



Butlerian Theory of Subjectivity in Annie Proulx's *Fine Just the Way It Is*

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ABSTRACT

The present article is an attempt to study Annie Proulx's short story collection: *Fine Just the Way It Is* in the light of Judith Butler's concepts of vulnerability and gender performativity. According to Butler, all bodies are manipulated by regulatory norms and existing cultural power to perform a predefined gender role as well as vulnerable from the start to the world of others. By exploring the stories through Butlerian concepts of gender performativity and vulnerability, this article presents that Proulx's characters not only gain their recognition in a political project through following their gender performativity, but also experience the collective condition of vulnerability to the socioeconomic structures as well as conditioned by power. Therefore, this analysis inevitably seeks to particularize the way Proulx's characters portray the norms of performativity which have to be performed in order to be recognized in social realm through 'desire' and 'enactment'. Furthermore, by paralyzing Butler's concept of vulnerability to the literary pieces, the present study delineates the situations in which characters experience 'violence', 'insecurity', and 'lack of autonomy' instigated by interdependency and imposed conventions of social structures.

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Introduction

The main concerns in Proulx's whole literary career have been showing American life values, social upheavals, and unwanted changes caused by social norms. Proulx's peculiar voice and unusual plot structure reveal the socioeconomic and cultural structures which characters do not choose and have no control over. In a sense, Proulx's characters and their bodies are the locus of certain cultural signs which Butler regards as the basis of both gender performativity and vulnerability. In this Wyoming short story collection, "Fine Just the Way It Is", characters gain their gender identity and recognition in social realm through pursuing the regulatory norms of gender. Moreover, these characters are vulnerable since the same regulatory norms expose their corporeal body to the imposed conventions that ideology has constructed. Furthermore, the characters are vulnerable to the changes of socioeconomic structures and due to their bodily needs, they are physically vulnerable as well. In this regard 'gender performativity' and 'vulnerability' are applied to dig better into the collective condition of bodies in Proulx's aforesaid literary pieces. The importance of this article is highlighted as there is almost no investigation done from this perspective on Proulx's works.

Significance of the Study

This article has tried to delve into Proulx's Just Fine the Way It Is, to explore the manifestation of Butlerian concepts of performativity and vulnerability. Since Butler has based her theories mainly on the effects of social and political changes on subject formation, it would well suit Proulx's stories which are rich in situations of cultural and economic upheavals as their background. Through this process Butler's theories and ideas would be practically and apparently shaped out from the literary text of Proulx.

Review of Literature

A Few critical essays and books have been written so far regarding Proulx's literary works which have investigated different aspects of her works. However, regarding the short story collection under study in this article, no one has attempted to analyze it through Butler's point of view, yet. Some works have been written and published so far about this story collection among which there is the article "Re-writing the American Naturalist Short Story: Annie Proulx's Fine Just the Way It Is" (2012) by Aitor Ibarrola which regards representations and pessimistic determinism as the main ingredients of this story collection.

In addition, *Rough in County* (2010) is a collection of reviews and essays written by Joyce Carol Oates that focuses on many books and writers including Proulx. In this collection Oates has provided the reader with reviews on short-story collections of Proulx like *Close Range*, *Bad Dirt*, and *Fine Just the Way It Is*. Further, there is a book *Understanding Annie Proulx* (2001) by Karen L. Rood in which Rood explains Proulx's private life and her literary background. Besides, she provides critical evaluations of Proulx's two short-story collections: *Heart Songs and Close Range* and three novels: *Postcards*, *The Shipping News*, and *Accordion Crimes*. Moreover, Daniel Mendelsohn has written a review named "An Affair to Remember" (2006) on Proulx's short story, "Brokeback Mountain" and a movie made based on this short story with the same name. Caroline Fraser has written an article named "Customs of the Country" (2003) in which she has made significant evaluation on Proulx and her novel *That Old Ace in the Hole*. Hilary Mantel has written an article named "Figures in a Landscape" (2000) which speaks about Proulx's *Close Range* short-story collection in particular. Moreover, Alex Hunt has written a book named

The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx (2009) in which he mainly discusses Proulx's literary works and her emphasis on geography as a category shaped by culture; a culture which Proulx has depicted in her literary works through the characters, geography, and critical recognition of specific places.

The present article, as the previous arguments reveal, has limited itself to Butler's two main ideas. Her theories of vulnerability along with her famous gender performativity theory have been focused on in this research. Many books are written to elaborate Butler's theories and ideas, but the researcher's first sources are Butler's own writings.

Proulx's Characters' Gender Performativity

To grasp Butler's concept of gender performativity, one must have an understanding of "body". For Butler "body" is not an absolute materiality, it is a materiality that bears meaning. Since all bodies are manipulated by the existing cultural power, there is no natural body that pre-exists its cultural inscriptions. Furthermore, body is the locus of certain cultural signs which serves the heterosexual purposes. Hence, Butler declares that gender is not what one is; it is something one does or more precisely a sequence of acts. Butler believes that gender reality is Performative, in a sense, gender is real to the extent that it is performed.

Proulx's characters are struggling with regulatory norms and obligatory system of society which shapes the cultural values and signifying practices based on which gender and gender performativity have been constructed. "Family Man", is the story of Ray, an old man, a former ranch hand, who spends his rest of life in a retirement house. At the beginning of the story there is a description of retirement home depicting men and women's enactments in a small society urging for opposite sex. "There were not many men in the Mellow Horn Retirement Home, and those few were so set upon by the women that Berenice pitied them. She had believed the sex drive faded in the elderly, but these crones vied for the favors of palsied men with beef jerky arms" (Proulx 3). Even in the elderly age they feel the need to structure themselves as socially acceptable and normal. Enactment of desire for the opposite sex is one of the main gender performativity about which Butler explains. Butler believes one of the fundamental elements of any gender is attraction to the opposite sex. Besides, Ray confesses to his only granddaughter, Beth, that he has married several women in different parts of the country in one of her visits; Marriage is a heterosexual ritual for him to practice as a man. Recalling his memories, Ray puts in the picture of his rodeo experience in old days which was rewarded by a buckle signifying a lot to him. This buckle meant as a symbol of bravery and manhood. Ray defines manhood in this way: "The old boys was a rough crew. Heavy drinkers, most of them. You want to know what pain is try bull riding with a bad hangover" (11). Being rough, heavy drinking, tolerating pain, and undertaking difficult tasks like taming wild animals are among the characteristics of a real man in his idea. Male bodies strive to perform the difficult norms of their gender to gain social intelligibility and definite parameters of social sphere. His buckle stands as a proof for his perfect gender performance. "Ray snorted. 'A buckle used to mean something,' he said. 'A rodeo buckle, best part of the prize. The money was nothing in them days,' he said. 'We didn't care about the money. We cared about the buckle,' he said" (10).

In the story, "Them Old Cowboy Songs", Dorgan family as the richest family in the area, try their best to perform their gender roles thoroughly. To gain social credit, this family

does their greatest to follow and practice the social definitions of gender performativity in their ways of dressing, walking, greeting, and spending money. In this story the women become their clothes, and the clothes become them since the Dorgan female figures strive to keep the surface of their bodies as acceptable gendered bodies. Women are not different in nature. All of them monthly go through pains and troubles of menstruation, pregnancy, and breast feeding their babies, but the quality of gender performativity they follow establishes their identity and social level. Archie is another character in this story through whom obligatory standards of a macho figure in West America is manifested. Archie even in his private dreams is under the influence of definition of male gender provided by dominant culture. His dreams are gender bound and culture based dictated by ruling power. "He longed to be back on his own sweet place fencing his horse pastures, happy with Rose. He thought about the coming child, imagined the boy half-grown and helping him build wild horse traps in the desert, capturing the mustangs" (63). All the more so, he wishes these manly features for his likely son, since these elements convey the prominent aspects of a perfect western man. Another instance of Archie's capitulation to the gender norms happens in the story when he rejects to sleep with his fellow work men. He prefers to sleep out of the bunkhouse to protect himself from any possibility of sex offer. Strictly following the sexual gender roles, he barely accepts homosexuality. The dominant discourse of the society is for heterosexuality, therefore, as a man in quest of recognition; he avoids his coworkers as sex partners.

In, "The Great Divide," there is a clear-cut distinction between jobs for male and female members of the society. Mr. Ruff used to manage six horses and their heavy harnesses which is regarded as a macho job. Hence, Mrs. Ruff as a woman is full of tension and finds it a frightening business, therefore, she sells all the horses and wagons and other stuffs with the aim of shifting to a womanly job. She buys a sizable house and lunch a small lodging house as if she is expanding her female enactment of a housewife. As a result of the dominant belief of society, no one will trust a woman for such a manly job. This belief is so strong that finally makes her to establish a ladylike job to survive and be recognized in the realm of society. In another part of the story, as a mother of five children and to enact one of the greatest female roles, Helen is pregnant. Reproducing the gender role, she had internalized by watching actresses' gestures in the movies, she "put her hand on her belly as actresses did when they wanted to indicate that they were pregnant" (Proulx 100); representing a good stereotype of her gender for her children as an agency. There is a character in the story named Fenk who had tried to hang himself when he was a boy and consequently damaged his voice box. His voice has a womanish tune. This is a characteristic which makes his fellow men to make fun of him. Fenk's main means of communication to the world is his voice which does not function properly according to the gender-based society. In line with gender roles of the society any womanly characteristic detected in a man is condemned. Fenk requires his manly voice to be recognized and to sound intelligible by other people.

"Tits-Up in a Ditch" is the last story of this collection. The story goes about a girl, Dakotah. She has been abandoned at birth by her young mother, Shaina, and raised by her bitter grandparents, Bonita and Verl. As Proulx depicts it clearly, disobedience of any culturally established norms creates vital conflicts within the family. Shaina as a rebellious girl who

disobeys many gender definitions such as being a housewife, and acting as a devoted mother is totally rejected by her fellow citizens. She is called slut by her neighbors which represents their view of a woman superficial and culture bound. "...and then had become the high school slut, knocked up when she was fifteen and cutting out the day after Dakotah was born, slinking and wincing, still in her hospital johnny, down the backstairs of Mercy Maternity to the street, where one of her greasy palls picked her up and headed west for Los Angeles" (Proulx 179). This story pictures a scene in which Dakotah and her husband, Sash, fight over each other's responsibilities as wife and husband. There is a shift in performing their gender role as we see that Sash has no job and cannot afford costs of living, while Dakotah has a job and pays the rent and other costs. They could not perform their gender functions properly as expected in the heterosexual construction. Dakotah's and Sash Hicks' failure of enacting their gender functions entails their separation and divorce. If one can't perform one's part as the female or male figure in the family, he will get himself tits-up in a ditch.

Proulx's characters, striving to be recognized and obtain credit in their lives, do their best to perform their gender roles thoroughly. The characters' existence, honor, and esteem in the social sphere are bound to how they enact their gender function. They trust and carry out the norms, ideology has offered them through the regulations. Hence, they anticipate achieving an eminence asset; in contrast they chase a mirage. No matter how much effort they put in, finally all of them result in tragedy.

Vulnerability of the Characters

For Butler, vulnerability is another key factor of subject formation. She believes that the body is vulnerable due to two reasons. First, the body is vulnerable due to its corporeal condition and primary needs in the physical world. Second, this corporeal body which is dependent and has many needs to be fulfilled, is vulnerable since it has been surrounded by implied conventions and practices of ideology which can determine the body's condition to a degree. Besides, the level of vulnerability the body experiences is different from place to place since it is not only dependent on the violence of geophysical world, but also on the social, political, and economic conditions which are provided for the body by social systems. In second chapter of her book *Precarious Life* (2004), Butler explains vulnerability as a collective condition in which the body is physically vulnerable from the start of its existence. She elaborates the body's condition and dependency as a social phenomenon in public space. This dependency creates the body's major weakness, since the body is exposed to tragic events which are unknown and out of control. Butler writes: "Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure" (20). The body cannot emancipate from its foundation, flesh which is corporeal. Besides, this corporeal body has to encounter and experience not only the dangers of the physical world, but also the imposed conventions that the ideology has constructed.

The characters of Proulx's stories are vulnerable, because their collective condition of bodily life and interdependency on one another, on social, political, and economic condition threaten the characters' security. These changes and conditions can be severely harmful, since they are not stable and reliable. Considering that one of Proulx's fundamental concerns in her writing is change in social sphere,

vulnerability as a result of change (Rood 10) has been depicted so delicately and in the following parts the researcher has tried to dig into the deeper layers of the influence of change on constructing and intensifying vulnerability.

In "Them Old Cowboy Songs", Rose a member of low class is vulnerable to the structure of divisions in the society determined by the social grouping. Trying to overcome the burdens caused by class differences, she undergoes terrible experiences. We always see her escaping from the truth of her life. She hates her life style; her way of dressing, the cabin she lives in, doing the chores, and bringing heavy buckets of water from the river near the cabin. "She did not want to become like a homestead woman, skunky armpits and greasy hair yanked into a bun" (Proulx 53). She longs for a life like that of the Dorgans; luxurious dresses, an elegant mansion, and lavish journeys. "She did not want to be where she would have ... to suffer Mrs. Dorgan supercilious comments about 'some people' directed at Queeda but meant for Rose to hear, did not want to show rough and distended beside Queeda's fine dresses and slenderness" (Proulx 60).

Rose is even vulnerable to her own family; her drunkard father, her sick mother, and their unfortunate and miserable life. The awful situation makes her to run away from home and enter a worse condition in the society. Because of her family background she inevitably accepts Archie's proposal of marriage. "But what could you expect from a girl with a drunkard father, an uncontrolled girl who'd had the run of the station, saying rough drivers and exchanging low repartee with bumpkin cow hands, among them Archie Laverty, a low life who sang vulgar songs" (Proulx 52). Because of the poor condition Archie and Rose have, during the last months of her pregnancy, Archie asks her to join her family for care and protection while he is away for work. However, she does not consent to go back and face the terrible situation of her family again. This denial costs her a life. Due to her premature labor, she loses not only her baby but her own life. "Rose said that if she had to go to the station early September was soon enough. She did not want to be where she would have to tend her sick mother and put up with her drunk father" (Proulx 60). Due to the lack of needed sources and necessary support Rose loses her life and her baby. If she was provided the required assistance, she would have never died. Archie, as a young boy in search of a prosperous future, cannot make an appropriate decision about his job. He rejects a nearby opportunity to follow the connoted concept of cowboy imposed by the society. The very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. "The body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life" (Precarious Life 26). It seems that he has little autonomy over his choice of object, which is the exact spot of his vulnerability. According to the dominant concepts of the society being a cowboy is so brave and macho that he unconsciously goes after it. Another instance of lack of autonomy in Archie's life is when he decides to buy a piece of land. His choices are limited due to the governmental laws. "It would have cost nothing if they have filed for a homestead twice that size on public land, or eight times larger on desert land, but Archie feared the government would discover he was a minor, nor did he want a five-year burden of obligatory cultivation and irrigation" (Proulx 50). According to the governmental laws, he has little autonomy over his own

money to buy the land he desires.

"The Sagebrush Kid" is the next story in which Indians keep attacking passengers, drivers, telegraph operators, and steal horses, and the expensive coaches. The people of Red Desert, Wyoming, are suffered by this violence. This is a recognized vulnerability which disturbs the people and makes them to confront it. The unrecognized vulnerability which is more harmful according to Butler can be detected in the case of the sagebrush. It is the symbol of unrecognized vulnerability. All throughout the story the people or any living entity are affected by it. Many mysterious losses start happening around the bush such as vanishings of horses, oxen, and even passengers. The harmful function of the sagebrush kid stays unperceivable to the people who live next to it. The vulnerability of people toward sagebrush kid remains unknown as far as no one recognizes the structure of that vulnerability.

In the story, "The Great Divide", Hi and Helen as a newly married couple, start off growing corn and wheat on their farm counting on the increase of the prices at that special period of the Great War. "The war years had been good for farmers. Corn had gone to two dollars a bushel and it seemed wheat prices would keep rising" (Proulx 101). In hope of a better financial status and gaining a promotion to a higher economic and social level, they started working on the farm diligently. To achieve this goal, they spend all the money they got to buy a tractor. However, against their estimation, they face the reduction of wheat and corn prices. "Hi was counting on the corn and wheat prices staying up, and when corn dropped to forty-two cents and wheat plunged from three dollars fifty to a dollar, he was stunned. 'I don't understand how it could slide like that'" (Proulx 104). During the Prohibition era, He inaugurates his potato whiskey business in an old Indian cave and later he has been put in jail for making potato whiskey. His vulnerability towards governmental rules marks another economic failure in his life. This failure makes him socially vulnerable too. By being imprisoned, his social credit is undermined and his wife goes through the burden of begging for money to release him from the prison. "These imprisoned lives are viewed and judged such that they are deemed less than human, or as having departed from the recognizable human community" (Precarious Life 57). Hi's whole life changes drastically by a simple decision made by judge. This is a clear example of lack of subject's autonomy and the power of government in monitoring people of which Butler speaks in book mentioned above that "the law itself is either suspended or regarded as an instrument that the state may use in the service of constraining and monitoring a given population" (57). Individuals' vulnerability towards economic upheavals of society is precisely conceptualized in this part of the story. In

each era governments create the standard norms and laws in accord with the changes, no matter how and in what ways these rules "forcibly imposed set of normative rules" as Butler names them in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) can affect the life of people. Since this situation is out of Hi's control, the outcomes of his vulnerability are intensified.

Conclusion

Interpreting Annie Proulx's characters in her short stories reveals diverse forms of 'gender performativity' which is an inevitable feature of gendered bodies living with gender norms, besides 'vulnerability' as the certain characteristic of corporeal life of the subjects and as a socially constructed entity. In each story the characters choose different means and strategies to survive and be recognized through the obligatory norms of gender performativity. On the other hand, characters are either vulnerable toward what others do regarding socio economic upheavals or are physically vulnerable due to the lack of adequate infrastructures. Short stories of Proulx give a disclosed image of characters with little autonomy over social and political conventions as well as the importance of gender 'regulatory norms' on subject formation which the characters strive ineffectively to subvert.

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