

Gender Performance by Miranda Priestly as the Main Character in Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada*

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Abstract. This research was aimed to describe the gender performance of Miranda Priestly as the main character in Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada*. As the data of the study were in the form of sentences, dialogue, phrases, and narrative, a qualitative method is served by using a literature review. It is chosen because the qualitative method is based on human behaviors or actions. Furthermore, this study also analyzed gender and feminism as a part of human behaviors and actions. In analyzing the data, the researcher used Judith Butler's postmodernism feminist theory as an approach to describe gender performance in Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada*. The result of the study indicates that Miranda Priestly's gender performance is displayed through her general description and gender reconstruction. The findings show that through Miranda Priestly's general description, her gender performance was described as an influential and successful chief editor of *American Runway* magazine. It further shows Miranda Priestly's gender reconstruction by challenging the gender stereotypes toward women's characterizations and performing masculine traits. By reconstructing her gender, Miranda Priestly's gender performance reveals that gender is performative and carries a variety of actions or behaviors that are revised, updated and transformed throughout time.

Keywords: gender performance, gender stereotypes, postmodernism feminist theory, reconstructing gender

1 Introduction

Many people still perceive that gender and sex are the same identities to define men and women. Since an individual was born, a males' gender would be valued with masculine characteristics, while a female's gender would be valued with feminine characteristics. Sex is related to biological structures from an individual, whereas gender is more related to an individual's characterizations.

Society is well-known as the ruler of social life that establishes values, codes, stereotypes, or ideologies for people to implement in their daily life. One of society's rules is gender stereotypes that rule both men and women to define their gender in their daily lives.[1] Society creates rules and concepts about women. All of those rules and concepts would be a culture, and culture becomes a way of life.

Being a part of society, many women encounter gender stereotypes in defining their gender. They have labeled by society and cultural constructs, and those labels strapped to women in their lives [2]. Although many females are valued with feminine characteristics, the development of civilizations and opportunities in the globalization era has driven many women to choose and define their own gender with or without adopting gender stereotypes. [3] Many women have shown their capabilities and strength in political, economic, or agriculture fields as they have more tenacity and carefulness that most men do not have.

One of the developed countries, The United States, has shown that many women could successfully reconstruct their gender by having better education or reaching the top positions in any field of life. [4] Feminine characteristics such as well-behaved, patient, weak, emotional, and peevish are assessments and biased constructions as these characteristics could be replaced, swapped, or vanished from time to time.

Through literary works, the readers could also find how gender is not an absolute identity where both men and women need to accept and follow in defining their gender. By gaining better education and choosing their career path, women have shown that they successfully reconstruct gender stereotypes that do not suit them. Reconstructing gender stereotypes could be done by handing women an important role as a leader [5].

By being aware that gender is not the same as sex in defining individual's identity, many women could have the same acknowledgement and opportunity in their social life. When society could construct gender stereotypes to define women's characterizations, women could also reconstruct it if they do not suit women's interests, ambitions, purposes, dreams, and beliefs in performing their gender.

As the world has been evolving, many women have improved themselves by pursuing their education and their knowledge to a higher level. The image of modern women is no longer just to dedicate their lives to men or home and children but also their interests [6]. Choosing *The Devil Wears Prada* by Lauren Weisberger, the research reveals how Miranda Priestly could show that gender stereotypes toward women are not absolute standards that every woman needs to follow as they could be reconstructed and changed.

Several similar studies have previously conducted in analyzing *The Devil Wears Prada* as the following. There are Babelyuk and Galaidin (2019) in their study entitled "The Image of Wise Woman in a Literary Text (Based on the Novel *The Devil Wears Prada* By Lauren Weisberger)". Using similar genre of postmodern literary text, this research revealed the image of a wise woman who gives much of their interests to their education and having professional positions in society [6]. However, this research's approach did not employ postmodern feminist theory as it employed lexical means and stylistic devices in analysing the Novel "*The Devil Wears Prada*".

The second study was written in 2020 by Putri in her article entitled "Dekonstruksi Girl Power Dalam Novel *The Devil Wears Prada* Karya Lauren Weisberger". The research analyzed gender reconstruction where the image of weak and passive stereotyped women could be reconstructed into the image of an intellectual and independent woman who was illustrated as a masculine woman because she is powerful and dominant [7]. The research gap was found in its approach of using deconstruction theory by Jacques Derrida.

Another study was written in 2015 by Wang, John, and Griskevicius in their article entitled "The Devil Wears Prada? How Luxury Consumption Influences Social Behaviors". Using psychological and behavioral consequences of luxury consumption, they identified that people who wear luxury products could influence their psychology and behaviors in gaining their social status for being more powerful than others [8]. However, this research employed quantitative research by using four experiments.

According to the previous studies, none of them analyzes *The Devil Wears Prada* by using postmodernism feminist theory by Judith Butler, and this is why this research is conducted to describe gender performance of Miranda Priestly in Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada*.

By using the postmodernism feminist theory by Judith Butler, this research analyzed gender performance described by Miranda Priestly as the main character in Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada*. [9] Performing gender as a form of identity is not expressive but performative. It means that gender is acts that are repeated. In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", [10] gender is not a concrete fact because it is created by various actions. If there is not any action then there is not any gender. When gender is considered as performative acts, the gender stereotypes that are expected to be performed and produced would be blurry as it is constructed by society in building the uniform gender.

Therefore, through postmodernism feminist approach, this research analyzed that Miranda Priestly's characterizations present gender performance as a form of challenge to women's stereotypes in defining their gender. In performing their gender, women might challenge or reconstruct the gender stereotypes as they do not fit into her interests, ambitions, purposes, or beliefs in performing her gender.

2 Methods

This research employs a qualitative approach. As the object of the study is a novel, the literature review is used to analyzed the object of the study. [11] One of the qualitative research types is a literature review. It is done by collecting preferences through primary and secondary materials. By using qualitative research, the researcher could understand the topic through explanation, analysis, and interpretation.

To describe gender performance by Miranda Priestly, this research also employs postmodernism feminist theory by Judith Butler. Moreover, to gather all of the data, the researcher begins with conducting an extensive reading on Judith Butler's postmodernism feminist theory and to find the proper text that described gender performance of Judith Butler's posrmodernism feminist theory, the researcher also read, identified, and classified the data collected from Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada*.

In analyzing data, the writer interprets the meaning of the explicit and implicit sentences to know the answer to the statement of the problems by using feminism and gender approach, which is postmodernism feminist approach by Judith Butler. Started from examining the gender stereotypes constructed by Miranda Priestly in the novel, the analysis was continued by finding the masculine characterizations displayed by Miranda Priestly and revealing Judith Butler's gender performance through Postmodernism Feminist Theory in defining women's gender.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Gender Performance Described By Miranda Priestly As The Main Character in Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada*

The Devil Wears Prada depicts the world of smart, beautiful, skinny, and fashionable women who work for the famous fashion magazine, *Runway*, which is also managed by the magazine's successful editor, Miranda Priestly. Published in 2003, *The Devil Wears Prada* portrays how many modern women are highly educated and economically stable. They display how modern women could be one step ahead of men for not being dependent on them since they can look for themselves. To reveal the gender performance by Miranda Priestly as the main character in *The Devil Wears Prada*, the researcher divides the result into the following parts:

3.1.1 Gender Stereotypes Reconstructed by Miranda Priestly Through General Description

Miranda Priestly's general description is described into two parts. The first part is her physical appearance, and the second part is her personality traits.

Being narrated by her second assistant, Andrea, Miranda was described with a skinny body and gentle fingers that look like a concert pianist. She also appeared with a head and chin that is almost forced to go forward. In the novel, Andrea stated "I was surprised to see how willowy she was. She had perfect posture – rare for a tall women – and held her head high, pronounced chin proudly forward, in a manner so natural it seemed almost forced" (Weisberger, 2003, 21). Observing how Miranda tries to take care of her body and manage her posture as well as possible indicates that Miranda Priestly has turned herself into a modern woman.

Although Miranda Priestly was displayed as an old woman, her body had not aged. She always wore a fashionable outfit every time she came to work. "Within minutes, every PR account exec and assistant working at Michael Kors, Gucci, Prada, Versace, Fendi, Armani, Chanel, Barney's, Chloé, Calvin Klein, Bergdorf, Roberto Cavalli, and Saks would be messengering over (or, in some cases, hand-delivering) every skirt they had in stock that Miranda Priestly could conceivably find attractive" (Weisberger, 2003, 47). With various kinds of clothes, coats, bags, or shoes, Miranda only wore overpriced brands for her outfits. Michael Kors, Gucci, Prada, Versace, Fendi, Armani, Chanel, Barney's, Chloé, Calvin Klein, Bergdorf, Roberto Cavalli, and Saks are known as a variety of luxury clothing brands in the fashion world that most of the time were worn by Miranda. Surrounded by luxurious things on her outfits displays that Miranda Priestly is economically empowered. She earns money and fulfills her life without being dependent on her husband when gender stereotypes expect women to rely on their lives on men.

Through Miranda's personality traits, her characterizations appears as a tough chief editor at *Runway* company and a perfectionist mother to her twin daughters. Being a leader for a big and famous magazine, Miranda is such an ambitious editor. When the results of the work did not satisfy her, she would not be afraid to start it all over again. Through Miranda's assistant, "Miranda was, as far as I could tell, a truly fantastic editor. Not a single word of copy made it into the magazine without her explicit, hard-to-obtain approval, and she wasn't afraid to scrap

something and start over,” (Weisberger, 2003, 225). It indicates that Miranda is very energetic and passionate when it comes to *Runway*.

Not only performing as a leader, Miranda was also a mother with two daughters. Her characterization shows that Miranda plays two roles as a mother in the family and a chief editor at the company. Having double roles indicates Miranda's gender performance does not adopt gender stereotypes toward women's characterizations as gender stereotypes expect women to become mothers and stay at home. When Miranda was called she stated “Yes, Ahn-dre-ah? This had better be important. You know how I feel about being interrupted when I'm spending time with the girls,” (Weisberger, 2003, 99-100). Being a working mother describes Miranda's gender performance as being an industrious woman.

Miranda's general description was portrayed as a modern, independent, and economically empowered woman and also a tough, ambitious, and perfectionist leader. Therefore, Miranda's gender performances through her general description do not reflect the gender stereotypes toward women's characterizations since women are expected to act soft, passive, obedient, and lower than men.

3.1.2 Miranda Priesly's Gender Performance

Gender stereotypes are widely recognized as misleading generalizations of male and female characteristics. Women are always illustrated as a girly, soft, weak, passive, or subordinate side of society. Although gender stereotypes or assumptions are believed and expected as 'the standard' for every female in performing their gender, none of these stereotypes or assumptions about women could be attributed to every woman since every female has her own interests, ambitions, and purposes. Through *The Devil Wears Prada*, Miranda revealed how gender stereotypes were being challenged and reconstructed.

Performing her gender by challenging gender stereotypes toward women's characterizations, Miranda Priestly showed that gender stereotypes did not fit her interests, ambitions, purposes, and beliefs in performing her gender. Miranda was raised by a poor and devout family with the family tradition to have blue-collar jobs and build a large family. As Miranda chose to follow her dreams and ambitions that differ from her family tradition, she left out from her house and worked for a British designer. In the novel, it tells “Miriam was the single exception to the family tradition. After saving the small bills her older siblings would slip her whenever they were able, Miriam promptly dropped out of high school upon turning seventeen – a mere three months shy of graduation – to take a job as an assistant to an up-and-coming British designer, helping him put together his shows each season.” (Weisberger, 2003, 40). It described that she did not follow the gender stereotypes that expect women to rely on their lives in men. By starting to live on her own, she performed her gender to be an independent woman who had purposes to be achieved.

Being presented from woman's point of view, Miranda's gender performance was described as a powerful woman in the world. Through her previous assistant who had been promoted, she stated “I was just promoted to an editor position, and that's the really great thing about working for Miranda. Yes, the hours are long and the work is tough, but it's incredibly glamorous and a million girls would die to do it. And Miranda is such a wonderful woman, editor, person, that she really takes care of her own girls. You'll skip years and years of working your way up the ladder by working just one year for her; if you're talented, she'll send you straight to the top,

and..." (Weisberger, 2003, 19). Working for Miranda Priestly was well-known with an 'A job million girls would die for' utterance that indicates that it is such a competitive job that only a lucky girl could have it. Miranda had a lot of international relations with a lot of important figures in the world that also indicates she is one of the influencing figures in the world. When women used to be positioned as the subordinate side of the society, Miranda's gender performance by being a powerful and influencing woman in the world reconstructs it to be the superior side of the society.

Although the novel is dominated by women's roles and works, it also presents Miranda's gender performance in challenging gender stereotypes toward women's characterizations through men's point of view. Miranda Priestly perceives differently from women who used to be forbidden to have better education and work outside the house. One of the male character acknowledged Miranda's power in his utterance "Just think! Your first job out of college, and you're working for the most important woman at the most profitable magazine at the biggest magazine publishing company in the entire world." (Weisberger, 2003, 81). Most of the male characters in the novel acknowledged and respect Miranda's superiority as the most important woman who works at the most profitable and biggest magazine publishing company in the world. Those characterizations described that Miranda's gender performance challenge the gender stereotypes toward women's characterizations that women should not be a leader and depend on their lives on men. When women are expected to be lower than men, Miranda performs her gender to be the most important and go higher over men.

Not only challenging gender stereotypes toward women's characterizations, Miranda Priestly also reconstruct it by performing masculine traits that are expected to be adopted by males. The first Miranda's masculine trait is being a leader for a big and famous fashion magazine in the world. The novel stated "Although the various fashion editors called in the clothes to shoot, Miranda alone selected the looks she wanted and which models she wanted wearing each one; the sittings editors might be the ones at the actual shoots, but they were simply executing Miranda's specific and incredibly detailed instructions. She had the final – and often even the preliminary – say over every single bracelet, bag, shoe, outfit, hair style, story, interview, writer, photo, model, location, and photograph in every issue, and that made her, in my mind, the main reason for the magazine's stunning success each month. *Runway* wouldn't be *Runway* – hell, it wouldn't be much of anything at all – without Miranda Priestly" (Weisberger, 2003, 226). Based on the quotation, it describes Miranda's masculine performance as a chief editor as being the superior figure for *Runway*. It also describes Miranda's masculine performance as a chief editor by having a major contribution to *Runway*'s success each month reconstructing gender stereotypes toward women's characterizations that women used to be positioned as the second-class in society.

Secondly, Miranda's masculine trait is her main role in supporting her two daughters' life. Through her assistant's utterance "Maybe from their \$18,000-a-year private school, where French was a required subject and all three of the French teachers were native speakers?" (Weisberger, 2003, 223) Miranda's masculine trait in her family as being a provider and supporter mother for her daughters. Earning her own money by being a working mother represents that Miranda reconstructs the gender stereotypes toward women's characterizations where women are powerless and should depend their lives on men.

Lastly, Miranda's masculine trait is her role in society. Having a top position in the world especially in the fashion industry, Miranda's impact in her society, New York the United States, has been widely acknowledged and honored. The novel stated "When at the shows, she went herself from runway to runway, sketchbook in hand, preparing herself to come back to the States and tell New York society what they would be wearing – and middle America what they'd like to be wearing – via the only *Runway* that actually mattered (Weisberger, 2003, 237). it describes Miranda's masculine performance as being the ruling character in the fashion industry by influencing fashion expertise. Miranda spreads her mastery through *Runway* magazine that performs masculine traits as her role in society should be filled with men who are expected to occupy the top position.

3.1.3 Judith Butler's Impact of Gender Performance's Theory On Redefining Gender Roles

Based on Butler's theory, either feminists or society should not try to define how to be a woman because she believes that either feminists or society should only focus on providing a place for women to shape and construct their gender. Butler views that gender needs to be seen as a performance, not an essence. By repeating acts, behaviors, or desires that challenge gender expectations, a woman could reconstruct her gender. Therefore, women could choose and perform their gender by reshaping or reconstructing it into what they desire to be.

The quotations from the novel reveal Miranda's characterizations in *The Devil Wears Prada*. Through postmodernism feminist theory by Judith Butler, the researcher analyzed Miranda's characterizations presented gender as a form of social construct that society creates to shape women in the same way. Describing Miranda's gender performances, the researcher presents Miranda's gender reconstruction in performing her gender. In Miranda's gender reconstruction, the researcher describes Miranda's general descriptions that are followed with Miranda challenging the gender stereotypes toward women's characterizations and performing masculine traits. Her performances in reconstructing gender represent postmodern feminism theory by Judith Butler as she lives with her ambitions and dreams to be what kind of woman she wants to be and is provided with a place for her to challenge and reshape her gender.

4. CONCLUSION

The result of this research is that Miranda Priestly's characterizations describes gender performance in Judith Butler's postmodernism feminist theory. In describing the gender performance of Miranda Priestly, the researcher breaks down into two following sub-chapters:

First, general description of Miranda Priestly cover her physical appearances and personality traits. Through a general description of Miranda Priestly, the researcher concludes that her gender performance is described as an influential and successful chief editor of American *Runway* magazine. Her physical appearance displays Miranda as a modern, fashionable, independent, and economically empowered woman in performing her gender.

Second, reconstructing gender of Miranda Priestly in performing her gender is done by challenging gender stereotypes toward women's characterizations and performing masculine traits. By challenging gender stereotypes toward women's characterizations, she challenges her

family tradition where she left the house and followed her interests and ambitions that leads her becomes a leader at American *Runway*. Moreover, from women's point of view, Miranda's gender performance is described as a powerful and impactful woman in the world. From a men's point of view, Miranda's gender performance is described as a successful woman and the superior class in society. By performing masculine traits, Miranda plays a role as a chief editor. As a female leader, Miranda performs some masculine traits such as having supremacy, active, energetic, and being the dominant and superior character. In the family, Miranda's masculine performance as being the provider, supporter, and an economically empowered mother as she does not depend herself and her daughter's lives on her husband. The last part of Miranda's masculine performance is her role in society where she is described as the ruling character in the fashion industry, the superior side of society, and the heroic figure for American *Runway*.

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