answer to this question we may say that these categories seem to signify certain acts or traits that are arbitrarily placed under each head—masculine, feminine. For instance, men are supposed to be mentally very strong and they are not supposed to cry. But these are stereotypes; can this reduction be applicable to all men living in all time and different places?

A Butlerian perspective of gender enables us to deconstruct gender as an essentialized category. Thinkers like Foucault, Butler, and others have paid close attention to the troublesome ways in which modern society tends to accept essentialist definitions of what it means to be a male or a female, masculine or feminine, heterosexual or homosexual. Butler is of the opinion that there is no such thing as some ‘inner essence’ and gender is only a construct. The gender acts that are performed are often regarded to be the essence of gender.
Because there is neither an “essence” that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis (Butler 1988:522).

The socio-cultural matrix provides the acts and gestures that go to qualify as the identity markers of gender categories and the selection of signifiers that constitute gender seems to be arbitrary. Nevertheless a human body is expected to exhibit these signifiers under the garb of ‘innate’ qualities. The process of ‘humanizing’ a body rests on the act of placing a body in the existing idea of the two gender categories, a girl or a boy which are socio-culturally intelligible as ‘human’. In the words of Judith Butler:

The mark of gender appears to “qualify” bodies as human bodies; the moment in which an infant becomes humanized is when the question, “is it a boy or girl?” is answered. Those bodily figures that do not fit into either gender fall outside the human... (1990:151).

Here seems to exist an interesting parallel between performing on stage and performing oneself in life. The performative acts that are there and are performed by individuals to attain gender identity, constitutes or makes these gender categories. Thus, in order to be a ‘man’ or a ‘woman’, one will have to perform those acts that are regarded to be masculine or feminine respectively. Butler is of the opinion that gender is something that people “do” rather than a quality they possess; as constituted by performative acts rather than by some inner essence.
The "I" will have to represent itself keeping in view the prevalent norm and how others will visualize the "I". So here comes the question of performing or representing one's gender on the stage of society. It does not matter what the "I" is but what matters is how the "I" perform its gender before the world. One must perform gender roles 'correctly', since 'wrong' performances lead to punitive consequences. The "I" that appears before the public may contrast with the "I" in private. If we take the "I" to be an actor playing the role of a villain, it is not necessarily true that the personal traits of the actor suit the 'role'. What is of prime importance is how successfully or appropriately the actor performs the acts that constitute his 'role' before the audience. Such issues related to performing oneself before the societal stage would be discussed at length in the next chapter.

A move towards Textual Representation

To sum up the theoretical discussion and move towards the literary illustration, I would like to say that this chapter attempts to highlight the issue of deconstructing gender essentialism which is often oppressive towards individuality. The perspective that considers gender as a matter of performing or representing oneself rather than being the expression of some inner essence may perhaps be successful in lessening the problems confronted by those that are born with a difference and thereby fails to cater to the existing model of gender. Merleau-Ponty is of the opinion that the body is not only a historical idea, but also a set of possibilities to be continually realized. In claiming that the body is a historical idea, Merleau-Ponty posits that the body gains its meaning through a concrete and historically mediated expression in the world. His idea that the body is a set of possibilities, signify that its appearance in the world, for perception, is
not predetermined by inner essence, and that its concrete expression in the world must be understood as the specific selection of a set of historical possibilities. Hence, there is an agency which is understood as the process of rendering such possibilities determinate. These possibilities are necessarily constrained by available historical conventions.

Regarding the body, Butler is of the opinion that, the body is not a self-identical or merely a “factic materiality”\(^\text{10}\); it is a materiality that bears meaning, and the manner of bearing meaning is fundamentally “dramatic”. By using the term ‘dramatic’, Butler suggests that the body is not merely a matter but a continual and incessant “materializing” of possibilities.

One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one’s body and, indeed, one does one’s body differently from one’s contemporaries and from one’s embodied predecessors and successors as well (Butler 1988: 521).

In her attempt to challenge the essentialist structure of gender, Butler formulates her theoretical postulations that take the shape of what she calls the theory of gender performativity. Butler posits that gender identity is more a matter of performing oneself or doing one’s body, adhering to the prescriptions provided by the socio-cultural matrix.

From the above theoretical discussion, it could be said that gender as a concept has confronted immense challenge in the contemporary theoretical domain. Gender Essentialism has very often encountered counter arguments regarding its tendency to generalize or to measure everyone by the same yardstick, irrespective of individual tastes and temperaments. But in the practical domain it could often be seen that it is
very difficult to transgress the binary or to act against the prevalent gender norm. The denizens of a particular society internalize the norm to such an extent that it is often desired that the norm should be maintained even at the cost of causing harm to the life of an individual or their near and dear ones.

Anatomical Dissection of Gender in Tara: Reconstructing the ‘Natural’

The play Tara shows how a mother, in her attempt to maintain the standard of normal human anatomy, even does not hesitate to cause harm to her own children. Mahesh Dattani could be credited for giving a new dimension to Indian English Drama. He does not confine himself to any dramatic convention and instead has created a new theatre that represents the hidden issues embedded in Indian life, bringing fringe issues and marginalized beings to the centre stage. In his plays those ‘facts’ that are often swept under the carpet are brought out to the limelight. While penetrating into various types of social abuse, Dattani also probes into the psychic life of the characters that are often found to be caught up in the tussle between individual emotions, desires and the societal norm that suppresses individuality.

In the play Tara, Dattani highlights gender discrimination and the influence of the gender norm that strictly imposes the binary and compels a ‘unified’ body to be dissected so as to attain discrete gender forms. This anatomical dissection demonstrated in the play Tara not only shows the powerful operating system of the social structure, but also gradually unfolds a gamut of psychological aftermaths of this dissection. In the process the psychic worlds of the characters get unraveled. The play shows the
reconstruction of a 'natural' body (created by nature), to fulfill the requirements of what 
will qualify as a 'natural' body according to the standards provided by the binary 
structure of gender. The anatomy of the conjoined twins is dissected in order to conform 
to the dominant idea of 'normal' body and gender. But if we take into account the term 
'natural' as a signifier of that which is a product of nature or something created by 
nature, than it seems quite paradoxical to normalize or naturalize a body that has been 
created by nature. The dissection of Tara and Chandan's body indicates that the term 
'normal' or 'natural' is dissected from its immediate connotation. Therefore the concept 
of 'normal' or 'natural' does not seem to signify something created by nature; it rather 
refers to or signifies the dominant idea of normal or natural that holds good in a 
particular social context.

The 'Self' and the 'Society' are two distinctive entities and hence there often exists a 
tussle between the two. But at the same time both 'Self' and the 'Society' is interrelated 
and inseparable. Together they constitute the crux of human life. Human life itself is a 
combination of selfhood and the social structure in which it is situated. Whether one 
likes it or not, no one can survive in isolation or outside society. Since one's very 
existence is entrenched in society, one has to internalize and adhere to the normative 
schemes provided by society for maintaining a meaningful social existence. In the play 
Tara, the playwright shows that pristine human relationships like that of a mother and 
daughter is undermined by the normative schemes of society designed for the human 
anatomy as well as patriarchy. Due to the pressure of societal norm this relationship 
ultimately takes the shape of a distorted image reflected by a freak mirror.
The ‘Indian’ society mostly adheres to the patriarchal set up where a prioritization of the male child is often visible. But another interesting point to note here is that within this system it can also be seen in some cases that instead of a male, one woman is seen to be dominating another woman. Women are found to be acting as surrogate patriarchs and exercising power over other women. In some family units, sometimes women are found to occupy the supreme position of power and acts as the decision maker of that family. Thus it tends to destabilize the idea that ‘patriarchy’ allows only men to occupy powerful positions in a family where women are subordinate to him. In the play Tara, Bharti, the mother of the conjoined twins Tara-Chandan acts as a surrogate patriarch who causes injustice to her daughter—a female oppressing a female.

The play Tara is the pathetic tale of Siamese twins whose unified body is dissected and given to separate identity of male and female in order to fulfill the norm of human anatomy that approves discrete gender bodies. The unified body or the androgynous body of Tara and Chandan is dissected even at the cost of causing fatal injury to the female child. Bharti the mother of the Siamese twins take the initiative in giving Dan the leg that biologically belongs to Tara, thereby compelling her daughter to lead a handicapped life.

The Siamese twins had three healthy legs. One of the healthy legs had a greater chance of survival on the girl child’s body. But Tara, being a girl was not given her due. When Doctor Thakkar asked the parents to which child two legs should be given, the mother prefers the male child Dan, and deprives Tara. The mother acts as surrogate patriarch. The injustice meted out to Tara by her mother can be considered to be an assertion of the societal norm of gender that has captivated the psychological domain of people and
can instigate the individual to embark upon such criminal injustice – a mother sacrificing her daughter’s life in order to stay in tune with society and patriarchy.

The urge to fulfill the requirements of a socially acceptable anatomy and gender bias undoubtedly invited misfortune to the life of Tara, but at the same time, this attempt made by Bharti, the mother to normalize the anatomy of her children had resulted in psychological disturbances on her own self and the other characters like her son Chandan and her husband. Like Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*, all of them carry the burden of guilt that often stings their conscience. Thus the external action of dissecting a unified body to meet the demand of society transcends externality and intrudes into the inner psychic domain of the characters. This inner conflict is perhaps the outcome of the tussle between the social self and the psychological self. Dan carries the guilt of being the privileged child and all throughout his life Dan lives with a sense of incompleteness—both physical and psychological.

Thus, in the play *Tara* Mahesh Dattani tries to highlight the influence of gender essentialism on a human anatomy. A ‘unified’ body of conjoined twins is dissected to fit into the norm of human anatomy even at the cost of causing fatal damage to one of the child – the girl Tara. The play *Tara* has been read in this context as an example of the hegemonic structure of gender that exercises ultimate power over human life. Conformity to the norm goes to the height of manifesting itself in the literal dissection of an anatomy – surgical separation of Chandan and Tara to attain ‘human’ identity that rests solely on being either a man or a woman.
As I have mentioned earlier, in his book *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the body is a historical idea—"man is a historical idea and not a natural species" (1962:198). A fixed definition of the idea of human being or human anatomy has been handed down to us and the idea of the 'correct' body and 'correct' performance of gender identity is predominating the world of gender. The socio-cultural domain that consists of elements like language, religion, medical science contributes a lot in determining what will qualify as 'human' and what will not.

Tara and Chandan (an androgynous figure) shares the same womb, but as soon as they enter the socio-cultural domain this unified self is forced to acquire the identities of discrete genders. In the body of the play we can see that the anatomy of the conjoined twins is literally dissected to meet the demands of the binary structure of gender. Medical science is seen here to make an attempt to 'correct' a body in order to satisfy the "historical idea" of human body. Thus medical science acts as an agency that reinforces the binary structure of gender by 'correcting' bodies to become unambiguously 'man' and 'woman'.

The play *Tara* shows the 'reshaping' of a body. Here a human body is pitted against the existing idea of 'normal', socially acceptable human anatomy. Nature has created Chandan and Tara in a certain way but it is the medical expert who attempts to correct this natural body in order to make it fit for the prevalent concept of 'normal' human anatomy. The conjoined twins Tara and Chandan are separated and pushed into the stereotyped gender roles that would help them fit into society. The 'male self and the 'female' self must be separated even if it is not wanted by nature, as Chandan puts it:
"May be God never wanted us separated. Destiny desires strange things...But even God does not always get what he wants. Conflict is the crux of life" (Dattani 2000:330).

An interesting paradox can be seen in this context. Nature has constructed the anatomy of Tara and Chandan in that fashion but that ‘natural’ body is not regarded to be a ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ human anatomy because it defies the dominant idea of ‘natural’/’normal’ body that holds good in the socio-cultural domain. Thus the ‘natural’ body of the conjoined twins Tara and Chandan is pitted against the socially approved ‘natural’ body and then the ‘nature’ made body is rejected in favour of a socially constructed ‘natural’ body which results in the ‘corrective’ surgery undertaken to dissect the body of conjoined twins.

At this point we may refer to what Foucault terms as the “medical gaze”. It works as an extension of the “panoptic” power structure. It brings the body under the jurisdiction of power generated by the norm and medical experts are there to perform correction and thereby manipulate the body. In the text Herculine Barbin: The Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite, Foucault highlights the plight of a hermaphrodite, who was designated as female at the time of birth, brought up as a girl but later on the medical experts reclassified her as a man. Being unable to cope with her newly conferred identity, she committed suicide at the age of thirty, being tortured by loneliness.

From the medical point of view, this meant that when confronted with a hermaphrodite, the doctor was no longer concerned with recognizing the presence of two sexes, juxtaposed or intermingled or with knowing which of the two prevailed over the other, but rather with deciphering the true sex that was hidden beneath ambiguous
appearances. He had as it were, to strip the body of its anatomical deceptions and discover the one true sex behind organs that might have put on the forms of opposite sex. For someone who knew how to observe and to conduct as examination, these mixtures of sex were no more than disguise of nature: hermaphrodites were always “pseudo-hermaphrodites” (Foucault 1978: viii-ix).

Like the case of Herculine Barbin, Tara-Chandan’s ‘nature’ made anatomy or unified self is placed in the list of ‘unnatural’ or ‘abnormal’ and therefore it is placed under the jurisdiction of medical science that attempts to confer ‘naturalness’ or ‘normality’ on them. The surgeon who dissects the body of Tara and Chandan subverts the subversive. In one sense, the doctor is trying to ‘naturalize’ or ‘normalize’ what is already a product of nature itself. Nature’s performance is here disrupted by that of the doctor. So ultimately in the hands of the surgeon Dr. Thakkar, the ‘natural’ body gets reconstructed – does Dr. Thakkar makes the body natural or he ends up in constructing something out of the existing ‘nature’- made body. Therefore, we may well ask the question: do the separated bodies of Chandan and Tara becomes natural or are they artificial constructs designed by Dr.Thakkar.

The parents of Tara and Chandan are a part and parcel of the society’s craze for ‘normalcy’. This idea of ‘normalcy’ or ‘naturalness’, rests on being what others around us want us to be. The concept of ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ is derived from the codes of conduct of the ‘majority’. What is exhibited by the majority of people becomes the norm of ‘naturalness’. People scarcely want to transcend this norm as is exhibited by Mr. and Mrs. Patel, the parents of the Siamese twins.
The family here seems to be a representation of a miniature form of the society at large. "Dattani’s focus on the family as a microcosm of society in order to dramatize the ways we are socialized to accept certain gendered roles..."(2005:320). The playwright makes use of the family as a smaller unit that represents the norms, codes of conduct, attitudes and expectations of the society in which it is situated.

Mr. and Mrs. Patel’s unwillingness to violate the societal norm results in subjecting their children to numerous surgeries that ultimately turns out to be a futile endeavour, because their children do not gain anything except pain and loss. Tara dies and Chandan had to spend an incomplete life which he finally declares to be a tragic tale of unified selfhood separated by the societal norm. The norm of a society operates at a hegemonic level that seldom gives any space to individual desires or wishes. An individual has to be what the socio-cultural matrix in which it is situated, permits it to be. The essentialized order of gender reigns supreme and the individuals are like small particles, almost powerless before this grand structure. This perspective has precisely been articulated in the speech of Chandan towards the concluding part of the play.

Someday, after I die, a stranger will find this recording and play it. The voice is all that will remain. No masterpiece. Only a voice—that once belonged to an object. An object like other objects in the cosmos, whose orbits are determined by those around. Moving in a forced harmony. Those who survive are those who do not defy the gravity of others. And those who desire even a moment of freedom find themselves hurled into space, doomed to crash with some unknown force. I no longer desire that freedom. I move, just move (Dattani 2000:379).
Thus, one has to represent or perform oneself according to the directives of the compulsory binary structure. When individuality confronts the binary, it is perhaps individuality that will have to bow its head because a defying act may lead an individual to the recesses of a dark world of 'non-recognition' and 'non-legitimation'. The socioculturally unintelligible or unacceptable body of the Siamese twins is made to bear pain simply because it defies the norm. Thus the play Tara shows the supremacy of the binary structure that centers around the attitude that to be human one needs to follow the existing pattern of discrete gender categories. This essential structure of gender may bring in harmful consequences for those that are born with a difference. The body of Tara and Chandan is also 'natural' but it is does not fulfill the socially approved idea of 'natural' human anatomy.

The situation is not less problematic for one who is placed in the 'acceptable' categories. The existing ideas of gender categories structure 'human' life and those who 'belong' to the acceptable gender categories and those who do not, are equally subjected to the hegemonic structure - no one is in a 'better' position, since everyone will have to adhere to the existing gender norm. In the play Tara, for instance, the girl child Tara is oppressed to a great extent. She is made to sacrifice a leg that 'naturally' belongs to her. Her leg was given to her brother and ultimately she loses her life. But the male child Chandan does not seem to be in an advantageous position. Having led a pathetic life of incompleteness, he surrenders in a moment of despair and declares his life and existence to be a tale of tragedy. He realizes that the attainment of individual freedom is impossible and so perhaps in a tone of submission and utter hopelessness, he says that he no longer desires freedom.
Conclude and Link with the Next Chapter

In the existing social system difference is seldom entertained and it is often labeled as abnormality. Every individual inhabiting a particular socio-cultural milieu is therefore expected to perform their gender identity in a 'socially' desirable way. The gender structure of the 'Indian' society recognizes only two gender categories that possess specific behavioural patterns and everyone is assumed to adhere to the norm. Being part of it one has to act or behave according to the prescriptions offered by the socio-cultural norm. The term 'norm' has been used here to signify the socio-culturally acclaimed way of behaving or exhibiting one's gender identity. The theoretical discussions in this chapter has also taken into account the Essentialist and the Social Constructionist approaches to gender that gives rise to a debate whether gender is the expression of some inner essence or a matter of imitating the pre-existing dimorphic pattern of gender. In other words it is a matter of performing oneself on the stage of the social world. The social constructionist point of view of gender also takes into account the role of factors like language, society, religious, legal and medical codes in the fabrication of the gendered self or human identity.

The social constructionist approach to gender, that has been widely accepted by thinkers like Foucault and Butler has compelled us to think about the significance of performance in the construction of our gender identity. From the above theoretical discussion, it has been noticed that almost every individual is caught up in the web of social norm, and as such gender identity is more a matter of performing oneself on the social platform and for the purpose of being successful performers, one has to perform the existing socially approved script of gender identity in a 'correct' way. The
significance of performance in attaining a gender identity and the issue of gender as more a matter of performing oneself rather than expressing some inner essence would be more elaborately discussed in the next chapter.

End Note

1. In the context of the play *Tara*, I have used the term renaturalization in order to refer to the act of imposing corrective surgery on the body of the conjoined twins for the sake of giving it a natural shape – that of a male and a female. The body of the conjoined twins is created by nature in that manner and therefore the attempt of the parents and the surgeon to separate them could be taken to be an act of renaturalizing an already natural body.

2. Regarding gender identity, the 'human' world is very different from that of the non-human entities. A human being's gender identity is greatly determined by the socio-cultural codes pertaining to modes of dressing, talking, behaving and so on. With the aid of make-up and dress code for instance, as Butler has pointed out, a human being can switch from one gender role to the other. Such kinds of codes are not available in the world of the non-human living entities.

3. Kant and Locke also talked about the existence of essence that determines our existence and it rules out the possibility of difference. Kant's scientific
rationalism and Locke's idea of 'real' essence are used to boost essentialist perspectives.

4. In the context of this chapter, I have used Freud's notion of dream as wish-fulfilment in order to analyze the idea of Dolly engaging in a dream like fantasy about Kanhaiya a dream lover. Dolly, in the domain of her private world, perhaps longs for an ideal lover who is symbolized by Kanhaiya, Lord Krishna, the perfect lover. But in her conscious state or in her social life it is an impossible wish. Her social reality is her dominating husband Jiten who abuses her. So wish-fulfilment is possible perhaps in one's fantasy or dream like state.

5. Lacan was greatly influenced by Freudian ideas of subjectivity. In his work Ecrits: A Selection (1977), Lacan offers his notions on subjectivity. Regarding the relationship of language and subjectivity, Lacan says that language is a pre-existing element and the subject must locate itself in the field of language in order to earn a place in the human society. The subject does not define itself. Instead it is defined by something other than itself.

6. Alfred Schutz (1899-1959) was the pioneer of the development of the social constructionism. He was an Austrian social scientist whose work produced social phenomenology by connecting sociology and phenomenology. The introduction of the term 'social construction' into the social sciences was greatly influenced by the ideas of Alfred Schutz.

7. Monique Wittig, in her work The Straight Mind and Other Essays (1992), discusses the idea of 'human' subjects being constituted by language. She talks
about the intricate relationship that exists between language and gender identity.

In order to be called a human being, one needs to be defined by the pronouns – 'he' or 'she'. If one does not have a place in language, one cannot have a place in the human world also.

Work Cited


