UNIT 2  GENDER AND PERFORMATIVITY

Structure

2.1  Introduction
2.2  Objectives
2.3  Defining Sex and Gender
2.4  Theoretical Background
   2.4.1  The Doing of Gender
2.5  Marking and Diluting Gender Through Performance
   2.5.1  Rituals and Sex Role Display
   2.5.2  Ambiguity in Gender and Performance
2.6  Let Us Sum Up
2.7  Unit End Questions
2.8  References
2.9  Suggested Readings

2.1  INTRODUCTION

The idea of gender and performativity emerges from an analysis of how cultures construct ideas around the idea of what is male and what is female. More often than not our understanding of men and women is completely different from the general idea of biological differences. Gender identity is created and sustained through multiple ways of being and doing. The two main strands of analysis in the anthropology of sex and gender look at ideas and practices that create differences, on the one hand—and remove or confuse those differences, on the other. This unit will try to unfold these differences. Later the discussion will move the way gender and performance are connected to each other in an extensive manner. The theorists who have influenced the analysis of gender from the perspective of performance will be discussed. We will look at examples and instances from India, in order to understand the subject matter better.

2.2  OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Define and explain the connections between gender and performance;
- Critically analyse gender from the perspective of performance;
- Discuss the ambiguity of gender roles in rituals; and
- Distinguish the differences and discrepancies in the gender and performance.
2.3 DEFINING SEX AND GENDER

You have already read in detail about the sex and gender dichotomy in unit 2 Block 1 of MWG 002. Let us briefly look at these terms again in the context of performativity. The terms sex and gender pertain to the spheres of biology and society, respectively. Sex lies in the domain of biological and anatomical differences, and gender is a socially constructed identity, that is to a large extent influenced by sex. The biological uncertainty created by the existence of hermaphrodites, posed newer questions regarding the identification of sex as binary or divided into two. Hermaphrodites are born with both the male and female sexual organs. The gender they belong to becomes an issue.

The fact that sex and by extension gender is seen in terms of a binary division is based on the difference in sexual organs, orientation, socialization and also differences in division of labour. Yet, a lot of people do not fall into either the male or female category, on the basis of various social markers, such as clothing and mannerisms. This presupposes that most individuals are therefore seen not only as male and female, but that to be recognized as male and female an individual has to exhibit certain characteristics. These characteristics, particular the kind of walk, dressing, talking are socially endowed or recognised as masculine or feminine.

From the World Health Organization website, ‘“Sex” refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women…. “Gender” refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women.’ The website of the organisation goes on to list the sex and gender characteristics that distinguishes male and female as sex categories; and masculine and feminine as gender categories. In terms of sex characteristics, males have testicles that females do not have; females have developed breasts that are capable of lactating—that males do not possess. Gender characteristics however are listed in terms of cultural differences. So, ‘In the US (and most other countries) women earn significantly less than men for the same work; in Viet Nam, many more men than women smoke as female smoking has not traditionally been considered appropriate; in Saudi Arabia, men are allowed to drive cars, while women are not; in most of the world, women do more housework than men.’

These are often identified with what is known as gender roles. According to West and Zimmerman (1987), gender roles are related to behavioural aspects of being a man or a woman. Now this might be prescribed by cultures and be played out as per a prescribed format. In this sense there are many who do not follow a prescribed gender role because of ambiguity regarding their sex or gender. It is therefore important to note the different
social categories of genders and identities before we go further into the unit. It may also be helpful for you to review similar categories in Unit 4, Block 3 of MWG 001.

**Transgender** is an umbrella term used to refer individuals who do not conform to the gender role expectations of their biological sex. Also used by persons who may identify their gender as being the opposite of their biological sex. Under this category, and contiguous to it are others that cannot be placed under the strict demarcation of men and women. **Transsexuals** are persons with the biological characteristics of one sex who see themselves as the opposite gender and have had some type of surgical alteration and/or hormone treatment that changes their bodies’ appearance in alignment with their identity. **Cross dressers** or **Transvestites** on the other hand wear clothes usually worn by people of the opposite biological sex. They do not however identify themselves as having a gender identity different from their biological sex or gender role. The motivations for cross-dressing vary. **Intersex** people are those born with aspects of both female and male physical features. This is usually understood to be congenital, involving chromosomal, morphologic, genital and/or gonadal anomalies, such as diversion from typical XX-female or XY-male presentations, e.g., sex reversal (XY female, XX male), genital ambiguity, or sex developmental differences. An intersex individual may have biological characteristics of both the male and the female sexes. Earlier, reportedly, doctors would often decide the sex of the infant at birth without consulting the parents (from the Boulder County advisory to understanding queer communities. Available on the website: www.bouldercounty.org).

By and large, people who conform to different gender roles and expectations. They also challenge the established definition of sex and gender. West and Zimmerman believe that gender is performed—they call it the ‘doing’ of gender. So, ‘ “doing” of gender is undertaken by men and women whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production’ (Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126). This means that people act out their ‘natures’ as belonging to either the masculine or the feminine as per socially prescribed rules. They usually act them out as per socially prescribed rules, which are more often than not dictated by the social context in which they find themselves. West and Zimmerman note how this context is an amalgamation of various social arrangements and relationships. The doing of gender as per gender roles therefore becomes a kind of performance. Let us examine this idea in a theoretical context in the next section.

### 2.4 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Gender performativity according to Judith Butler, refers to the process by which difference and identity are constructed in, and through the discourses of sexuality (Morris, 1995). In an insightful study by Foucault, the idea of
Gender and performance becomes clearer. Foucault published the memoirs of an eighteenth century French hermaphrodite named, Herculine Barbin. In the memoirs Barbin talks of the predicament of forcibly taking on a male identity after having lived as a female for most part of ‘her’ life. The male identity is an imposition by medical and legal authorities who want to assign one particular ‘sex’ to Barbin. Through the memoir Foucault tries to recount the history of sexuality in pre-modern Europe wherein certain ideas of sex and gender were privileged over others. The most dominant amongst these ideas was that of the binary quality of sex and gender, i.e. there are only two types of gender and sex—man and woman, and male and female. This also resulted in a view that discriminated against those who did not fall into either category, or worse had sexual preferences for those belonging to the same sex. In Foucault’s analysis history bears testimony to how sexuality comes to be seen in relation to sex and gender. Therefore homosexuality was seen as abnormal or going against nature.

Interestingly the theoretical and academic work in the area of gender and performativity tries to do away with the binary division of sex and gender, and attempts to analyse it from a more dynamic perspective wherein the idea of gender and sex is ever changing. Performance theory is therefore seeking to place both gender and sex within multiple layers of understanding and practices.

Rosalind Morris (1995) notes that the theory of performance emerged as a critique of structuralism within socio-cultural anthropology. Structuralism, as a theory and form of anthropological analysis espouses the importance of social structure in the mental life of individuals who make up society. According to structuralists, society and its structure condition individual actions as well as social rules and norms. Performance theory combines anthropology and a feminist perspective to arrive at a substantial critique of structural theory.

Here, thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau and others are very important, even though a gendered perspective is not overtly present in their work. Yet, the influence they have exercised on performance theorists has been very important.

Bourdieu’s (1995, 1998) study of practice has been very influential in performance studies. Through the idea of the *habitus*, or a set of structuring structures that produce and are produced by specifically embodied subjects, Bourdieu wishes to place the idea of structures that recreate themselves through the acts of individuals who are socialized into reproducing the very same structures. Let us take the idea of acts and structures and then the idea of the embodied state.
Practical logic, according to Bourdieu, creates the illusion that all acts are geared towards a model, knowing fully well that the model and its rules will be violated. Take for instance, the idea of the ‘feel of the game’. To be successful, or good at what one does, one needs to have a feel of the game—a sentence we have heard often, in different contexts, but conveying the same meaning—that in order to win one must know how the game operates. So even though the football player enters the match with no hidden intentions or motivations, he still knows that they exist and the rules can be manipulated in order to win the match. This is how individuals act to subvert, go against established models and rules. We work out strategies to get over rules. A strategy, according to Bourdieu, is a way of calculating practice which is not previously thought out, nor mechanically determined by the rule. They are on-the-spot in a way and yet not completely devoid of some kind of idea of the consequences that will follow. Strategies are context-specific, and a very important aspect of practice and practical logic. For Bourdieu the importance of time cannot be discounted in practice. The way it is presented is often removed from how it really happens in real time. As models the representation of a practice hides many layers within it. For instance, in gift exchange one is unable to see the motivations of the actors involved or what repercussions a delayed gift might invite. All one sees is the process removed from its reality, in a way. This is how, for Bourdieu, most structuring structures operate.

In this way the collective representation of the body, self and person come to be represented in material terms—that can be valued. In Bourdieu’s idea of embodiment, the body comes to be seen as a result of social processes rather than in terms of abstractions. What we therefore call ‘body language’ is a carefully constructed set of codes and rules that are understood by others because they too are aware of, and practice the same rules. Tual gives the striking example of Iranian women, who must never let men be aware of their presence in public (Tual, 1986). For this they must be fully covered in the hijab or veil, they should avoid looking into the eyes of a stranger, and they should basically be invisible. Men, in turn, must treat them as if they are invisible. According to Tual, in Iran both men and women have embodied the habitus.

Michel de Certeau looks at practice as a form of meandering, improvisational acts of the individual, who must move through the systematized world (Morris, 1995). Individuals therefore indulge in ‘creative gestures’ that cannot be seen within the perspective of structural principles. De Certeau is known for his approach that looks at the everyday negotiations that individuals go through in order to subvert and overturn established rules. And even though the individual is completely socialised into believing that he/she is an objectified product of society and its rules—there is indulgence, often unconscious and in small acts, in the overturning of structures.
In the everyday approach, the most cited example is de Certeau’s reading of walking in the city (Certeau, 1984). Individuals often take shortcuts to navigate through routes in a city and to save time. Interestingly, for de Certeau, it is these shortcuts that defy established routes, which are often set down in maps and route guides. By taking the unidentified routes individuals create their own paths—a creative gesture—to go against the established and the given.

Many gender theorists have been influenced by both de Certeau’s and Bourdieu’s approaches to look at everyday subversions of gender norms, as well as place practice within a dynamic, ever-changing perspective. Judith Butler (1999), has been influenced by Bourdieu’s theory and sees gender as a set of non-normative practices. Butler, as one of the primary proponents of the gender and performativity theory, finds Bourdieu’s idea of embodiment as relevant to understanding how even though the body assumes its sex as per culturally mandated practices, it is in the aberrations or deviations that gender and sex roles are really played out. So, as a set of acts gender ‘derives its compulsive force from the fact that people mistake the acts for the essence—and come to believe that they are mandatory’ (Morris, 1995).

It is this very idea of the essence or essential nature that influences the next theoretical stance in the understanding of gender and performance.

### 1.4.1 Doing of Gender

Another key thinker, Erving Goffman (1976), theorised that ‘doing’ gender is a part of every individual’s negotiations with her/his gender identity and role. Goffman mentions that it is during social interaction with others in the latter’s environment that individuals exhibit, what he calls, their ‘essential natures’. This essential nature is representative of their social situation and basic character—and it is relevant to give an idea to the other person the social context from which the individual is coming from. Often as expressive acts, essential natures get represented in the form of ‘displays’. For Goffman, “If gender be defined as the culturally established correlates of sex (whether in consequence of biology or learning), their gender display refers to conventionalized portrayals of these correlates” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p.130). These gender displays however come to represent the personalities of the individuals, more than their essential natures. In this form they become to be dramatizations of the cultural ideals of masculinity and femininity. As an important part of everyday interactions, individuals may not want to express the conventional ideas associated with their gender. That is when the doing of gender becomes very important for us to study and understand.

Influenced by Goffman, West and Zimmerman base their analysis of doing gender by looking at how individuals negotiate in their everyday gender displays. They formulate and define three categories that form an important
part of one’s sex and gender identity. Sex is defined as the “determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females or males” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p.127). This classification may be on the basis of genitalia, or chromosomal typing before birth. Sex category is defined as when “placement... is achieved through application of the sex criteria, but in everyday life categorization is established and sustained by the socially required identificatory displays that proclaims one’s membership in one or the other category” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p.127). The authors note that even though ostensibly sex and sex category go together, the two can be different. Finally, Gender “is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p.127). Gender activities emerge from membership to a particular sex category. Through a definition of the three concepts above the authors wish to point out how certain roles are played out in terms of one’s sex-gender. However, they are unlike contextualized roles like that of a doctor, teacher, patient, which have an organizational base that is absent in sex and gender roles.

In order to understand how individuals negotiate through the three categories defined above, West and Zimmerman draw on Harold Garfinkel’s study of Agnes (1967). Agnes was a transsexual raised as a boy, who after the age of 17 took a female identity—and some years later underwent surgery to make herself ‘permanently’ into a female. Pre and post surgery, Agnes enacted the sex, sex category and gender of a female and a woman. Despite having male genitalia, Agnes undertook what Garfinkel calls—being a ‘practical methodologist’. This implies that she did not fake being a woman but tried to negotiate her everyday interactions by presenting herself the way a woman would—as part of a calculated, preconceived design and assessment of herself. In their analysis, West and Zimmerman note that when it comes to negotiating with her ‘sex’, Agnes manages very well. She insists that she has a penis by mistake—a fault that has to be corrected, and is eventually corrected through surgery. She is able to camouflage her genital difference through clothes. At the cultural level therefore the identification of sex remains restricted—so while clothes may help identify one’s sex, they may camouflage it too. In the case of sex categorisation it is slightly different, for in the absence of clothes as symbolic markers, recourse is taken to aspects such as voice and facial hair—again variable in character. Some men have less facial hair, while some women may have a deep voice—again a terrain that can be negotiated with ease. Agnes made her adjustments to convincingly portray her sex category. It is when gender comes into the question that the authors note that Agnes finds the performance of being a woman challenging. In trying to be a ‘woman’ Agnes takes recourse to her fiancée’s assessment of other women. She follows his guidelines to try and ‘acceptable’ gender performance. The fiancée’s advisory
is of course loaded with the unequal power relations between men and women—but in following the same Agnes conforms more to her advantage.

The doing of gender therefore emerges from a mix of the prevailing social context and the kind of social relationships the individual is embedded in. In that sense, no particular social code with reference to gender display can be uniformly in practice. Variability is the most important characteristic of the ways in which gender plays itself out in different settings.

**Check Your Progress 1**

1) How would you describe the difference between sex and gender? How does performance theory view this difference?

2) Summarise the ideas of Goffman and Garfinkel regarding the ‘doing’ of gender.

---

**1.5 MARKING AND DILUTING GENDER THROUGH PERFORMANCE**

Rosalind Morris identifies two main strands of analysis in the anthropology of sex and gender. One strand looks at the way cultural orders construct gender and create subjects. This involves focusing on ideological and symbolic representations that further exacerbate the difference. For instance, rites of passage or life cycle rites (marriage, death, birth, initiation) that are an important area of analysis, combining performance and the explicit creation of a gender identity. The second strand decomposes difference and focuses on those institutions that create ambiguity in terms of transgendering institutions, especially those found in non-Western societies. This approach looks at subversion and agency through established and covert spheres such as theatre or marginalised groups. In the next section we look at both these spheres of analysis. In the first anthropological analyses of life cycle rites in Bengal are discussed to look at how cultures construct and socialize people into the idea of gender, through performance of rituals. With regard to the anthropology of decomposing difference, we look at a study on the Hijras of India.

**1.5.1 Rituals and Sex Role Display**

Rituals have always been important social markers of gender. There has been much anthropological analysis of the ways in which the rites of passage or life cycle rites play an important part in many non-Western cultures in social identification of sex and gender. Rites such as marriage and initiation
use symbols and practices to stress the change in social status for individuals. The symbols often focus on the body, especially genitalia, in an attempt to highlight sexual relationships. Morris notes that in many cultures, for instance, virginity is made visible through its destruction—both symbolic and real.

And the ambiguity surrounding the rites is often meant to fulfil the dual task of pointing out not only the difference between men and women, but between men as husbands and women as wives. Below we look at the analysis of traditional initiation rites prevalent in the Bengali community to see how virginity and purity are notions employed symbolically to identify a young girl as a woman at the time of her menstruation.

In traditional Bengali kinship, the woman belongs to her husband’s clan and family after marriage. This change in membership is important because she will bear her husband’s children in future—children belonging to her husband’s clan. It is for this reason that on attaining puberty the initiation ritual marks her transition to the status of a woman who is ready to be a wife and mother. In traditional Bengali culture women are also associated with ideas of auspiciousness (sumangali) and inauspiciousness (amangali). On attaining puberty, the girl stops being auspicious for her father’s family—and becomes auspicious for the family that will accept her as their daughter-in-law. All these aspects, the change in status especially is reflected in the ritual—as are the references (in the ritual) to the impending sexual union that will seal the girl’s fate as wife and mother. Before puberty, a polluting state amongst most upper-caste Hindus in India, the girl is auspicious for her family and is worshipped as a goddess (the Gouri Puja is an example). Ostor and Fruzzetti (1984) look at the initiation ritual as an example of how the women’s domain was ritualised and hierarchically placed in an inferior position—away from the public domain of men and power.

In the Bengali menstruation rites the primary objects used in the ritual are the stone pestle and mortar (nora/sil) which women use in the kitchen to grind spices. The nora or pestle symbolises the penis (linga), while the sil or mortar symbolises the vagina or yoni. The two are together and can never be separated. The pure, virgin in the form of the goddess is the mortar, but with menstruation she must take the nora as an inseparable part of her. Interestingly, the pestle symbolises both the child and its father. Similarly the mortar is a symbol of the virgin, mother and wife—the latter two in relation to the pestle. These two objects, along with others appear through other rites specifically related to women, called stri acars. Even at the time of marriage they are essential to show the transition in status from an ambiguous, androgynous being to one who is now established in her role as woman and wife.

The repetitive aspect of the rituals, according to Morris, is important in understanding gender performativity. In the above rite, not only the stress on the use of the symbols, but their meaning as well is emphasized over
many other rituals to stress on the importance of the purity of the bride before marriage. Interestingly, the virgin must be married off once she undergoes puberty. Earlier, in these communities where child marriage was practiced, child brides would live in their parental home till their menstruation after which they would be formally transferred to their husbands’ home for the consummation rite—establishing her firmly in her in-laws family and as a woman with procreative powers.

Yet, in many rites in North India there are provisions to subvert the institutionalized mechanisms within which the ritual operates. These occasions become the source of rebellion against established cultural norms regarding gender and gender practices. Raheja and Gold (1994) have looked at women’s rites during the marriage ceremony in North India to show how women use songs and dance to jokingly get the message across to mothers-in-law and other members of the patriarchy that their suppression of the former’s desires are not forgotten, or will be taken lightly. The songs are laments by women against their husband’s family, and even their fathers and brothers for having forgotten them after giving them away in marriage. These songs enabled women to use the rituals, to vent, and air their grievances against and unjust social and familial structure where patriarchy treats them as inferior.

However some of these rites are clearly part of the ritual structure and may serve as only an avenue of protest without really impacting the nature of hierarchical relations already present. Yet, the festival of Tij which is traditionally celebrated by women for the welfare of their husbands has been analysed as a subversive movement amongst women, in the garb of tradition (Skinner, Holland and Adhikari, 1994). By looking at various types of Tij songs the authors trace their importance in women’s lives as a medium through which they give voice to their grievances. So, for instance the dukha (sad) songs primarily deal with themes of marital unhappiness. The struggles that a young wife has to go through vis-à-vis her husband, mother-in-law, parents and society as a whole. The songs are often written and composed by the women themselves and form a part of their ritualised protest against the unfair treatment women are subjected to in society. The authors’ analysis clearly places the Tij songs as subversive rather than a ritual overturning of otherwise dominant structures.

1.5.2 Ambiguity in Gender And Performance

In many cultures the idea of a third sex, not male or female, is neither seen as an aberration nor as something to be celebrated. The three sexes often live within the same social structure without necessarily threatening the structure. Hijras in India form a particularly interesting field of study. They are marginalized, and yet a necessary part of Indian culture. Serena Nanda (1990) undertakes a detailed account of the Hijra community to understand who they are and what place they occupy in mainstream Indian society.
Nanda contests that simply defining Hijras as eunuchs would be incorrect. They have many definitions attached to the multiple ways in which they are perceived in society. Most of these definitions are either in opposition or in disjunction with each other. So while even though in India, Hijras are identified in their traditional role of performers—in reality many of them rarely fulfil their traditional roles and have been reduced to the status of prostitutes or sex workers. However, the understanding of Hijras as neither man nor woman can primarily be seen in the following ways. As hermaphrodites the Hijras are found in very few numbers; as genetically belonging to the male gender, but who prefer to be women; and as emasculated or those who have gone through the castration ceremony from being men to Hijras.

The other understanding of who or what of Hijra is emerges from their rejection or renunciation of male sexuality in favour sexual relations with other men. Through the castration ceremony or even without it, most Hijras see themselves as impotent or unable to be men, both in the sexual and the social sense of being a man. Again as ‘incomplete’ men they are seen as lacking the appropriate genitals—and wishing to be like women. In this sense they are defined as in-between, or both men and women. Nanda notes that the desire to be like a woman is seen to be predominant amongst the Hijras, as seen in their clothings, gait, behavior and mannerisms. Even their names are feminine. Incidentally, many Hijras try to get themselves registered as women in the national population census in India. Yet in trying to be women, Hijras also believe that they are not like ‘real’ women. For real women do not behave in public as they do (loud, solicitious of male attention, often threatening to expose genitalia in public if not given alms, often threaten with curses, but also bestowing blessings), Hijras do not menstruate and do not have the ability to bear children. This is an important marker of why Hijras think they are not really women. Their public performances and gestures are both a sign of their lack of being a woman, and a man.

However the lack of a male organ bestows on the Hijras special powers (Hindu mythology testifies to the same). Nanda describes this as creative asceticism wherein the castrated phallus is also the source of tapasya or meditation. Thus, a negative cultural feature of being without the male organ is turned into a source of positive energy. This energy is seen to be important especially during many Hindu life-cycle rites, where the Hijras blessings are actively sought. Especially after childbirth Hijras are known to provide blessings to the child. Their curse is regarded as equally strong as per cultural notions—and most people invoke their blessings rather than incur their wrath.

The emasculaion ceremony is seen as a big sacrifice for those who are not born hermaphrodites but do not see themselves as male. The Hijras invoke
the blessing of the Goddess Bahuchara to help smoothen the process of castration. In this way a Hijra enters the order and becomes the chela of a guru within the community. The Hijra community has an intricate set of caste relations governed by the guru-chela (teacher-student) relationship. The Jamat is the larger body amongst the Hijras headed by a few influential gurus. The Jamat as an umbrella organization includes in it other smaller groups, each headed by a particular guru. The gurus train, house and feed the chela in return for monetary compensation from them.

The Hijras, as a community, are symbolic of how cultures assimilate groups with different identities. Even though marginalised, the Hijras draw from their marginal status to show how idea, regarding sex and gender are variable. Through their performance during key life-cycle rites the Hijras are able to show that those very rituals that reinforce social identities of men and women are open to interpretation.

### Check Your Progress 2

1) How do rituals perpetuate established cultural ideas of sex and gender? Give an example of any ritual that you know of that does the same.

2) Do Hijras dilute the binary difference in sex and gender? If yes, explain how.

### 1.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we embarked upon the study of sex and gender and their relationship to performativity. Along the way we learnt that it is very difficult to precisely define sex and gender especially when the two often intermingle and create identities that may be different from established ideas. Thus we learnt that:

- gender is subject to negotiations in the way it is represented and performed in particular contexts and relationships;
- gender and sex displays are often manipulated against established social codes;
- while certain practices magnify sex and gender differences, others help hide them; and
- different cultures have different understandings of sex and gender.
1.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Differentiate between de Cardeau’s and Bourdieu’s theories of gender and performativity.

2) Explain how rituals become the social markers of gendered performance.

3) Discuss the ambiguity created in performance with reference to the hijras.

1.8 REFERENCES


### 1.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

