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# *Self Searching: A Performative Reading of Chris Abani's Becoming Abigail*

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# INTRODUCTION

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This thesis looks at performativity and the construction of identity in relation to Chris Abani's novella *Becoming Abigail*.

The term performativity started to spread in the academic world after J.L. Austin's series of lectures about the linguistic value of the term "performative". In the years that followed it became the subject of a critique by Jacques Derrida. The main focus of this thesis is, however, on the creation of identity through the later theories about performativity as discussed by Judith Butler.

In the second half of the 1980s, Judith Butler started to develop her theories about gender performativity and identity formation. Taking as a starting point the linguistic theories by Austin and Derrida, Butler further analyses the definition and possibilities of the term "performative" according to gender creation. Also thanks to the ideas of Simone De Beauvoir, Butler shapes a gender theory which will revolutionise gender studies forever.

Butler talks about gender identity as a performative act that is produced through repetition, and it is this specific concept that will become the key of this dissertation. Performativity is a concept that involves the creation of an identity. This process does not only communicate to others some aspects of one's identity, but it also constructs that very identity through repetition. Butler argued that every gender identity is performative, that is to say, that gender is nothing more than the effect of repeated acts of imitation. Gender, in this sense, is a social construct, an act we all carry out throughout our life. Butler's theory about performativity will be used to analyse the protagonist's path toward her search of an identity. In Abani's novella, in fact, the protagonist will face many difficult

situations during her short life, and, in order to overcome them, she will have to fight to find her own agency and identity.

Chris Abani was born in Afikpo, Nigeria, of an English mother and an Igbo father. He left Nigeria when he was very young to escape the Biafran War, and after living in England for some years, he returned to his home country. Abani started to write at a very young age; he published his first novel, *Masters of the Board*, when he was sixteen. The book was a political thriller that, after its publication in 1985, would cost him his freedom. The government, in fact, noted that the narrative had some similarities with a recent coup attempt, and Abani was imprisoned for six months as a conspirator. After his release, he was imprisoned again in 1987 and 1990, for producing critical plays about the government. After his release he returned to Imo State University, where he started his studies, and graduated in 1991.

After graduation he left Nigeria for London, where he graduated at Birkbeck College, University of London, in 1995. Four years later he migrated to the United States. There, he received a Master of Arts degree from the University of South California in 2002 and a Ph.D. two years later.

Abani is very interested in the human condition and has always been active against political injustice. In 2008 he received the Distinguished Humanist Award from the University of California and he now teaches at Northwestern University in Chicago. Abani has also given Ted Talks, in which his passion for humanity, art, ethics and political issues is made evident by his passionate speeches.

Abani's later works include *GraceLand* (2004), the novella *Song for Night* (2007), the novel *The Virgin of Flames* (2007) and *The Secret History of Las Vegas* (2014). He is also interested in poetry, and he has published several poetry volumes, among which are

*Kalakuta Republic* (2000), *Daphne's Lot* (2002), *Dog Woman* (2004) and *Hands Washing Water* (2006).

*Becoming Abigail*, published in 2006, is Chris Abani's first novella. This poetic work was chosen as a *New York Times* Editor's Pick for 2006 and received many other acknowledgments. The protagonist of the novella is Abigail Tansi, a fourteen-year-old girl who lives with her father. The novella begins with Abigail's memory of her mother's funeral. Her mother died while giving birth to her, so the memory is only a fantasy created by Abigail's mind. As she grows up, she feels the urge to mourn her dead mother, even though she has never met her, through strange and disturbing grieving rituals.

After the first chapter, the book's following sections are divided on a temporal level; there are "now" chapters and "then" chapters. In the "then" chapters, Abigail recalls her life in Nigeria with her father, until he decides to send her to live in London with her cousin Peter. Before her departure, Abigail's father commits suicide, and she is left alone with no one to take care of her. Once arrived in London with the promise of a better life, she discovers that her cousin Peter is actually a human trafficker, who picks up children from his hometown in Nigeria and brings them to London to use them as sex slaves.

After her escape from Peter's house, Abigail is taken into custody by Derek, a social assistant with whom she falls in love. This relationship is her first real human connection in which she feels she can find redemption from her past relationships with other men. This idyllic situation is, however, abruptly broken by Derek's wife, who discovers them and denounces the fact. Abigail is then once again taken into custody and treated as a victim, even though she repeatedly tries to save Derek from public shame by testifying her genuine love for him. Society, however, does not listen to Abigail, and treats her case as sexual abuse. The "now" chapters begin with the figure of Abigail smoking by Cleopatra's Needle in London, just before her suicide.

The first section of this thesis is dedicated to picturing the theoretical framework at the basis of the term “performative”. Firstly, the linguistic approach is analysed. The theories of J.L. Austin and J. Derrida provide an early insight on what performative means. Austin’s theories have been of great importance for the creation of the basis of future research in the field of performative studies. The same Butler will reference to Austin’s theory about performativity to further expand her studies on gender identity and its construction. From Austin’s theory about the importance of context in performative utterances, Derrida draws his critique that will bring a new interpretation of how performativity works. Iteration and iterability become an important turning point in further theories. The Butlerian analysis of gender identity, in fact, is based on the assumption that gender is created through repeated acts; it is this kind of process that allows the individual to act out his/her identity.

Before analysing in more depth the performative work of Judith Butler, an overview on some Foucauldian concepts is provided. In particular, the second section of the performative framework investigates the concepts of power, knowledge, discourse and the theory of subject formation produced by the French philosopher. These concepts are then further developed in relation to De Beauvoir’s and Butler’s theories. The discourse created by the system of patriarchy in society is the main focus for De Beauvoir’s studies about the disparity between men and women and is also of great importance for the literary analysis of the novella.

The last section of the performative framework, finally, develops the topic of gender formation and identity. All the theories analysed in the first two sections concur to the formation of Butler’s theory about gender performativity. According to her view, identity construction is made possible through the repetition of gender performances. These repetitions of acts are also the way through which Abigail is able to find her self,



that is why Butler's theories are the starting point for the literary analysis of the last section.

The second part of the thesis proposes a selected series of postcolonial concepts related to the main themes of the novella *Becoming Abigail*. The relationship between colonised people and colonisers will be transferred to our modern society, where the relationship of power between men and women is analysed through concepts that explain the workings of colonialism. Male superiority is one of the main themes in Abani's book, together with Abigail's struggle to find an identity.

The last part of the thesis is dedicated to the analysis of the novella, and it covers the most important aspects and events of Abigail's process of "becoming". The starting point of the analysis is the troublesome relationship that the protagonist has with her mother. The death of this female figure is one of the causes of Abigail's struggle to find her own identity; the people around her only see the ghost of her mother in her and consider her as a mere body to use and abuse. The only way she has to anchor her self to reality is through the markings on her bodies, which become the reminders of her identity. The last part of this section analyses the ways through which Abigail tries to find her identity. The theories about performativity give depth to Abigail's struggles and show how she is finally able to perform her identity after years of delusive self searching.

# THE PERFORMATIVE FRAMEWORK

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The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term ‘performative’ as: 1. Relating to or of the nature of dramatic or artistic performance, 2. Characterised by the performance of a social or cultural role, and 3. Relating to or denoting an utterance by means of which the speaker performs a specific act.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the second and third definition are useful for the purpose of this thesis.

In the first section, the role of theorists of language in the emerging of the performative is analysed. Theorists like John Langshaw Austin and Jacques Derrida have given a great contribution to the definition of “performative” in the linguistic field, which, in the years to come, would lead to many applications in various fields, such as philosophy, anthropology, gender studies and others.

Then, the attention will be shifted to the creation of subjectivity by the theories of academics like Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault. Specifically, Lacan underlines the importance of the Other in constructing the self. Studying the various phases of the development of the self in the early stages of life, Lacan highlights the fundamental status of an external image of the body in creating the subject.

Foucault’s idea about how subjects come into being will be of great contribution to following theories about performativity. In particular, Foucault suggests that the subject comes into being through existing power structures, and this power is the main tool through which discourse keeps people into place.

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<sup>1</sup> “Performativity” in *Oxforddictionaries.com*.

Finally, gender theories about performativity will be discussed. From the famous phrase by Simone De Beauvoir “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman”,<sup>2</sup> a new approach to the word *performative* is brought to the academic world. In her book, *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir analyses different sources in scientific fields, myth and history, that may make people think that men are superior to women; actually, as she will then explain, the main cause of this spreading idea is a stereotype perpetrated by society, that begins at the very early stages of a girl’s life, who, since an infant, is treated differently from baby boys.

From these starting points, Judith Butler will produce her theory about gender performativity. Her works deal with identity and how subjects come into being, and some of the theory about performativity already cited are at the basis of her works. Themes like language, the subject, gender and the body will highly influence Butler’s theory.

All these theories about performativity will be analysed according to a specific topic; the main focus will be the connections with the novella written by Chris Abani, *Becoming Abigail*,<sup>3</sup> and its main character, Abigail Tansi. Since birth, she is not quite recognized as a subject; her mother’s ghost still haunts both her and her father, who sees in her the replica of his late wife.

The fact that she wants so desperately to become someone, to be seen for who she is, and not through her mother’s image, will be the starting point for a search of her self, a self that so desperately wants to ‘become’. In this sense, performativity will be the keyword for finding an identity and becoming a subject.

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<sup>2</sup> Simone De Beauvoir, (2011), *The Second Sex*, Vintage Books: New York, 330.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Abani, (2006), *Becoming Abigail, a Novella*, Akashic Books: New York.

## THE LINGUISTIC PERFORMATIVE

In Chris Abani's book *Becoming Abigail*, an important aspect of the protagonist's character is brought to our attention; Abigail is in search of an identity, and, in order to find it, she carries out some actions that are supposed to bring her self to light. She repeatedly marks her body, she cuts herself and burns her late mother's photos and her skin in a sort of ritualised commemoration.

By analysing the language theories of Austin and Derrida, some observations relevant to this case can be made. Just like Austin's utterances perform something and change the reality by carrying out an act through saying, so Abigail, when carving her skin with symbols and signs, tries to perform an act and come into the world; she wants to be recognized, and not only be a mere description and reproduction of her dead mother. Her father, when looking at her, only sees the ghost of his dead wife; he does not recognize another identity, another subject, which in fact Abigail is (or, at least, is trying to become). This effort to be seen and to be identified as something different from her mother, brings Abigail to perform damaging acts on her own body, the primary site of recognition for herself and for others.

Derrida's theory about iterability seems to fit this scenario. For Abigail, the fact of repeating signs on her body means, at the same time, searching for an identity and underlying her difference from her mother. As Derrida says, identity and difference are linked in the definition of iterability; these performative repeated acts have in themselves the possibility of alteration and of change.



## **Austin's performative speech acts**

The philosopher of language J.L. Austin gave, in 1955, a series of lectures at Harvard University, where he firstly introduced the term 'performative'. These lectures were then collected by his students in the book titled *How to do Things with Words*.<sup>4</sup> Austin's theory was based on the assumption that words cannot only describe something, but that they can also produce an action; they are not merely a tool to state facts and produce statements about something, but they influence and change the reality we live in.

Austin sees language not only as a tool to state the false or the true, but as an activity used to make promises, declarations, to marry and to baptize.

These performative speech acts, however, in order to be effective, must follow some felicity conditions, which are at the basis of their performativity. If one of the felicity conditions is not fulfilled, the speech act becomes 'unhappy', and loses its power on reality.

## **Constative and performative speech acts**

Austin distinguishes two types of speech; constative and performative. The former has the capacity to describe and report on certain facts, and these sentences can be either true or false. For example, when someone says "It is raining" on a sunny day, he is uttering a false constative statement, because he is describing something, the weather, but falsely, because the sentence does not correspond to the reality.

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<sup>4</sup> John L. Austin, (1962), *How to do Things with Words*, University Press: Oxford.

Although some sentences may be said to be true or false, they can also provide more than true or false pictures of the world. Austin's theory describes the performative speech as an act that creates events; these events are related to the world and contribute to change it. The most common example is when a bride or groom say "I do" at a wedding; it is obvious that this sentence is not describing something; in uttering the phrase, the bride and groom actually become married, hence, they change their reality by simply saying two words.

In uttering a performative sentence, people are not only saying something, but they are doing something. By saying this kind of phrase, a person performs an action using language. This opposition between constative and performative means that, while with the first type of speech a person is merely saying and describing something, with the second type he/she is actually doing something while saying it.

### **Felicity conditions**

As said before, not all utterances are performative. When particular social conditions and conventions are met, the sentence has a felicitous uptake, and this will make it into a performative that transforms and acts upon the reality. Citing the previous example about marriage, for the utterance "I do" to be performative, it is necessary that the bride and the groom fit into socially constructed roles, in this case the role of bride and groom, which allow them to say, "I do" and, therefore, to enact a marriage.

Therefore, opposed to constative utterances that can be either true or false, performative acts can go well or badly; in the second case, it does not mean that the utterance is false, but that the performative act is simply a failure. These kind of speech acts are called unhappy or unsuccessful. According to Austin there are many things that

can go wrong when a person utters a performative speech act; they can fail because of a wrong context, or because of conventions of the society one lives in. If, for example, a person stops somebody in the street and says, “I do”, the utterance is not successful, because the context does not allow it to be enacted; the performative is invalid, and the result is that the act uttered is not achieved.

As we have seen, the violation of some conditions disallows the performative characteristics of some utterances. In order to be carried on as performative, a speech act must follow specific conditions.

First of all, for the speech act to be performative, it must be uttered by certain persons in specific circumstances; moreover, these people and the circumstance must be appropriate. This is the case explained above; a marriage is valid only if carried out by specific people in a specific context.

Then, the act must be carried out in the right way and until the end; that is the situation in which a speaker, by uttering a certain sentence, presents himself/herself as the performer, and the hearer acknowledges the act by responding and behaving in a certain manner.

When for example a mother says “I order you to clean your room” to her son, she is impersonating the role of the performer, while the son, which in this case is the hearer, may acknowledge the order by saying something like “yes, mum” or by just going to his room and clean it. In this case, these kinds of utterances can fail because the hearer misunderstands the speaker, or just because he does not acknowledge the act; they can also fail because the speaker may make a mistake, by producing distorted or inaudible sounds. Violations of these felicity conditions produce a non-performative act, since something went wrong during the utterance and the act cannot be carried out or performed.



The last felicity conditions are based upon feelings of participation and intention in carrying out the act; opposed to the previous ones, if these felicity conditions are not followed, the act is still performative, even though it is a case of abuse. To say that the participants abuse the procedure is to say that the utterance is performed after being said, but in an insincere way. The performer does not mean what he says and does not intend to take responsibility. So, for example, if a person makes a promise, he/she can plan to maintain it and consequentially carry out the promised act, or he can utter the sentence in an insincere way and decide later not to keep it. In both cases, the utterance is still performative, because it still does what it says, “to promise”.

Austin’s ideas formed a turning point in theories that dealt with language and the way academics began to think about it; moreover, they prepared the field for later performativity theories.

## **Difference and identity in Derrida**

As showed in the previous section, Austin's theory about speech acts focuses on some characteristics that are at the basis of performative utterances; the most important are context and intention. These features define what can be considered a happy or unhappy speech act. But some critics believed that the origin of the speech act could not be always controlled, that is to say that the speaker cannot always be sure he/she is stating something unambiguous, happy and normal.

One of these critiques come from the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, a post-structuralist and postmodern scholar. He wrote many books and essays that influenced different study fields, such as sociolinguistics, psychoanalysis, politics, anthropology, literature, and so on.

Regarding the linguistic field and the main topic of this thesis, his definition of iterability will be developed; Derrida's works about this topic show how utterances are not univocal, but rather polysemic, and for this reason they can be cited and repeated in different contexts. Moreover, he shows how this repetition of the same sign does not only produce identity, but, at the same time, it also generates difference.

### **The concept of Iterability**

Derrida's theory is based on the fact that utterances are repeatable, but their repetition embraces alteration; in other words, the repetition of an utterance is not the repetition of some self-identical unit because this repetition will be both the same and different.

If we think about two identical words, it is obvious that we are repeating the same word twice; but, if we think about it, these two words are at the same time identical and

different. They are distinct from one another, being two different and independent existence of the same word; but, simultaneously, they also are two copies of one another and have the same meaning. They are repetitions of one another because they replicate themselves.

One could say that the two words are the same because they are identical, but what does it mean to have the same identity? For Derrida, being identical does not mean being the same. When something is repeated, that repetition comes into existence, creating something that is otherness. The same word can have, for example, different pronunciations, and, also, be written in different texts or uttered in different contexts.

Derrida says about this:

For the structure of iteration - and this is another of its decisive traits - implies both identity and difference. Iteration in its 'purest' form - and it is always impure - contains in itself the discrepancy of a difference that constitutes it as iteration. The iterability of an element divides its own identity a priori [...].<sup>5</sup>

Identity, in this sense, can never be untainted, because what creates it, is a process of repetition that, at the same time, differentiates it. Repetition is not something external from identification, but it is at its basis.

Iterability, then, does not only imply repetition; it is also an act of alteration that comes from the repetition of the same something. This characteristic allows new context-specific meaning to the same word, which then becomes independent from its original context.

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<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, as cited in Wolfreys, J. (2004), *Critical Keywords in Literary and Cultural Theory*, E-reader version, Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 123.

For Derrida, then, iterability does not only imply repetition of something; rather it also suggests alteration and modification of the same. It introduces new contexts in which the sign can be used, while at the same time maintaining an identity, through which the repetition itself can be recognised.

Iteration is a necessary characteristic of a linguistic mark. The sign must be repeatable and recognisable as the same sign in every repetition. Each iteration, as already said, will differ to some extent, but the marks should be however recognised as the same sign. For example, then, the letter “A” can be repeated, and through repetition it will carry difference, but still it must be recognisable as the letter “A”.

The form of language that more suits this repeatability is the written one. In fact, all writings can be copied, because it is their intrinsic characteristic of being written that determine their copyability; therefore, written text is also able to bear iteration and reiteration. Writing, in fact, is intelligible also in the absence of the author, and this means that it can be cited indefinitely, that is, iterated.

The possibility of repeating, and therefore of identifying, marks is implied in every code, making of it into a communicable, transmittable, decipherable grid that is iterable for a third party, and thus for any possible user in general.<sup>6</sup>

This means that a sign can be used by other people in other contexts. This mark, though, should have a meaning, otherwise its iterability is not possible.

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<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida (1984), *Signature Event Context*, in *Margins of Philosophy*, The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 315.



## THE FORMATION OF THE SUBJECT

This section deals with the formation of the self and the birth of the subject. These themes can be related to Abani's book in the sense that the protagonist is a figure in search of an identity. As already said, Abigail is not recognised as a subject and does not have an identity of her own; she is still seen as a shadow of her late mother, and this affects her entire existence, her relationships with her father and the other men in her life.

In this section, Lacan's theory about the formation of identity through the recognition of a mirrored image will be analysed; just as Abigail is only seen as a reflection of her mother, the infant firstly recognises her *I* through an external image reflected in the mirror.

This image is not the subject herself, because it is something that exists outside the subject, but, at the same time, it is its first approach to becoming a subject. Also, Abigail, who is unseen and not acknowledged as an individual, is recognised only through her mother's existence. It is 'the other' that allows Abigail to be seen, because without this other she would not exist at all.

Abigail is a subject who exists only in the reflection of others, first of all her mother; her desire is to be acknowledged as something separate from her mother's identity, but this would be possible only through the others' gaze. Unfortunately, no one recognises Abigail as an autonomous entity, instead, she is always recognised through the other's desires and needs.

Through the theory of Michel Foucault, we can analyse the emerging of the identity in Abigail. As already said, she is always seen through the other's gaze, just like the subject in Foucault creates identity only through communication with others. For the French theorist, there is no fixed identity, because also the subject is shaped according to

the context he/she lives in. History and society continuously change the models in which a subject can recognise itself, and consequently, also identity becomes a sort of flowing process. This choosing permits the subject to have agency over its life, and, as Foucault says, it allows individuals to carry out a certain number of actions on their bodies, personality, feelings, and so on, in order to transform themselves.

In the novella, the only means Abigail has to choose an identity is either through others or by her own agency. The society around her is a patriarchal society, one that does not permit women to have a voice, to become a subject capable of accounting for themselves. Peter's wife can only be compassionate when her husband is not around, but when he is at home, power relations between the two suppress her identity, and she becomes an accomplice.

Abigail is never really herself, because her own history and her society do not permit it; she can choose who to be, but only inside limited possibilities. But these possibilities are not enough for Abigail, who searches for a way out of the institutions she is trapped in. The operations she conducts on her body are her way of transforming herself; these *technologies of the self*,<sup>7</sup> as Foucault calls them, are her only modes of creating a self that is her own.

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<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, (1988), *Technologies of the Self*, edited by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton. University of Massachusetts Press, 16.

## Lacan's mirror stage

Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan presented his theory about the mirror stage in a paper in 1936, at a conference of the International Psychoanalytical Association and, thirteen years later, he further developed it at a Conference in Zurich.

The full title of the lecture held in 1949 in Zurich is *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience*.<sup>8</sup>

His famous theory presented at these conferences is the 'mirror stage' theory, in which he proposes that babies go through a phase in which an external image of the body, that can either be reflected in a mirror or presented to the infant through the body of the mother, produces the consciousness of the 'I'. This stage occurs in infants between 6 and 18 months, during their development phase. For Lacan it signifies the birth of the self, which, however, is also related to the birth of the other. This process establishes the self of the infant as dependent upon the external object reflected in the mirror but, because the external body does not correspond to the weak and dependent duplicate of the infant, this image becomes a sort of ideal which the subject will always try to reach.

Through his work, Lacan tries to understand the experience of an infant looking in the mirror and how it relates to the child's concept of 'self'; he believes that this experience is helpful in understanding more specifically the construction of self, that he calls *I*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Lacan, (1977), "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience", in *'Ecrits'*, W.W. Norton and Company: New York.

<sup>9</sup> Lacan, 1.



## **The mirror stage and the creation of the other**

Lacan focuses his studies on children between the age of six and eighteen months, and the way they engage in a kind of path of self-discovery by simply looking in a mirror. According to him, the child notices its movements in the mirror, and, by seeing itself, he realises that he is seeing its reflection. This is the first impression that the infant has of itself; this part of the baby's life is called by Lacan the 'mirror stage'.<sup>10</sup> According to the psychoanalyst, this phase helps the formation of the self and supports the infant in the discovery of the world.

Lacan proposes that infants go through this stage in which an external image of the body, that can come from a reflection in a mirror, produces a mental representation of the *I*, that he calls an *Ideal-I*.<sup>11</sup> This mirror phase becomes a sort of identification, in the sense that the subject assumes an image, and, through this image, a transformation takes place.

When an infant looks in the mirror, that is the first image he sees but, because it is not real and material, this copy is a fantasy that only seems real; the first approach to the world is only partially constructed, because the infant's self-image is a fantasy. This leads to a strive in the baby's entire life to find a fulfilment of his self-image. This image is thus imperfect, and this is also given by the fact that the reflection he sees in the mirror while attempting to move is not a perfect product; the infant's movements are awkward, difficult, clumsy.

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<sup>10</sup> Lacan, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Lacan, 2.

According to Lacan, in fact, when a human infant comes to the world, it is not as fully developed as other animals are; the human is not able, for example, to walk immediately after birth, while animals are already capable within hours to walk and run on their legs.

Lacan says:

In man, however, this relationship to nature is altered by a certain dehiscence at the very heart of the organism, a primordial Discord betrayed by the signs of uneasiness and motor unco-ordination of the neo-natal months. The objective notions of the anatomical incompleteness of the pyramidal system and likewise the presence of certain humoral residues of the maternal organism confirm the view I have formulated as the fact of a real *specific prematurity of birth* in man.<sup>12</sup>

The clumsiness of the infant movements is a result of *specific prematurity*; while animals are independent from their parents within few hours from their birth, human infants must be cared for by their parents for years before they are able to be independent. Human babies are premature in the sense that they are not fully developed when they come from the womb like other animals are.

This mirror phase become a sort of identification, in the sense that the subject assumes an image, and, through this image, a transformation takes place. The 'mirror stage' establishes the self as always dependent upon something external, an other.

There are however two different types of 'other': the small other and the great Other. The one that the infant recognizes in the mirror is the small other; it is both similar and distant from the self, because the baby must be able to recognise itself in it and, at the same time, it must set a goal for future mastery, one that he has not accomplished yet.

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<sup>12</sup> Lacan, 4.

This type of other is the one at the basis of the subject's identity; it is through this that the baby defines its identity and ego.

The second type of Other is the 'great Other',<sup>13</sup> and it can be represented by someone or something external from the infant; the great Other can be represented, for example, by the mother or the father. By their gaze, the infant attains identity outside itself; instead of being a reflection of the ego like the little other, the great Other is not assimilated, and this creates alterity.

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<sup>13</sup> Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2007), *POST-COLONIAL STUDIES, The Key Concepts*, Routledge: New York, 155.

## **Foucault's subject through discourse**

Poststructuralist theorist Michel Foucault wrote the volume *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*<sup>14</sup> in 1977, in which he studies how social institutions, like prisons, hospitals, schools, and so on, produce certain systems of power on the human body, in order to regulate them and generate a stable social order. These practices were first cultivated in specific institutionalized settings, but then they started to be used also in other social fields in order to regulate and control.

Discipline is a power exercised primarily and directly on the body; these practices focus on the control of body activities through surveillance and examination. The human being is constantly controlled, and his/her individual conduct is always kept under scrutiny.

This kind of discipline does not only produce docile bodies; it also generates subjects. At first, in fact, constant surveillance is directed to the body to create discipline; then, it focuses on the mind as well, and this creates self-awareness. According to Foucault, power has the aim of modifying human life in order to make it more productive and controllable. Prisons, labour camps, and so on, are the institutions in which power practices and methods are used to subjugate individuals. The main focus for Foucault is to study the ways in which the body is made docile in these particular social systems.

Foucault argued that subjects are constructed through power, and it is this power that produce the subjects. In fact, he underlined that it is not the subject who creates the

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<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, (1978), *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books: New York.

system of power, but, on the contrary, the subject itself is created by these structures, and the way through which they represent themselves is discourse.

Foucault was not interested in the study of power in big organisations like the state or the economy; instead, he focused on power relations at a micro level. This means that he was interested in the kind of power which is generated every day, locally, through personal relations. In his works, institutions like the prison are not marginal buildings, but they are closely integrated into the city. In both the prison and the city, for example, the same strategies of power operate, and the discipline used to control the criminal is also used to control the citizen.

We are used to the notion of power as being hierarchical, as in a pyramid; the person at the top is the most privileged, the one who has the power to control the ones at the base. But, Foucault argues, power is more relational than this, being produced in everyday relations and actions as we interact with each other.

## **Biopolitics**

In Volume I of his *History of Sexuality*, titled *The Will to Knowledge*,<sup>15</sup> Foucault analyses the concepts of biopolitics and biopower. For him, biopolitics is the government of life used to keep things in order. Consequently, biopower happens when biopolitics is applied in a society combined with disciplinary power.

In his book Foucault talks about it as a

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<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, (1978), *The History of Sexuality*, Volume I, Pantheon Books: New York.

power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavours to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations.<sup>16</sup>

The power mentioned here is a power that has no negative connotation; it is a positive power that has a positive effect and impact on life. On the contrary, the power which limits human life is the one used by the law and the government.

In his works, Foucault provides a brief history of biopolitics, starting from the sovereign power which used to regulate life and death over its subjects. This type of power was effective because it had the capacity to decide on a life's value through its death; it was basically a power that could decide to take life or let the subject live. To better explain this kind of power he compares it to patriarchy, the power of the father in Roman times to decide over his children and slave's life.

As time passed, this control over subjects evolved to a subtler form of regulation; the master could no longer decide directly over his subjects' life, but, if felt threatened, he could command them to take part in a war, creating an indirect power that legitimized him to control once more their life and death. In this way, power over life was considered more like a tool that one could use if his sovereignty was threatened, and not, like in ancient times, like a direct control over less privileged people.

Still, this kind of power was constituted on its ability to subtract something, being life, things, time, and so on. As Foucault says, it was merely a means of deduction, that allowed the privileged one to take something from its subjects, being them trivial things like things or vital things like their life.

From the classical age, things started to change; this use of power to deduct things started to lose force, becoming one of many means of power; it converted into

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<sup>16</sup> Foucault, 137.

merely one element among others, working to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it: a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them.<sup>17</sup>

This repressive and exploitative type of control was not totally replaced; it started to work with other forces to create a new type of society in which biopower worked together with the former sovereign power.

Now, Foucault says, the main concern is the existence of the human race, and wars are fought with this purpose in mind. It is nonetheless a contradiction; in order to preserve life, the population is called to arms. Their death is not required as a defence for someone's life, but for everyone's survival. Wars, in this sense, are still fought, but they are not carried out because of the right over life of a sovereign person, but rather to secure a better way of life for an entire population. Power is now exercised exclusively over life, and is exercised either to promote life or to negate it.

This new kind of power, called *Biopower*, is now divided into two types; one focuses on the discipline of the human body, while the other puts its attention on the regulation of the population. The first type of power uses the human body like a machine in fields like the military, the education, the workplace, and so on; its purpose is to create a disciplined population. The second type of power focuses on the reproductive capacity of the human body, and is used, for example, in demography, as its purpose is to control the population on a numerical level.

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<sup>17</sup> Foucault, 136.

## **How the subject is created**

Foucault never really talks about a single theory of how the subject is constituted. He believed that setting a theory about this argument would spread the idea that people are attached to a fixed inner identity, which was something he did not believe in. In his works, however, he talks about subjectivity and how it was created through different discourses. The subject and all its forms are socially and historically constructed; there is no subject which exists outside this context and, even more so, there is no identity which is fixed and constant.

In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault focuses on the production of subjects through discipline; this mode generates obedient subjects through control, assessment and observation. The modern prison system ‘normalises’ individuals and produces new subjects through invasive techniques that govern and control every aspect of life. It is through surveillance and sight that power is produced over inmates; observation is strictly connected to the making of individuals, because it is through that, that power is transmitted. Discipline as a technique of control is traced back to monasteries and the army; timetables and ranks are examples of control of the time and space in which the body can move.

The body is treated as an object to be acted upon; throughout history it is affected by punishment, by torture before and regulation and supervision after. In modern times, the main purpose is the renovation of the soul rather than the material punishment of the body. In this way, the focus of attention is not the body anymore, but the individual itself.

Another account of the formation of subjectivity is given in a work titled *The Subject and Power*,<sup>18</sup> in which Foucault talks about the creation of the subject and its



relationship with power which, according to him, is not formed thanks to oppression like in sovereign times, but through the making of individuals.

In order to explain the ways in which power determines subjects, Foucault focuses on the different strategies of resisting power. Resistance allows people to be classified into categories and forces them to recognize and be recognized according to the law of truth. These struggles are, for example: women resisting men's power, children resisting parents, and so on. But, he says, these oppositions are not directed to power itself, but to the ways in which power is used in daily life.

This form of power applies itself to everyday life, and it categorises the individual, by making it a subject. However, the term subject can have two meanings; it can be subject to someone that controls it and subject tied to one's own identity by self-knowledge. Both these forms, though, presume a system of power which subjugates and makes subject to. The dominant oppression of our time is the one that creates subjection; it is a kind of subordination that brings individuals under the power of others while creating subjectivity.

Foucault rejected the idea of a person having a fixed inner identity; the self is defined by the discourse that is creating during communication with others. Individuals can, however, act upon themselves to produce particular means of identity; these modes are called technologies of the self, and they include methods of self-contemplation, self-disclosure and self-discipline. They are the individual's systems by which a person can find his/her way into discourse.

According to Foucault, these technologies of the self

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<sup>18</sup> Foucault, M. (1982), "The Subject and Power", in *'Chicago Journals'*, Volume 8, Number 4, pp. 777-795.

permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and the way of being, so as to transform themselves.<sup>19</sup>

These modes allow the subject to act upon itself, even though they, again, are not invented by the individual itself, but are culturally and socially constituted; the outlines that the subject finds are created, projected and forced on it by its same culture and society.

The subject and the individual are two different concepts that intertwine; the subject is the effect of the transformation of the individual through outside events and actions that are acted upon him. That is to say, different forms of power relations transform the individual into the subject; this means that there is no fixed identity, because the subject is modified by different discourses in history that impede the creation of a static identity.

Structures and institutions that exercise power in the society are the builders of the reality in which the subject is constituted; they set the rules that a person must follow. The subject, however, is not a passive product of these relations of power; it does not merely follow the directions established by society, but it is also able to choose among the models that are given.

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<sup>19</sup> Michel Foucault, (1988), *Technologies of the Self*, edited by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton. University of Massachusetts Press, 18.

## **GENDER PERFORMATIVITY**

In this chapter the role of women and their realisation in society will be analysed. Through the theories of Simone De Beauvoir, a new approach to what means to be female is brought in the social field. Like Foucault, also De Beauvoir thought that identity is not something a person is born with, but it is something constructed by culture and society. In particular, differences between female and male identities are a product of experiences and not fixed variances. Through the analysis of different fields of research, De Beauvoir comes to assert that women have always been evaluated as inferior to men, but she does not find any explanation in any of those field that supports this view. Biologically, she says, girls and boys at birth have the same opportunities, but, as they become adults, the environment they grow up into categorise them into two different classes; women are seen as objects by men, who define themselves as subjects.

Women have always been put to disadvantage compared to men, and their identity has been shaped by society since their birth. A woman is supposed to act according to certain models, while men can choose their own path to follow. Being the “weak ones”, women have always been used and represented as objects, opposed to the supposedly strong and leading nature of men, who pose themselves as subjects.

In the novella written by Chris Abani, Abigail is subjected to the roles society imposes on her. The patriarchal culture she lives in demands her to follow determinate paths of behaviour; she is supposed to cook for her father, to greet and receive hosts politely, to wash the dishes and to follow her father’s wishes. When Peter, her cousin, goes back to the village to take her with him in London, she is not interpellated; he speaks about her future with her father, like she is just something to be carried around and not a person with opinions about her own future. Her father and Peter put themselves in a

position of superiority, because they are the ones who decide about Abigail's future, the subjects of the decision, while she is only the object of the conversation.

The same happens when men take her; from her first sexual encounter she understands that she would never be a protagonist of this act. Her first sexual encounter is at 10, when she exchanges her virginity for a bag of sweets. Her cousin did not even see her as a person, but as a bargain. She is aware that men do not really see her, for she is treated like a thing. In remembering how these men treat her, she says

It was never the luxuriating of one person in the presence of an equal. No. They led her, pulled her behind their chest-thrust-forward-see-how-lucky-I-am-to-get-such-a-pretty-young-thing walk.<sup>1</sup>

Abigail herself knows she is not equal to them and that she is, in their eyes, a 'thing'.

The ideal of femininity is strong in the society Abigail lives in. In remembering her childhood, she tells about when she used to climb mango trees to get the fruit; when her father finds out about it, he beats her, for he is ashamed of her tomboy nature. Just like De Beauvoir says, a girl is supposed to follow specific roles, and the ideal of femininity is the main model to aspire. Women who do not follow it are set as outcasts, as deviances that have to be corrected.

She will never find an identity, simply because there is no identity to pursue; the only possible roles for her are the ones that society has decided for her.

How can a person, then, find his/her identity if the roles that can be taken are already given by society?

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Abani, (2006), *Becoming Abigail, a Novella*, Akashic Books: New York, 29.

Judith Butler talks about performativity and the formation of the subject as processes through which the self can find an identity. According to Butler, gender is constituted through repetitions of acts; it becomes something real only when performed. Gender is performative in the way that it produces something that has effect on the individual.

Butler believes that gender identity is something constructed by society, influenced by patriarchy and filled with gender norms. Gender becomes then the cultural meaning that bodies assume through culture, law and norms that are embedded in our society. This mode of assuming gender is then internalised and repeated over time, so that it becomes something taken for granted, something acknowledged by everyone in the society.

Abigail Tansi is a product of the society she lives in, not only regarding her feminine role, but also about the formation of her identity. She is trapped in that situation because her subjection is not something evident anymore, but it is embedded in her own life, and is taken for granted. No one, not her father, not her lovers, can understand that Abigail needs an identity of her own, and not some recycled selfhood given to her by others.

She cannot escape the image of her mother being continuously substituted to her identity, but, as Butler suggests, through repetitive acts she can at least try to perform a sort of individuality. Just like gender is something that has to be performed, the only way Abigail has to escape her situation of doppelganger for her late mother is to perform on herself acts of identity. The only possibility of producing a kind of individuality is through repeated performances, that are carried out on her own body. This repetition of performances is what enables a subject to become but, for Abigail, this is at the same time

an act of subversion. She cannot accept the role society has given to her, and her only mode of rebelling is to act on her own body. A subject is supposed to behave according to specific norms and laws in order to be accepted, but what really matters to Abigail is not to be acknowledged by society, but to be seen.

## **Simone De Beauvoir and the man/woman dichotomy**

The famous phrase by Simone De Beauvoir *one is not born, but rather becomes a woman*,<sup>2</sup> can be linked to all the theory analysed up till now. It means that females are not born women, they don't have a fixed identity, but they are the products of a process of othering carried out in the society they live in. Femininity is not produced by biological or psychological differences, but it is a construction of culture based on the differences created by their situations in society. Women, in this sense, are not born already female, but their identity as women is shaped by her upbringing and the role society offers.

According to De Beauvoir, women have a marginal position in society, and their values are affected by patriarchy. They do not have an identity, being a sort of intermediate stage between the man and the eunuch; their creation is not the product of biological or psychological means, but rather the effect of society and culture.

### **The woman as other**

In her well-known book *The Second Sex*, Simone De Beauvoir talks about the role women have in civilisation, and how their identity is formed and constructed through culture and society. The main idea of the book is that women are oppressed by men, and this oppression is possible thanks to the fact that they are defined as the *other* in opposition to men. In order to define oneself, one must define the other in opposition to

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<sup>2</sup> Simone De Beauvoir, (2011), *The Second Sex*, Vintage Books: New York, 330.

the self; for every subject there is always an object, and this is what women are in relation to men.

“He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other.”<sup>3</sup> It is not something new to be characterised as the other; alterity is at the basis of every human thought, when we think, for example, about duality in nature. There is left and right, good and evil, up and down, and even for humanity it is the same; for every group that identifies as a part of something, it must create its counterpart, its opposite. On the other hand, being individuals who are part of one of the groups, we must also admit we could be seen as the other from the opposite group. We are conscious that what we call other, may call us other as well.

But, using this process to identify women in opposition to men, is like negating their humanity. There is no reciprocity in the man/woman duality, because man has always defined himself as the only essential one, while women have been relegated in their opposing role as other. It is men who have always referred to women as other and, as subjects, they have the power to do so. The other is created by the subject, and not vice versa; here lies the real power of men. They are not an opposite category of something but, at the same time, they could create their opposite category in women.

In this framework, women must remain subservient and in a position of subjugation. What makes possible for men to be the absolute, is the complete docility of women, who accept their role as inferior; the only thing that could free women from this position would be by asserting themselves as human beings.

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<sup>3</sup> De Beauvoir, 26.



While men represent the subject, women are considered as objects. There is a very deep distinction that characterises the relation between men and women; while the former are absolute and complete identities, the latter have a scattered and incomplete individualities. While women inhabit the realm of immanence, men perform the transcendent role. Being an immanent figure for a woman means being an inferior, passive and static subject, while men are active, creative and powerful. Men have denied the possibility to women to be transcendent, so they are confined in this closed dominion where they are, de facto, imprisoned in fixed roles.

In order to understand where this dichotomy comes from, De Beauvoir starts to analyse different fields of research, like biology, psychology, and so on. The disparity between the two genders is located in every discipline, but no justification for women's inferiority is given in any of them.

Even in history many examples of female subjugation can be found, but, like for scientific discipline, no explanation for this phenomenon is given. She then moves to mythical representation; here, she finds many examples of women representations but, like in the scientific field and in history, these images are always given as a disadvantage for women. De Beauvoir thinks that the reason these representations are always negative for female subjects is because the woman is associated with the symbol of life, and consequently stripped of her individuality. The myth of the essence of femininity can take many forms, from the sacredness of the mother, to the purity of the virgin, but its main purpose is always the same: to deny women an identity and confine them into the ideal of femininity.

As De Beauvoir says: “ ‘Femininity is in jeopardy’; we are urged, ‘Be women, stay women, become women’ ”.<sup>4</sup> Because, according to society, femininity is in danger and women must strive to keep it alive. When a woman does not observe these ideals of femininity, she is refused by society; women who choose not to be elegant enough or not to be passive are the ones called unfeminine. They are not considered as real women and are marginalised because they put their humanity before their femininity.

### **The stages of becoming a woman**

In the second volume of her book, De Beauvoir analyses the stages a woman goes through from infancy to adulthood; even here, she finds that being a woman is not something fixed and given from birth, but it is something a person acquires through cultural processes. A girl is not born passive, fragile, subjugated; the fault lies in the external process of her development, where she is conditioned to accept these characteristics as her own. Society and culture are the main causes for this; girls are shaped to be objects while being stripped of their subjectivity.

Since little babies, girls are differentiated from boys, and these differences do not come from some biological assumption, but are all transformations developed through experience. Girls are, for example, allowed to cry and whine, while boys are reprimanded for doing so. How many times have we heard the phrase “boys do not cry”? People demand suppression of emotions from boys because exposing them means exposing fragility, while girls’ cry is tolerable because of their delicate nature.

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<sup>4</sup> De Beauvoir, 23.

Even their body and gestures are considered in opposing ways: girls must act like proper ladies, while boys are allowed to fight, to use their muscles and to do whatever they please. To a girl is taught to dress nicely, to act politely and to please others.

Moreover, the experiences a girl goes through in the period from her childhood to the adulthood are way more dramatic and violent than for a man. For example, sexual initiation is considered a victory for the boy, something to be proud of, while is experienced as a sacred and traumatic passage by the girl. Loss of virginity is never accompanied with pleasure for a woman, and the enjoyment of sex is often hard work. This transition for a girl marks a breaking with the old world of adolescence; she is initiated into adulthood through pain and suffering. The experience for men is completely the opposite: his sexuality is always accompanied by pleasure, and in the act of sex he reaches the fulfilment of his erotic desire.

The roles a woman can choose when becoming adult are very limited; because she cannot produce or create, she is only seen as a mere object of reproduction, and thus the only thing she can do is to give herself to serve the wellness of men. The adult woman can be nothing else than mother, wife and entertainer, all roles she does not choose, but which are selected for her.

As Foucault underlined the role of society in the construction of a subject, also De Beauvoir claims that the situations a woman can find herself in are not the consequence of her character but, on the contrary, her character is the result of these imposed situations. At the same time, all her features like mediocrity, incompleteness, passivity, etc, are not the cause of her subordination, but rather the consequences.

Then, how can women find their independence? It is not easy to break free from this role of femininity, particularly because often women are accomplices of their own

dependency. The fact that a woman cannot be of any use if not for the well-being of men, leads her to feel miserable, unfulfilled. There are different modes by which she can react: by becoming obsessed with herself, by giving herself completely to her men or dedicating herself to mysticism. In all these cases, however, the woman is only reinforcing a kind of dependency, being it for a mirror, for a man or for God.

A woman that accepts her roles of mother, wife and sex slave can never be free; only by economical independence the female subject can reach autonomy because she would be able to support herself. The only possibility for women to free themselves of this role of object is to aspire to equality between the sexes. This new type of relation would not disrupt the difference between the two genders, but would create alterity based on mutuality.

## **Judith Butler's gender performativity**

The philosopher Judith Butler is considered one of the most prominent feminist theorist writer today; basing her ideas on Foucault and Austin, she focuses on the processes that create gender in a society, affirming that sex and sexuality are actually products of society and consequences of cultural norms.

In her book *Gender Trouble – Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*,<sup>5</sup> Butler theorizes the performativity of gender, that is to say that gender is not something people are born with, but rather it is something that is made by doing. Through the theory about performative utterances by Austin, Butler says that certain categories are assigned simply by certain acts. When Austin explained performative utterances, he meant that certain sentences are not just said, but they also perform acts while being said. They make something come true, something that did not exist before its utterance.

The same, says Butler, can be true about gender; just like performative utterances, also gender is something created by doing. Women are inscribed in the category of the feminine, and when performing some acts, they have the ability to transform these acts into feminine performances. The simple act of wearing a skirt by a woman, for example, makes that skirt a feminine item. And, at the same time, every act a woman does is passed as feminine, not because they have the meaning of femininity in them, but because the body that makes the performance is inscribed in the category of the feminine, and it has the ability to pass this ideal to the things that it does. These acts are then assimilated in the society and keep their meaning.

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<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, (1990), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge: London.

At the same time, also masculine bodies have a similar ability; if a man wears a skirt, that item does not make him feminine, because also the male category has the ability to give meaning through their act. The problem is that objects carry a label, and they also have the ability to affect what the body that is doing the act means. This means that these categories are fluid, always expanding according to what people do and perform, always changing on the base of what their gender performs. Gender is not solid and fixed, a category that can never be changed; its meaning is always in expansion, always running into other categories, never stable and never fixed.

### **Woman as a performative act**

Judith Butler's theory about how an identity comes into existence is strictly related to Foucault's idea about the creation of subjects through discourse. Butler resumes the theory according to which the subject is created as an effect of institutions and discourse, rather than the other way around. A subject cannot simply be but is always created by the surroundings he lives into. Similarly, identity is not something already given, but is something created through a process that is embedded in discourse.

It is discourse that shapes the self, and gender categories follow the same process; gender is not something that people have since birth, but it is something that is created. Just like De Beauvoir says that a woman is the product of society and cultural processes, also Butler follows this theory asserting that gender identities are performative acts; they become true in discourse through the acts they perform.

When Butler comments on De Beauvoir famous sentence, she writes:

If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born but rather *becomes* a woman, it follows that *woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing

that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification.<sup>6</sup>

Gender is, in this sense, not something that simply exists, but it is a process with no origin, something the subject acts rather than is.

Butler, moreover, reinterprets feminist theories about the man/woman duality and masculinity/femininity. This dichotomy has always been presupposed as true; at birth a biological sex is provided, and to it a cultural gender is attributed. There seemed to exist a connection between the male sex and the idea of masculinity, just like the female sex was linked to femininity. Butler disrupts this idea of imposed connection between gender and sex, arguing that they are cultural creations imposed on us by society. According to this, gender is not a restriction for a male or female body, but it becomes a flowing process that can be actualised in both identities.

It is, however, wrong to assume that there is an actor behind this performativity; it is true that gender is a process, something that exists in discourse through the acts it performs, but, for Butler, there is no subjects that produces its identity and no performer who stages these acts. Gender is indeed a choice, but no chooser lies beneath it, simply because there cannot exist a free negotiator that stands outside gender and selects it. Gender is a process which is always occurring, and existing outside it is impossible.

Although subjects are forced to choose their identity inside the power discourse they are immersed in, subversion is still possible. It would not permit the subject to completely escape though, because the possibility for subversion always comes within the constraints of the power structures where gender is located. To better explain this

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<sup>6</sup> Butler, 33.

characteristic, Sara Salih<sup>7</sup> uses an analogy, already used by Butler herself, aimed to clarify the relationship between autonomy of choice and the subsequent constraints that derive from it.

Salih uses the image of a wardrobe as metaphor for the choices we can make; there seems to be a sort of freedom in selecting the clothes one wants to wear, but it is also true that one chooses his/her clothing according to society expectations, even without realizing it. Also, the varieties one can choose between are determined by the culture one lives in, by fashion, by one's salary, and so on. This means that we only have the appearance of autonomy of choice, but we are actually constrained by the ideas of others. Moreover, explains Salih, if one wants to subvert these ideals, he/she would have to 'rip' its clothes in order to show that he/she is not wearing them in a conventional way. But still, those clothes are part of the power structure in which the subject acts, and so this subversion is still a controlled product.

Another central topic of Butler's theory about performativity is that gender is constructed through repetitive acts; this idea is related to Derrida's theory about iterability,<sup>8</sup> which takes performative utterances out of their original context and asserts that repetition generates both identity and difference. For Butler this means that gender is not something stable and fixed, but rather the product of reiterated acts. It is the repetition of the performance of gender that allows gender to exist.

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<sup>7</sup> Sara Salih, (2004), *The Judith Butler Reader*, Blackwell Publishing: Oxford.

<sup>8</sup> The theory is explained in the section titled "Difference and Identity in Derrida" in this thesis.



## **Theory of subject formation**

In her book *Psychic Life of Power*,<sup>9</sup> Butler talks about a theory of subject formation; as identity, one is not born a subject, but society turn him/her into one. Being a subject is a process of becoming that is linked to subordination to power. Being subjected to power is the primary condition to the formation of the subject.

This theory comes from the concept of interpellation theorised by the philosopher Louis Althusser,<sup>10</sup> which talks about how being addressed by an other creates the subject in the society. In order for the subject to be formed, it has to be interpellated by an authority that makes the subject behave in specific modes in the social area. The famous example about a policeman that calls out a subject illustrates the characteristics of this theory. The subject is addressed by a policeman by a simple “Hey, you there!”,<sup>11</sup> and, in turning around, he recognises the authority of the one calling, and assumes the identity that the caller gives him/her. By the simple act of turning around, the subject makes himself/herself as a subject to the policeman’s command and at the same time recognises him as the holder of power. Similarly to Foucault, Althusser proves that the subject is not something that creates society but, vice versa, it is a plain effect of social relations.

The institutions that work through interpellation are called by Althusser ISA, that is Ideological State Apparatuses. They include family, schools, churches, arts, politics, sports, and every other institution that works through ideology by addressing people in particular modes, in order to make them think about their identities in specific ways and

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<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler, (1997), *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Stanford University Press: Stanford, California.

<sup>10</sup> Louis Althusser, (1971), “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in ‘*Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*’, Monthly Review Press: New York.

<sup>11</sup> Althusser, 174.

behave accordingly. The purpose of ISAs is to create subjects through interpellation; they impose subjectivity on individuals through ideology and make people think that these subjectivities are self-made. In a capitalistic society, says Althusser, people think that this path is something they have chosen freely as independent subjects but, actually, these individuals are subjected to that ideology without even realising it.

Ideology is something that works unconsciously; it gives individuals the illusion that they can choose freely what to do and what to believe in. Ideology works through representations. What we believe is the real world, is actually nothing more than the result of ideological representations we make of it and of the relations we create into it; what people know are mere representations of the real world.

Similarly, says Butler, when a baby is born, it is interpellated as either male or female. The doctor, which in this case is the authority, decides whether the baby is a girl or a boy simply by looking at its body parts. He utters the sentence “It’s a boy/girl”, and in doing so he, the authority, decides the social and cultural place of the subject. In this sense, the gender of an individual is constituted on himself/herself through categorisation of his/her body parts.

This concept of identity is, though, way too rigid and fixed. Identity, like gender, is something continuously performed, shaped and constructed by traditions, culture and norms; through repetition, this process is internalised and again repeated over time. The characteristic of this performative identity is that it becomes fluid, something that can change over and over.

What really happens, however, is that gender is a feature forced upon us and then acted out by us; power and the dominant discourse formed by society are the things that reinforce this process. This causes the subject to act according to the dominant discourse;

in order to fit into society, he/she follows imposed norms and, consequently, performs a role that is seen acceptable by others, repressing his/her real self.

There is, nevertheless, a possibility for subversion; individuals and groups should challenge and reject male/female classification and cultural norms. These social rules should not be believed as natural and obvious, but must be contested and disrupted. In order to do so, the subject has to go against those instructions and escape conformability through acts that interrupt the dominant expectations. For women, for example, it can mean to start behaving, dressing and talking as a man. This disturbs the gender norms and creates subversion to culturally imposed ways of acting. Parody, for example, can become a mean of subversion. As Butler explains, engaging in parodies of gender roles is a way to destroy gender boundaries given by culture. The drag parody is an important tool for resistance and becomes a subversive bodily act that disrupts gender norms. Drag questions the fixity of these norms by performing gender in a completely different way; a man performing as female exposes gender identity as a constructed act, because gender norms would be considered effective only if the same feminine performance was acted by a woman. Drag, as gender identity is performative, something that comes into existence through repeated acts; it imitates and reproduces through mimicry. It destabilises the discourse that creates gender identity, disrupting and altering the truth. The drag becomes a subject that causes some “gender trouble” because thanks to it, the notion of a true and given gender identity is disturbed.

Repetition brings in itself the possibility of change; the fluidity of reiteration makes possible for the subject to change his/her gender identity, and through change the subject produces subversion.



## THE POSTCOLONIAL FRAMEWORK

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Colonialism is the process through which European colonisers settled in non-European regions, often through violent appropriation and intense exploitation of native spaces. European states used different tools to gain power over colonised people, for example through difference in race and culture, technology advancements and political systems.

Colonialism, however, does not only indicate the political control of colonised regions; it also refers to the context and the discourse through which non-European cultures were modified or destroyed by the discipline of colonial rulers. Colonialism, in this sense, cannot only be seen as a mere political or economic condition, because it also involves cultural conquest and knowledge appropriation; it did not only take the form of political governance or economic exploitation, but also cultural domination. During colonial times, theories about the new world postulated that the non-European races occupied the lower step of human development, and that natives were primitive and irrational. Since the colonised people could not take care of themselves, they had to be taken care by Europeans. This process justified European colonial presence in countries like Asia and Africa throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In historical terms, postcolonialism refers to the period of time that follows the colonial rule. During the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, colonised states started to demand independence from the colonial rule. Fights for freedom originated throughout the colonies, and by the mid-twentieth century these struggles had resulted in political independence for many states. In temporal terms, these regions were postcolonial, with the meaning of “after the colonial”. Places like Asia,

Africa and the Caribbean Islands, have all faced colonialism differently, and the consequence is that they all have gained political independence in diverse and particular ways. The term postcolonial, however, is not only used in the historical context; it also includes the politics and the social conditions faced by the natives after independence.

For this reason, postcolonial theory does not only refer to the history and the conditions of the former colonised regions. It includes discussions about experiences of various kinds, such as migration, resistance, representation, difference, gender, suppression, slavery, migration and other practices that, together, form the complex network of this field. Postcolonial theory has been taken up by many different disciplines in the humanities and social studies; it has become an interdisciplinary process that connects various areas of study. It refers to the different sets of perspectives and groups of concepts which overlap in diverse fields; postcolonial then, can be seen as a process that puts ideas and practices in constant relation.

Postcolonialism is a term in continuous expansion. Its meaning includes ethnic and minority studies, African, Caribbean and Third World studies, all groups that have been dominated by the Euro-American culture; postcolonial investigations explore the various processes through which power, subjectivity and identity have been influenced by class, gender, race and ethnicity. The literatures that started to bloom from the zones of colonial conflict explore the structures of subordination through which minorities have been cast as the “other” by Euro-American discourses. Postcolonial theory also explores how colonial strategies of representation and ideology are embedded into the literary texts, and how these processes supported the political, military and social operations in colonies. The texts that were produced in colonial times by the Empire, in fact, became

actual tools of domination thanks to the creation of a colonial discourse that justified material oppression.

The field of postcolonial studies started to gain prominence in the 1970s, also thanks to the contribution of Edward Said, a Palestinian-American scholar who, in his famous book *Orientalism*,<sup>12</sup> wrote about Middle East countries seen as the “Orient” by intellectuals that lived in France. The same can be said for British and Spanish colonisers, who constructed the colonies as the “Orient”, which can be seen as a metaphor for everything that is “Other”. Through this view, the colonies were constructed as objects, cultural and political entities that needed civilising, while the West assumed the role of the subject who holds power.

Said argued that knowledge about the Orient was never pure knowledge, because it also signified actual colonial practices. Through the production of such knowledge, colonisers gained power over the colonised without even using strength. Colonial power based on Orientalist knowledge does not need physical violence; the texts and discourses produced in the imperialistic programme are seen as natural even by the colonised subject, who accepts them as the norm. These texts spread an idea of the native as inferior and were used by the Empire as a tool of justification for its presence in the colonies.

The natives wellness was not in the Empire’s interest. The identity of the colonised person did not have value, because they were considered inferior and not as important as western people. The native was rendered a marginalised subject with little agency or identity. The works of postcolonial critics shaped the view through which the

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<sup>12</sup> Edward Said (1978), *Orientalism*, Routledge: London.

colonised was seen by the West society. The purpose of postcolonial criticism is to define the modes of representations by which the native is represented as inferior. The assumption of these texts is that colonial writing was racialised, and such literature fed the intentions of the Empire. Postcolonial scholars' aim was to question and challenge the inequalities that were common during the colonial period and to overturn colonial authority.

Postcolonial studies can offer a variety of analytical tools through which works of literature can be analysed. In particular, postcolonial literature can include many genres and themes, and it often focuses on the problems that occupation has brought to people in the colonies and the effects on their land and society. It covers various important aspects which are all consequences of the settling of colonies, such as the effects of racism on people, the searching and discovering of a new identity in a new context, the struggling for freedom, and other problems colonialism may have raised. The problems that postcolonial literature deals with are often consequences of the decolonisation of a country. Many works of postcolonial literature deal with the issue of the construction of identity; this kind of literature is interested in describing and letting outsiders know the effects that colonialism has had on individuals and the ways the subjects perceived themselves. In postcolonial literature we can often find subjects who strive to find their identity after the establishing and collapsing of colonies. During the colonisation era, people who lived in colonies started to feel like they belonged to the Empire and, at the same time, like they did not really belong there; that is why the produced literature can have both a political and an emotional value.

Colonial domination had disastrous effects both on the lands it claimed and on the people who inhabited the colonies. The scholar Franz Fanon was strongly interested in



the consequences that this process had on people's psychology. In *Black Skin, White Masks*,<sup>13</sup> Fanon explored the experiences of black people in a white world. After colonisation, black people started to feel as if they belonged to two worlds: theirs and the Empire's. Black people were educated in western schools, they were thought western religion, culture and habits. They were educated as whites, but when they moved to the motherland, they would find that the reality was very different. Imperial countries did not accept them as whites, and this racism created psychological problems in the black man. The same Fanon had a similar experience. He, a black Martinican man, was schooled and educated as a French, but when he moved to the mainland, he experienced racism and, consequently, felt a sense of disorientation and confusion. Because his identity had been constructed as white for his entire life, he really thought he belonged to the Empire. That is why, in order to deal with his inadequacy, the native tried to be as white as possible by rejecting his own culture; the black skinned person started to wear a *white mask*. This process, however, created a duality that could affect the black man's psychology and could have violent consequences on his sense of identity.

The postcolonial writer asks the reader to think about the effects that imperialism had on people of colonised countries. At a macro-level, colonialism brought a different view to the world system; colonised people were dehumanised and treated like savages. Moreover, a new binary mentality started to diffuse among people; the colonised was seen as "Other", contraposed to the coloniser, the value carrier, who became the "Us" subject. The colonised lost his/her identity; in order to bring "humanity" and supposed

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<sup>13</sup> Franz Fanon (2008), *Black Skin, White Masks*, Pluto: London.

better values, the colonising nation tried to change the faith, language and way of living substituting its own culture to it. The colonised subject did not know where he belonged anymore; he could feel belonging both to his/her mother country and to the imperial state at the same time.

In this framework, the works of Chris Abani offer a good insight on these issues. Many of his works deal with the search of identity or with finding the roots of one's culture; they present the effects western civilisation have caused to both the nation that has been under colonial domination and to the people. In Abani's books, the protagonist's village is often influenced by western politics, and the protagonist's society must face the consequences of colonisation, human traffic, wars, conditions of poorness and other negative changes that colonialism has caused. The old culture is not the same anymore, because colonialism has changed the way people lived and even what they thought. These aspects brought a fracture both in the society and in the individual, who has been stripped of his/her individuality and left as a country in ruin. In these contexts, Abani's protagonists try to find their place in the world as they grow up or try to survive, while facing the hard conditions life has given them.

The main theme of Chris Abani's novella *Becoming Abigail* is the struggle the protagonist goes through while trying to find her own identity both as an individual and within the society. Abigail lives in Nigeria with her father who cannot help her with her emotional conflicts because he is the main cause of them. Even society cannot help Abigail; her culture is clearly male-controlled, and her needs as a girl are not important. Even her education is put aside for her father's wellbeing. Moreover, her male relatives do not see her as a person, but only like a body to use to satisfy their needs and desires.

The men she has had in her life cannot see her as an independent identity, but always as something to have control on or to dominate.

Abigail, like colonies in postcolonial discourse, is classified as the “Other”, a subject on which the man, that in this context impersonates the Empire, has power and authority. As a consequence of her inferior position, Abigail has to accept the role given to her by the male power and is never able to create an identity of her own. She is disciplined through her mind and, above all, through her body. The men in her life are not really interested in her inner self, but only in her as a body to abuse and to take profits from. The same happened during the colonial period with exploited nations; the body of Abigail becomes the colonised state, which the empire took advantage of only for its purposes and material ambitions.

In order to better understand and analyse the characteristics of the novella by Chris Abani, a postcolonial overview is provided. This chapter is dedicated to depicting a background of postcolonial concepts linked with the novella. In particular, this section deals with themes like patriarchy, the relationship between men and women in society, and the way the body can affect the construction of identity.



## **POSTCOLONIALISM AND MODERN SOCIETY**

### **Patriarchy and colonial desire**

With reference to the postcolonial field and gender studies, one of the first central notions to analyse is the term power and how disparity of knowledge has influenced our society. As already seen, power and knowledge have a very tight relationship; those who have knowledge also detain power over those who do not. The systems of knowledge create discourse, which then defines the reality of the society through people, ideas, thoughts and behaviours. It is through discourse that power is spread; knowledge creates power, and, at the same time, power becomes a function of knowledge. Discourse in postcolonial studies is not only a linguistic term indicating a part of a speech; it is more a social system that produces knowledge and power through acceptance of certain realities as true and socially approved by the people who live in that society. The truth within discourse is legitimized through power because the ones who control knowledge are also the ones who produce truth within the discourse.

In postcolonial studies this means that the Empire, which had power over the colonies, was the only system able to create a discourse within which both the coloniser and the colonised had to feel represented. The violence of the coloniser, for this reason, was legitimised thanks to the discourse he/she was inserted in; violence could be perpetrated on colonised people because the Empire made everyone think that this was something right and necessary to do. The whole society saw the colonised individual as a savage, someone to educate and instruct, simply because they lived in a reality where this assumption was made true and socially acknowledged. Of course, there was no truth behind these behaviours; the colonised individual was not inferior simply because he/she

did not live in a progressed society like the one of the Empire. It was the power that the Empire had over people that made possible for the coloniser to create the discourse in which the colonised were seen as savages, and this idea became the truth in that same discourse.

The same happens in today's society with the disparity between men and women. As we have already seen with Butler and De Beauvoir, there is no univocal relationship between the terms sex and gender; the first refers to the physical and biological characteristic of a person's body, while the second is a cultural construct imposed on a person by the expectations of the society he/she lives in. In today's culture, at birth a person is characterised by her sex, either male or female, and then a social role is imposed on the individual, making him/her a woman or a man. As De Beauvoir argues, the formation of these two categories is fundamental in the formation of the subjectivity of an individual; the sense of the self in a person can only be understood in opposition to something which is not-self. That is why the category of women has been relegated to the state of "other", while men have claimed the category of self and subject for themselves. Moreover, all the cultural representations about women that are created in myth, art, literature and popular culture, are constructed by men; the discourse created is internalised both by the creators and the subjects, in this case women. Female subjects too are compelled to accept their role of object because they have internalised the representations created for them, and thus their cultural construction as other is one of the causes of their oppression.

This means that, in order to feel accepted into society, individuals need to follow some cultural rules according to the gender they are linked to; thus, men should represent masculinity and women should follow ideals of femininity. These gender roles are created

by society to regulate how men and women are expected to behave based on their gender. Just like the Empire created the colonial discourse, also society creates a truth about the relationships between men and women; the first detain the power, while the second are inferior and their role is of subjugation. One of the consequences this view has brought along is that we live in a patriarchal society, where certain negative aspects and relations are embedded in our culture. Patriarchy is a power system where control is realised by men on women. In this system, female individuals are treated as inferior, subjugated and discriminated only because they are of a different sex. Women are seen as objects, a property of men, who can manipulate them in any way they want; they are reduced to secondary subjects, intellectually, physically and morally inferior. This process justifies their limited rights and the way they are treated by men, just like colonial discourse justified the negative ways in which colonised people were treated by colonisers. Women are the Other, while man is the Absolute, the one that creates them and allows them to have a place in society.

Like women, also colonies were seen as objects, something the Empire could decide to dispose of according to its will. The colonisers were valiant men, the ones whose main task was to bring civilisation in savage regions. Men and the Empire have always seen both women and colonies as a personal resource; they could be exploited for their needs without having any other value than that.

Women are seen as mentally inferior, like savages were in colonial times. They could not look after themselves because, according to the Empire, they were inferior, unable to reach the high values that a civilised society had. This binary exploiting relationship has created a discourse that has become taken for granted, both in postcolonial and in patriarchal systems.

Imperialism has created a discourse that allowed the Empire to produce and regulate the Orient as “Other”. The Empire reinforced its authority on the East by creating a system of representations. The Orient was seen as opposed to the East, the “Other” that needed regulating, thus creating a binary structure of concepts that resulted in a system of hierarchies. So, for example, while the Empire represented the values of good, white, civilisation, rationality, masculine, and other positive features, the Orient was portrayed as evil, black, savage, irrational and feminine. This last characteristic is interesting in many ways; the Orient was seen as female because in Western society women, like the colonies, were the subjects to be controlled and regulated. Moreover, the Orient was a place where everything was allowed, an imaginary free from the restrictions of sexual fantasies that, in the civilised society, were forbidden. These fantasies and desires were the ways through which the Western individual saw both the colony as land and the colonised women.

During colonial times, women suffered a double colonisation; female subjects in the colonies were controlled both by the Empire and the patriarchy system they lived in. Because the male individual was the dominant subject, women were inferior both to the white coloniser and the black male man. They were twice colonised because they were seen as the “Other” in two ways; just like the Empire created the colony as “Other”, also patriarchal society conceived female subjects as “Other”. This process of double colonisation created subjugated women both within the colonial discourse created by the West, and the male dominant discourse created by men in society.

These norms still persist in everyday life, that is why the effects that these systems of knowledge had during the colonial period can also be applied to modern society. Man is the dominant force that rules through knowledge and power; he has created a discourse



in which the woman is the inferior “Other”. By means of art, history, literature, and other methods through which knowledge can be spread, men disseminated our society with latent and subconscious ideas of women inferiority.

These views, however, seem to avoid an important aspect of power relations, that is the possibility of resistance. Until now, colonised countries and women alike have been described as passive, and it seems that they have been accepting this reality with submission. This view of power reduces the individual to an inactive victim, a passive and docile body on which power is exercised without possibility of resistance.

## **The possibility of subversion**

As we have already seen, at birth men and women are assigned to different gender categories. This construction of femininity and masculinity reinforced male domination and supremacy. Society assigned specific personalities to both genders; women must be compliant, gentle, controlled and operate for the wellbeing of the family, while men's traits reinforce their dominant position thanks to aggression and power. One may think that, in order to subvert this discourse, women could assume male roles and characteristics. According to this view, if men had more feminine traits and women assumed male positions of power, the system of patriarchy would be dismantled. Actually, by adopting masculine traits, women could only reinforce the idea that male traits are superior and feminine skills are under-valued.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler theorises the possibility of resistance and subversion in gender discourse. Here, subversion is related to some acts that could undermine the heterosexual dominant discourse, but, as there does not exist a subject prior to its agency, subversion can be possible only within a gendered discourse. When a subject performs subversive acts, they are necessarily already embedded in the norms that society has created because he/she is constrained by what has been chosen by others. Even in Foucault theories, although there is possibility of rebellion from subjection, the process is still embedded in the discourse of power. Resistance is possible; it does not come from the outside but, on the contrary, is formed within power itself. This means that resistance grows out of the situation of power which it tries to subvert. However, power demolition will never be possible because this would become a struggle internal to power itself. From these conflicts, the only thing that can be accomplished is the loosening of the pressure of power in order to achieve more possibility of action and agency.

According to these views, the Subject/Object discourse will follow the same destiny, because it could never be subverted. In order to rebel and subvert their position of inferiority, women should obtain more power. This, however, would not destroy the binary system male/superior and woman/inferior, but only create a different relation in the same discourse. By appropriation of the characteristics of masculinity, women are not really subverting the reality, because the system that created the “Other” is still present, only reversed. The only possibility here seems to lie in the re-appropriation of power structures. As subjects limited by power, women’s agency can never be purely subversive, but can only recreate power through different modes of resistance. All the ways in which a subject can subvert authority are originated from within the power systems in which the subject is immersed. Whether it mimics, resists or tries to overthrow the system created by society, subversion always comes from within that same discourse the subject plans to take over.

As Butler affirms, gender is not something that is only performed once, but it is repeated constantly in order to create the stable idea of gender. This repetition is the mechanism through which the production of gender identity is possible. One possibility for subversion, then, can lie in the disruptive repetition of acts that may call into question the practices of identity regulation. Since the base for gender performance is its repeatability, subversion too becomes an act that cannot exist if performed only once. The potential for fracture comes from the fact that gender must always be re-cited in order to be successful, a characteristic that can be true also for subversion. In fact, every time gender has to be performed and acted, a possibility for re-interpretation is given; this new performance of gender subverts the discourse because it calls into question its fixity and naturalness.

Moreover, arguing that both body and identity are constructed, Butler gives a possibility for subversion to the body too. Both identity and the body are constructed by discourse, and both need to be continually re-interpreted and re-performed in order to achieve the façade of stability, just like gender. It is through these repeated acts that bodies become fixed norms; the process of continual re-citation through discourse makes possible for the body to create the illusion of stability. Disrupting these processes questions the norms and transforms the bodies too in subversive forces.

In order to subvert the dominant discourse, then, the only effective way seems to be through appropriation of the same tools power uses and manipulate them in order to change that same discourse. Subversion and agency are deeply conditioned by the dominant discourse, from which the subject does not seem to be able to evade or completely overthrow, although possibility of disruption seems still possible.

## **The body of the subject**

The postcolonial subject created as the “Other” is also represented as such in body. Contrarily to the coloniser, which embodies all the positive and strong characteristics a body can carry, the colonised man is seen as inferior even in his physical appearance. The same process about identity and culture is transferred on the bodies of the subjects, which, in their physical characterisation, are related to the land they belong. The body of the colonised individual is thus seen as something wild, savage, an unexplored territory that awaits possession. Representations made by the first colonisers paved the way for the creation of a discourse in which the body of the colonised subject is deprived of a subjectivity and becomes a mere object of difference, an item used to assess Western authority through this system of knowledge. Of course, the term body means more than the mere physical appearance; it can be influenced, constructed, created and changed by society and culture and it, in turn, affects not only what is outside, but also the identity of the subject it belongs to.

Like the body of the colonised, also the body of women is seen as an object to control. In a society dominated by men, the body of the woman is treated as an item, juxtaposed to the male body, which takes the position of the subject. Women struggle against the apparent disadvantages of the female body; the attitude of a woman toward her body, in fact, changes over the years. Since development, physical appearance produces negative reactions in a girl; she comes to think about her body as something external to her, something she cannot control. According to De Beauvoir, society creates ideals around feminine bodies, about how they should appear and through sexualisation. These supposed disadvantages, though, are only created by our society.

A woman comes to think of her body as an object for men's pleasure because patriarchal society imposes that view, and not because female weakness is something that exists objectively in all societies; a girl's body becomes the object of male's gaze, even though she cannot control it. However, says De Beauvoir, there is possibility for escape; when a woman is alone and not in presence of male's gazes, she can re-appropriate her body and define it for herself. If stripped of patriarchal culture, women would not see their bodies as negative experiences, because they could provide positive representations for themselves, and not be influenced by society and the truths it creates.

Women have no choice about how to think of their bodies because the culture they live in already gave them the norms to follow and to adjust to. Society creates docile bodies that can be controlled because power relations have immediate effects upon it. In a Foucauldian view, power is seen as a circulation of gender norms through a system of relations, and this creates truths manifested in discourses. The body, then, becomes a sort of vessel of power for the society, something that cannot be personally and individually characterised. The body is simply a body inscribed in a system of power/knowledge, which makes it the main locus of social control. A woman, then, is forced to follow some norms given by society in order to make her body acceptable by the standards given by a certain discourse.

The body is, in fact, the primary target of power and through this control it is constituted as an object of knowledge. In *Discipline and Power* Foucault analyses the influence that executioners have on the body of the condemned through the forces created by power in institutions. The body is disciplined and subjected in order to become a useful force to be then exploited by political forces. These discursive practices also create the soul of the subject, which is historically constituted through the technologies of power

over the body. Docility is obtained through the correction of the soul which, in turn, regulates the body. Supervision, punishment and restrictions are the methods used through which power creates the soul around the body of the subjects.

Following a similar process, also the female body has been discursively constructed as inferior and in need of constant control and subjection through discipline. The man, in fact, represents the mind, the culture which is rational, thinking and seen as one, while women symbolize the body, the irrational and emotional part. Mind and reasons are seen as superior to emotions and senses, and for these reasons they should be disciplined. The discourse created by patriarchal societies produces and determines female identity as a form of social control. Women do not choose to think about their bodies as a negative thing. Rather, it is thanks to the patriarchal structures, that she finds herself embedded in the discourse of male superiority. There is no freedom of thinking for women; their body is already constructed by male dominance.

## **Biopower**

According to Foucault,<sup>14</sup> biopower became the main system of social control in our society at the end of the eighteenth century; the coercive mechanisms of control lost their strength paving the way for new methods of social control.

Power can operate at two different levels; the human body as individual human being and the human species as mass of population. The first kind of power deals with individual bodies and is dispersed in the society and in social relationships. It operates at the level of everyday life to control and manipulate the body of the individual. The production of knowledge in our culture results in a discourse of norms to which individuals seek to conform. Biopower focuses on the body as the site of subjugation and underlines the role of the individual and the society in perpetuating power practices that enable control on bodies. Through the production of docile bodies, political order is maintained. The institutions that form our society control every aspect of life, creating subjugated, passive and productive individuals that are compliant to that same society. The individual wants to feel part of the society, and this desire makes him/her behave accordingly to the norms created by others. The subject feels constrained to regulate his/her body to conform to the norms society has established in order to be seen as normal.

The second kind of power allows sovereign power “to foster life or disallow it to the point of death”.<sup>15</sup> Biopolitics is mainly about the management of the life of the population and it necessarily deals with bodies, reproduction and sexuality at a bigger

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<sup>14</sup> For a history of Biopower see “Biopolitics” in “Foucault’s Subject through Discourse” in this thesis.

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, (1978b), *The History of Sexuality*, Volume I, Pantheon Books: New York, 138.



level for the masses. The regulation of the population is gained through application of sciences in fields like reproduction and mortality.

In modern times, the main goal of power is not deprivation anymore, but production; from power that authorised someone to take life or let someone live, to power to promote life or disallow it. The passage from ancient times to modernity is characterised by the transition from sovereignty to biopower, which focuses on a more productive relation to life.

The Italian Philosopher Giorgio Agamben offers a reformulation of the definition given to biopower by Foucault. He asserts that power is all constituted by biopower, because it represents the ability to suspend itself in a state of exception in which it can decide who lives and who dies. Exception does not only mean excluded, but rather it represents something that is taken outside. This outside state is not, however, without relation to the inside, which is the norms and rules; the exception exists in the form of the rule's suspension, in a zone called by Agamben the state of exception.<sup>16</sup>

Agamben explains that today, the word "life" is the only word we use to represent being alive, while in ancient times the Greeks used two different terms to express two kinds of lives. *Zoē*<sup>17</sup> represented the simple fact of living, the naked and pure life which is common to humans and animals alike, while *bios*<sup>18</sup> was the life interpreted as political existence, where man becomes a political subject.

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<sup>16</sup> Giorgio Agamben (1998), *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Agamben, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Agamben, 9.

When *zoē* becomes part of the political life through its exclusion, it produces bare life, which is the form of life that corresponds to the state of exception. According to Agamben, bare life is excluded from the political level, the one of the “normal” situation, and lives in the state of exception determined by the sovereign. To say that bare life is excluded from the political state does not mean that the subject is outside the legal system. It means, in fact, that it exists in the law as a form of exception; this creates a sort of inclusion/exclusion where something is included through the characteristic of being excluded. Agamben uses the figure of the *homo sacer* to represent bare life. In Roman times, this kind of subject had a peculiar legal status; it was a person who was excluded from the law and could therefore be killed with impunity.

For Agamben, Auschwitz represented the classical model of how *homo sacer* is produced and the violent consequences this process has. Human bodies in concentration camps were considered merely by their biological status, and this allowed their annihilation without any consequences for the executioners. The camp became the most biopolitical space in which bare lives were created and destroyed.

In modern times, this figure of *homo sacer* is still present in our society; immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees are some examples of modern bare lives. They have neither rights as citizens nor as human beings because they belong to the state of exception that puts them outside of both the natural and the political law; they are stripped of any political status and completely reduced to bare life. In fact, although they are living beings, they have far fewer rights than the citizens of the nation-states. Human rights were born to include all human beings, even the ones who find themselves in the state of *bare life*, but they actually turned out to be effective only for citizens. In this sense, not only refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants, but also homeless people, prostitutes, victims

of sex-traffic and political prisoners become the absolute biopolitical subjects. Those are the subjects who can be regulated in a state of exception and reduced to *bare lives*.



## BECOMING ABIGAIL

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The following section deals with the literary analysis of the book *Becoming Abigail*<sup>19</sup> by Chris Abani. Using the theories analysed in the first part and the postcolonial concepts studied in the previous section, an examination of the novella is provided. In particular, this chapter follows Abigail's struggle to obtain an identity of her own and the oppositions she finds in men and society. Since birth, Abigail is not considered as a self; she is "other" both in contrast to her late mother and to men. She does not exist for herself, but only in reference to others, who set themselves as subjects opposing her state of object. Even her name, which should be one of the foundation through which people build their identity, is a trap made to constrain her in the chains of society. Abigail, in fact, is given the same name of her late mother, and this brings a psychological distress in her, because she feels compelled to live up to that name, which will never be completely hers. How can she assert her own individuality? According to the theories analysed in the chapters before, through repeated acts there exists possibility of subversion, but always within the limits of the discourse created by society. Abigail continuously tries to perform subversive bodily acts; marking her skin or burning her flesh can be seen as acts that try to disrupt the norms into which she is imprisoned. It is something a "good girl" should not do, that is why by doing it Abigail can grasp a trace of an identity which is hers only.

In the end she decides to take her own life. It is not clear whether this act is an appropriation of her life or if it means that she has given up. It is, indeed, the only act she

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<sup>19</sup> Chris Abani (2006), *Becoming Abigail, a Novella*, Akashic Books: New York.

decides for herself and that is carried out because of her will. But death is also the choice of the darkness, of a place where she would not suffer anymore and where she should not struggle for an identity any further. Is then the choice of death an act of submission or a performance of subversion?

## SEARCHING FOR AN IDENTITY

### **Abigail and Abigail: the importance of a name**

The title of the book is composed of simply two words that summarise the journey that the protagonist makes. It is a story of *becoming*, because Abigail has no self-identity, and is always seen as something she really is not. It is becoming *Abigail* because that name has always been troublesome for the protagonist, and she struggles to make it her own. Her father loved his wife so much that her death created a hole that Abigail is forced to fill. He wants her to be his dead wife, thus he gave Abigail her same name. She is forced to live a life that is not hers; Abigail is a ghost that lives in the shadow of her dead mother. But the pressure of replacing her is too strong.

Surely, Abigail must have had dreams about her future, a life, maybe a boyfriend, and many other things that she may have dreamt about. But these dreams will never see the light; they are crushed by the constant burden to become her mother.

These unexpressed feelings and desires show themselves in rebellious acts during her youth. She is so desperate to be noticed that her actions become quite disturbing and troublesome. To correct her, her father even tries to bring her to a doctor first, and a witch then. But her problems are caused by the pressure she feels from him and are not psychological or mystical troubles. She is repressed by her father's expectations, while her desires remain unfulfilled.

When the novella begins, Abigail Tansi is a fourteen-year-old girl from Nigeria. She is recalling her mother's funeral, an event she was too little to really remember. Her mother was named Abigail too, a name which was given to the little girl as a sort of memorial. In fact, her mother died giving birth to her, and little Abigail is the only legacy

she left. Her father loved his wife so much that he wanted her spirit to be with him forever. He gives Abigail her name out of pure egoistic purpose.

Having the same name as her mother will be a burden for Abigail throughout her entire life; since the first chapter we notice her struggle for identity, a subjectivity that she wants to differentiate from her mother's:

Abigail had died in childbirth and she, Abigail, this Abigail, the daughter not the dead one, the mother, was a baby sleeping in the crook of some aunt's arm completely unaware of the world.<sup>20</sup>

Even in her memory, little Abigail finds herself fighting for separation from her dead mother. In this passage there are many assertions that underline the fact that the Abigail the narrator is talking about is the little child, as if, with the protagonist, also the reader might get confused. There are multiple repetitions in the same utterance through which she wants to assert her separate persona; "she", "Abigail", "this Abigail", "the daughter", "not the dead one" are all reiterations of the same concept in the very same sentence. This means that little Abigail wants to clearly and undoubtedly isolate herself from her mother. Many other times, while remembering episodes of her life, she underlines this difference between her mother and herself through repetitions and reinforcements of her separate identity. Even while making love to Derek, the social assistant, she feels the urge to stress that "Abigail, this Abigail, only this Abigail, always this Abigail, felt herself becoming, even in this moment of taking."<sup>21</sup> She had to live her entire life with the burden of replacing her mother, and this makes her doubt her own separateness from her. Abigail

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<sup>20</sup> Abani, 20.

<sup>21</sup> Abani, 54.



feels the urge to continuously stress this distinction and repeat it to herself, because she is the one who needs it the most.

At the same time, however, she feels a strange connection to her mother. Her loss makes her perform strange acts of mourning. She has never met her, but she nevertheless feels the need to grieve and feel pain for this tragedy. She would surround herself with anecdotes about her mother and collect them “[...] until she was suffused with all parts of her.”<sup>22</sup> She writes them down in red ink and put these pieces of paper under her clothes and presses them onto her skin. This kind of ritual is what allows her to grow into someone, an identity that is not her own. She has always been under pressure to become like her mother, and she feels the urge to inscribe her onto her body. It is like, through these pieces of paper, Abigail wants to anchor her body to the reality, in order to finally become someone. The fact that her father always reminds her of behaving like her mother, brings a desire in Abigail to imprint her mother’s anecdotes onto her skin. This desire is always linked to her mother, and these rites are made to unite and blend herself to her mother:

Chaffing. Becoming. Becoming and chaffing, as though the friction from the paper would abrade any difference, smooth over any signs of the joining, until she became her mother and her mother her. <sup>23</sup>

Through these markings she is transforming her own body into a collection of signs that will connect her to the memory of her mother. Since childhood she has been pressured to be like her mother, although she has never met her. Her father puts on her so big a burden that Abigail feels compelled to make her mother’s memory concrete. She seeks anecdotes

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<sup>22</sup> Abani, 33.

<sup>23</sup> Abani, 36.

about her mother and then burns the stories into her skin in order to create a link to her mother's identity.

She cannot find an identity for herself because everything always recalls her dead mother; her father, her name, her sense of grieving. She wants to carve her mother into her skin probably because that is the only way she knows of becoming more like her, and that is the easiest solution for herself and the people surrounding her.

It was her father who gave her the same name as his wife, but, in doing so, he probably never thought of the consequences it would have on his little daughter. He did that because she resembled her mother; Abigail is described as "Tall, thin, and dark, she, this Abigail, looked so much like the other that her father had named her the same."<sup>24</sup>

In describing the decision her father made by naming her as her mother, little Abigail puts herself in a subject position; she is the real Abigail, while her mother becomes "the other". For her father, however, "the other" will never be his wife, but always his little daughter. Her father's yearning for the wife he has lost is not always apparent, but there is always a feeling of longing that accompanies every dialogue and life event with his daughter. Abigail's father is always described in constant mourning; he drinks a lot and falls into depression. Abigail often finds him in a sort of trance in which he calls for his wife, repeating her name.

Having a little girl that resembles the love of his life and has her same name has difficult and painful effects on him too:

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<sup>24</sup> Abani, 46.

He turned and looked at her and she saw it and recognized what it was. She looked so much like her mother that when he saw her suddenly, she knew he wanted her to be Abigail.<sup>25</sup>

This scene is described as the first time little Abigail, aged eight, sees that expression on her father's face. He was drunk, and sad, and the memory of his wife, says Abigail, was so strong on those nights that he was overwhelmed by it. And this recurs many times during Abigail's life; she is seen not as herself, but as her late mother. Her father's eyes cannot see her as a separate persona, because the memory of her wife and the resemblance Abigail has with her mother are too strong. Little Abigail knows that, and she tries everything to make her dad see her as someone else as her mother. Once, she dyed her hair in purple, and when he demands explanation for it, she lets herself go in a sort of desperate call for recognition.

According to the tradition, Abigail is allowed to grieve for her mother, even though she never met her. But this mourning seems to disturb her father, who recognises his late wife in her little daughter; for him it is like seeing a smaller version of his wife grieving for her own death. But despite his feelings for these episodes, he does not interfere with her peculiar mourning rituals. Abigail's attitude in grieving her mother is very unusual. Once, she shot some birds and, after dressing them with her mother's wedding dress, she burned them on some kinds of funeral pyres. In another occasion, she took off the heads of some dolls and recreated a funeral for them. The only time her father thinks she has gone too far was when she cut the heads out from some photographs of her mother and, after murmuring a sort of incantation, she took the pieces and stuffed her

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<sup>25</sup> Abani, 22.

mouth with them. All these rituals and the continuous re-affirmation of a separate identity from her mother, can be seen as Abigail's attempts of finding and building an identity for herself. Their sharing the same name, makes it difficult for Abigail to assert an identity of her own.

Names are important because they carry on our legacy, it is the first thing through which other people know us and through which we distinguish a person from another one. The name is what determines the individual part of someone; it makes him/her unique among others. For many cultures a name carries specific values and can predict the baby's future. It is interesting to notice that the name Abigail, which comes from the Hebrew *Abigail*, was used as a slang word for a servant in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In the Bible, Abigail is the third wife of King David, and she describes herself as David's handmaid. If we think about Abani's Abigail, it is clear that her destiny of being a servant has been fulfilled. She is a slave in the patriarchal society she lives in when her cousins rape her; she is her father's handmaid because she is supposed to cook and clean after him; she is also subdued to the society system when her affair with the social assistant is discovered. If truly the names our parents choose for us carry the destiny of a person, it really seems that Abigail's future was already embedded in her name.

## **Invisibility: the ghost of Abigail**

Invisibility is a recurrent theme in the novella, and both Abigail and her mother are represented as ghosts, even though in two different manners. Abigail's father and the society around her do not seem to really see her; she grows up as a mere shell which can be filled with other's needs and desires. Men only use her as a sexual object, and her father only sees her through her mother's image.

The first trace of invisibility we find in the book is when Abigail describes her body:

None of the men who had taken her in her short lifetime had seen her. That she wore bronze lipstick, or had a beautiful smile that was punctuated perfectly by dimples. That she plaited her hair herself, into tight cornrows. That her light complexion was a throwback from that time a Portuguese sailor had mistaken her great-grandmother's cries. None of them noticed the gentle shadow her breasts cast on her stomach as she reached on tiptoe for the relief of a stretch. Never explored the dip in her lower back where perspiration collected like gentle dew. They never weighed the heft of her breast the way she did, had, from the moment of her first bump.<sup>26</sup>

The men in Abigail's life behaved like colonisers, that is why the narrator says "She was a foreign country to them."<sup>27</sup> And like a foreign country, she is invisible and exploited. They do not see her, and thus her complexity as human being does not exist for them. Her body is like a "foreign country" to men, because they use it without really looking at it and seeing it for what it really is. This interesting connection with colonialism is reinforced by the experience endured by her great-grandmother. In colonial times, the coloniser did not care whether the land he settled in was already occupied by natives; the

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<sup>26</sup> Abani, 28.

<sup>27</sup> Abani, 29.

same happened with women's bodies. That is why the link with colonialism is reinforced here with the image of a Portuguese sailor who did not mind the screams of a Nigerian woman and took her anyway. The sailor represents the colonial powers, while Abigail's great-grandmother represents the victims of colonialism. Abigail will face the same violent experiences; she will be extracted from her native land and taken as sex slave to the Empire. Colonies, like Abigail and her great-grandmother, are all ghosts for men; they do not exist and thus can be occupied and used as they please. Colonial lands have been exploited for their resources thanks to the use of force and violence, leaving the colonies economically and politically damaged. Abigail's and her great-grandmother's bodies have gone through the same experience that colonies had to go through. These women have been abused with the use of violence, and none of the men who used them cared about their will.<sup>28</sup>

Abigail continuously tries to fight this sense of invisibility, even though the consequences are the same every time. She feels the urge to be seen by her father for whom she really is, and not as an ethereal entity who wanders the house:

She tried to talk to her father about this need to see herself, but he couldn't understand what she meant. Or maybe he just pretended not to. The desire to be noticed for herself didn't go away though. She couldn't be the ghost he wanted her to be.<sup>29</sup>

Once, trying to be seen by her father, Abigail dyed her hair and put on heavy makeup. But again, like all the past efforts she made, this attempt to be recognised did not work.

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<sup>28</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between colonialism and patriarchy, see "Patriarchy and colonialism" in the *Postcolonial Framework* of this thesis.

<sup>29</sup> Abani, 47.

Her father is so filled by her mother's loss that he cannot recognise any other identity which is other from his wife's.

The only one who sees Abigail for who she really is, is Derek, the social worker she will be given in custody to. They fall in love, and for the first time Abigail feels herself seen by someone else, as "[...] eyes looking at her, wanting no more than was here. This was love? To be seen."<sup>30</sup> She feels loved for the first time, and consequently she feels really seen for the first time. In Abigail's mind, Derek does not see anything else but herself, her body, her soul, her character. She is not her late mother's copy anymore, but a new identity, one that for the first time is recognised by another human being. Eventually, the ghost of her mother does not overtake her own self, and thus does not make her a ghost anymore, differently from what happened in the past. For Abigail, the greatest joy is to be seen, to be perceived and acknowledged by others. Thanks to his recognition she is not invisible anymore.

The bond with Derek is one of mutual desire; Abigail, for the first time, loves someone and can decide to use her body as she pleases. She is not forced into sexual intercourse by a violent partner, as happened in her past, but she chooses freely how to use her sexuality. This new power allows Abigail to finally take for once, and not only give to others like in the past. She becomes a woman who wants to find her identity through an egalitarian love relationship.

Abigail was giving. For the first time, she wasn't taken. And she wept for her joy [...] Abigail, this Abigail, only this Abigail, always this Abigail, felt herself becoming, even in this moment of taking.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Abani, 54.

<sup>31</sup> Abani, 54.

She feels empowered by this relationship because it permits her to feel something for herself, because she wants to be herself and because she can afford to become herself.

On the contrary, though, society does not see these acts as a searching for awareness. When Derek's wife discovers the relationship, Abigail is taken into custody and treated as a victim again. No one really listens to her anymore, and she, again, becomes an object without a voice, because "[...] now the one time she took for herself, the one time she had choice in the matter, it was taken away."<sup>32</sup>

The state does not seem to understand that the relationship was consensual, even though Abigail tries to defend Derek many times. Just like in the past, Abigail does not get involved in the decisions that concern her own life. Loving Derek was her first real choice, but society does not care about her desires. In order to protect her, the state takes her decisional power away from her, and she becomes once again a manipulated object which society does not really see. She has no power to defend Derek as long as the state does not see her as a subject.

In the searching of her identity, Abigail is continuously disturbed by the presence of her mother and the expectations that come from society and her own father. The late Abigail was a strong woman who became a judge; she defended the less fortunate and the weaks against the powerful ones. Especially, she would defend women whose husbands beat them and, at thirty-five, she set up a women's advocacy group. To live to those expectations is too much for Abigail, who finds herself lost in the stories people tell her about her mother.

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<sup>32</sup> Abani, 119.



The shape of that Abigail was so clearly marked, the limits traced out in the stories that filled the world around this Abigail, that it was hard to do anything but try to fill the hollowed-out shape.<sup>33</sup>

Her mother had control and power over her own life, while Abigail is empty and sees herself inadequate. She says that the figure of her mother is clear, almost like a drawing made with strong and distinct lines. But Abigail is not like her mother; she needs to actually mark her skin to feel anchored to this reality. She is like a ghost, roaming the world seen by no one. Neither her father nor the other men can actually hold her to this world because what they see is not really her, but only what they would like her to be. She is a lover, a surrogate, but never really a person with her own identity. She is a ghost because society treats her like one and, consequently, she starts to feel like one herself.

She was more ghost than her mother, however, moving with quality of light breathing through a house in which the only footprints in the dust were those of her dead mother.<sup>34</sup>

Even her mother is less a ghost than she is, even though we assist at her funeral in the first chapter. The fact that her mother is perceived as more alive than Abigail is possible because she is actually still a strong presence for Mr. Tansi, while Abigail, the daughter, is less than that. Her existence is not recognised by anyone, not even her father, who only sees in her the copy of her dead mother.

Her movements too have an element of something ghastly and shadowy. The narrative itself gives the feeling that Abigail is never really there, like she is moving from a memory to another without really leaving traces behind. The first really strong assertion of presence is when she rebels against Peter and wounds him. That episode really sends

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<sup>33</sup> Abani, 46.

<sup>34</sup> Abani, 46.

the reader back to reality and makes us realise that Abigail is not only a ghost made of memories, but a human being capable of agency.

This recognition, however, is only temporary, as Abigail sinks again into her state of invisibility immediately after. When liberated, she runs in the street with Peter's penis in her hand, like a trophy. But, interestingly, people do not notice or look at her. When police pick her up from the street and starts searching for her parents, they could not find anything. In order to bring her to London, in fact, Peter made her a fake passport, so, in front of the law, she actually does not exist. And, until the end, she will be a ghost, wandering in the streets of London until her final act that will obliterate her sense of invisibility forever.

## Mapping, marking and memory

One of the first ways through which Abigail tries to confront the past and her mother's death is through her body. In order to cope with it, she traces the absence of her mother on her own flesh trying to differentiate herself from that identity that was of her mother. Abigail uses needles and cigarettes to create a collection of scars that symbolise both the remnants of her lost mother and her own path of becoming.

But there were also the ugly whip marks of cigarette tips. Angry. Impatient. And the words: *Not Abigail. My Abigail. Her Abigail? Ghosts. Death. Me. Me. Me. Not. Nobody.* She stared at them.<sup>35</sup>

She carves her skin with repeated words, which become signs of an identity never recognised by anyone. With her identity buried and suppressed, the only tool Abigail has to express herself is her body. Through her skin she can tell her story and express her feelings and desires. When she carves her skin with words and signs, she is trying to represent her identity and to construct it over and over again. She repeatedly marks her body in order to leave a sign behind, something stable and durable. At first, she uses a crayon to write the word "me" all over her breasts, but the wax would melt away as soon as she washed herself, leaving only a faint trace behind.

[...] she had rolled her growing breast between her palms like dough being shaped for a lover's bread. This wasn't an erotic exercise, though it became that, inevitably. At first it was a curiosity, a genuine wonder at the burgeoning of a self, a self that was still Abigail, yet still her. With the tip of a wax crayon she would write "me", over and over

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<sup>35</sup> Abani, 35.

on the brown rise of them. And when she washed in the shower the next day, the colour would bleed, but the wax left a sheen, the memory of night and her reclamation.<sup>36</sup>

This act is seen as a production of her own identity; she describes her physical appearance as similar to her mother's and marking these parts of her body is a way of re-appropriating her body for herself. She is saying that this flesh is hers, and not her mother's. She is different, she is someone else, and to express that she writes the word "me" over and over again on her flesh. Through the inscriptions on her body, Abigail is trying to assert her power on her consciousness.

Marking her own flesh is a way for Abigail to assert her own identity through her body, something that is truly hers. These markings are the ways she uses to anchor herself to reality. They are a means to be seen, to pin down her own self on her body in order to be acknowledged by others. As explained in the previous section, Abigail is a ghost for society, and the markings she carves on her body are her way to feel and bring her body into the reality; through those markings Abigail is trying to perceive her body as something palpable and solid. She is desperate to be recognised, because no one really sees her. The markings she records on herself are unique; through time, they have become the way to differentiate herself from her mother. By burning her skin, Abigail is trying to organise her life experiences and to pin them down into her corporality.

These signs are speaking for her, because she is not able to talk about her feelings. When she tries to confront her father, he continuously reminds her that she should behave more like her mother.

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<sup>36</sup> Abani, 28.

Those markings are her way of talking:

She pulled up her left sleeve and absently traced the healed welts of her burning. They had the nature of lines in a tree trunk: varied, different, telling.<sup>37</sup>

Abigail, by engraving signs on her own body, becomes both the torturer and the tortured one, transforming her body into a site of both resistance and abuse. These signs are not, however, an act of self-violence; the same Abigail does not see them as “combustion” or “immolation”,<sup>38</sup> on the contrary, they become permanent signs that express her own self and that are used to remind her that she is a separate human being from her mother. These markings are the representation of her own subjectivity, and it is through them that Abigail is able to claim agency over her body.

One of Abigail’s favourite things is reading maps; they are the only things she likes to read, apart from Chinese poetry. She likes to touch them, to feel them and follow the borders with her fingers. It is interesting to notice a link between her hobby of reading maps and the colonial activity of mapping. During that period, colonised lands had to be organised through spatiality, and in order to fully possess a land, maps were essential. They delimited spaces and gave data for exploration. Maps are a way to chart the world, to order it through organised and precise lines on a piece of paper. Abigail follows the same process on her body; through the signs she records on her skin, she tries to achieve control over her identity.

The similitude between Abigail and a foreign country is even more pronounced in her marking her own body. Cartographers trace lines on paper to delimitate spaces, and

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<sup>37</sup> Abani, 35.

<sup>38</sup> Abani, 36.

Abigail tracks her self through scars on her skin. Like colonisers used maps to organise their possessions, Abigail colonises her own body through lines and words. Maps are the way through which we can understand and define the world; they make sense of the space around us. Similarly, Abigail's body is, for her, a map on which she defines and organises the important events in her life.

And the black lines of science, carving things into sections – longitude, latitude – pretending that here, at least, on the flat spread of the map, it was possible to have any kind of dominion over a landscape. Over things.<sup>39</sup>

Maps become also the way through which she can imagine her mother. Pretending that landscapes are bodily features, she creates her mother's outline. Stable, permanent and solid signs that are developed into the figure of her mother, while she, Abigail, the daughter, can only replicate the same process on herself to have a shade of solidity into this reality, because maps, for Abigail, are "a way to hold it all."<sup>40</sup>

In the worst moments of her life, the only thing she can grab on in order not to lose herself, is her body markings. By burning and marking herself, Abigail organises her experiences and, through them, she gains control over her body and her life. When she is humiliated and forced into submission by her uncle Peter, she searches for her marks in order to feel relieved and to hold that little crumb of self that she is left with. While being chained to the doghouse, the only relief she has are her markings, the only things she ever created for herself: "Without hands, she rooted around her skin with her nose. Feeling for the brandings, for the limits of herself."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Abani, 73.

<sup>40</sup> Abani, 81.

<sup>41</sup> Abani, 93.

The moment when Peter's actions threaten to erase Abigail's precious markings, is the moment when she finds the strength to rebel and attack him. Those signs are the only things that tie her to her past and the remnants of a human self; the breakpoint comes when the subjugation reaches a level that could put at risk who she is:

And she no longer fought when Peter mounted her.  
Wrote his shame and anger in her. Until. The slime of it threatened to obliterate the  
tattoos that made her.  
Abigail.  
One night.  
Unable to stand it anymore, she screamed. Invoking the spirit of Abigail.  
And with her teeth tore off Peter's penis.<sup>42</sup>

This action can be seen as the really first process of becoming for Abigail; before she is subjugated by everyone, her father, her cousins, society and Peter, but now this action becomes a statement of who she has become after all these years of mental and physical abuses. When she marks her body, she asserts her identity for herself; no one acknowledges her signs as her becoming a subject. Even when she escapes Peter, the moment she gains agency and subverts the power discourse she was victim to, is a brief moment. In the streets no one notices her, making her act of subversion very private and fleeting.

Those markings are her way of coming into the world, and threatening them is like threatening her own existence. When Derek feels the bumps caused by the scars she has made herself, it is like she comes into existence, because those markings are her identity. They are recognised as alive through touch:

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<sup>42</sup> Abani, 97-99.

And he traced her in that moment, the map of her, the skin of the world, as she emerged in pointillism. Emerging in parts of a whole. Each. Every.<sup>43</sup>

Abani's choice of words is never casual, and even in this simple utterance the reader can find a deeper meaning for Abigail's feeling. Abani uses the word "pointillism" to describe the materialisation of her body into reality. The term is related, of course, to Abigail's habit to mark her body through dots, but this action can also be read in a more artistic way. Pointillism is, in fact, an artistic current that started in the 1880s, and it refers to a particular technique that uses small dots of colour to form an image. These dots are applied in patterns, and when finished, the work forms a complete image. The effectiveness of the technique depends on the ability of the viewer's eyes and mind to blend the spots together and to recognise the full image.

Thinking about this technique, the reader may think of Abigail as both the full image that tries to be recognised and composed by people, and also as her own painter. Abigail wants to be recognised by others, but the only way she knows to do it, is through fragments, lines and dots, because even Abigail does not know the full picture of herself. She leaves it up to the others to re-compose her identity and body and to see her as a full human being. For Abigail, Derek is the only one who sees her full image, and he is also the only one who recognises her marks through touch. He is the one through which Abigail comes finally into reality, the one that traces her lines of existence.

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<sup>43</sup> Abani, 55.



## Violence and resistance

Abigail faces both psychological and physical violence in different episodes; since when she was little, she has been subjugated by men who have treated her like an object to exploit. The first experience of psychological and bodily violence is when she is ten, and her fifteen-year-old cousin exchanges her innocence for a bag of sweets. After raping her, he gently strokes her hair and says to her: “I will kill you if you tell anyone.”<sup>44</sup> Her cousin knows that what he did was wrong, that is why he intimidates a little girl with threatening her life if she tells anyone about it. And Abigail does not tell, because she knows that no one would listen. She is not even seen, why would she be heard?

The second time she is raped is two years later, and this time menaces are not even necessary. She is a bridesmaid at Peter’s wedding to her cousin Mary, when he follows her into the bathroom and forces her to kiss him. He even abuses her (he touches her with his fingers), but still Abigail does not say anything.

Mental oppression comes not only from the men who threatened and violated her, but also from society itself. A woman is not protected, and Abigail knows that. A woman is supposed to be servile, to fulfil men’s desire, even though it means to be ashamed and used. That is why she does not tell anybody; she can tell that it would be a waste of time. Abigail is aware that her voice would not be heard, because she already knows how things work for women in her society.

Through this simple sentence, Abani describes all the weight that culture can have on a little girl: “Even at that young age she knew what men were like.”<sup>45</sup> She is not even

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<sup>44</sup> Abani, 30.

<sup>45</sup> Abani, 64.

an adult, but she already knows that society forces the abused to keep quiet, because these brutal acts are permitted and accepted as the norm.

On the contrary, her mother was very sensitive about the question of violence. She was a judge and created a free women's advocacy group; she is described as a fierce woman who would confront violent husbands and threaten them to cut off their penises if they did not stop abusing their wives. It is surrealistic that the things against which her mother fought all her life are the things that will negatively affect Abigail's life. Her mother strongly opposed these violent behaviours, while Abigail will be a victim of them for her entire life.

After the first abusive encounter with Peter, Abigail will not see him for another two years, when he goes back to the village to talk with her father. Peter has become a wealthy man in London, and every once in a while, he goes back to his motherland to take children to London and give them a better life. So, when he goes to Abigail's house, her father is very happy that he chose her to go back to England and live with him and his wife, which is Abigail's cousin. Abigail does not trust him, because she remembers what he did to her, but since she told no one about it, her father does not oppose. Moreover, the whole decision is taken without even asking Abigail; the patriarchal society she lives in allows her father to take decisions for her. It is not clear whether her father knows about Peter's business in London. He seems happy while talking about the possibility, because, he says, London will allow better living standards for his daughter. However, according to his past experience in London, her father should not have such a good image of the West. While on holiday with her wife, in fact, he faced episodes of racism, and this experience contradicts his joyousness for Abigail's trip.

It could also be that her father is knowingly complicit in Abigail's future. She knows that her departure is a sacrifice for her father; she is his caretaker, the one who cooks for him, who cleans after him and the one who runs the household. She also had to change her school and had to give up her educative expectations in order to be near her father and help him. Abigail knows that, for her father, her departure would mean losing her, but she also perceives something else: "But there was also the faintest shadow in his eyes, one that revealed rather than occluded. She shivered and crossed herself, arms and legs crossed."<sup>46</sup> It could be true that her father knows, or at least presumes, what Peter does in London. In response to her father's look, Abigail's instinct is to cross her legs in a protective act that almost reveals her fate. However, it is not clear whether her father knows it or not, but what is sure is that Abigail does not have a choice in the matter. She is an object, not a person who can choose her future; her male relatives are the ones with the power over her, and she cannot do anything to impose her voice.

The first night of her arrival in London, Abigail hears Peter and Mary arguing about her being there. Mary does not agree, and Abigail sees Peter beating her. She does not understand why Mary would not fight back, and so she reacts and hits Peter, who kicks her in the stomach and leaves her on the floor. Mary does not seem grateful about Abigail standing up for her, telling her that that was a mistake and she should have not done that.

Some days later, while she is asleep in her bedroom in Peter's house, two men burst into her room; one of them is Peter, and the other is a stranger. She does not recognise him, but she feels that he is a menace. He, as a matter of fact, tries to rape her,

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<sup>46</sup> Abani, 69.

while Peter incites him, but Abigail fights back hitting him. Because of this, Peter wants to punish her and tries to hit her, but she bites him in response. The men leave, and after a while Peter comes back and handcuffs her; he then drags Abigail outside and confines her in the backyard like a dog.

This physical violence goes on for several days; Abigail is treated like a beast and forced to act like one.

And this is how she was made.

Filth. Hunger. And drinking from the plate of rancid water. Bent forward like a dog.

Arms behind her back. Kneeling. Into the mud. And the food. Tossed out leftovers.<sup>47</sup>

This bodily and psychological abuse is intended to make her docile, to allow Peter to control and restraint Abigail. He goes to her twice a day, to water her and bring rancid food. During his visits he mistreats and abuses her, and these repeated acts almost succeed to bend Abigail's will, until she is described as a "girl slowly becoming a dog."<sup>48</sup> The disciplinary space of the backyard serves as purpose of educating and training Abigail into subjection. By treating Abigail as an animal, Peter is trying to dismantle her humanity and make her a servile and obedient object for sexual exploitation. Through the manipulation of her body, Peter gains power over her, and this allow him to abuse her over and over. She is forced to live in a reduced space under continuous physical and psychological violence; through these practices, Peter intends to threat and annihilate her own self in order to render her subservient. The purpose of this procedure is to completely obliterate her will so that she will no longer fight back. She is made into an object who

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<sup>47</sup> Abani, 93.

<sup>48</sup> Abani, 94.

must be shaped according to Peter's desire. He is the subject that controls her body and mind through discipline, while she is the object who must obey.

Peter represents the man with power, the one who expects obedience from the women he brings into his house. Even his wife, Mary, cannot stop him from perpetrating such violence. She is threatened too, and in many occasions these threats have not been empty words. Peter already beat her many times, and he is the cause for their daughter's death. In fact, just because the baby was not a boy, he pushed Mary down the stairs while she was carrying their daughter, and when she fell, she hit the baby causing her to die.

Mary's victimisation makes her a character which can be a little ambiguous. According to her behaviour, she can be seen as an accomplice; she knows what Peter is doing to Abigail and what he did to the other kids he brought along, but still she does nothing. The first night that Abigail is forced into sexual intercourse with a stranger, she calls for Mary, but when she comes, she closes the door of the room where Abigail is being raped. After years of violence, Mary knows that there is nothing she can do, because Peter is the one with the power in the house, and even only saying something can have brutal repercussions on her.

Even after Abigail manages to escape, Mary does not alert the police, nor does Abigail say who her captor was. Mary's reason could be that, after years of dependency and cruelty, she cannot afford to give Peter in to the police. She is jobless, and we do not know if her documents are faked like the ones Peter made for Abigail. The only act of resistance Mary can afford to do is to offer Abigail comfort while Peter is away. Moreover, after Abigail tears off Peter's penis, she is the one who unchains her and lets her free.

It is interesting to notice the juxtaposition of the effects violence can have on Abigail according to whom is the one to use it. Abigail is made submissive because of oppression and Peter's brutality, but when she adopts cruelty for her advantage, she sets herself free. Violence, in the story, has a binary function; it serves to enslave Abigail and is also a tool that sets her free. Through the brutal act of tearing off Peter's penis, Abigail performs an act of freedom, and thanks to that she can escape. While Peter's violence took away everything from the women in the house, Abigail's brutality takes away the main thing that makes Peter powerful and dominant: his penis.

In order to assert herself against her captor, she performs a violent action that brutally deprives Peter of his quintessence as a male. It is no coincidence that the piece of flesh she tears off is the male penis, almost as if she wants to take vengeance on every man who mistreated her in her past life. Robbing a man of the most typical thing that makes him a man is an important statement of subversion against the male population. The symbol of patriarchy is literally severed from Peter's body, and thanks to this Abigail sets herself free. Abigail leaves the scene of her abuse as the dominant subject. Peter's castration is a symbol of subverted power relationships; if before Peter was the dominant figure, now Abigail has achieved the prevailing position. She does not only have the power to change her situation from weak to powerful, but she also has the ability to affect Peter's body and rank. What she does with her body demonstrates that subjugated women can have the power to subvert their relationship with patriarchy.

Abigail's body transforms from the primary site of abuse to her only tool of resistance. She fights Peter through her corporality, taking advantage of the same violence she has been trained to endure. Abigail resists brutal treatments using her own body as locus of physical agency. After being objectified, violated, and both sexually and

psychologically abused, Abigail finds the strength to use and re-constitute her body as space of resistance. Through the re-organisation of the body as medium of resistance, Abigail produces agency and uses it to destabilise patriarchal control. In this sense, the body is not seen as a site of vulnerability and exposure, but it becomes a tool through which Abigail can appropriate her life.

Even the marking on her skin can be seen as acts for the production of agency. Following psychological oppression, she cannot find an identity for herself, because she is forced to fill the void that her mother left in her father's life. Those markings are her way of re-organising her experiences in something that is hers and hers only. Once again, her body becomes her primary site of resistance.

Violent resistance is not, however, the only way through which Abigail performs agency. Her sexual experiences with Derek are her only positive contacts with men. In these encounters Abigail again uses her body to obtain agency, though not through violent acts. Before meeting Derek, Abigail is the passive subject, the one who had always been taken and never given anything willingly in return. This relationship, however, is her turning point, the event that allows her to shift from a passive subject to an active one. It is again through her body that she experiences agency and finally feels herself "becoming". Resistance, in this case, takes the form of willing sexual acts. The experience of rape is turned into a satisfying contact that gives her power on her own body.

## Traces of performativity

In order to provide a “performative reading” of Abani’s novella, this section is dedicated to presenting a link between the first part of the thesis about the “performative framework” and the literary analysis of *Becoming Abigail*. The theory about performativity by Butler<sup>49</sup> is particularly relevant for the commentary about Abigail’s production of an identity.

According to Butler, the roles a person plays in a society are the outcome of repeated acts. Gender, for example, is described as a performance that is reproduced many times to conform to society’s rules. The same happens to the protagonist of the novella: Abigail, in order to create her own identity and to be accepted in society, performs repeated acts on her body to try to affirm her own self. She uses her body because it is the primary and her only site of control; by changing and marking her body, she asserts her possession on it and, at the same time, indicates it as the tool through which (or upon which) her identity is constructed. The body, here, becomes the central factor in subverting the norms in which Abigail is trapped. For Butler, it is the normative function of biological sex that creates the materiality of the body; this means that because sex is seen by society as a normative power, the body becomes the materialisation of that norm. Biological sex, then, becomes a tool through which a body is qualified. Following a similar process, Abigail brings into materiality her body through the only normative power she can have access to; her body markings become, as the “sex” for Butler, the

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<sup>49</sup> The theory is illustrated in the section titled “Judith Butler’s gender performativity” of this thesis.



norm that materialise her body. Those markings are, for Abigail, the only reiterative power she has in order to produce her own bodily discourse.

Throughout her life, Abigail has always been the “other”, the object that is created by the men she encounters in her life. They always place themselves as the subject, and Abigail is supposed to be the malleable and docile object because that is what society wants her to be. This is possible because Abigail is immersed in a patriarchal society that creates the discourse of what being a woman means. According to Michel Foucault, the discourse created by knowledge determines the power relations in a society.<sup>50</sup> Abani’s protagonist and her struggles are the products of the patriarchal system created by African society.

The patriarchal tradition is shown through the abuse of women’s bodies. Men never really take into consideration Abigail’s body if not to abuse it. No one notices that her complexion is different from her people; this is an inheritance from the effects of colonialism on her great-grandmother. The narrator fills the novella with many references to colonialism, entwining it with rape. Sexual exploitation is not only a thing of the past colonial time, but it connects to Abigail’s present. The Portuguese sailor who raped her great-grandmother is represented in Abigail’s life through the men who abuse her. Sex trafficking in the novella draws the reader’s attention to the continuity of these “colonial rapes”. Abigail’s body becomes a tool for making money and creating discipline, especially for Peter and her father. She is deeply buried in male dominance discourse, and her body becomes an object for their profits; Peter exploits her for his financial needs,

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<sup>50</sup> Michel Foucault’s theory about discourse is analysed in the section titled “Foucault’s subject through discourse” of this thesis.

while her father uses her as a caregiver. These patriarchal structures that work in Abigail's society reinforce the colonisation of women's bodies through violence and brutality. Abigail gets "[...] caught in the sheath of men's plans."<sup>51</sup>

In particular, the mentality of patriarchy is deeply embedded in Peter, who sees himself as the superior being who can decide about the life and death of women just because he does not see them as human beings. Peter represents here Foucault's sovereign power, the subject who can decide about the life and death of his subjugates.<sup>52</sup> Male-centred societies use the female body as sites of discipline and control, and Peter enacts this power on both Abigail and Mary. They are invisible subjects for Peter, and more generally for men, because their rights, desires and needs as women are not important in the system of patriarchy.

But since, according to Foucault, the body is the main tool of social control,<sup>53</sup> one can use it to define and regulate one's own self. The subject is socially constructed because it does not exist outside its context, and even identity cannot be represented as fixed and constant. Society can create subjects through the regulation of the body, but so can a subject. Abigail tries to organise her body as a mean to delimit her own self and to pin it down to reality. The repetitive signs carved on her body are Abigail's way of performing herself. In fact, it is the only way she has. Her violent sexual experiences have marked her body in a way that she does not feel hers. By re-writing her body and asserting her self-awareness again and again on her skin, she subverts her preceding negative

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<sup>51</sup> Abani, 77.

<sup>52</sup> A brief introduction to sovereign power is provided in the section about "Biopolitics" in "Foucault's subject through discourse" of this thesis

<sup>53</sup> See the section of this thesis titled "Biopolitics" in "Foucault's subject through discourse" for a more extensive analysis about the body as a mean of social control.

experiences and creates her true identity. The reiterative power of the markings Abigail carves on her flesh is the means through which she tries to impose her self on the materiality of her body, since this tool of self-assertion has always been used and abused by others. The repetitive signs and words represent for Abigail the performative acts that Butler talks about in her theory of gender production. Abigail has already been produced as a subservient subject by men through the repeated acts of physical and psychological violence she had to endure (from her father first, and her cousins then); consequently, her place in society has been created by others. In order to produce an identity that is solely her own, Abigail knows that the tool upon which she has to act is her body, because that is the mean through which others created her as their subject. Abigail re-appropriates her identity through the re-appropriation of her body.

Repetitions, a key concept in Butler's theory, can be found in many parts of the book:

And the words: Not Abigail. My Abigail. Her Abigail? Ghosts. Death. Me. Me. Me.  
Not. Nobody.

Abigail, this Abigail, only this Abigail, always this Abigail [...]

"This one is you, this, me. In the middle is Greenwich. Here," and she was down on her stomach, "is my hunger, my need, mine, not my mother's. And here, and here and here and here, here, here, here, me, me, me. Don't you see?"

"This is my mother. Words. And words. And words. But me? These dots. Me, Abigail."

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<sup>54</sup> Abani, 36,54,55.

The story is so full of repetitions that it almost feels like the author too is helping Abigail in her quest for her becoming. Repeating words is Abigail's connection to the process of performativity. Through reiteration, in fact, Abigail wants her identity to be recognised and acknowledged.

Abigail does not only mark her body with symbols and dots, but she also records words on her skin. Words can be used to describe something or, as Austin says, they can be used to perform something in the reality.<sup>55</sup> They have an impact on our world, and for Abigail they are the mean through which she can produce her existence. Performative utterances produce effects on reality while being said. So, for example, when a person apologises saying "I'm sorry", his/her apology is recognised as valid by society, and it brings into reality the sentence and its validity. Through the same method, Abigail carves on her body the words and signs that should have the ability to act on her reality and thus to construct her identity. Abigail's hope is to produce her identity thanks to the same process used by performative utterances; her markings' aim is to validate her self through words, which, in her case, become performative once written on her flesh. She does not need one particular context in order to render these performative actions effective, because the context is her own life. The process of becoming is carried out throughout the growth of a person, so the performance, in her case, is always valid. On the contrary, one of Austin's felicity condition is the presence of a context;<sup>56</sup> without it, the performative sentence does not exist. Referring to the example mentioned before, an

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<sup>55</sup> Austin's theory of performative utterances is analysed in the section of this thesis called "Austin's Performative Speech Acts".

<sup>56</sup> The other felicity conditions of the performative utterances are explained in the section "Felicity Conditions" in "Austin's Performative Speech Acts" of this thesis.

apology should follow a wrongdoing, otherwise it is not valid as a performative act. Abigail's context refers to her entire life; since when she was born, she has had to struggle to produce an identity that is her own, and, until the very end, she will have to prove her existence. Austin's context, in this case, is not something external from the subject who carries out the performative action, because it is not given by a specific situation. Abigail, in fact, transforms her body and all her life in the context she needs to validate her affirmation as a person.

There are other processes through which Abigail experiences the production of her identity, and most of them, like the practice of marking her body described before, are linked to pain. When she is enslaved by Peter, she is treated like a dog, and the fact that she is forced to behave like a beast, makes her almost become one. Derrida's theory about reiteration says that it is thanks to repetition that the norm can be disrupted. Utterances, in fact, can be repeated, and through their repetition, alteration is possible;<sup>57</sup> in other words, Abigail uses iteration to both assert her own self and to create subversion. The signs she carves on her body and the experiences of reiterated violence, are all repetitions of an identity, and for this reason they can be reproduced. At the same time, however, this iteration creates difference, and it is through this disruption that Abigail can perform a kind of subversion.

Butler's theory of identity formation asserts that the repetition of acts produces identity. In Abigail's case, she is not the only the only subject who performs these reiterated acts on her body; in her life, in many occasions she is the victim of violent acts

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<sup>57</sup> The process of alteration through repetition is briefly explained in the passage titled "Difference and Identity in Derrida".

that have consequences on the production of her identity. The repetitions of these violent performances have the effect to create an imposed identity on Abigail. She does not choose to become a dog, but Peter forces her to perform like one little by little, action after action, until she feels almost like a dog. Butler's theory shows that the only possibility for producing one's identity is through repeated performances; violence, for Abigail, becomes the repeated act that allows her jailer to impose an identity on her, and, at the same time, it also represents Abigail's only possibility for subversion.

It is thanks to this treatment, in fact, that Abigail manages to escape; this is, in fact, the outcome that Abigail gets when she revolts against Peter's violence by appropriating his imposed identity. She has become a dog through repeated acts of violence on her body, and like a proper animal, she has learnt to bite to defend herself. This imposed performativity allows Abigail to become a dog, and she uses it as an advantage to hurt Peter and run away to find salvation. The body is for Abigail, again, her tool of salvation through its subversive aptitude.

The other time she finally achieves a sense of identity through pain is when her affair with Derek is exposed. He gets incarcerated, and Abigail is treated as a victim. No one believes that their love was mutual because they all think that Derek raped her, who is a minor. Abigail is emotionally destroyed. For the first time she was seen for who she really was. Derek was the one who made her feel special, someone worth having and caring for, all things that her father never showed her. Through his gaze, Abigail is not lost anymore, and she can finally be who she wants to be. According to Lacan's theory of the *mirror stage*,<sup>58</sup> the subject gains identity through the appropriation of an image,

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<sup>58</sup> The *mirror stage* theory is explained in the section titled "Lacan's mirror stage" of this thesis.

which is given by “the other”. It is thanks to this image that the subject establishes his/her own self, as something dependent upon an external being. Abigail’s parents should have provided her that image, but all she is left with is her father’s and society’s expectations. She cannot build her identity because, according to Lacan’s theory, she is not able to complete her self-image. In fact, the first approach a baby has of his/her image is only partially constructed; it comes from his/her self-reflection, which, in Abigail’s case, is the only thing she can appropriate. Without the image given by the “other”, according to Lacan’s theory, Abigail will never be able to construct her whole identity, because she will always strive to find a fulfilment in her self-image. The only person who, in Abigail’s mind, can help her reach a full identity, is Derek. Through his gaze Abigail obtains that image of herself that has always been elusive for her. Derek’s love is, for Abigail, a mirror which allows her to see her complete reflection.

However, society does not approve this relationship and condemns it as an act of sexual abuse. The paradox here is that Abigail’s case is perfectly dealt with from the legal point of view, but Abigail’s feeling is that her will has not been protected or safeguarded at all. It is the pain of loss that marks her becoming:

Had her mother known this particular pain?

It didn’t seem possible. More likely that she was becoming herself, this Abigail. In this particular moment, in this particular way. As particular as the dots burning across her body, mapping a constellation.<sup>59</sup>

She finally feels that she is becoming herself because this situation, this pain, is not something that her mother could have experienced. She finally marks the distance

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<sup>59</sup> Abani, 118.

from her mother through the pain she feels. The moment in which she finds something that not even her mother could have had, is the moment she discovers her identity. The focus is still the same; distancing herself from her mother. Derek never knew her mother, that is why his love made her feel special and seen for the first time. The pain of Derek's loss is again something that her mother could not have experienced, along with the other experiences that Abigail has gone through. They are Abigail's personal struggle, the ones that, in the end, make her really become Abigail.

Abigail is described throughout the narration as a ghost, an invisible entity that is never really seen by anyone. She is no one; her father never really saw her, men never noticed her, and she does not even exist in front of the law. In this sense, Abigail can be related to the figure of *homo sacer*,<sup>60</sup> a person who is not recognised by law and lives outside it. *Homo sacer* is a ghost, and Abigail is one of them:

Even the name she gave, Abigail Tansi, drew a blank. It was like she didn't exist. And she didn't, because Peter had used a fake passport and a forged visa to bring her into the country and she was registered everywhere under that fake name, a name she had forgotten.

She was a ghost.<sup>61</sup>

Agamben's definition of *homo sacer* can be related to Abigail's condition as invisible human being. Abigail is, in fact, stripped of political existence, because she is not recognised by the law. She is a minor and an illegal immigrant, and she can be categorised as bare life; the rights that should be natural for every human beings fail to protect her because she is not recognised as a citizen. Abigail is deprived of her political status, and

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<sup>60</sup> Agamben's theory about *homo sacer* and bare life is explained in "Biopower" in the "Postcolonial framework" in this thesis.

<sup>61</sup> Abani, 112.



she has no rights in her state of invisibility. She is the symbolic realisation of the bare life, the form of human categorisation that stays on the threshold between life and death.

## The final act of agency

In the “now” chapters<sup>62</sup> Abigail is in London at night, smoking cigarettes. At Cleopatra’s Needle, she remembers her past and all the events and circumstances that led her there.

Of all the men she had during her short life, Abigail did not love any, and they neither really loved her. The only two people she really cared about are her father and Derek, the social worker who became her lover. When found by the police, Abigail is treated like someone who is there but is not really seen by the state. While her father always wanted her to replace her mother and men always wanted her to be a sexual object, Derek is the first one to see her and to want nothing more than what she has to offer. Even just one person is enough for Abigail to become someone, because what she really need is a person who really notices her and brings her own self in the reality of existence. Feeling “seen” for the first time is the first trace of “becoming” for Abigail, opposed to all her previous experiences where she would not even be noticed. The very first recognition a person is supposed to get is from his/her parents. Abigail has never felt the sense of security or the feeling of being loved that comes from parents or, later, lovers. Consequently, she has never felt worthy of love, because she had never been the object of the recognition that comes from this kind of relationships. That is why Derek’s gaze, the look of the one who loves her, is the most important thing Abigail’s life. Derek is also the only person that actually sees and touches the signs she has carved on her body. This apparently small and simple act becomes, for her, a very important and powerful gesture

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<sup>62</sup> For the narrative structure of *Becoming Abigail*, see “Introduction” in this thesis.

of acknowledgment. For Abigail, Derek does not only acknowledge her existence; she also feels that he accepts her as a person. It is through acceptance that Abigail feels finally as belonging to something; she gains consideration, appreciation and, consequently, more power and control over her life. Abigail depends on other's feedbacks in order to develop an identity, and Derek seems to be the only one who really recognises her: but, with Derek in prison and their relationship ostracised by everyone, she knows that having that look for herself again will be impossible. Without that gaze she is, again, not recognised by anyone, and thus she feels like not existing anymore. She knows that and she feels the despair and the dissolving of her own self:

And now that she could not feel the gaze on her, she was more lost than ever.  
“Abigail,” she called softly to the dark. The cold. The water. “Abigail.”  
And with the hum of traffic behind her, it was as though she hadn't spoken.  
As if the wind was merely passing through her.<sup>63</sup>

Without Derek she feels herself becoming a ghost again, so much that even the wind passes *through* her body. She even tries to call her name, as if saying it out loud could retain that little identity she has constructed thanks to the help of that love. Even her name, however, is lost in the air, as though she never said it. The markings on her body are not of help anymore either. Through them, Abigail has tried to construct an identity of her own, but the only person who has ever seen them and that has touched them is Derek. Who will recognise her now, when the only person who literally touched her self is gone forever? Like a word not heard by anyone fading away, she is slowly losing her glimpse of identity she had constructed thanks to Derek's love.

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<sup>63</sup> Abani, 56.

Abigail knows that she would never see Derek again, and this makes her realise that no one will ever be able to really see her like Derek did. She is losing her identity again, and without him she feels she could not regain it in any way. After the affair is discovered, she again falls into oblivion; no one cares about what she says, and others decide about her future. She is stripped of her own self, a power she so hardly obtained through sacrifice and violence (first) and love (then). The past feeling of being a ghost is produced again and lingers upon her fate. The only decision she can still make is about her life, whether going on to live unseen or to take action and demonstrate agency for a last time.

Abigail chooses the second option; she commits suicide for love, for Derek and for herself. Feeling constrained by society once again, she is desperate to assert her identity once more. Without Derek's love, though, the task is impossible. In this situation, Abigail finds the only alternative she has in order to escape a life of subjection, silence and invisibility. She is claiming that she learned to appropriate her life, but that small pleasure is taken away from her once more. She has struggled all her life to be seen and acknowledged by someone, and losing the only person who has made her experience uniqueness is too much for Abigail.

Abigail likes poetry, especially Chinese poetry, but a piece of Western work remains in her mind and is recalled while she is standing at the banks of the Thames before her final act. The poetry is *Death Shall Have no Dominion*, by Dylan Thomas. It is Derek who has showed it to her, and it has such a great impact on her that she decides to carve the initials *DSHND* on her skin. It is an interesting choice, because of what she is about to do; the result of all the events that brought her there, is that Abigail is determined to take her own life.

To describe Abigail's intentions and emotions in that moment, the narrator says:

Of course she realised that there was the flow and the intent, hers and the river's, and that no amount of thought, or nostalgia, could change this thing at the center of her desire.<sup>64</sup>

She is sure of her choice, because she knows that there is no turning back now. She has lost the only love of her life, the only one who made her feel like really being Abigail, herself. Continuing to live would mean losing that bit of "becoming" that she so desperately and hardly gained.

For one last time, she wants to taste the feeling of being able to decide for herself, and to do so she acts on the only thing she is left with: her own life. In the end, Abigail decides to take control actively on her body, becoming an agent. She has lived a traumatised life, and she is now determined to put an end to her life of abuse and invisibility. Death becomes for Abigail the only mean of agency she is left with.

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<sup>64</sup> Abani, 51.



## CONCLUSIONS

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The analysis of Abani's book through the theories of performativity has helped me to shed light on all the experiences that influenced Abigail to "become" Abigail. The protagonist's figure has not been easy to analyse and to determine. Abigail's circumstances can have different interpretations and using performativity as a tool of investigation is only one way of explaining her process of search for an identity. Butler's theory of performativity has been the very foundation for all this study. The performative framework paved the way for a more detailed analysis of Abigail's behaviour, while the postcolonial references have been helpful for the investigation of the novella's essence.

Abigail's search for an identity has been her main focus throughout all her life; the circumstances of her story have denied her the possibility of agency, even regarding the creation of her own self. Performativity, understood as the production of an identity through repeated acts, plays here an important role. Abigail has never been considered as a human being with needs and desires by anyone; violence and abuse have imposed on her an identity that she does not feel her own. She is desperate to create a self and to anchor her body in the realm of materiality. According to the literary analysis provided in this thesis, performativity seems to be the only effective process through which Abigail can finally construct her own identity on her body and to validate it into reality. The body becomes very important for her task of asserting her identity through resistance and it also becomes the first site through which Abigail experiences subjectivity. Thanks to the re-appropriation of the forms of violence she goes through, she is able to subvert the general norm and to free herself from the material and psychological chains she has to

wear her entire life. Power is achieved through the use of the body, and this is what allows Abigail to gain some agency.

African culture is still influenced by patriarchal systems, and women's lack of agency within these systems is an important issue even today. Performativity has been, for Abigail, the process through which she has been able to produce a glimpse of identity and, thus, gain some agency over her life.

Though her final act may seem like a renunciation to life, the last inscriptions she marks on her body reveal another face of the medal. The letters *DSHND* are the acronyms for *Death Shall Have no Dominion*, and indeed death does not have control over her actions. Abigail is the only doer, and behind her decision there is a whole life of disregard and neglect. She tries to assert herself through various modes, from marking her body to rebelling, but, in this case, they all brought to invisibility again.

The performative process in the novel does not always produce effective consequences; sometimes Abigail sees a spark of identity construction, and sometimes society brings her back in her state of anonymity. Abigail does not exist for society; she is a ghost who becomes whatever others want her to be. Losing Derek is losing the only possibility she has ever had to exist, and that is why her final decision is to take her own life. Abigail's will has never been acknowledged, but through this tragic final act she can stop striving to find her identity and finally claim her real self.

*Becoming Abigail* is not a light reading, because of its cruelty and crudity in the images that Abani presents to the reader. Abani was deeply influenced by the story of a trafficked girl that he read, but this novella does not only represent the true story of one person; it has become the symbol of enslaved girls and oppressed people in the whole



world. Abigail is constantly in search of an identity, and this makes her the perfect shell, able to contain other's people stories of violence and abuse.

The functions as a reminder of the state of the trafficked girls in our society; Abigail's story, like the ones of many other girls in her situation, is real, and is happening for others now in our Western society.



## ITALIAN SUMMARY: ALLA RICERCA DEL SÉ

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Lo scopo di questa tesi è quello di dare una lettura basata sul concetto di “performatività” alla novella scritta da Chris Abani intitolata *Becoming Abigail* (2006). Il testo racconta la storia di una ragazza di 14 anni che, cresciuta in Nigeria, viene portata a Londra da suo cugino per vendere il suo corpo a sua insaputa. Il libro è diviso in capitoli *Then* e *Now*, ossia “Allora” ed “Ora”, i quali seguono la vita di Abigail dalla nascita fino alla sua morte per suicidio nel fiume Tamigi. Il primo capitolo racconta il funerale della madre, anche lei chiamata Abigail. Il rapporto con la costante presenza di sua madre segnerà tutta l’infanzia della piccola Abigail. I successivi capitoli, intitolati semplicemente “Then”, seguono la crescita della ragazza in Nigeria e il suo viaggio a Londra, fino agli avvenimenti che la porteranno a prendere una decisione finale. I capitoli “Now”, invece, iniziano la notte stessa del suo suicidio, atto che chiude il libro.

Il testo viene analizzato prima da un punto di vista puramente letterario, seguendo i temi principali collegati ai concetti di performatività, identità e ricerca del sé, e successivamente tramite il pensiero dei vari studiosi che compongono la cornice teorica iniziale di questa tesi. In particolare, il concetto di performatività della filosofa post-strutturalista Judith Butler, sarà la base di innesco per tutta la ricerca teorica e l’analisi letteraria della novella. La parte teorica della prima sezione riprende i temi relativi alla ricerca dell’identità e alla formazione del soggetto, partendo da una cornice linguistica che, insieme alle altre teorie analizzate, forma il pensiero di Judith Butler e il suo concetto di “performatività di genere”.

Il termine “performatività” venne utilizzato per la prima volta dal linguista John Langshaw Austin che, durante delle sue lezioni tenute nel 1955, lo utilizzò per definire la

caratteristica di alcuni atti linguistici di incidere sulla realtà. Queste lezioni vennero raccolte poi dai suoi studenti in un unico volume intitolato *How to do Things with Words* (1962).

Austin portò nel campo della linguistica un'importante novità; prima di lui, infatti, gli studi degli atti linguistici erano focalizzati sulla loro funzione di descrivere o semplicemente comunicare qualcosa. Austin, invece, inizia ad interessarsi alla funzione performativa delle frasi, intesa come la loro capacità di avere effetto sulla realtà tramite ciò che viene detto. Innanzitutto, egli divide gli atti linguistici in due categorie: constativi e performativi. I primi hanno la capacità di descrivere e riportare dei fatti, e di conseguenza essi possono essere considerati veri o falsi. Gli atti linguistici performativi, invece, incidono sulla realtà e veicolano informazioni che vanno aldilà della veridicità o meno di una descrizione. Gli atti performativi, infatti, creano eventi che sono legati alla realtà e la alterano; essi hanno cioè valore performativo. Non tutti gli enunciati performativi hanno, però, successo nella realtà. Austin, infatti, distingue fra due tipi di condizione che sono proprie degli atti performativi, chiamate da Austin condizione di felicità e di infelicità, legate al successo o al fallimento degli enunciati performativi. Innanzitutto, un atto linguistico è considerato performativo se esso viene enunciato da specifici soggetti in specifici contesti. Dopodiché, un atto linguistico deve essere sincero, altrimenti viene considerato nullo. Se una persona fa una promessa o si scusa, essa deve essere sincera nelle sue intenzioni, o l'atto linguistico perde il suo valore. Le conseguenze della mancanza di una delle due condizioni sono di due tipi differenti: nel primo caso, infatti, l'atto manca delle sue componenti essenziali (contesto o soggetto adatto), e quindi l'esecuzione viene considerata nulla, poiché non ha avuto effetto. Un uomo che pronuncia la frase "lo voglio" a una scimmia in uno zoo non sarà sposato con quella scimmia, poiché

parlanti e contesto non sono idonei affinché l'atto linguistico venga riconosciuto come valido. Se, invece, un parlante non è sincero nella sua enunciazione, questo atto è nullo solo nel suo valore; un uomo che si scusa ma non è sincero, comunque porta a termine l'azione di scusarsi, ma l'intenzione è assente.

Queste caratteristiche che validano un atto linguistico come performativo vengono criticate da Jacques Derrida nel suo saggio *Signature Event Context* (1984). Il teorico francese si concentra sulla condizione del contesto indicata da Austin e ne critica l'importanza. Secondo lui, infatti, un'idea non è legata necessariamente ad un contesto. Il concetto di idea e iterabilità diventano quindi quasi complementari; un'idea, afferma Derrida, non è legata alla persona che la pensa, e quindi, come entità indipendente, essa continua ad esistere anche dopo che la persona ha smesso di pensarla. L'idea, quindi, così come il segno scritto, è iterabile, cioè ripetibile anche in contesti diversi. A maggior ragione, la scrittura, che secondo Derrida è la massima espressione di comunicazione per cui il contesto non è necessario, deve potersi staccare dall'intenzione iniziale e assumere il carattere di ripetibilità. Un testo scritto, sottolinea il filosofo, è caratterizzato dall'assenza del destinatario; e è proprio questa sua proprietà a renderlo più libero di un dialogo, in cui intenzione, contesto e destinatario sono sempre obbligatori affinché esso abbia un senso. Il fatto che un testo scritto possa essere quindi staccato dall'intenzione della sua produzione, ha come conseguenza la sua possibile citazionalità in altri contesti. Il segno scritto, quindi, attraverso la sua ripetizione e iterazione, permette una rottura del suo contesto iniziale; esso è ripetibile e, allo stesso tempo, può essere ri-utilizzato creando differenza nell'identità del segno e nel suo contesto.

Nella novella *Becoming Abigail*, la protagonista segna il suo corpo tramite marchi, punti, linee e parole; è tramite la ripetizione di questi simboli che Abigail tenta di ancorare

il suo corpo alla realtà. Per tutta la sua vita, infatti, ella è sempre stata considerata come altro rispetto a se stessa; suo padre l'ha sempre vista come una copia di sua madre, mentre gli uomini come un corpo da usare e abusare a loro piacimento. Nessuno ha mai guardato Abigail per quello che è, o cercato di conoscerla per se stessa. Attraverso questi atti, Abigail vuole segnare e rappresentare la sua identità sul suo corpo, unico strumento di cui ella dispone; il suo sé viene creato tramite questi segni scritti, che, in questo contesto, hanno valore performativo.

L'attenzione viene poi spostata sulla creazione del soggetto; di particolare rilevanza in questo contesto sono le teorie di Foucault e Lacan, entrambi interessati alla formazione del soggetto dalla e per la società.

Lacan teorizza la formazione del sé nell'infante attraverso una fase che lui chiama "fase specchio". Questa teoria venne presentata in una conferenza nel 1949 a Zurigo, intitolata *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience* (1977). Attraverso questa fase, spiega lo psicologo, il bambino riconosce una prima immagine del sé attraverso lo specchio, quindi tramite il suo stesso riflesso. Questa prima fase si manifesta in bambini dai 6 ai 18 mesi, e ha come conseguenza la creazione di una parte di coscienza dell'*io*. Questa prima rappresentazione del sé è però ideale e non completamente formata; il riflesso che il bambino vede nello specchio è solo una copia che assomiglia alla realtà. La produzione dell'identità del bambino, quindi, è sempre conseguenza di qualcosa che esiste come esterna al bambino stesso. Il primo "altro" che il bambino riconosce nello specchio, ossia il riflesso di sé stesso, è chiamato da Lacan il "piccolo altro"; esso è contemporaneamente simile e distante dall'immagine che il bambino ha di sé. Esiste, però, anche il "grande Altro", che nella vita di un bambino è impersonato da una persona esterna, come il padre o la madre. Il fanciullo, attraverso lo

sguardo dell'Altro, realizza la sua identità al di fuori di se stesso. È proprio questo sguardo che procura al bambino il riconoscimento della propria immagine.

Nella novella di Abani, Abigail Tansi è una ragazza alla continua ricerca di sé. Fin da bambina ella ha vissuto all'ombra della madre e dell'idealizzazione della donna che suo padre le impone. Il signor Tansi non è mai riuscito a vedere la figlia Abigail come un'identità separata da sua moglie, e per questo motivo la piccola non è mai riuscita a realizzare un'immagine di sé completa. Secondo la teoria di Lacan sulla formazione dell'*Io* nel bambino, una delle fasi fondamentali è il riconoscimento del sé tramite lo sguardo dell'“Altro”. Abigail non ha mai potuto sperimentare questo sguardo su di sé, perché suo padre non l'ha veramente vista per quello che è: una bambina con una identità propria. La somiglianza fra Abigail e sua madre ha creato nel Signor Tansi una sorta di cecità per tutto quello che riguarda la figlia. In questo modo Abigail non ha mai potuto realizzare la propria identità al di fuori di se stessa, e questo ha prodotto un grande vuoto che la ragazza non riuscirà mai a colmare.

Altro studioso molto influente per quanto riguarda le teorie di produzione della soggettività è stato il filosofo francese Michel Foucault, uno dei pensatori più importanti del '900. I suoi lavori sulla sessualità, la conoscenza, il potere e molti altri temi, hanno influenzato il sapere filosofico degli ultimi anni e sono stati ripresi da molti altri pensatori moderni come base per nuovi concetti filosofici. Uno dei concetti fondamentali nella sua filosofia è il discorso. Esso è strettamente collegato ai concetti di conoscenza e potere; un discorso, infatti, rappresenta un sistema di conoscenze che si inserisce nella trama dei rapporti di potere che esistono nella società ed è il luogo in cui potere e sapere interagiscono. Per Foucault, il potere non è da considerarsi come una sorta di controllo dalle sfere più alte della società; esso è onnipresente e viene generato ad ogni livello delle

relazioni e dei rapporti umani. Inoltre, il potere viene concepito da Foucault come la base per la costruzione dell'identità degli individui. La soggettività è considerata come il prodotto dei meccanismi messi in atto dal potere nel quotidiano; l'individuo, infatti, cresce e si sviluppa fin dalla nascita all'interno di sistemi di potere come la famiglia, la scuola, il lavoro, ecc. Questi sistemi creano i discorsi che plasmano e disciplinano il soggetto sia esteriormente a livello comportamentale, sia interiormente, a livello psicologico. Una volta interiorizzate queste relazioni di potere, infatti, l'individuo dà per scontato il discorso in cui è immerso, e lo ritiene indiscutibile e naturale; si creano delle norme che stabiliscono gli standard di verità, e questo influisce sul modo in cui i soggetti si costituiscono e riconoscono come tali. La nascita del soggetto è quindi strettamente collegata al discorso di cui l'individuo fa parte. Il concetto di potere, in questa prospettiva, non è da intendersi solo come negativo. Foucault sostiene l'importanza di passare ad una visione positiva di potere, inteso come forza produttrice di discorsi che normalizzano e controllano la vita di un individuo nella società. Il potere, quindi, non è solo visto come mezzo di repressione, ma anche come produzione di verità. In questo senso, il potere può essere visto come una forza *performativa*, capace cioè di creare i soggetti del proprio discorso tramite il semplice atto di nominarli e, conseguentemente, producendo sapere e conoscenza sugli stessi.

La cultura patriarcale che traspare in *Becoming Abigail* influenza profondamente la vita della protagonista. Ella non riesce a creare una personale identità poiché la società in cui vive le impedisce di produrre una soggettività propria che la libererebbe dal discorso in cui essa è intrappolata. Gli uomini hanno creato sistemi di sapere che mantengono le donne in uno stato di assoggettamento, e questo ha creato dei soggetti-donna costretti ad accettare questi discorsi come normali e legittimi. Abigail non viene



considerata da suo padre e dagli altri uomini come un individuo capace di decidere per sé, poiché il discorso patriarcale in cui essi tutti si trovano ha creato la “verità” per cui la donna deve essere subordinata e inferiore all’uomo. Per tutta la sua vita Abigail sperimenterà su di sé questa cultura patriarcale, e questo influenzerà molto la ricerca della sua identità.

La studiosa Simone De Beauvoir prende spunto dal pensiero di Foucault sulle relazioni fra discorso e potere per produrre la sua teoria basata sulla critica delle differenze di genere. De Beauvoir è stata una delle figure di spicco nella lotta per i diritti delle donne e una dei pionieri della riflessione femminista degli anni Settanta. Nel suo saggio intitolato *The Second Sex* (1949), De Beauvoir si concentra sulla condizione femminile, tentando di rompere le catene con cui la donna è sempre stata assoggettata all’uomo. Il libro è diviso in quattro parti; nelle prime tre, De Beauvoir analizza il concetto dell’inferiorità femminile da diversi punti di vista, smontandolo completamente; ne conclude che le rappresentazioni di inferiorità femminile sono state frutto della potenza e della conoscenza dell’uomo. Nell’ultima parte del suo saggio, la filosofa analizza le diverse fasi della vita della donna, descrivendone la condizione attraverso le varie età della sua vita, dall’infanzia alla vecchiaia. La società, afferma De Beauvoir, accentua fortemente la condizione di inferiorità femminile, fin dai primi anni di una donna. Già da bambina, infatti, la donna è sottoposta a pressioni sociali che la costringono ad assumere un atteggiamento adatto ad una femmina. Così, ad esempio, se una bambina piange non importa, mentre se lo fa un maschio, allora deve smetterla subito perché “gli uomini non piangono”. Durante tutta la sua vita, quindi, alla donna viene imposta un’identità forzata, che la mortifica, e non ha la possibilità di crearsene una propria. La donna, infatti, è sempre stata rappresentata come la parte “altra” dell’identità maschile; l’uomo si è sempre

posto come il soggetto, ponendo al donna come suo “opposto”. Questa differenza di genere verrà eliminata solo quando le donne smetteranno di essere l’“altro” dell’uomo e inizieranno a imporre la propria indipendenza e a conquistare il loro posto nel mondo.

Le premesse teoriche finora analizzate formano la cornice conoscitiva dalla quale la filosofa Judith Butler attinge per la produzione del suo pensiero riguardo la performatività di genere. I suoi libri più famosi che trattano questo tema sono *Gender Trouble* (1990) e *Bodies That Matter* (1993), saggi che l’hanno resa una delle figure più importanti nel panorama del pensiero femminista contemporaneo. Quando Butler afferma che il genere è “performativo”, significa che tutti gli atti che producono il genere, tramite reiterazione, creano una norma in cui il genere rappresentato viene considerato come vero. Il genere, così formato, costituisce l’identità di un soggetto, e ne marca il corpo come appartenente ad una determinata categoria. È proprio questa ripetizione che viene intesa come riproduzione dell’identità; il genere è inteso come una serie di atti ripetuti nel tempo con lo scopo di produrre l’apparenza di un nesso naturale fra sesso anatomico e identità di genere. Per liberarsi da questa visione, è necessario che il genere venga visto come effetto di un processo storico che produce la norma nella società, e non come conseguenza ovvia del sesso di un individuo. Prendendo spunto dalla famosa frase di De Beauvoir “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”, Butler si focalizza sulla proprietà del “diventare” donna, concetto aperto quindi all’intervento, al cambiamento e ad una nuova produzione di significato. È questo il caso, ad esempio, della *drag performance*, dove gli atti di genere vengono ri-appropriati e ri-prodotti per creare sovversione dalla norma.

Sia secondo De Beauvoir che secondo Butler, le differenze di genere sono diventate la norma nella nostra società, e questo impedisce agli individui di produrre un

sé che non sia assoggettato alle regole create dalla nostra stessa cultura. Nella novella di Abani, la protagonista è costretta a sottostare alle norme imposte dalla sua società, con la conseguenza che Abigail non avrà mai la possibilità di produrre una propria identità. Durante tutta la sua vita, Abigail subisce ripetuti abusi e violenze, sia psicologici che fisici, che la incatenano al ruolo di vittima nella società. L'unico modo che Abigail conosce per sovvertire queste imposizioni è tramite la ri-appropriazione del proprio corpo, segnandolo e marcandolo per creare differenza e, al tempo stesso, identità. Anche la ri-appropriazione della violenza subita diviene, per Abigail, una forma di sovversione, tramite cui ella riesce a rompere le catene degli abusi subiti e, anche se per momenti passeggeri, a produrre la propria identità come Abigail.

L'altra base teorica utilizzata per lo studio della novella *Becoming Abigail* si concentra sulla teoria postcoloniale e su alcuni concetti ad essa collegati. Questa breve analisi sugli studi postcoloniali è stata pensata come contestualizzazione della novella tramite lo studio degli aspetti del postcolonialismo più utili all'approfondimento del libro, come la relazione fra colonialismo e patriarcato, le possibilità di sovversione, il corpo del soggetto e la biopolitica. Infatti, anche se il termine postcolonialismo nasce come concetto storico per definire ciò che avviene "dopo il colonialismo", esso viene utilizzato dagli studi postcoloniali anche per descrivere l'insieme di pratiche, ideologie e concetti che sono nati a seguito della dominazione coloniale. Durante il periodo di dominio europeo, infatti, l'Impero inizia a diffondere un vero e proprio *discorso coloniale* atto a legittimare il proprio controllo sulle terre e sulle popolazioni colonizzate. Uno dei principali studiosi del postcolonialismo, Edward Said, nella sua opera *Orientalism* (1978) spiega come certe opposizioni binarie, come ad esempio bianco/nero o civilizzato/selvaggio, siano state la base per la produzione di un discorso in cui la violenza

e la dominazione europea furono riconosciute come la norma. L'Impero, spiega Said, ha creato un immaginario dove gli stereotipi della cultura "orientale" sono diventati verità assolute; attraverso l'arte, la letteratura e altre forme di diffusione di idee, le colonie sono state definite come "Oriente", entità culturali e politiche che necessitano civilizzazione. Il potere esercitato sulle colonie, quindi, non è semplicemente violenza e sottomissione fisica, ma anche, e soprattutto, psicologica. Inoltre, la massiva imposizione di idee e valori da parte dei colonizzatori, ha avuto delle conseguenze psicologiche molto importanti sui nativi. Le colonie, infatti, vengono viste come selvagge, società da colonizzare e istruire. Per questo vengono istituite scuole, chiese, e altri sistemi di educazione occidentale, cosicché i valori dell'Impero possano essere diffusi anche fra i "meno fortunati". Questo, però, porta uno squilibrio a livello psicologico nella mente del nativo. Franz Fanon, autore del celebre saggio *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008), inizia ad interessarsi all'esperienza dei nativi nel mondo dei bianchi. I nativi si sentono parte di due mondi opposti: quello dell'Impero e il loro. Parlano la lingua dell'Impero, frequentano le scuole dell'Impero, praticano la religione dell'Impero, ma quando emigrano in Europa, non si sentono parte di quella stessa madrepatria a cui avevano dato tutto se stessi. E così, dice Fanon, nasce nell'uomo di colore un senso di disorientamento e confusione dovuto al primo impatto con l'esperienza del razzismo. Per far fronte a questa ineguaglianza, il nativo indossa una "maschera bianca", rifiutando il suo passato e la sua identità per inserirsi meglio nella società dei bianchi.

La letteratura postcoloniale chiede al lettore di pensare criticamente agli effetti che il colonialismo ha avuto sui nativi. Essa copre diversi temi e problematiche che sono sorte dopo la fine del colonialismo, come il problema del razzismo, la ricerca della propria identità culturale, la lotta per la libertà, e altre conseguenze che il colonialismo può aver

causato. La lettura in contesto postcoloniale di *Becoming Abigail* si concentra sulla crisi di identità che la protagonista sperimenta in quanto donna nigeriana e vittima dei trafficanti di sesso. La cultura in cui Abigail vive è fortemente influenzata dal patriarcato, e questo ha creato un discorso simile a quello coloniale di cui abbiamo parlato sopra. L'uomo/colonizzatore è il soggetto che porta civiltà, colui che è superiore e colto, contrapposto alla figura donna/nativo, che invece è l'opposto debole, selvaggio e ignorante che deve essere civilizzato. Abigail, così come le donne nella sua società, assumono lo stesso ruolo che i nativi avevano durante il colonialismo. Abigail non ha mai la possibilità di produrre una propria identità poiché, proprio come i nativi in periodo coloniale, ella non viene vista come un individuo con un proprio sé; gli uomini hanno plasmato la sua identità e sfruttato il suo corpo a proprio piacere, senza dare valore alla sua vera essenza. Come il corpo dei nativi, infatti, veniva trattato come un oggetto da controllare, così anche quello della donna subisce, nella società moderna, lo stesso trattamento.

In queste situazioni di violenza e sottomissione, Abigail trova però la forza per sovvertire il discorso nel quale è intrappolata. Il pensiero di Butler e Foucault presuppone una possibilità di sovversione dalla norma creata dalla società; questi atti, comunque, non possono provenire da fuori al contesto in cui l'individuo si trova, ma bensì essi devono formarsi all'interno delle relazioni di potere stesse. Questo significa che la resistenza nasce dallo stesso sistema di potere che l'individuo cerca di rovesciare; da qui deriva poi l'indebolimento della pressione del discorso sul soggetto e la conseguente possibilità di azione e agenzia. È proprio tramite questo processo che Abigail trova la forza di sovvertire la sua posizione di vittima e può agire come soggetto cosciente e libero, anche

se per brevi attimi. Tramite la riappropriazione della violenza subita da Peter, suo cugino e suo aguzzino, Abigail riesce a resistere e ribellarsi e, infine, a ritrovare la libertà.

Nonostante la fuga dal suo carceriere, Abigail non ha vita facile. Viene trovata dalla polizia, ma il suo nome non compare in nessun database. Per poterla portare a Londra, infatti, il cugino ha utilizzato un passaporto falso, e ora la sua identità non è riconosciuta dal governo inglese. Abigail è a tutti gli effetti un fantasma, l'emblema dell'*homo sacer* di cui parla Giorgio Agamben nel suo libro *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998). Agamben, infatti, riprende l'antica figura dell'*homo sacer*, e la contestualizza ai nostri giorni. Questo tipo di individuo dell'età romana aveva uno status legale molto particolare; egli era considerato una persona che esisteva al di fuori della legge, e che quindi poteva essere uccisa senza conseguenze. Agamben riprende il concetto di "vita" e la ri-descrive tramite due termini che si rifanno alla tradizione greca: *zoē* e *bios*. La prima rappresenta il semplice fatto di essere nato, la vita pura e semplice, mentre con la seconda si intende la vita come esistenza politica. Ma, quando *zoē* viene inglobata nella vita politica tramite la sua stessa esclusione, allora si crea una terza definizione, ossia *bare life*, la "vita nuda". Questo tipo di esistenza è la stessa dell'*homo sacer*, figura-simbolo riferita all'individuo che si trova nello "stato di eccezione". Anche Abigail è una "vita nuda"; ella non esiste legalmente per lo Stato e può essere violentata e abusata senza che nessuno ne paghi le conseguenze.

La terza parte di questa tesi è dedicata all'analisi della novella; la sezione è suddivisa in temi: il rapporto di Abigail con la madre e con il padre, il suo senso di invisibilità, il suo bisogno di tracciarsi segni sul corpo e la violenza subita. Il titolo della novella è formato da due parole che riassumono chiaramente l'anima centrale del libro. E' infatti una storia di "divenire", *becoming*, perché Abigail figlia lotta per tutta la sua

vita per essere riconosciuta come una persona con una propria identità; ed è divenire “Abigail” perché questo nome, in particolare, rappresenta l’inizio della lotta della protagonista per la conquista della sua individualità. Durante tutta la sua vita infatti Abigail ha sempre avuto un rapporto molto difficile con la presenza della madre, anche lei di nome Abigail, morta di parto poco dopo la sua nascita. Il padre di Abigail decide di dare lo stesso nome della moglie alla figlia, e questo ha un impatto molto forte sulla piccola Abigail. Essa è infatti sempre vista dal padre come la copia della madre e questo comporta uno squilibrio nella mente di Abigail, la quale si sente esclusa dalla sua stessa vita. Il padre le impone un’identità che la figlia non sente propria, e tutti gli sforzi che fa per essere notata come individuo sono vani. Lo sguardo di suo padre è come un fardello che le impedisce di far emergere la propria identità. Per questo motivo la piccola tenta di avvicinarsi alla presenza della madre attraverso strani riti e cerimoniali; tramite queste azioni sembra quasi che Abigail voglia imprimere sul suo corpo l’identità della madre, così da assimilarla e divenire lei. Ma nessuna delle azioni che fa sembra avere effetto su suo padre. Abigail rimane invisibile; perfino il fantasma della moglie sembra avere più consistenza della figlia.

Lo stesso vale per tutti gli uomini della vita di Abigail. Nessuno di loro ha mai visto la persona dietro il corpo, e l’unica cosa che hanno fatto è stato prendere ciò che volevano senza curarsi di Abigail. L’unico uomo che sembra vederla come una persona, e non un oggetto, è Derek, l’assistente sociale al quale viene affidata dopo essere scappata da Peter. Per Abigail, Derek è colui con il quale può finalmente esprimere se stessa, colui che la conosce e ri-conosce come essere vivente, e l’unico il cui sguardo non la trapassa come se fosse un fantasma. Ma quando la loro relazione viene scoperta, Abigail è costretta a lasciare Derek, che viene condannato per abuso di minore. Abigail è stata un fantasma

per tutta la sua vita e tale rimarrà fino alla fine. L'unica arma che Abigail ha per non essere invisibile è quella di segnarsi la pelle con simboli, parole e marchi, i quali fanno da ancora fra il suo corpo e la realtà. Abigail, fin da piccola, ha imparato a disegnarsi simboli sulla pelle come unico modo per portare in superficie la sua identità. E' tramite questi marchi che si crea la possibilità di avere il controllo sul suo corpo e, di conseguenza, sulla sua vita. Essi sono l'unica cosa alla quale Abigail può aggrapparsi quando sente di stare per perdere se stessa. Come le mappe, una grande passione di Abigail, tengono il mondo in ordine e organizzato, così i simboli che lei si incide sulla pelle sono il suo modo per tenere sotto controllo la sua vita, disseminata di abusi e violenze. Abigail, infatti, fin da bambina subisce stupri da uomini più grandi e da parenti. Il suo primo rapporto è a 10 anni, con un cugino di 15; Abigail viene poi violentata una seconda volta dal marito della cugina, Peter, a 12 anni, durante il loro matrimonio. Peter torna poi al villaggio due anni dopo per portarla con sé a Londra con la promessa di una vita migliore. In realtà, qui Abigail sarà venduta come prostituta, e subirà molte violenze fisiche. Quando infatti il primo cliente di Peter cerca di violentarla, Abigail reagisce con forza e morde Peter, che la punisce relegandola in giardino e incatenandola come un cane. Tutti i giorni Peter la violenta, sia fisicamente che psicologicamente, fino a quando Abigail, oramai logorata da quel trattamento, scoppia in un accesso d'ira e con i denti strappa il pene di Peter. E' proprio la violenza inflittale che fa trovare ad Abigail la forza di rovesciare la sua situazione e ricercare la libertà. La resistenza che Abigail oppone a Peter prende forza dalla situazione di violenza continua alla quale ella è stata esposta per così tanto tempo; da sito di violenza, il suo corpo diventa strumento di sovversione e spazio di resistenza.



La teoria di Butler riguardo la “performatività di genere” trova spazio in questa novella in quanto Abigail, tramite le sue azioni, si fa portatrice dello stesso processo per formare la propria identità. Per produrre un proprio sé, Abigail esegue diversi atti ripetuti sul suo corpo; usa la sua pelle come primo e unico spazio di controllo e, attraverso questi marchi, ella rientra in possesso del suo corpo e lo usa come strumento tramite cui (e sul quale) la sua identità viene costruita. Così come per Butler, il sesso in una persona viene trasformato in norma dalla società e agisce sul corpo creando l’identità di genere, allo stesso modo Abigail produce il proprio sé tramite la riappropriazione del suo stesso corpo. Queste parole che Abigail si scrive sulla pelle diventano atti performativi che, come gli atti linguistici di Austin, producono un effetto sulla realtà. Basandoci sulla critica di Derrida, il contesto (che per Austin era necessario) diviene superficiale; Abigail non ha bisogno di un contesto specifico per produrre questi atti performativi o per reiterarli, perché tutta la sua vita rappresenta il contesto nel quale ella può operare. Se per Derrida i segni scritti possono essere citati in altri contesti e, tramite la loro ripetizione, creare differenza e alterità, per Abigail essi diventano l’unico mezzo che ha a disposizione per produrre un proprio sé, e contemporaneamente, per distaccarsi dall’identità impostale dagli altri. E’ necessario, però, che questi atti vengano riconosciuto dall’”altro” per essere effettivi. Infatti, i segni di Abigail sul suo corpo non vengono mai notati da nessuno se non se stessa. Ed è per questo motivo che lei non riesce mai a produrre materialmente la propria identità. L’unico che davvero vede Abigail e i suoi marchi è Derek, e non può essere un caso se, proprio con lui, ella si sente finalmente qualcuno. É nei momenti con Derek che Abigail, per la prima volta, invece di dare, riceve qualcosa in cambio. Questo qualcosa le permette di essere finalmente se stessa, la Abigail che ha cercato di essere per

tutta la sua vita. Gli altri uomini vedono solo il suo corpo come oggetto da abusare, ma Derek fa sentire Abigail una persona che può scegliere cosa realmente desidera.

La teoria dello specchio di Lacan accenna a questo bisogno negli individui; l'infante, infatti, per poter formare completamente la propria identità, ha bisogno del riconoscimento dell'“Altro”, ossia di qualcuno esterno a se stesso che, tramite il suo sguardo, gli permette di riconoscersi e formare il proprio sé. Abigail non ha mai avuto questo sguardo da piccola; l'unica cosa che può aver sperimentato è il suo riflesso ma, senza il riconoscimento dell'“Altro”, ella non è mai riuscita a completare questa immagine. Quando inizia la relazione con Derek, Abigail si sente finalmente riconosciuta come un individuo, e la sua immagine può essere completata. È per questo motivo che quando la loro relazione viene scoperta e Derek accusato di abuso su minore, Abigail si sente disperata. L'unico uomo che poteva restituirle la sua immagine è lontano, e lei sa che non potrà più rivederlo. Tutta la felicità che aveva provato nell'essere finalmente riconosciuta viene demolita nel momento in cui ella ricade nell'oblio. Abigail, ormai disperata dopo quell'assaggio di libertà totale così presto, decide di porre fine alla propria vita. L'unico uomo che le aveva permesso di tirare fuori la propria identità non c'è più, e l'ultima cosa che le rimane da fare è scomparire per sempre tramite un ultimo atto volontario. Mai Abigail ha deciso della sua vita; gli uomini hanno sempre scelto per lei: della sua sessualità, della sua libertà, del suo futuro, tranne Derek. Adesso, ad Abigail non rimane nulla da fare che riprendersi la sua vita, anche se per un breve momento, e produrre l'ultimo atto di identità che può permettersi.

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