



Performativity and Agency in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*: A Butlerian Study

 **Amirreza Abyar Firouz Abadi**

English Language and Literature,
Human Sciences, Islamic Azad
University, Qom Branch, Qom, Iran.

Corresponding Author: Amirreza Abyar
Firouz Abadi

E-mail: abyarf13@gmail.com

Article Citation: Abyar Firouz Abadi, A.
(2022). Performativity and Agency in Willa
Cather's *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*: A
Butlerian Study, *Journal of English
Literature and Cultural Studies*, 2(4): 26–35.

Received Date: December 25, 2021

Accepted Date: March 1, 2022

Online Date: March 18, 2022

Publisher: Kare Publishing

© 2022 Journal of English Literature and
Cultural Studies

E-ISSN: 2667-6214



This work is licensed under a Creative
Commons, Attribution-NonCommercial-
NoDerivatives 4.0 International

ABSTRACT

The present study attempts to explore Judith Butler's concepts of performativity and Agency in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1918). Being a regional author, Cather creates her fiction replete with immigrant female characters who struggle to resist the patriarchal power and dominant discourses of their society. Both fictions present their female protagonists as characters who are mentally and physically strong and non-subservient to men after the loss of their fathers. Judith Butler argues that the concept of agency is indeed an extension of performativity, for prior to anything, an act must be performed by an agent, and then that act is performative as long as it is done repeatedly. In addition, Butler contends that agency is what a subject makes out of him/herself and makes every effort to stand against the discourses, power, conventions, and norms of the society. For Butler, someone becomes an agent when he/she acts differently, and in an unusual way. Accordingly, Alexandra, the protagonist of *O Pioneers!*, undoes the patriarchal system of property ownership through standing against her brothers, and Mr. Shimerda's daughter in *My Antonia* challenges the stereotypical pattern of women doing all household chores and child-rearing. Since Cather's characters have been harmed within such a society, they ignore the norms of their society and subvert the discourses by building the gender of their own through performativity, and finally become an agent.

Keywords: Performativity, Agency, Discourse, *O Pioneers!*, *My Antonia*, Willa Cather, Judith Butler

1. Introduction

As history puts it, the twentieth century has witnessed various forms of cultural, social, political, and economic changes. Accordingly, it is believed that this period is known as a transitional period. During this era, women have been considerably affected by such transitions in history. Thus, they started demanding their right and position and resisted the patriarchal discourses within the socioeconomic culture. In *How to Interpret Literature* Robert Parker states that "Feminism is a simple concept. It is about taking women seriously and respectfully. It sets out to reverse a pattern and history of not taking women seriously." (136). Therefore, women inevitably have been deprived to express themselves historically and traditionally in society.

The American modernist writer, Willa Cather (1873-1947), authored *O Pioneers!* in 1913 and *My Antonia* in 1918 among many other well-known stories and fiction. Known for being a regional author and closely identified with the Nebraska prairie, Cather became alienated from the materialism of the modern world and started writing about the alternative visions in the southwest and past. Her works commemorate the importance of the American experience outside of the literary mainstream, pioneering, the establishment of religion, and women's independent lives.

Willa Cather in her Nebraska fiction portrays a sort of setting in which she challenges social norms and conventional womanhood and the way her female characters break the borders of the patriarchal system through the performativity of their gender, and then they confirm their agency. Also, it should be stressed that Cather's characters strive to reverse the discourses of their society to save their family and life.

The protagonist of *My Antonia* is Mr. Shimerda's daughter, Antonia, whom Cather characterizes through a male narrator, Jim Burden. Antonia constructs her gender right after her father's suicide through repetitive hard work on the land against the discourse and stereotypes of the society and by the end of the novel she is a successful lady who has achieved all she has wished for, and thus Jim states that "She was a rich mine of life" (141).

The protagonist of *O Pioneers!* is Alexandra Bergson who disapproves of the hierarchical and patriarchal family tree after her father's death. She fights against her brothers' patriarchal system of property ownership who intend to take control of the land for fear that Alexandra's husband might inherit their parental inheritance. Therefore, Alexandra aspires to create a new inheritance system that subdues patriarchy. What seems to be conspicuous within Cather's novel is the female characters' struggle for independence, self-sufficiency, and success. In this essay, the researcher strives to address the way these female characters construct their gender performativity and prove their agency. Obviously enough, Butler's notions of performativity and agency seem quite appropriate for reading Cather's *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*.

2. Literature Review

An ample amount of research is available on Willa Cather's works under various topics ranging from concepts of regionalism, ecofeminism, and feminism, to hybridity, violence, and nostalgia.

Sean Michael Abrams, explores the concept of reciprocal regionalism in Cather's *My Antonia* by which he means that the characters hold a reciprocal regionalist relationship with the environment throughout the novel and the way they survive, prosper, and perish due to their ecological relationship. He argues that Cather believes in an inherent essentialist relationship between the artist and the muse, the character, and the region therefore if this connection falters, the art and the characters perish. Abrams elaborates on W.T. Benda's illustration of Cather's *My Antonia* representing the relationship between material and personal experience. He concludes that Benda has mainly focused on the natural bounties, the wide spaces of prairie, the largeness of sky alongside the characters' bondage with them, which truly offers the reader an obvious perspective of a relationship one must have toward nature in order to succeed or survive. Thus Abrams bridges the gap in Cather criticism that hasn't been touched upon so far in Cather's fourth novel *My Antonia*, and that is a regionalist study of the text.

Fangyuan attempts and examines the role of nature in Cather's novels. He generally discusses the way nature reflects or impacts human attributes. He points out that Cather in her novels tries to integrate and segregate human beings with the landscape to offer the reader to contemplate the human-landscape relationship in the past and present.

Yang Han-Yu concentrates on the notion of pioneer women's development of the self from the outlook of feminism in the two novels by Willa Cather. The author's big claim is that rigid social connections and concepts restrict women's autonomy and freedom; hence, they need to transform themselves and the environment in order to keep living. The author compares and contrasts the specific situation and interprets the characteristics of the characters especially the protagonists. Finally, he concludes that the pioneer women always create a nurturing and gracious atmosphere in their household and they alter the old civilization to the newly built homestead and this is how the pioneer women establish the process of self-growth throughout their lifetime.

Maryam Heydari Fard and Hossein Pirnajmuddin using Homi Bhabha's notion of Hybridity analyze the two novels to manifest the cultural relation/interaction and propose the colonized-colonizer relationship. The colonizers arrive in order to dominate the region and civilize it but gradually through their interactions with the natives their superiority and patronizing attitudes are transformed. In contrast to the habituated attitudes of the colonizers, they begin to equalize their values with the natives. Finally what the researchers conclude is that the idea that colonizers always change the native land's dominant ideology is fully debunked in these two novels, and those who come as colonizers are themselves subject to change as well.

Jordan Fletcher Hobson discusses the concept of violence that occurs at the end of the novel where the two young lovers, Emil Bergson and Marie Shabata are murdered by Marie's husband. Through the theoretical lenses of René Girard, Jacques Derrida, and Slavoj Žižek; Hobson concludes that according to Derrida, violence is more apparent in language as form and meaning are irreparably served at the point of articulation. The researcher's Žižekian reading invites Lacanian "sinthom" as well. The researcher maintains that far from a simplistic pastoral, *O Pioneers!* is a novel that allows for an intensive exploration of what Colin Davis describes as the "unnerving strangeness" of the text. The "unnerving strangeness" of this work echoes in the thick, deadly atmosphere of Frank Shabata's mulberry orchard.

Pathathai Suksangdow conducts research on *My Antonia* to examine who the characters having nostalgia are, what has caused such a feeling, and in what way this nostalgic feeling has been demonstrated throughout the course of the novel. The study reveals that the characters' nostalgic feelings have been presented through loneliness,

depression, isolation, physical decline, homesickness, and death. The main reason that has caused this feeling is immigration. Moreover, the characters' past experiences and memories and the great changes in their lives have altered the characters' emotions.

Nathaniel C. Wagner investigate the classical language of Vergil as well as the use of Vergilian allusion in *My Antonia*, *The Professor's House*, and *Shadows on the Rock*. Wagner claims that the author regularly uses Vergilian language, and figures to raise a sense of grandeur to the small individual lives of the characters to suggest a sense of infinite and infinitesimal. The researcher attempts to explore the traces of two Vergilian rhetorical techniques, such as echphrasis and anacholouthon in these works.

3. Methodology

3.1 Performativity and Agency

3.2 Performativity

Judith Butler's well-known concept of performativity is driven from J. L. Austin's "Speech act theory". Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), discusses the theory as referring to utterances that establish reality. Butler maintains that "within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative, that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (Gender Trouble, 34). Thus gender identity, which is established through acts, is performative. Furthermore, Butler is careful to distinguish between performativity and performance. According to her, Performative is not what one chooses, whether by intention or not, rather it is what one does repeatedly.

Performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition of a ritual, which achieves its effect through its naturalization in the context of the body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration (Gender Trouble, XV).

Approving Butler in this regard, Sara Salih writes:

To describe gender as a 'doing' and a corporeal style might lead you to think of it as an activity that resembles choosing an outfit from an already-existing wardrobe of clothes...To start with, we will clearly have to do away with the notion of 'freedom of choice': since you are living within the law or within a given culture, there is no sense in which your choice is entirely 'free', and it is very likely that you 'choose' your metaphorical clothes to suit the expectations or perhaps the demands of your peers or your work colleagues, even if you don't realize that you are doing so. Furthermore, the range of clothes available to you will be determined by factors such as your culture, your job, your income, and your social background/status. (50)

For Butler the idea of performativity is far from theatrical performances, which means one would choose his/her role by standing in front of a closet and pick some clothes, and start playing on the stage in *Gender Trouble* she claims that:

"Gender proves to be performative, that constitutes the identity it is supposed to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed." (34)

Butler continues that there is a link between the concept of performativity and Nietzsche's claim since he states "there is no being behind doing, effecting, becoming the doer, is merely a fiction added to the deed, the doer is everything" (34). By acting, Butler claims one can construct his/her gender; therefore, when there is no act, there will be no gender at all. Butler furthermore claims that performativity cannot be external to discourse;

Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that "performance" is not a singular "act" or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance (Bodies That Matter, 95).

Iterability for Butler is not a singular action; whatever is done by norms of sex is performative accordingly, gender is more important than sex for her. By arguing sex is a "gendered category" she means this performativity is the action of a gendered subject. To sum up, what brings the subject into existence is performativity thus; performativity of gender creates a coherent link between identity categories, and through a person's performative act incoherent "discourses" turn to be understandable, and also the subject is constructed by performing the very act and finally the "I" of the subject is constructed.

3.1.2 Agency

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler asserts that agency and performativity are closely linked, for prior to anything there must be an act performed by an agent and thus that act is performative. Moreover, the subject and the process of

repetition are relevant together as well. That is, the subject is established through those repetitions. Butler maintains that,

The subject is not determined by the rules through which it is generated because signification is not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself, and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects. In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; 'agency' then is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition (Gender Trouble, 198).

In *Bodies That Matter* (1993) Butler asserts that agency is driven from an "I" which comes from the subject and is in close relation with power or discourse, while she tends to stand against it; therefore, when the "I" acts opposite to the power, agency will be constructed. She states:

The "I" who would oppose its construction is always in some sense drawing from that construction to articulate its opposition, further "I" draws what is called its "agency" in part through being implicated in the very relations of power, indeed, enabled by the relations of power that the "I" oppose is not as a consequence, to be reducible to their existing forms (Bodies That Matter, 122).

As Foucault claims in *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (1972), a discourse is a "group of statements" that links to a "single system or formation" (182). Furthermore, the subject is taken into existence through the same statements. Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997), draws on Foucault and maintains that the process of subjection occurs as a form of "power" and she continues remarking that this concept is governed by outside of "oneself", for finding out "what one is", that one for its form relied upon power. (1). For Foucault "the subject is not spoken", and the subject which is produced via a kind of "power and discourse" is "neither singular nor sovereign in their productive action" (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 5). Butler goes further to claim that the subject is constructed upon power, and that power is acting through the psyche. It should be within a "linguistic category" since it is first produced via language. The subject should be subjected through language, and gains "intelligibility" (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 11).

To sum up, Butler's view of gender is about what one does in contrast with many other feminists who think it is about what one is. In *Gender Trouble* she proclaims that one's gender is made when he/she does things repeatedly, then he/she makes his/her gender performative. Butler's performativity is one step beyond Austin's; for Austin, it is at the level of utterance, but Butler believes it is not only uttering but also a 'doing'. Butler's concept of agency is associated with performativity and power. When within a discourse or power a subject attempts to act against the discourse he/she constructs his/her performative gender and by opposing the society he/she constructs an agency since the agent is not outside of the context.

Here is a run-through of the whole theory, firstly, through a 'doing' a person makes his/her gender. Secondly, his/her gender would be 'performative' if only it is done repeatedly, and finally, if the person finds him/herself as someone opposing the 'discourse' of the society then his/her agency would be constructed.

4. Performativity and Agency in *O Pioneers!*

Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*, is a reflection of the lives of Americans who settled in the Nebraska prairie. The Bergson family, most specifically Alexandra, struggles to adapt to the land through many hardships and adversities. It is only Alexandra who turns out to be the proprietor of her family, and she survives her struggles after Mr. Bergson's death. Ultimately, Alexandra through her great will and strength makes the family farm prosperous and fertile.

Colleen Mack-Canty in "Third-Wave Feminism and the Need to Reweave the Nature/Culture Duality, remarks that Second-Wave Feminism "challenge[s] women's exclusion from the public world of politics and economics," which inadvertently establishes an essentialist us-versus-them binary that reduces womanhood to the singular identity of contesting the conventions of the male public sphere (154). Throughout Cather's *O Pioneers!*, one can figure out Cather promises the steadiness of male dominance in Nebraska as a space where the discourse of patriarchal pattern takes place. However, Alexandra through a reworking of her gender disrupts such a discourse and proves her agency.

In the first section of the novel the majority of the people are leaving the town, for all the lands have turned infertile and barren. Lying on his deathbed, Mr. Bergson summons her daughter to entrust the family farm to her, for he believes Alexandra has great potential and ability to run the family farm. Mr. Bergson likens Alexandra to her grandfather, and through masculinizing her, he believes she is "intelligent." "Alexandra, her father often said to himself, was like her grandfather; which was his way of saying that she was intelligent." (*O Pioneers!*, 13). Furthermore, Alexandra appears to be financially intelligent; she has a great knack for business and great knowledge to accumulate money, which is why her father is more interested in her than in his sons.

"It was Alexandra who read the papers and followed the markets, and who learned by the mistakes of their neighbors. It was Alexandra who could always tell about what it had cost to fatten each steer, and who could guess the weight of a hog before it went on the scales." (*O Pioneers!*, 13)

Through her abundant efforts, Alexandra constantly embarrasses her conservative brothers who fail to take control of the land. According to the dominant discourse of the time, family property ownership belonged to the men of the family, and women were left at home only to do all the household chores and child-rearing. But Cather creates her protagonist, Alexandra, as a female who seeks authority and struggles to subvert the dominant discourse. Dorothy Dinnerstein in *The Rocking of the Cradle and the Ruling of the World* elaborates on conventional gender norms. She maintains that when men are in charge of "ruling the world," women are expected to stay at home and take care of the children, and private affairs. Dinnerstein asserts that a double sexual standard exists, "as men are free to come and go geographically or psychologically from the place where they are most intimate" (208). Nevertheless, women must be waiting for their men and being "sexually available" upon their arrival (208). Such roles that Dinnerstein discusses are adopted in a patriarchal system. She introduces women as idealized, submissive wives, and men as active agents and domineering subjects. *O Pioneers!* portrays Alexandra's deconstruction of all these conventional roles, adherence to more masculine identity, cultivation of the farm which is outside the feminine sphere, and thus she achieves independence.

Oscar and Lou, Alexandra's brothers state that: "The property of the family belongs to the men of the family" (*O Pioneers!*, 92) and they never tend to give up their male privilege and power. A single woman seems to them as a child who is not capable of making proper decisions, thus they want Alexandra to marry Carl with no property rights. To them, the spheres of men's and women's activities and privileges are different.

In *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism* Rosalind Rosenberg asserts "The womb, doctors emphasized, dominated a woman's mental as well as physical life, producing a weak, submissive, uncreative, emotional, intuitive, and generally inferior personality." (6). Therefore, it could not be acceptable for Oscar and Lou to be subordinated by their sister. Disrupting such an idea, Alexandra does not abandon the outside world of society, for she has a doing. Cather portrays Alexandra as follows,

[Alexandra,] was a tall, strong girl, and she walked rapidly and resolutely as if she knew exactly where she was going and what she was going to do next. She wore a man's long ulster (not as if it were an affliction, but as if it were very comfortable and belonged to her; carried it like a young soldier), and a round plush cap, tied down with a thick veil (*O Pioneers!*, 9).

Alexandra constructs her gender as such. As she is described as intelligent and determined, she is well-aware of her purpose and desire. She masculinizes herself through cross-dressing as Cather writes "she wore a man's long ulster, but as if it were very comfortable and belonged to her," and appeared "like a young soldier" in the society. In "Sexy from the Start: Anticipatory Elements of Second Wave Feminism," Jennifer Scanlon refers to early "feminists in the 1960s and 1970s [who] wore flannel shirts, jeans, and work boots" (129), however, not all feminists wore such male-specific attire, Scanlon's reference to the Second-Wave feminist is indicative of Alexandra's cross-dressing.

Nathan Erro in his article, "Asexy Pioneer: Asexuality Versus Eroticism in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*," maintains that "by presenting herself in defiance of conventional female attire, attire maintained by the construct of the gender binary, Alexandra establishes her opposition to being a sexual object for men." (Erro, 4). Following that, she abandons her house and devotes herself to cultivating the land every day. As Butler maintains in her *Gender Trouble*, gender is always a doing, and thus by acting one constructs his/her gender, and "gender proves to be performative, that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (*Gender Trouble*, 34).

Alexandra is a character who wants to construct her identity, furthermore, she tries to put herself out of that context or discourse. One could argue that she is a subject who is gendered which is to say that, she is a gendered subject. She does something; which is wearing man's clothes and plowing the farms repeatedly. Based on the heterosexual matrix, people must act according to their sexes, but Alexandra does not dress according to accepted norms of women's clothing. There she tries to make her gender, for according to the discourse of the society she cannot labor on the land.

Alexandra challenges what social norms and customs expect her to do. Furthermore, she regards it as a responsibility and is accustomed to it. She has started to do what most men were not supposed to believe she would be able to do and that is laboring on the land. Alexandra constructs her gender through one act and that is her self-fashioning; wearing man's clothes and holding onto a "young soldier" style and as she does them repeatedly she constructs her gender as performative. As Butler states "gender is an identity tenuously constructed in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts." No doubt, while she is performing her gender, she is escaping from the discourse and norm of the society, which is male dominance, male property ownership, and restrictive roles in society to prove her agency in this way. As Butler proclaims agency is what a subject makes out of him/her when he/she tries to stand against the norms, conventions, and powers, the result is the subject acts in a different and unusual way. The narrator states,

"There was about Alexandra something of the impervious calm of the fatalist, always disconcerting to very young people, who cannot feel that the heart lives at all unless it is still at the mercy of storms; unless its strings can scream to the touch of pain." (*O Pioneers!*, 123)

The “impervious calm” of Alexandra manifests her rejection of social and domestic norms. Furthermore, the narrator describes Alexandra’s accommodation as follows,

If you go up the hill and enter Alexandra’s big house, you will find that it is curiously unfinished and uneven in comfort. One room is papered, carpeted, over-furnished; the next is almost bare... Alexandra’s house is the big out-of-doors, and that it is in the soil that she expresses herself best (O Pioneers!, 45).

And it promises that Alexandra’s construction of her gender is repetitive and thus this repetition of action proves her performativity. Further in the novel, Alexandra expresses her lack of interest in domestic life and what the discourse of society urges women to do.

Alexandra had put herself in the hands of the Hanover furniture dealer, who had conscientiously done his best to make her dining room look like his display window. She said frankly that she knew nothing about such things, and she was willing to be governed by the general conviction that the more useless and utterly unusable objects were, the greater their virtue as an ornament. (O Pioneers!, 52)

Alexandra acknowledges domestic life as something useless or unusable and she strongly resists what discourse brings about and finally she becomes a successful farmer who has constructed her agency.

Alexandra’s dispute with Oscar and Lou starts when she aims to leave no money behind for her children. She resists the patriarchal pattern of property ownership within the bounds of familial inheritance. Alexandra’s father asks her daughter to take control of the familial land not because she is a woman, but she has strong hands. “He thought of his Alexandra’s strong ones.” (O Pioneers!, 14). Alexandra shatters the idea of hierarchical family structure, and the established dominance of the traditional family structure when John Bergson tells his sons, “so long as there is one house there must be one head... And you will be guided by your sister, boys, and be good brothers to her, and good sons to your mother?” (O Pioneers!, 15), giving more power to Alexandra once again. Since relinquishing her power subordinates Alexandra to her brothers, she never gives up and does whatever she wishes to. Once again in their family argument, Alexandra constructs her gender as more masculine. She states,

“Maybe I would never have been very soft, anyhow; but I certainly didn’t choose to be the kind of girl I was. If you take even a vine and cut it back again and again, it grows hard, like a tree.” (O Pioneers!, 94).

According to Alexandra’s quote, her hardness refers to the patriarchal family structure which rather is a “vine” that grows without patriarchal and hierarchical grounds. Thus, what Alexandra performs is against the discourse of both family and society.

Alexandra works repetitively on the farm that marriage does not interest her until she is forty years old. The narrator asserts that “Even as a girl she had looked upon men as work-fellows.” (O Pioneers!, 94). This is a claim that Alexandra resisted having any romance with men and distanced herself from heteronormativity. Here again, Alexandra builds her gender, and thus as a result of such repetitive acts she constructs her performativity. She resists marriage, however, for some years, and as such she creates her agency. Erro asserts that,

Alexandra is the sole character who remains unmarried with no hint that she will marry anytime soon. This contrast to the marriages about her underscores her deviance from cultural norms, including her lack of sexual desire. Alexandra derives pleasure in different ways and is completely content with being different. (Erro, 5)

In “Performative Acts” Butler maintains that according to the system of compulsory heterosexuality everyone must be either masculine or feminine; that masculine and feminine traits are and should be opposed to each other, and finally, everyone should be heterosexual. Whoever deviates from such norms is considered as “unintelligible” and deserves punishment (performative Acts, 520). Therefore, there are several traces in the text that proves Alexandra’s deviation from her gender, and thus deserving to be punished. As discussed earlier, Alexandra subverts submission to the conventional norms and discourse of the society, and instead of staying at home and doing housework, starts laboring under the sun on the land till her skin color turns brown like the soil.

Mary Paniccia Carden in her article, “Creative Fertility and the National Romance in Willa Cather’s O Pioneers! and My Antonia,” states that many feminist critics champion Cather’s works and characters, for Cather

confronts and challenges gender-specific narratives of the nation along with complexities she faced as an unconventional woman at a time when tangible anxiety about the male supremacy that had served to explain the nation to itself was attended by slippage in traditional male/female power relations. (278)

Erro implies that “characters such as Alexandra represent this slippage in tradition and are indicative of a shift in cultural consciousness in the early twentieth century, one that will soon give way to women’s suffrage,” he also continues: “Alexandra’s character serves to challenge male supremacy in the economic and public sphere.” (Erro, 1).

When she is gazed at by a flirtatious “shabby little traveling man” in town telling her: “My God, girl, what a head of hair!” her reaction is described as: “She stabbed him with a glance of Amazonian fierceness and drew in her lower lip—most unnecessary severity.” (O Pioneers!, 5). This severe look proves Alexandra’s more masculine gender, and resistance to submit to the man. Since normally “fierceness” is a male-attributed feature, but Alexandra practices that. She spurns any man who wishes to gaze at her as an object of beauty.

In her article, “The Situation of the Looker-On,” Beth Newman draws on Sigmund Freud’s reading of Medusa. For Freud what seems more important than Medusa turning men into stone is the fact that Medusa defiantly looks

back; "Such defiance is surely unsettling, disturbing the pleasure the male subject takes in gazing and the hierarchal relations by which he asserts his dominance" (1031). Similar to Medusa, Alexandra rejects being an object of pleasure. She not only disturbs the traveling man's pleasure but also "the hierarchal relations" of gender. In this way, Alexandra subverts the traditional discourse of her society that women are passive and submissive, and she escapes from the patriarchal heterosexist system of power.

Alexandra resists marriage until she is almost forty years old and finally she marries a friend named Carl, for she believes "when friends marry, they are safe. [They] don't suffer like those young ones" (*O Pioneers!*, 169) and in contrast to the common marriage stereotypes, she aims to prove that her marriage does not mean her submission to patriarchy. As a result of Alexandra's resistance against marriage for a couple of years, she is punished to have a nightmare of a figure "like no man she knew". She has anxiety in her unconscious.

As she lay with her eyes closed, she had again, more vividly than for many years, the old illusion of her girlhood, of being carried lightly by someone very strong. He was with her a long while this time and carried her very far, and in his arms, she felt free from pain. When he laid her down on her bed again, she opened her eyes and, for the first time in her life, she saw him, saw him clearly, though the room was dark, and his face was covered. He was standing in the doorway of her room. His white cloak was thrown over his face, and his head was bent a little forward. His shoulders seemed as strong as the foundations of the world. His right arm, bared from the elbow, was dark and gleaming, like bronze, and she knew at once that it was the arm of the mightiest of all lovers. She knew at last for whom it was she had waited, and where he would carry her. That, she told herself, was very well. Then she went to sleep (155).

Finally, she admits to marrying a friend, rather than submission to a dominant male.

5. Performativity and Agency in *My Antonia*

Similar to *O Pioneers!* Cather's second fiction, *My Antonia* is set in Nebraska. When the Shimerda family moves from Bohemia to Nebraska they have no accommodation to stay at, thus they stay in a cave until they get familiar with the Burden family. Jim Burden an orphan boy who lives with his grandparents meets Antonia, and they spend most of their time with each other. Jim starts teaching Antonia English, and they share lots of nostalgic memories. One day tragedy strikes the Shimerda family, and Antonia's father commits suicide as a result of homesickness. From that day Antonia labors on the lands and struggles with all the hardships of her life to survive her family.

In her second Nebraska novel, *My Antonia*, Cather draws on a female character, Antonia as well, and the researcher attempts to explore the performative gender norms of the protagonist and also how she subverts the dominant discourse to prove her agency. Butler in her "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" maintains,

"Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Performative Acts, 519).

Butler also draws on Simone de Beauvoir's ideology that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman," meaning that gender is constructed culturally and it is not the result of biological sex. In other words, for Butler gender is not a fixed and stable notion, but an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (Performative Acts, 519).

Cather writes *My Antonia* from a male point of view, Jim Burden, and she portrays the established patriarchal system of the nineteenth century and the way Antonia strives to disrupt such a discourse. Jim shows his disapproval of Antonia working on land outside the domestic sphere. Although Jim is thoroughly aware of Antonia's poor living conditions and that her labor saves her family, he does not support her to work. The dominant discourse of the nineteenth century lies in what Barbara Welter, an American historian, in her study "The Cult of True Womanhood" asserts:

"The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife-woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement, or wealth, all was ashes. With them, she was promised happiness and power." (Welter, 1)

Thus according to Welter in the nineteenth century, society valued men over women, and a nineteen-century woman was not allowed to escape from domesticity and what the dominant discourse determined. Nevertheless, Cather's protagonist not only subverts such a discourse but also deviates from the accepted gender norms of the society which is again another disruption of discourse. In her study, "Willa Cather: Male Roles and Self-Definition in *My Antonia*, *The Professor's House*, and *'Neighbor Rosicky'*," Kristina Anne Everton states that "Cather's characters are often frustrated, unsatisfied, ambiguous, often androgynous, and unhappy with the roles that they have been

playing.” (Everton, 35). Everton implies that “Antonia’s character suggests a mixing of male and female gender roles, much like Cather’s adolescent cross-dressing.” (35). After Antonia’s father commits suicide pretty much like Alexandra, Antonia is determined to perform the role of her father. She wears her father’s clothes and boots and starts to work hard on the land.

“She wore the boots her father had so thoughtfully taken off before he shot himself, and his old fur cap...She kept her sleeves rolled up all day, and her arms and throat were burned as brown as a sailor’s.” (My Antonia, 56)

Moreover, as a result of her long-term work at the exposure of sunshine Antonia’s skin color has turned brown, “as brown as sailors.” Therefore, as Butler asserts: “gender is not an essence, various acts of gender create the idea of gender” (Salih, 41). For Butler gender is always a doing and in this part of the novel Antonia constructs her gender as more masculine besides, she confirms her performativity, for her repetitive performance. At first, Antonia made her gender by doing an activity, and when she repeated that activity she made it performative.

Antonia is seriously warned by Mrs. Burden and Jim to stop laboring in the fields. Mrs. Burden is deeply concerned about her labor and says “heavy field work’ll spoil that girl. She’ll lose all her nice ways and get rough ones” (My Antonia, 57). For Jim and his society, Antonia’s adherence to masculine traits is not acceptable, for she is doing outside of the construct of her gender roles. Added to that, Antonia’s masculine performance is exasperating for Jim since she is a woman, but Antonia resists any remark and tells Jim:

“Oh, better I like to work out-of-doors than in a house! I not care that your grandmother say it makes me like a man. I like to be like a man. She also continues to toss her head and ask [Jim] to feel the muscles swell in her brown arm.” (My Antonia, 62).

In this section, Antonia’s performativity of gender is at the level of utterance; what J. L. Austin through his “speech act theory” maintains, proves the above quote. In his book *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) Austin discusses language as “referential”, that is when there is no “referring” there is no “meaning”. Hence, Antonia constructs her gender as masculine both at the level of utterance and performance and as a result of her resistance she has demonstrated her agency. As Antonia is the protagonist of the novel, she is the character whose gender identity is changed. In one part of the novel, Jim describes Antonia “Antonia ate so noisily now, like a man, and she yawned often at the table and kept stretching her arms over her head as if they ached.” (My Antonia, 57). In another part, Jim tells Antonia “Why do you all the time try to be like Ambrosch?” (My Antonia, 63), continuing that Jim states: “Ambrosch hired his sister out like a man, and she went farm to farm, binding sheaves or working with the threshers” (My Antonia, 65), meaning that Antonia is acting according to male gender norms. Butler argues that agency is what a subject makes out of him/herself when he/she starts to stand against the dominant norms and conventions, and one’s agency is made when he/she acts differently in an unusual way. Antonia changes her gender identity since she has decided to do what she likes to do. Her resistance is, moreover, manifested when the neighboring farmers in Black Hawk criticize her by joking “in a nasty way” (My Antonia, 57).

Nowadays Tony could talk of nothing but the prices of things, or how much she could lift and endure. She was too proud of her strength. I knew, too, that Ambrosch put upon her some chores a girl ought not to do, and that the farmhands around the country joked in a nasty way about it. Whenever I saw her come up the furrow, shouting to her beasts, sunburned, sweaty, her dress open at the neck, and her throat and chest dust-plastered, I used to think of the tone in which poor Mr. Shimerda, who could say so little, yet managed to say so much when he exclaimed, “My Ántonia!” (My Antonia, 57).

Antonia does subvert the dominant discourse of the society through masculinizing her gender role, for she did “some chores a girl ought not to do” and further, Jim chooses to call her “Tony” a masculine name for Antonia; he also gets an impression by Antonia’s gesture and tone as if Mr. Shimerda was on the land. In another part of the novel, Jim exclaims “I hated a superior tone that she sometimes took with me”, for I was a boy and she was a girl, and I resented her protecting manner” (My Antonia, 27).

One can easily recognize that according to the established discourse, society cannot accept Antonia and she must accept what discourse obliged her to do, thus as Butler maintains in “Performative Acts” the result of such deviation from norms is “unintelligible” and it leads to punishment. Antonia is within the discourse, not outside of it, and within such a system she started to oppose it. Consequently, Antonia is punished when she forms a relationship with Mr. Donovan at the dance party, and after that Mr. Donovan abandons her, and she is left pregnant. Antonia does not give up, however, she is punished, and for not performing according to the discourse of the society she continues working on the land while being pregnant. She is criticized by the neighboring farmers, and Jim himself hates her. Finally, she becomes successful, and marries a man, and gives birth to eleven children.

Years after Antonia’s married life, Jim learns from Tiny Soderball that Antonia had not “done very well” and had “had a hard life” (My Antonia, 131). Jim describes Antonia as a woman who is now “battered but not diminished” (My Antonia, 132) as a result of hard work and childbearing, but Antonia claims that “I feel just as young as I used to, and I can do as much work” (My Antonia, 134). Once again she confirms her determination, and subjectivity after years of hard work on that land and this amazes Jim to say that “I know so many women who have kept all the things that she

had lost, but whose inner glow has faded. Whatever else was gone, Antonia had not lost the fire of life". (My Antonia, 132).

6 Conclusion

Investigating Cather's fiction from Butler's view, the researcher throughout this present essay came to the point that based on the notions of performativity and agency, both Cather's female protagonists have endeavored to construct their gender identity through their deviation from the dominant discourses, norms, and conventions of the society. The researcher found out that gender is culturally constructed rather than natural. Furthermore, one's gender would be constructed if the subject does something; therefore, Butler states "gender is always a doing".

Butler argues that performativity is free from the matter of choice and theatricality. In other words, she believes that it is not about someone picking up his/her favorite role and playing it on the stage, yet one would be successful in performing his/her gender if he/she does something.

It could be argued that the three concepts of gender, performativity, and agency are strongly associated with each other. When one constructs his/her gender through doing and not through just uttering, he/she can make it performative through doing the same act repeatedly. Then when an agent within the context tries to oppose the discourse and norms of the society he/she, Butler says makes an agency.

Both Alexandra and Antonia ignore male privilege and domestic life in the context of nineteenth-century patriarchy, and they keep farming on the lands repetitively. As a result of their repetitive acts according to Butler, they construct their performative gender identity. Alexandra never surrenders herself to her brothers who believe that the property ownership of the family belongs to the men of the family. She fights against such patriarchal structure through a reworking of her gender identity and avoids her domestic life to take control of the cultivation of the land herself. Antonia as well sacrifices herself to the lands after her father's suicide and constructs her gender as more masculine through an overt attempt. She resists all social norms that society has assigned them as dominant discourse. Such resistance against the existing power and norms of the society, Butler believes shapes one's agency. Finally, Both Alexandra and Antonia achieve success and become strong, self-sufficient, and independent figures during the fiction.

References

- Abrams, Sean Michael. "My Antonia and Willa Cather's Reciprocal Regionalism and W.T. Benda's Illustrations." University of Vermont, 2016.
- Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford University Press, 1962.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.
- . *Gender Trouble*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.
- . *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, 2009.
- . *The Psychic Life of Power Theories in Subjection*, Stanford University Press Stanford, California, 1997.
- Carden, Mary Paniccia. "Creative Fertility and the National Romance in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*." *Modern Fiction Studies*. 45.2 (1999): 275-302.
- Cather, Willa. *My Antonia*. BOSTON NEW YORK, 1995.
- . *O Pioneers!* Webster's KoreanThesaurus Edition, 2005.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier, 1949.
- Dinnerstein, Dorothy. *The Rocking of the Cradle, and the Ruling of the World*. New York: Condor Book Souvenir Press, 1976.
- Erro, Nathan. "Asexy Pioneer: Asexuality Versus Eroticism in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*," 2011, <http://inquire.streetmag.org/articles/12>
- Everton, Kristina Anne. *Willa Cather: Male Roles and Self-Definition in My Antonia, the Professor's House, and "Neighbor Rosicky"*, Brigham Young University, 2006. Pdf.
- Fangyuan. "Nature in Willa Cather's novels." Tohoku University, 2014.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. Trans. A. M.
- Sheridan Smith. PANTHEON BOOKS, NEW YORK, 1972.
- Heydari Fard, Maryam. and Hossein Pirnajmuddin. "Hybridity in Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*." *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 2203-4714, 2014.
- Hobson, Jordan Fletcher. "Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*: Violence and Modern Aesthetics." Georgia State University, 2011.
- Mack-Canty, Colleen. "Third-Wave Feminism and the Need to Reweave the Nature/Culture Duality." *NWSA Journal*. 16.3 (2004): 154-179. Print.
- Newman, Beth. "'The Situation of the Looker-On' Gender, Narration, and Gaze in *Wuthering Heights*." *Modern Language Association*. Vol. 105, No. 5 (Oct., 1990), pp. 1029-104. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/462732>, 2015.

- Parker, Robert Dale. *How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies*. New York: Oxford UP, 2008.
- Rosenberg, Rosalind. *Beyond Separate Spheres: the Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism*. Yale University Press, 1982.
- Salih, Sara. "Routledge Critical Thinkers: Judith Butler." New York and London: Routledge, 2002. Pdf.
- Scanlon, Jennifer. "Sexy from the Start: Anticipatory Elements of Second Wave Feminism." *Women's Studies* 38 (2009): 127-150. Print.
- Suksangdow, Pathathai. "A Study of Nostalgia in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*." Srinakharinwirot University, 2006.
- Wagner, Nathaniel C. "Vergilian Allusion in the Novels of Willa Cather." Minnesota State University – Mankato, 2015.
- Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860". The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2711179?origin=JSTOR-pdf>.
- Yang Han-Yu. "A Feminist Analysis of Protagonists' Self-development in *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*." Beijing Information Science and Technology University, Beijing, China, 2014.