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Cultural Gendering and the Shaping of Identity in David Dabydeen’s The Intended

A Social Constructionist and Psychoanalytic Analysis

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Introduction

Black British literature has sparked a good deal of interest in the postcolonial era. It can be defined in the words of Bénédicte Ledent as “designed to describe writing by authors based in Britain but with origins in former British colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean.” (16) Ledent also states that the phrase was at first conveniently used as a political tool, rather than a racial label, in order to link writers’ ethnicities to British national identity. Nonetheless, Eurocentric representations of the former colonizer and the outcast colonized can still be seen in novels such as David Dabydeen’s *The Intended*, which is often analyzed as representative of Black British literature and the postcolonial era. Indeed, the hopes of the narrator and protagonist of the novel to attain a sense of belonging in England is influenced by colonial representations of the former British Empire. In colonial discourse, whiteness is synonymous with culture, intelligence, sophistication, and genius, while it reminds the protagonist of his own skin color as a physical trait of otherness and Guyanese origins associated with baseness. These former Eurocentric colonial representations make British identity attractive to the narrator as much as they make him aware of his difference as an immigrant in the metropolis1 (Fee 116, 117, 121, 123). This results in an alienating experience whereby the protagonist is riven by a simultaneous sense of inclusion and exclusion, which translates into a conflict between two cultures. Although the term Black British leads the immigrant to think that he belongs to the white national identity, the phrase paradoxically points out the

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1 Margery Fee propounds this idea by stating that Jospeh and Janet “map out the bleak opposition that the dominant stereotypes force in those categorized as Other: assimilate (and, implicitly vanish into the majority) or just vanish into the shadows of the margin” (116).
coexistence of two identities associated with two cultures that push away mutually and cannot coexist in a stable identity\(^2\) (Stein xvi).

*The Intended*, whose protagonist thinks European education and literary production can help him compensate for his color, has been conspicuously understudied from a postcolonial approach when it comes to analyzing the alienating experience that he undergoes in England. Notably, Dabydeen’s use of intertextuality in *The Intended* has been underlined in the analysis of postcolonial concerns regarding race, ethnicity, and national identity (Fee 120; McIntyre 159; Jackson 436; Frank 3, Richler 42). This intertextuality appears in the narrator’s strive for stylistic grandeur like the writers of the British canon, which is a source of alienation for him. In the same manner as skin color is associated with otherness, this seemingly unattainable literary production by white writers associated with cultural values of whiteness becomes a norm to be matched in order to attain a sense of belonging (Fee 108-10, 117, 120, 123). In this sense Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* has been pointed out as underlying the narrative of *The Intended*. Conrad’s novel, which belongs to the colonial era and the British canon, thus could be regarded as embedding *The Intended* deeper in traditional, alienating colonial representations\(^3\).

However, *The Intended* can be considered a novel that celebrates cultural plurality as a means to raise awareness concerning colonial representations. As stated by Kevin Frank, the novel can therefore be understood from these two radically different perspectives shown through the literary aspirations of the protagonist:

\(^2\) The adjective “black” is a physical trait that underlines a difference that makes a minority group stand out as particular and in opposition to the term “British” to speak of the national identity, commonly associated with whiteness. “White British,” is indeed not spoken of and sounds odd.

\(^3\) Although it is likely that an attentive reader will understand *The Intended* subverts and dismantles colonial thinking, it remains that the novel offers an explicit double vision of the immigrant in relation to racial considerations that needs to be reflected upon to reach such a conclusion.
The narrator’s quest involves a struggle with the literary imagination, a struggle to find a voice and language that meaningfully represent the humanly necessary truths of his experience. Because of colonialism, that experience is both hybrid and hegemonic, and therein lies a central conflict. (Frank 5)

On the one hand, the protagonist’s sense of exclusion in England stands out from the narrative and can be considered reinforced by the element of intertextuality as the alienating continuation of colonial discourse that underlies it (McIntyre 153). On the other hand, from a postmodern perspective, the novel can be considered a celebration of cultural plurality, which in turn encourages the reader to reflect critically on classical representations of the colonizer and the colonized. Karen McIntyre defines this space of binary opposites as “questioning the impulse towards the recuperation of a common ancestry or cultural unity and thus circumventing charges of both essentialism and of the complete loss of individual identity through hybridization” (McIntyre 158).

Existing analyses of *The Intended* have thus largely focused on unveiling alienating dynamics related to race in the postcolonial era. However, some researchers have to some extent focused on gender in order to explore the influence of culture on the self in the shaping of identity, such as Elizabeth Jackson, and most notably Amira Richler, whose analysis takes into account the ties of the narrator to his Guyanese origins and the influence thereof. On the one hand, Jackson has analyzed the extensive objectification of women through a critique of masculinity and pornography; on the other hand, Richler has called attention to gender instability, and the narrator’s homosocial desire toward his immigrant friends, thereby excluding female characters to a large extent. In that respect, Mushira
Habib’s essay “Black Desires, White Beauties” studies gender by analyzing the relationship between the narrator and his girlfriend Janet; yet, her essay does not consider other characters in the novel, and thus ignores a major part of interpersonal interactions that might help shed light over cultural influences on the self and gender. In addition, although Habib draws textual comparisons and conclusions that deal with the psyche to some extent, it does not rest on psychoanalytical concepts that would overcome textual limitations, hence making possible a deeper understanding of the connections between cultural influences and the psyche. Furthermore, aside from an intent to focus on a particular gender, Habib’s and Jacksons’s analyses have been conducted by comparing The Intended with other writings, thus preventing a full focus on the novel.

Consequently, although currently existing research has underscored a cultural influence on the self, whether it be through a study of colonial discourse or gender, it has barely focused on attempting to clarify the connections between cultural influences and the psyche. This presupposes the consideration of language and how cultural representations are mediated and integrated into the self. In this regard, since gender is undeniably a substantial part of the self, it arguably constitutes the best anchor point for this analysis. Therefore, through the study of cultural representations of gender that emerge from The Intended with concepts of gender performativity and androgyny, as well as Lacan’s concept of lack and the Oedipus, this analysis will attempt to give a deeper understanding of language as the vehicle for cultural constructs of men and women and its inadequacy to represent individualities.

In order to study and understand the impact of culture on gender representations and the self in The Intended, a cultural influence on the psyche must be
acknowledged and to some extent accounted for. As a result, it seems difficult—and would largely impede the analysis—to dissociate the novel from the postcolonial era in which it was written.

**On Gender, Culture, Language, and the Psyche**

A generic definition of gender is provided by Chris Beasley: “Gender in Western society refers to a **binary** division (into two categories) of human beings and social practices to the point of this division even being construed as oppositional” (11). But it should be noted that various understandings of gender have been developed within Gender Theory. Thus, an all-encompassing definition, aside from being an impossible task to undertake and subject to debate, may also appear reductive (Beasley 12).

However, Beasley with this definition highlights the notion of culture by speaking of social practices and their impact on gender representations, which allows for relevant connections and clarifications concerning gender performativity, language, and the psyche required for this analysis. Indeed, culture can be defined as: the ideas, customs and social behavior of a particular people or society (“Culture,” def. 2). In this regard, human beings, hence characters in *The Intended*, must be understood as pertaining to a specific culture the social customs and practices of which have been constructed and normalized through history in the sustained social interactions between men and women. Since gender representations are related to social practices of a culture that always precedes the individual born in it, and extensively conflated into either body of the male-female binary, an influence of culture and gender norms on the self must be taken into account and understood from a Social Constructionist perspective. Borrowing from the work of
Mary M. Gergen and Kenneth J. Gergen⁴, Alexandra Galbin summarizes succinctly well the general axiom of this theory:

> It [Social Constructionism] is concerned with the ways in which knowledge is historically situated and embedded in cultural values and practices. According to this approach, meanings are socially constructed via the coordination of people in their various encounters; therefore, it is always fluid and dynamic (qtd. in Galbin 89).

This conclusion by Galbin concerning culture and social practices poses the question of meaning and language in human experience, which is in connection to Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity central to this analysis.

Indeed, Butler contends that gender can be performed, hence social interactions that have been maintained and reenacted through time have created fixed gender norms of the male-female binary. But, following the same logic, gender is performative, which means that the shared meanings of what it is to be a man or a woman can be challenged through the body, and there is in that sense a patent cultural pressure and influence of these gender norms (Meyerhoff 1; “Judith Butler” 00:00-03:00).

Taking into account the aforementioned considerations, gender must be considered an axis where masculinity and femininity work as abstractions that overlap, and wherein androgyny can occur as the combination of feminine and masculine characteristics (“Androgyny”). It is within this space that classical gender representations can be subverted as pointed out by R. W. Connell: “Without

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concepts such as ‘masculinity’ or ‘femininity’ we could be unable to talk about the questions of gender ambiguity…or about the contradictions in personality that are so important in psychoanalysis” (17).

Consequently, gender representations as well as the human body and experience must be put in relation to language, but apprehended in the broad sense of the term: a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures, or marks having understood meanings (“Language,” def. 2). Language is indeed the means of humans to describe reality, but most importantly to generate meanings and thus alter it, in order to live in community. Hence, following Butler's argument, cultural human behaviors exist in language as belonging to the broader field of semiotics; they generate meanings that are in turn conceptualized in linguistic signifiers commonly accepted as truth and conflated into fixed cultural gender norms, wherefrom it can be argued that there is an unconscious language of gender. Indeed, if language is the medium that reinforces human behaviors into culturally embedded gendered behaviors while it allows for the attribution of and reflection upon their meanings, these gendered behaviors are arguably rooted in language and indissociable from it. Butler admits to this relation between gender norms and language: “performativity must be understood not as a deliberate “act,” but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (Butler 2).

Therefore, in order to study gendered behaviors in relation to a pre-existing language that is culturally embedded and can be unconsciously integrated, the human psyche must be taken into account as the mind in its totality (“Psyche”). In this regard, the Lacanian structure of the psyche, which the psychoanalyst thought as “structured like a language,” can prove insightful in the analysis (Johnston).
Notably, Lacan’s conceptualization of his Oedipus and lack will be introduced in the third section of this thesis as it will help highlight the relation between the unconscious language of gender and the integration of gender constructs. In *The Intended*, culture generally holds sway over the characters, and especially the narrator whose thought process is fraught with inconsistencies caused by conflicting gender representations of two different cultural environments, mainly wielded by other characters. Most of these characters are dispossessed of their individualities through language and culture that condition them in a continuation of gender stereotyped representations, which is however contrasted by the subversion of the gender binary to some extent. In this sense, gender in *The Intended* will be studied as both performed and performative.

**Guyanese Masculinity and Femininities**

In *The Intended*, gender relations between men and women are well-informed by the narrator’s memory of his time in Guyana, wherein representations of masculinity and femininities emerge and conflict with these of Britain throughout the novel; it is consequently important to dwell on them in the first instance. These recollections of the narrator clearly show how men and women rely strongly on their cultural environment and act in the reinforcement of pre-existing constructed gender norms. However, while a single vision of Guyanese masculinity seems to stand out, women’s behaviors arguably constitute different femininities that put into question gender categorization.

A first glimpse of Guyanese masculinity is given by the narrator in his recollections of his grandfather, who is depicted as a purveyor for the family that cares for his reputation in a rural environment. He wakes up the narrator for no
apparent reason and takes him on a venture that resembles a rite of passage into Guyanese manhood as the young boy will soon fly to England. In this instance, the narrator takes the role of the apprentice, who follows the grandfather as the teacher of what it means to be a man by reinforcing what, according to the narrator, is a gendered behavior for men in Guyana: stealing a lamb back home (Dabydeen 25-28). This act of theft is an implicit example of harmful behavior as the manifestation of the Guyanese hypermasculine atmosphere5 (“Guyana: Domestic Violence” and “Guyana 2018 Crime”).

In *The Intended*, a relevant example of physical harm in the private sphere is best represented in a graphic episode when the narrator’s father beats up his wife to then have sex with her under the eyes of his children (39-40). In the Caribbean, intimate partner violence (IPV) caused by men is a recurrent topic; in a 2015 research article by Halimah A.F DeShong and Tonya Haynes the focus of which is put on the reaction of the public sphere to IPV, principally in Guyana, evidence is provided that violence toward women might have become an ideology over time through gender normativity: “media representations frame women’s agency negatively and reinforce harmful, heterosexist gender ideologies, which were also echoed in the interviews with some state managers” (“Intimate Partner Violence” 92). Significantly, the research article underlines the fact the media often puts forward the narrative of infidelity, wherein sociocultural rules of respectability imputed to the woman in the couple become a justification for the husband’s abusive behavior

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5 The related sources show that violence in Guyana is widespread. The 2018 report on crime and safety states that “serious crimes (murder, armed robbery) are common” and although they principally occur in Georgetown, they also do “in other parts of the country as well” (Crime Threats). As for the 2012 report on domestic violence, it mentions a 2000 study, which found that “40 percent of women had experienced domestic abuse.” The report also mentions a rise in domestic violence in the years 2009 and 2012 (1. Situation), as well as a general problem concerning law enforcement to palliate the problem (2. State Protection).
This is a clear example of how gender is both performed and performative, for indeed, a wife has to align with a gendered image of purity and dependency on the husband associated with the private sphere. This image of feminine dependency constitutes the basis of the dynamic that is expected of a respectable couple that can be socially and culturally accepted, and the reproduction of which, encourages existent gender norms. (DeShong, “Policing Femininity” 85-87, 91 and “Intimate Partner Violence” 84, 90). In *The Intended*, aggressivity and honor as the manifestation of masculinity are proven gendered values in instances of gender performativity; not only does the narrator’s father beat up his wife, but he utilizes the same aforementioned constructed narrative of her infidelity to then justify his violence to Auntie Pakul. This concern with pride in relation to harm shared by both the narrator’s father and grandfather, also visible in research on Guyanese masculinity, shows that gender is performed and meanings expressed through it are perpetuated over time in representations of a masculinity unconsciously agreed upon and necessary for social acceptance. Consequently, this buttresses the argument that gender representations are embedded culturally and shape the individual’s identity.

On the other hand, different femininities are visible in the novel in relation to culture and ethnicity. Even though Alicia Trotz points out that Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese femininities have come to follow cultural representations that the former must be submissive, while the latter must be self-assertive and more dominant, it seems as if Indo-Guyanese women in *The Intended* subvert preconceived notions of femininity through gender performativity, and consequently put into question gender categorization (“Beyond the Banner” 6, 15 and “Between Despair and Hope” 7).
On the one hand, to a certain extent, the cultural representation of the female category in relation to ethnicity is proven valid through several characters. Indeed, the Afro-Guyanese femininity referred to by Trotz is visible in Auntie Clarice whose description suggests strength, independence, and authority, which are arguably traits that are associated with an Afro-Guyanese woman. Indeed, Auntie Clarice answers “hoarsely,” and her voice is “stern and cautionary” while she gives orders to her daughter to fetch some food for the young narrator (Dabydeen 31); she is far from resembling a submissive woman such as the narrator’s mother, who, on the contrary, falls into the stereotypical construct of Indian womanhood. She is brutally beaten into submission by her husband and thus forced into performing a preconceived idea of gender that is imposed on her, similarly to Tana’s wife, another Indo-Guyanese woman in Albion Village, who must cope with her drunkard husband and his regular abuse.

However, such clear-cut notions that would imply a singular femininity according to ethnic origins are challenged. Indeed, Auntie Pakul, a stalwart and brave Indo-Guyanese woman, although she would be expected to fall into the category of the submissive Indian woman silenced by her male counterpart, such as the narrator’s mother or Tana’s wife, is instead depicted as a strong and outspoken person, who can fend for herself in the manner of the stereotypical Afro-Guyanese woman. In this regard, after the narrator’s mother is being abused by her husband, Auntie Pakul does not fear coming to their house and retaliate toward the father with physical violence⁶ (Dabydeen 40; Jackson 440-41).

⁶ Before reaching her conclusion, Jackson states that the victimization of women is nonetheless resisted in Dabydeen’s novels, and adds that Auntie Pakul and Miriam’s toughness, a character of *The Counting House*, are tantamount.
Thus, female characters in relation to stereotypical visions of femininity underline the concept of androgyny through gender performativity; they emphasize the notions of resistance and compliance concerning cultural gender representations and categorization. Indeed, while Auntie Pakul is determined to retaliate and fight men’s hypermasculine behavior, Tana’s wife is a silenced woman, who in performing gender and abiding by the stereotypical representations of the Indo-Guyanese femininity, reinforces them. As for the narrator’s grandmother, she both resists and complies with these gender representations alternatively; although she deceives herself by attributing the insults of Richilo, her brother-in-law, to his excessive consumption of alcohol, thus excusing a gendered behavior, she is also capable of standing up to hypermasculinity, for after Tana’s wife comes to her house with bruises, Auntie Pakul and her go to his house to “abuse him” (Dabydeen 38). Such an overlapping of masculine and feminine traits in Auntie Pakul’s case subverts clear-cut assumptions of a singular femininity that would apply to all Indo-Guyanese women. Auntie Pakul can be motherly and caring as much as she can be strong, self-reliant, independent, and can thus be considered an androgynous character. This androgyny expressed through gender performativity subverts the commonly accepted Indo-Guyanese femininity and shows that the border between the feminine and the masculine fluctuates as they are abstractions that are culturally and linguistically defined. This shows best in the narratives constructed by patriarchy that aim at reinforcing gender norms in reaction to her resistance.

Indeed, since Auntie Pakul’s masculine attributes must not exist in a woman according to other men, they coalesce against her; this takes the form of a constructed narrative that frames her as a murderous woman who killed her husband. Through the notion of murder connoted with words such as violence, strength, and
cruelty, which ironically also relate to Guyanese masculinity, her masculine characteristics are blown out of proportion in terms of what is socially unacceptable, which aims at maintaining the traditional representation of the submissive Indo-Guyanese woman. In the case of a man, despite the fact that his reputation can be ruined if he is caught in the act of theft, his disappearance is turned into a myth. Indeed, the sudden disappearance of the father of Peter, a young friend to the narrator, is on the contrary glorified, even though it is suspected that he left his wife and six daughters to fend for themselves. The man remains unfound and is imagined as being neatly dressed according to Eurocentric standards of masculinity (Dabydeen 42-43).

In this regard, borrowing from multiple sources, Alissa Trotz argues that the Guyanese gender norms can be traced back historically and reflect in part the colonial discourse imposed on indentured laborers through legislation of 19th century indentureship (“Beyond The Banner” 6, 13-21); thenceforth, the woman’s body has been the territory of the assertion of masculinity in relation to ethnic communities, a tendency that is still relevant today (“Between Despair and Hope” 7-8).

Thus, in the same manner that language is used by men to appropriate Auntie Pakul’s masculine characteristics and repress them as they constitute a threat to traditional gender categorization, the female body is reified and fragmented linguistically. This is most visible in the overtly disrespectful behavior of Richilo in his reification of the female body. A woman’s sex is “a hairy fish” or “Canje swingbridge” while her head is a “coconut”. Notably, these bawdy remarks are

7 Peter’s father is imagined clad in a suit and felt hat. Moreover, he is said to have become a “hero and villain, pioneer, pilot, politician, technician, saviour and beast,” a life of “legendary proportions” (42-43). These archetypes evidently in connection to Western civilization represent the influence of a culture on another one.
implicitly approved by his brother, the narrator’s grandfather, who is made complicit in his refusal to react or simply being too drunk to care that his wife is being insulted by his own brother (Dabydeen 44-46). This masculine language is thus performed and shown to be agreed upon, which is linked to a sense of community since the two brothers are two Indo-Guyanese men.

Furthermore, the female body is very much characterized in animalistic terms. While Richilo describes the woman’s sex as a “hairy fish,” Matam, the owner of the rum shop, has an old donkey named “Sheila” whose ragged skin, due to “life-long bullying,” is reminiscent of the Guyanese female condition. The violence exerted on the woman’s body to assert masculinity and that displayed on the donkey are alike; whereas Sheila has “patches of skin missing” and “edges of her ears chewed off,” Tana’s wife comes to the house of the narrator’s grandmother with “face swollen and hair torn up” (38). Moreover, after Richilo’s sexual frustration is made evident in the insults he spurts at women, who in turn mock his desperation, he is described as “spurring on the donkey with sharp and cruel blows” to assert his masculine power on the animal in whom the feminine is projected (45).

Indeed, the name Sheila, which metaphorically stands for the Guyanese female condition supports the argument that gender representations are linguistically and culturally constructed. Not only is Sheila a common feminine name found across the anglophone culture, but its origins and representations have sexual overtones. Although the origin remains uncertain, the name would have originated from the Irish “sile,” which means “effeminate man” or “homosexual” (“Shelah’s Day”). This supposed origin, which implies that the feminine is only achieved through a derivation of the masculine in that Sheila would be an “effeminate man,” but nonetheless still a man, reveals an appropriation of the female body through
language in the maintaining of dynamics that constitute gender constructs, as well as an unconscious awareness of gender. In addition, the combination of the feminine and the masculine in a feminine name raises the question of human experience in the differentiation between the two, thus highlighting the flimsiness of the border that separates gender categories.

In this regard, in the introduction to a 2014 *Caribbean Quarterly* issue entitled “Cock Mouth Kill Cock,” hypermasculinity is assessed as representative of anxieties concerning mutations in gender dynamics as it is argued that it demonstrates a queer unconscious running in Caribbean masculinities. Since the feminine logically functions in opposition to the masculine and is the site of its assertion, any possible change to the established gender norms linked to the woman’s body represents a process of emasculation to men, which triggers this excessive masculinity that in turn reveals a queer unconscious pervading culture (1-2, 6). Indeed, hypermasculinity, as manifested in sexuality and violence to assert manliness, is considered to be linked to the symbolic emasculation that has been imposed on black cultures by white Europeans during colonialization (Miller 104). In Caribbean culture, the most relevant expression of queerness is probably the cross-dressing that occurs during carnivals as an old tradition of Guyanese masculinities and gender performativity; it is viewed in a review of Rosamond S. King’s book as the expression of a sexual agency that is an erotic resistance to gender categorization. Indeed, performances and costumes, even though they seem to uphold masculine dominance over women in the deriding of a silly female figure, also highly emphasize the queerness in Caribbean masculinities through attitude and clothing (Donnell 122-23). In that regard, Maria Santos Febres affirms that the interplay of cultural representations and language has come to shape cross-dressing itself as a
cultural phenomenon, which underlines the influence of a culture on another, hence of culture on identity also: “We posture as heirs to cultures which are not our own, we negate identities we never really got to know, we think ourselves citizens and natives of countries where we have never lived” (qtd. in Taylor 125).

### Identity and Reinforcement of Gender Representations

To point out an underlying queerness in Caribbean masculinities, principally through clothing, is to acknowledge that gender performativity and cultural influences function as stimuli that affect the psyche in the manner of a language, and thus play an undeniable role in identity formation. The narrator’s alienation in his oscillating between two selves with either the British or the Guyanese culture, whereby he attempts to fully grasp his identity, can in part be explained by the fact he has witnessed hypermasculinity first-hand in a traumatic experience that relates to the Lacanian Oedipus and structure of the psyche, which consider the individual in relation to language. Since gender representations emerge in language, Lacan’s theory can serve to shed light over the relation between the self and cultural gender representations that are arguably unconsciously integrated (Butler 2). Interestingly, by elaborating on Butler’s gender performativity, Annamma et al. hint at the link between gender and culture in the fact that gender is performed in “a language that precedes and supersedes the ‘I’” (1741).

In Lacan’s theory the mother is the Real Other, “the source of all-important love” for the child, and thus also the source of his early anxiety in that she can be distant from it, since they are two separate entities. In order to palliate this separateness and

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8 Lacan says that “the unconscious is structured like a language,” which—it should be noted—is a translation from the French “langage,” that does not necessarily refer to any particular natural language, but instead to language in the broad sense of the term: the spoken and unspoken (Johnston; Gasperoni 80).
anxiety, the child tries to incorporate the mother’s persona into his ego (Johnston; Ellmann 18; Gasperoni 85-86). The father is indeed this other source of desire diverting the mother’s attention from the child, who consequently attributes the phallus\(^9\) to the father: “the structural function of whatever ‘x’ the child hypothesizes the paternal figure possesses making him the focus of the maternal figure’s desire” (Johnston; Gasperoni 86). In that sense the father, since he possesses the phallus, represents the Nom-du-Père\(^{10}\), who insofar as he rules over the mother’s desire with the unknown phallus as signified, represents an authoritative and prohibitory figure that not only comes in as the third term that establishes a difference between himself, the mother, and the child, but also the sexes: “[He] severs the Imaginary dyad, marking the mother and child as different and separate from each other” (Gasperoni 86). In *The Intended*, this definitive separation between the narrator and his mother occurs symbolically through her beating after which “he [the father] [is] naked on top of her, kissing her, and she [is] kissing him back and clasping him tightly” (Dabydeen 40). Thus, this symbolic prohibition equates to her symbolic loss and the individual enters the symbolic order wherein lack emerges. Indeed, since the mother was this love provider and the metaphorical space of self-wholeness for the child, this symbolic loss established by the Nom-du-Père enforces the dominance of language over the self in lack and desire: “Henceforth, all pleasures will be substitutive, for sexuality consists of the pursuit of metaphorical alternatives to lost

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\(^9\) It should be noted that Lacan himself could not clearly define his concept of the phallus insofar as it is the abstraction in his theory that consists in the oppositional nature of language itself, and thus, ultimately its intrinsic meaning (Ellmann 19; Johnston). Lacan borrows his understanding of language from Saussure: a signified cannot be fixed to a signifier that always functions in opposition to other signifiers.

\(^{10}\) Lacan plays with the homophony of the French “nom” that translates as “name,” but can be understood orally as “non,” which means “no”. Thus, the Name-of-the-Father is also the No-of-the-Father and the Not-of-the-Father, meaning that the father symbolically is the one who prohibits, as well as arbitrarily possesses this symbolic power, which resides in language (Ellmann 18).
felicities: indeed, desire in Lacan is nothing other than the drive to linguistic substitution.” (Ellmann 18-19).

Since the Lacanian Symbolic order wherein lack and desire emerge places the individual in relation to language, and cultural gender representations are integrated in the manner of a language, a close link can be identified between the cultural environment and the psychoanalyst’s theory regarding the shaping of gender and identity. Namely, the Symbolic synonymous with language and governed by the phallus as that which establishes a difference between the sexes underscores the unconscious of gender representations inherent to language and culture. Indeed, since stereotypical gender representations of men and women pre-exist the individual in opposition to one another through language, the narrator’s identity formation directly informed by this language and linguistic substitution that arises in lack can hardly be dissociated from the influence of these stereotypical gender representations, along with their reinforcement. This link between culture, gender, and language is highlighted by social constructionist Stefan Cojocaru, who states: “Social knowledge resides in collective interaction; the latter is created, maintained and used by people in interaction.” (81).

Indeed, on the one hand, the narrator’s identity is shaped by the Guyanese gender representations: men are most often pictured as violent and debauched, whereas women are victims of this hypermasculinity. Meanwhile, the connection between these gender representations and identity formation is emphasized through the narrator’s lack that emerges in language. He seems to miss his grandmother as the person who is imagined as a substitute for a mother figure; he remembers her washing him, helping him dressing up, protecting him during his sleep, or having conversations with him he wished would last longer (Dabydeen 24, 25, 36, 46, 49).
Consequently, lack that emerges in a pre-existing language in connection to gender performativity unconsciously functions in the reinforcement of gender representations embedded in it, which in this precise case is true of the Indo-Guyanese woman supposed to belong to the private sphere\(^{11}\).

On the other hand, the narrator’s identity formation is informed by English gender representations that must be associated with the English culture, which he idealizes, and even, seems to have been educated to regard as superior to the Guyanese one. Indeed, this can be seen in his mother’s words: “Because they good, kind people, not like we colonial trash. Is great curse will come on this country if the white people pack up and go” (Dabydeen 92). In this regard, since gender representations are conceptualized and embedded culturally through language built upon an oppositional logic of signifiers, then Guyanese gender representations the narrator has assimilated as primarily brutal and base stand in stark contrast with English gender representations he associates with intelligence, refinement and sophistication, mainly through literature and especially Janet (Fee 108-09)\(^{12}\). In this sense, gender and culture are intertwined, for the writers of the British canon he reads are idealized and magnified as the token of a masculinity culturally superior to the Guyanese one through its literacy and intellectualism. Therefore, these writers are paradoxically an ideal to attain but unattainable for the narrator whose identity conflict is exacerbated: “I paused in self-doubt, wondering whether I could ever rival Conrad and the other white writers when it came to jungle scenes” (Dabydeen 104).

\(^{11}\) Even though this argument concerning gender representations in relation to culture might seem coarse, I argue that insofar as these representations are embedded in a language the logic of which rests on opposition while it precedes the individual, they function in a way that cannot reflect social individualities. On the contrary, they always tend toward generalization, self-reinforcement, and polarization, hence the tenacity of gender binarity.

\(^{12}\) This idea is underlined by Margery Fee, although she does not associate gender representations to culture. She claims that this literary aspiration produces an “anxiety of influence” (108) or that the narrator wants “to assimilate, to succeed in British terms by going to Oxford” (109).
This is to be contrasted with: “To me, ‘black words’ meant the language of Albion Village, the vivid curses of Richilo after he had sucked at the mouth of a rum bottle” (107).

Therefore, gender representations that emerge from two cultures in relation to language can account for the narrator’s unstable identity as they underline gender performativity. His attitude in relation to his friends can be linked to his idealization of English sophistication—an idea rather femininely connoted, for it is notably associated with Janet—but also the element of queerness found in Caribbean masculinities, the two of them conflicting with remnants of the aggressiveness he has incorporated from other men in Guyana, and the one that continues in England through pornography. Indeed, the narrator often adopts a passive behavior with his friends that is reminiscent of the stereotypical Indo-Guyanese woman, and is often put in the position of a student of sexuality as the point of reference thanks to which they can assess his masculinity. When Shaz and the narrator go to a sex shop together, for instance, feelings of discomfort prevail in the latter, who feels his “shyness waning” in a place that fosters and is reminiscent of the violence toward women found in Guyanese masculinity. In this regard, the identity conflict in the narrator and the influence of cultural gender representations are visible. Indeed, although his shyness transforms into comfort in an environment that bolsters up violence against women, for he says, “the longer we stayed, the more secure I felt,” his curiosity for a pornographic magazine suggests the aforementioned queerness found in Caribbean masculinities that he has arguably unconsciously integrated: on the magazine cover, a gay man can be seen spanking another one. This element of queerness is then emphasized through gender performativity by Shaz, who by impeding the narrator from leafing through the magazine, represses a type of
sexuality deemed culturally unacceptable for a man (Dabydeen 125). The narrator’s passivity also occurs in a student-teacher dynamic with Patel in a feeling of inferiority that underlines his arguable androgyny: “He [Patel] mocked, and he made as if to take the papers from my hand and give me a lesson in a way that I once did as the ‘professor’” (Dabydeen 143). Therefore, these three masculine characters perform gender: Shaz and Patel seem to act in agreement with what is expected to be the norm for a man, whereas the narrator differs from it in that he shows femininely characteristics that are ultimately a threat to the established gender norms repressed by his friends.

However, since the narrator is shown caught up between gender representations and interpersonal influences, his behavior is not uniform; he is at times pushed toward violence, which strikingly manifests itself against his friend Nasim in his early English life, thus underlining further Butler’s gender performativity. Nasim is thrashed by white boys and ends up in the hospital, wherein the narrator feels a sudden impulse to hit him (Dabydeen 14). Nasim, after he has been beaten up, is thus arguably perceived by the narrator as an emasculated man, who has been cast out of the masculine norm, which delineates what it is to be a real man such as commonly accepted traits of strength and courage against adversity (Richler 33-34). The young boy’s crippled body is viewed as the feminine, and as it is the battle ground to assert masculinity, the narrator’s desire to hit him can be interpreted as a means to affirm his potency and evade conflicting gender representations. Indeed, the suppression of the feminine in another man is similar to the gender representations of Guyana that the narrator has incorporated. To him, Nasim’s body

13 Richler expresses the same idea by linking gender with racial identity, but her analysis is based on grief as reflecting the narrator’s queerness. On the contrary, I would argue that this impulse comes from gender representations unconsciously integrated through language.
arguably represents a symbolic escape from conflicting cultural influences in order to access a sense of stable identity in the embracing of uniform cultural gender representations of masculinity. However, it in turn upholds traits of hypermasculinity as a standard for men in that gender is implicitly performed, hence the reinforcement of gender categories also.

In the same manner, it can be argued that although Shaz mocks the narrator’s idealization of British culture in intellectualism and sophistication, his excessive enthusiasm for pornography reveals that he is similarly caught up between representations of masculinity. Indeed, to support and reproduce pornography’s ethos and its hypermasculine images is Shaz’s means of affirming his potency in perfect alignment with gender representations of masculinity.

Therefore, a stable identity cannot exist without language, which allows for the accessing gender representations, and although Shaz ardently supports pornography and is indeed influenced by it, he is capable of reflecting on it and regretting his behavior toward women; however, it must be specified that this is not the consequence of a conscious impulse at first. It is not so much the pornographic content that enables Shaz to reassess his values, but spoken language itself in relation to individuality and gender. Indeed, it is only after the narrator expresses the eventuality that Shaz might have caught a sexual disease from his prostitute girlfriend Monica that he lovingly tries to defend her in “a pang of regret,” which conveys a feminine feeling of empathy incompatible with his liking for the brutality toward women found in pornography (Dabydeen 133). Thus, it is through spoken language directed at a most intimate person to Shaz that enables him to reflect on pornography as a system that encourages the objectification of women a bit further: “I [the narrator] looked up at the poster that Shaz was still admiring in a pang of
attraction and regret” (143).

Consequently, in spite of its influence pornography can be reflected upon and partly rejected, and language as the medium through which representations of gender become culturally embedded seems to be the means to bring them from the unconscious to the conscious to reflect upon them.

**Lack, Pornography, and White Femininity**

Culture, language, gender, and sexuality are thus closely linked, which is ultimately reflected in pornography in its relation to white femininity in *The Intended*. Although white women are depicted as being deeply affected by pornography, it can be argued that young men are the first victims of the gender representations conveyed through it, which in turn affects women in their relationships with them. Indeed, although pornography can be reflected upon, it remains true that the narrator and Shaz’s relation to sexuality is directly influenced by it, and their relationships with Janet and Monica, respectively, give a representation of gender dynamics in the novel that must be understood with the aforementioned notions of lack and liminal cultural gender representations existing in language.

As remarked by Elizabeth Jackson, the young men’s British environment is pervaded with sexuality and subliminal messages that commodify women. This commodification becomes a cultural feature as influential as the widespread violence that plagues Guyanese gender dynamics as a model of masculinity. But even though Jackson underlines an extensive commodification of women and full participation of men in the process (432-33, 435), it can be argued that both men and women encourage and are victims of this industry, thus highlighting through
gender performativity the essential role of the body and sexuality in relation to language.

Indeed, pornography is primarily shown as holding sway over the young, deprived immigrants. In this sense, it not only normalizes violence through its imagery but contains an economic allure for the young men who live in precarious conditions, hence its overall influence on a psychological level\textsuperscript{14}. Noteworthily, pornography and its ethos are gradually regarded by Shaz and Patel as an easy way out of misery in order to achieve economic stability, making them in turn interpersonal influences to the narrator, who is being temporarily diverted from his goals in life and made hesitant because of the gradual economic security that his friends are provided with. These interpersonal influences can be seen in his amazement at Shaz’s money: “I’d never seen so much cash in my life, he must have been holding a hundred pounds in his hands” (Dabydeen 128). Similarly, Patel’s thriving VHS business, thanks to illegally sold pornographic content doubtlessly represents a tempting opportunity to escape the immigrant condition (142-43). However, it is in relation to Janet that the best instance of pornography’s influence can be noticed: “I wondered how her parents would react if she [Janet] returned home bruised and bitten and impregnated, whether they would expel her from their presence or protect her by buying me off” (Dabydeen 122; Fee 114-15). No detrimental outcome can be imagined by the narrator, which is directly connected to the influence of pornography that can be considered a continuation of the hypermasculinity found in Guyana. At any rate, the morals of the young immigrants

\textsuperscript{14} Fee emphasizes the same influence by propounding a postcolonial idea: Shaz and Patel’s independent business is their refusing to enter the mainstream one in the inflection of the materialistic drive of the culture against itself; I am however inclined to disagree with that statement, insofar as they nonetheless support the same ethos as the culture does through mainstream pornography, which in my opinion hardly challenges the ubiquitous power of culture and its influence.
are shaken by the pervasiveness of pornography, which through economic deprivation as a reality of their conditions, reinforces cultural gender norms in a less straightforward but sneakier and grim manner.

To this economic temptation as a central component of pornography’s influence on identity formation must be added the idea of lack, which—as mentioned before—is linked to a sense of identity grounded in the emotional and the sexual. Lack is visible in both Shaz and the narrator within or without their relationships with Monica and Janet, respectively. The narrator’s grandmother as an object of desire and viewed as a mother figure is lost and replaced with Janet. This is also an idea put forward by Fee, who states: “The young narrator clearly cannot detach Janet from his fantasy of her privileged family life” (117) or that “in his view she becomes dominant like his mother or his grandmother” (118). In this sense, his idealization of English culture and femininity arises in the Symbolic through lack and language. As for Shaz, this process of linguistic substitution in the Symbolic is represented in the progression of a renewed sexual desire for women, which nonetheless seems to ultimately settle for Monica in the hope of finding a complete self, which had previously only existed with the mother. A good example of Shaz’s linguistic substitution is that of his intercourse with a prostitute: “the sudden thrill made his mouth fasten upon her nipple childishly whilst she moved up and down” (Dabydeen 132). In this regard, sexual desire is less a need for sexual satisfaction than a search for meaning that is lost in the symbolic order (Horrocks 68-69). Consequently, lack is an open door to pornography’s influence on identity formation, which is a means to access a sense of identity by performing gender, and thus align with a cultural representation of masculinity.

This can be seen in both immigrants’ relationships and highlights a vision of
white femininity which shows that being a woman does not equate with being weak or a commodity; Janet shows the power of femininity which lies in seduction while Monica fully embraces her sexuality, the two of them making of the body a site of emancipation. Indeed, as remarked by Mushira Habib, although the narrator is at first sight the leader in his relationship with Janet as he “sets her free,” by inviting the narrator in the ride as a metaphor of it, she is the one truly in control (142). Since Janet is a maternal figure associated with Englishness, which the narrator idealizes as purity, intelligence, and sophistication, it can be argued that she represents the narrator’s lack in the broad sense of the term: she embodies the narrator’s lack of the mother as well as that of a stable identity, the two of them compounded into the cultural. The sexual act is thus reasserted as a symbolic means to access selfhood in the embracement of cultural gender representations (Fee 117-18; Habib 144). However, Guyanese gender representations and British pornography are incompatible with the narrator’s idealization of purity and sophistication embodied by Janet. Therefore, it can be argued that the narrator’s inability to penetrate her during their sexual intercourse symbolizes the narrator’s unstable identity and arguable androgyny in the elevation of the feminine. In this respect, Margery Fee points out the close relation between gender and culture where both intersect in identity formation by stating that Janet accesses a position of “dominant mistress” and “gatekeeper of white culture” (118).

This results in Janet breaking away from the supposed defenseless woman objectified in passivity during the sexual act. The narrator’s impossibility to penetrate her is reminiscent of the process of seduction wherein a woman can reject

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15 Habib mentions a “newly formed sense of manhood,” which points out an implicit influence of cultural gender representations. It should be noted that Habib borrows from Fee.
a man at will, revealing Janet’s stable identity represented in her control over her mind and body. On the contrary, the narrator’s clumsiness that arises from conflicting gender representations show his disrupted potency as the manifestation of his inner conflict. Consequently, the impossibility to penetrate Janet highlights his lack and impossibility to align with uniform gender representations of masculinity. In this regard, Janet’s strength is not only expressed through the control over her body in passivity, but the arguable role of savior that she plays for the narrator by maintaining his desire through seduction and the deferment of the sexual act. She is the reason that the narrator can pursue a purpose toward higher education and resist external influences in better agreement with his idealization of English culture and gender representations.

As for Monica, not only can Shaz be considered dependent on her as he is her pimp in a master-slave dialectic and the money that he has is the result of her work and not his, but he seems to have respect for her beyond his crude words, which reflects in his regretting his attitude and defending her, as previously mentioned. Thus, she is not totally objectified. Furthermore, by embracing her body and sexuality, Monica underscores the potential of gender performativity; she manages to affirm her strength as being different from that of a man, which reflects the dynamic found in the sexual act. The stereotypical strong man supposedly in command during the sexual intercourse with the stereotypical passive woman reaches orgasm and must realize the limits of a potency built on strength and domination.

Thus, in connection to lack and pornography’s influence, gender performativity emphasizes Monica and Janet as two characters that unveil the artificiality of language concerning supposedly natural relations of power in sexuality between
gender categories of men and women. Indeed, in the woman’s body very often associated with fragility and passivity lies a strength that makes it a site of emancipation and redefinition.\(^\text{16}\)

**Conclusion**

By using Butler’s gender performativity, androgyny, as well as the Lacanian Oedipus and structure of the psyche, the aim of this analysis was to attempt to shed light over cultural gender representations in relation to language in *The Intended*, and more specifically its overall incapacity to represent individualities, which can be seen in its influence on the self. Thus, this analysis has principally focused on characters and the narrator whose personality can be best investigated.

First, gender performativity has been instrumental in outlining gender norms of Guyana, which has shown that the language of the masculine and the feminine can overlap in practice. Auntie Pakul is a character who embodies this overlapping of feminine and masculine traits in her androgyny. Therefore, the individual does not necessarily fall into an abstract ideal of the language of gender, although they are highly influenced by it, as shown through Guyanese male characters that seem to align with representations of a rather uniform masculinity. This shared enactment of hypermasculine characteristics in turn reveals a queerness found in Caribbean masculinities, which has been used to further explore an unconscious of gender, and the oppositional nature between the feminine and the masculine that exists in language.

\(^{16}\) The sexual intercourse between the narrator and Monica, who seems totally passive, represents this idea; the narrator has a body “bruised and sticky” and only feels “vaguely excited to see the traces of teethmarks,” all words that hint at his disappointment and almost a feeling of self-disgust (157). This contrasts heavily with what he lived only momentarily a bit earlier as an opportunity to express his confidence and manhood (156).
In this regard, Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory is a framework that can partly explain the individual’s psyche in relation to language and the integration of gender constructs in his idea of the phallus. Since language pre-exists the individual and establishes an inherent distinction between the sexes construed as oppositional, it functions in the polarization and reinforcement of the feminine and the masculine, hence its widespread influence on identity formation.

However abstract this explanation might be, it has to some extent managed to outline complicated connections between the psyche and the language of gender that is embedded in culture through sustained human interaction. Also, this has allowed for the introduction of the Lacanian concept of lack, which functions in the reinforcement of this language of gender.

The final section has shown the influence of pornography on the self as a cultural phenomenon and how it encourages gender constructs. In this regard, gender performativity has been used in connection to pornography in order to outline white femininity and show that passivity as a commonly associated feminine trait can in fact be considered a strength. It consequently reveals that femininity and masculinity are abstractions that can be subverted through the body.

In conclusion, the axiomatic influence of culture supported by Social Constructionism on the individual, as well as the conceptualization of the psyche and language in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory seem to intersect. While it may seem as though this analysis supports the language of gender by reinforcing abstractions of the masculine and the feminine, it utilizes it in an attempt to show its power, intricacies, and contradictions in identity formation. Considering this, the complex notions tackled by the hybrid theoretical approach of this analysis might consist in its strength and originality. If there is seemingly no way out of the
influence of gender constructs in the abstract language of gender that is culturally embedded, Butler’s gender performativity shows that the body is the ultimate site of definition towards social change, which in turn reveals that the border that this language sets between oppositional categories is always an artificial consensus between individuals. The question remains as to what extent language can be redefined by the body in order to overcome the gender binary if it is both unconsciously rooted in culture and constructed around the sexes.
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