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UNDOING GENDER PERFORMATIVITY IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS – *BALLERINO NATE* AND *WILLIAM'S DOLL*

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"It's a girl!" cried the nurse, holding the new – born baby in her hands.

This is how one's life invariably begins – with being sexually identified as male or female. As one grows up, one is coerced by hegemonizing social and cultural institutions such as family, religion and education, into playing the gender roles considered ideal for one's sexual identity. Beginning with parents getting a blue truck for the boy and a pink Barbie doll for the girl, people live their lives day by day perfecting the art of becoming the 'ideal' man or woman.

American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler read against the grain the historically constructed discourse between the sexual identity that is believed to be intrinsic and the gender identity that is under construction by culture and society. In her 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler formulated the theory of gender performativity.

The gender performativity theory puts forth that "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (*Gender Trouble* 33). According to the theory, gender is not what one "is" but what one "does." For a male or female individual to get identified as a man or woman is a "culturally enforced effect" that has to be cultivated, policed and enforced, says Butler.

Performativity of gender is ingrained in shaping the identity of an individual right from early childhood. Why does a 3-year-old male child favour guns and cars as toys, while a 3-year-old female child prefers dressing up Barbie dolls and playing house? What makes little boys impersonate policemen, while girls impersonate teachers? As grownups, what makes women lament loudly at a funeral, while men mourn in stoic silence?

The quest for answers unveils a vicious cycle, wherein the need to perform normalized gender roles is buttressed by social and cultural reinforcements which make people fall in line with the notion of 'normal' male or female. Invariably, all social and cultural institutions, from the family to the media, thrive on reinforcing and re-actualizing the norms of gender performativity.

In order to lead a self – actualized life, one needs to break out of limiting gender roles at many instances. This realization must begin right from childhood, when social patterns have just begun to attain fixture in one's mind. Many children's writers have strived to bring about this realization in children through their books, which deliver strong messages through an interesting, light - hearted plot and colourful, yet thought – provoking illustrations.

Ballerino Nate is a 2006 children's picture book set in a world of dogs, penned by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley. Nate, a boy in his early kindergarten, comes to know about ballet and becomes interested in learning the dance form. Nate's brother Ben jeers at him for desiring to learn a dance form which has been typically slotted for girls. However, Nate refuses to be cowed down by the taunts, and with the support of his mother, enrolls into a ballet class and becomes a "ballerino."

Ballerino Nate takes to task the aspect of gender performativity which typifies professions such as dance as characteristic of a specific gender. The story questions gender roles right from the title by using the word “ballerino” which is seldom in usage as it signifies a male ballet dancer. Ballet, or any other dance form, is a cultural marker for grace and femininity; a gauge for an ideally ‘performing’ woman. Thus in *Ballerino Nate*, the author, by making a male character learn ballet, breaks the norm of gender performativity and makes the young readers cross – examine the standards of performativity that have freshly congealed in their minds.

Language is used as an effective means of resisting hegemonic gender ideals. The narrative stresses that Nate learned stereotypical female words such as “ballerina” and “tutu.” Ben’s affirmation - “Boys can’t be ballerinas. They never, ever, ever, can” (*Ballerino* 15) is juxtaposed with “He danced . . . He danced on the smooth cold tiles . . . He danced on the rough hard driveway” (*Ballerino* 10 - 11).

When Nate declares his desire to learn ballet, Ben, who is in second grade and who “knew almost everything” calls ballet “Stupid stuff . . . Girls in dresses” (*Ballerino* 7). Ben is the foil to Nate. He represents the collective culture that ridicules people who do not adhere to the heteronormative performativity pattern. Ben is always shown with a stereotypical ‘male’ toy in hand, like a video game and a baseball. Ben serves to reinforce the fact that the ideals of performativity are ingrained in children right from the beginning of their school days. Just two years older than Nate, he is already a product of the paradigm that forces children out of their individuality and coerces them to fall prey to the ideals of heteronormative gender performativity. It is the habitual disease of replacing ‘most’ with ‘all’ that has caused the greatest conflicts in human history. The author addresses this case when Ben says that ‘all’ ballerinas are girls, and the over – generalization is rectified by Nate’s father – ‘most’ ballerinas are girls.

Ballerino Nate is a critique of the society that has matured enough to allow its women to take on typically masculine professions but still look down upon men who wish to take up professions such as music and dance, since they are not the usual bread – winning ones. The story effectively bridges this gap in the end, when Nate’s mother explains, “Dancing is their job. Like professional baseball players . . . Major league dancing” (*Ballerino* 25). The story ends as Nate exclaims in wonder at the ballerinos – “[They] are boys!” and his mother retorts, “Men!” (*Ballerino* 29)

One of the earliest children’s books to address the problems of performativity is *William’s Doll* by Charlotte Zolotow, published in 1972. The book tells the story of a little boy who longs to have a doll but is teased by his brother and his neighbour for desiring a typical girls’ toy. “He is a boy . . . why does he need a doll?” (*William* 30) asks his father, and buys him a basketball and an electric train set. Finally, William’s grandmother understands his wish and gets him a pretty doll to be treasured and cared for.

William, the protagonist, is literally undoing gender performativity in the illustrations which show him ‘performing’ the actions of cuddling and caring for a doll even without an actual one in hand. “He wanted to give it a bottle and take it to the park . . . and bring it back home and undress it and put it to bed. And pull down the shades and kiss it good night,” (*William* 6-8) writes the author, teasing the reader’s mind into wondering why a boy wants to do ‘girly’ activities. Just then, she subtly drops a crucial sentence - “just as though he were its father and it were his child” (*William* 10). When William’s grandmother finally gets him a doll, she tells his father, “He needs it . . . when he’s a father like you he’ll know how to take care of his baby” (*William* 30-32).

The illustrations show two figures – William’s brother and his neighbor - creeping at the background and constantly watching over William. The two boys, calling William a “creep” and a “sissy,” play the equivalent of Ben in *Ballerino Nate*. They hold racquets in red and blue, which are colours associated with masculinity. These characters represent peer pressure, one of the earliest factors that confront children who are different from the norm.

William’s Doll is a seminal text in children’s literature, which teaches its readers that the father and the mother must equally share the process of bringing up a child. Through *William’s Doll*, the author deconstructs the notion that the performativity of motherhood is quintessential for a woman. It is remarkable that Zolotow started writing the story when she observed that her husband always left the room when their baby’s diaper had to be changed, leaving it out to be the mother’s job.

In a society that will soon step into the post – feminist era, both men and women are still held captive by the silent power of performativity that is deeply engraved in the social and cultural fabric all around the world. Under the watchful eye of gender performativity, each individual dances to the tune which people have collectively set up as a society. In earlier struggles rooted in gender issues, the spear was largely aimed at external factors such as social rights and economic equality. To escape the clutches of performativity, though, it is the demons residing in one's own mind that one has to fight.

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