

“This Cosplay Does Not Really Suit Her”: Identity and Gender in Raven Leilani’s *Luster*

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Contemporary fiction authors apply various approaches to represent identity and gender in the literary context. Representation influences interpretation and shapes the conceptual meaning of identity and gender. The literary representation thus often reflects the diverse essence of identity and gender that have developed in contemporary society through evolving cultural ideals. Focus on gender roles and identity within fiction is one way to explore these concepts. In this thesis, I examine how American author Raven Leilani applies the subversion of identity to challenge traditional gender roles in her debut novel, *Luster* (2020). The discussion revolves around the dynamic functions of character relationships in Leilani’s narrative, the subversion of identity as a concept in gendered fiction, and finally, how these elements function and interact in the novel. In *Luster*, Leilani creates a narrative where each character constructs a sense of self by interacting between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’. The subversion of identity enables this interaction, which the narrative portrays as identifiable performative acts. The acts allow a constructed identity free from cultural ideals and gender expectations, which results in a genderless identity. The subversion of identity reshapes relationship dynamics and challenges traditional gender roles in the narrative. Although Leilani’s approach to gender in *Luster* is interesting regarding gender inequality, I focus more on identity’s complex and evolving nature to examine how identity can challenge traditional gender roles in a literary context.

Key words: identity, gender, gender roles, subversion of identity, literature, Raven Leilani.

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1 Introduction: Gender Takes Centre Stage

Literature scholars have acknowledged the significance of gender to their field of study for over half a century. As Bennet and Royle (2009, 185) note, “[s]ince the late 1960s, feminism has revolutionized literary and cultural studies”. The ongoing influence of feminism and the consequent development of feminist literature theory by the 21st century means that although the theory covers a growing number of themes and reaches from medieval to cyberfeminism, the heavy lifting within feminist literature theory has been achieved by, and the focal point remains in, systematically tearing down barriers caused by gender inequality. It is, therefore, fitting that scholars such as Plain and Sellers (2007, 340) conclude their comprehensive work on the historical development of feminist literary criticism by stating that “feminist literary critics know that what Woolf called ‘tyranny of the patriarchal state’ has not withered away [...], and we ,therefore, need to continue to use our words to set fire to the old hypocrisies”. It is easy to agree with this statement. However, it poignantly reminds us of the perpetual dynamic and antagonistic nature surrounding the concept of gender in feminist literature criticism, past and present.

What remains behind the confrontations of feminist literary critics against patriarchy and gendered literacy is the harnessing and categorization of the concept of gender and gendered identities to support the argument. It is a Pyrrhic victory, unfit to beneficially grasp the essence of identity and gender in the literary context. Gender identity, especially in literature, is by no means a zero-sum game, and manifestations of gender reach far beyond a mere juxtaposition of opposites contending for exclusive authority. A different perspective towards gender and identity offers literary critics unlimited opportunities. In the introduction to *Gender and Popular Culture: Identity Constructions and Representation*, Tiwari (2019, ix) states that: “blurring of boundaries has created new parameters of identity construction and fashioning that have in turn led to realignment of gender identities”. Challenging traditional gender roles and expectations with this approach to gender and identity makes it possible to examine these concepts without the oppositional male-female contrast. However, typically, specific oppositional characteristics such as strong/weak and passive/aggressive are associated with identity and traditional gender roles and, therefore, create gendered identities and uphold stereotypical models for gender. In the following section, I establish a framework for how this thesis examines gender and identity. The section also provides an account of the primary material I use to question gendered identities, traditional gender roles, and their representation in a literary context.

Through fictional narratives, literature offers a practical space to examine different aspects of identity and gender. Bennett and Royle (2009, 180) state that “[a]ll literature texts can be thought about in terms of how they represent gender difference and how far they may be said to reinforce or question gender-role stereotypes”. This premise thus reinforces that the concept of gender and a literary text form a tight bond, which opens a possibility to introduce accompanying themes such as power relations and identity, which then determine outlines for further examination of gender from an established perspective. As the primary material for this thesis, I will examine American author Raven Leilani’s debut novel *Luster* (2020), a first-person narrative and a coming-of-age novel where Edie, the protagonist in her early twenties, is struggling to come to terms with herself and her own identity. In addition to Edie, Leilani’s narrative is built around three other main characters, Eric, Rebecca, and Akila, who maintain and form complex relationships with each other and the protagonist throughout the novel. I will show how the subversion of identity challenges traditional gender roles in *Luster*.

In the section titled ‘Scripted Roles, Scripted Expectations’, I begin my discussion by examining the construction of character relationships and representation of traditional gender roles in Leilani’s narrative by providing examples of three cases of character relationships. I then define the dynamic functions which command these relationships. In the section ‘Metamorphosis and the Essence of Identity’, I examine the subversion of identity as a concept and a tool for deconstructing personal and gendered identities in a fictional narrative. Finally, in the section ‘Masks, Costumes and Real-Life Superheroes’, I adopt the concepts discussed in the previous sections and show how the opposites generally associated with gender roles, such as the previously mentioned strong/weak and passive/aggressive, do not consistently apply in *Luster*. I discuss this inconsistency by examining the alteration of the identity of the characters and the subversive nature of the relationships the characters establish with each other through which the narrative challenges traditional gender roles.

As I will later show, by adapting an identity-based approach to gender within such subversive relationships, gender escapes the limiting essence of categorization. An identity-based approach, therefore, allows for an unrestricted examination of the topic because a subverted identity is reversed and multi-dimensional. Bennett and Royle (2009, 182-183) move on to highlight that the key to literary representation of gender is “not merely that a particular text can be shown to be sexist or phallogocentric, or even feminist. Rather it is that literary text call into question many of our essentialist ideas about gender”. Although I examine the role of traditional gender roles and gendered identities, I must note that I do not use the concepts of identity and gender to establish a specific position for Raven Leilani’s

Luster within feminist literature theory or any other. Instead, I aim to shed light on the multi-dimensional space and evolving nature of identity and gender in which they best reveal their diverse form within the literary context.

2 Dress Rehearsal: Scripted Roles, Scripted Expectations

In the introduction to *Gender and Narrativity*, Barry Rutland states that “[g]ender is a fundamental constitutive category of culture, narrative is a basic cultural practice” (1997, 1). Although the way Rutland frames narrative as a tool to convey events and stories is not attached to a particular form of expression and serves as a general definition of narrative as a practice, it is helpful in the literary context, especially in the analysis of identity and gender. From a literary perspective, Rutland (1997, 7) continues to particularize that narrative “stages an ideology of gender grounded in relations of power which the narratives authorize”. A fictional narrative thus establishes the ground rules on which different groups, influenced by culturally constructed ideals, operate. It is critical, however, to elaborate that a narrative can establish these ground rules from a wide range of themes. In addition to gender, other factors such as race or the environment can influence the identity of a character in a fictional narrative. Regarding *Luster*, I have narrowed the scope of my thesis to identity and gender to allow for a more extensive focus on a specific topic. Nevertheless, Rutland’s position offers a particularly fitting perspective to examine these topics in Leilani’s narrative, as the character relationships in *Luster* connect tightly and form their dynamics based on power relations.

The protagonist Edie is a young woman in her early twenties who gets involved with Eric, a middle-aged man, husband, and father. Rebecca is a middle-aged woman, mother, and wife to Eric, and Akila is the adopted daughter of Eric and Rebecca. Within these complex relationships, different power relations are inevitable. At the novel’s beginning, Leilani’s narrative introduces the relationship between the young protagonist and the married older man, who follows in the footsteps of traditional gender roles that rise from cultural ideals. Edie’s fragile character and cautious optimism are displayed clearly: “[e]ven with good men, you are always waiting for the surprise” (Leilani [2020] 2021, 30), and “[t]he age discrepancy doesn’t bother me. [...] [T]here is the potent drug of a keen power imbalance” (7). Eric, however, is “talkative and filthy” (40) and displays his manhood as he “emerges from the club through a wall of smoke and pulls me inside with his large, clammy hand” (38). The narrative presents a stereotypical, culturally recognized romantic relationship dynamic involving the young protagonist woman and the elderly married man. Viewed from this perspective, Rutland’s (1997, 7) “ideology of gender” is equivalent to gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles.

As I will discuss below, it is essential to make a clear distinction here between gender stereotypes and gendered identities. Stereotypes drawn from a culturally constructed ideal are

recognizable in relationships upheld by power relations; gender identities are not. In the relationship between Edie and Eric, the female appears vulnerable, submissive, passive, and weak, and the male is overly confident, dominant, aggressive and robust. All these characteristics are stereotypical but do not necessarily represent the character's identity to the same extent. What is happening in Leilani's narrative is what Sarah Gleeson-White (2010, 69) calls "*deliberate* masquerade", a showy, acknowledged display of gendered identity characteristics and a devotion to a specific gender role. Before examining this and other identity-related issues in further detail, I will examine two other relationships in the novel to determine if they include similar aspects of power relations and traditional gender roles.

If culture has constructed certain expectations for the traditional female-male relationship, the same is undoubtedly true for the mother-daughter relationship and the power relations involved. In *Luster*, Rebecca is a successful middle-aged woman with an adopted daughter, Akila. The narrative portrays their relationship through the regular expectations of a caring, protective mother and a vulnerable adolescent where the power relations, again, are in line with the culturally constructed ideals: "[m]ake sure you go for a run today" (Leilani [2020] 2021, 107) and "I am her mother" (120). Although Rebecca's parenting methods are conservative and purposeful, they do not intentionally relinquish stereotypical expectations of a mother-daughter relationship. Rebecca has apparent authority over Akila in the narrative: "she needs a firm hand" (119). From Akila's perspective, understanding of the power relations and the nature of the relationship with her mother is telling: "[i]t isn't perfect here, but it's fine" (142) are the words she uses to describe her new home and circumstances of her life as an adopted twelve-year-old.

The narrative suggests that Rebecca's actions are peculiar and over the top, implying Akila's victimhood rather than a loved daughter's position. However, Akila understands her situation and is not completely satisfied but willing to adapt. This dynamic strongly signals yet another performance of acknowledged display of a gendered identity, which I will revisit in the next section. Furthermore, it later becomes clear that there are elements in Rebecca's and Akila's relationship that reflect a mother-daughter relationship in line with cultural expectations and traditional gender roles:

I look outside and Akila and Rebecca are in the garden wearing wide-brimmed hats. They are kneeling in front of a single tomato, and for a moment, they look completely alike, the plant the centre of their silent communion. Then Akila takes off a glove and cradles the tomato in the palm of her hand. They turn to each other and laugh. (Leilani [2020] 2021, 122)

With the relationship between Rebecca and Akila, Leilani's narrative travels from the seemingly unbalanced to the indisputably harmonious, capturing the principal elements of a culturally ideal mother-daughter relationship. The representation of Rebecca is within what Winrow (2020, 255) refers to as "a society that values, [...] the idealized image of nurturing women", and both Rebecca and Akila interconnectedly feed from what Winrow identifies as founding traits of a mother-daughter relationship: "the maternal role to define, nurture, and grieve" (245). Although Winrow draws these conclusions specifically from poetry instead of fiction, the ideals originate from a cultural setting that equally serves both forms of written text. Thus far, the female-male and the mother-daughter relationship have shed light on how character relationships formulate and gender roles apply to Leilani's narrative, as well as to what are some of the dynamic functions which command these relationships. Before proceeding to the second section of this thesis, I will briefly examine the relationship, which, based on cultural ideals, is generally presented most conventionally and stereotypically in terms of power relations and gender roles: the wife-husband relationship.

Instant assessment of power relations and dynamics for newly presented relationships is a recurring theme in *Luster*. As I have shown, Leilani's narrative establishes clear guidelines for the female-male and the mother-daughter relationship. It continues with this tendency as the reader gradually learns of Rebecca's and Eric's marriage through Eric's interaction with the protagonist, Edie. As I have thus far argued, the female-male and the mother-daughter relationship follow culturally constructed ideals and fulfil traditional gender role stereotypes; the impression of Rebecca's and Eric's marriage, however, appears counter-intuitive:

"So the rules," he says, looking down at the paper. I steal a look, slide it out from under his hand, and this is the first time I make contact with his wife. "Your wife wrote this," I say, scanning what seem to be bullet points before what seem to be words. The paper is soft and deeply creased, as if it has been folded and unfolded frequently. (Leilani [2020] 2021, 32)

Here, notably, Leilani's narrative makes a conscious effort to display the atypical nature of their marriage. However, the narrative also links to the real world and maintains a connection between the reader and the characters. The nature of the relationship may be atypical, but it materialises from circumstances that the reader can comprehend from the context of the novel. Farner (2014, 49) notes that "[w]hen the reader identifies with a fictional character, he regards that character's experience as a representative of himself and his own life in the real world". The rules of Eric's and Rebecca's atypical marriage stand out in the novel, but the narrative preserves its credibility. Eric can practice romantic relationships outside the

marriage, but Rebecca makes the rules. Although this remark immediately questions power relations and the categorisation of this marriage as stereotypical or something considered culturally ideal, it does not explicitly mean that it has any effect on the gender roles of that marriage. However, it does confirm altered dynamics and differing guidelines as a starting point. Furthermore, the contrast between this wife-husband relationship and the other relationships discussed above highlights this offence on cultural ideals. Despite the unconventional nature of Eric's relationship with Edie, as established already, it is more in line with the norms regarding power relations and culturally constructed gender ideals than the other relationships I have discussed above.

To understand how Leilani's narrative constructs character relationships and represents gender roles in *Luster* is essential as I continue to the next section of my thesis to examine the subversion of identity. As I have established, power relations and culturally constructed ideals of a relationship determine the lens through which a fictional character operates and functions. Gender roles within these relationships possess stereotypical characteristics equal to culturally constructed ideals. How, then, are these constructs of culture, and specifically gender roles, questioned or challenged? Or, on a broader scale, "[c]an narrative be mobilized to displace the kind of knowing it constructed in the first place? (Rutland 1997, 8). To answer these questions, I now examine the subversion of identity as a tool to deconstruct personal and gendered identities in Leilani's narrative.

3 Intermission: Metamorphosis and the Essence of Identity

The complex essence of identity in fiction is perhaps best captured by Erica M. Bexley, who defines identity as “indicative of human traits but equally applicable to fictional figures, and largely unencumbered by the semantic baggage of terms such as ‘personality’ and ‘selfhood’” (2022, 6). Outlining personality traits and sectioning out situational actions helps widen the scope and enables discussion outside the conventional representation of identity within the norms of prevailing reality. Thus, identity is not merely a characteristic, action, or an attribute. It is a sense of self within the laws of the governing environment. In other words, identity is an autonomous state which accounts for the culturally constructed ideals of function.

As discussed in section Two, gender roles and characteristics in *Luster* draw from power relations that appear through the lens of character relationships. To allow these relationships to develop and exist, the narrative portrays assumed character identities drawn from the presence of these relationships. Furthermore, as the dynamics of these relationships follow the culturally constructed ideals of traditional gender roles, they materialize as gendered identities. Felski (2003, 97) notes that “[t]he feminine virtues are patience, submission, selfless love” and later adds that “[t]he male hero embodies the potential of masculinity; the female hero, by contrast, is at odds with her sex” (98). Identifying these virtues as a leading factor that steers characters’ behaviour in Leilani’s narrative raises the question of why the characters submit to these roles in the first place instead of simply inheriting roles that are suitable for each character. Adapting to these gendered virtues for the lack of awareness would imply ignorance; surrendering to them while acknowledging the problematic fallout would signal a lack of a sense of self and denial of genuine identity overshadowed by the culturally constructed ideals of such relationships.

Leilani’s narrative is, in straightforward measures, eager to point out that characters in *Luster* indeed acknowledge that the governing circumstances in these relationships work against their sense of self but accept the position since they operate within the lines of culturally constructed ideals:

When it comes to this, I cannot help feeling that I am at the end of a fluctuation that originated with a single butterfly. I mean, with one half degree of difference, everything I want could be mine. I am good, but not good enough, which is worse than simply being bad. [...] Still, I can’t help feeling that in the closest arm of the multiverse, there is a version of me that is fatter and happier, smiling in my own studio, paint behind my ears. But whenever I have tried to paint in the last two years, I have felt paralyzed. (Leilani [2020] 2021, 26-27)

Edie's desire to become another (better) version of herself is transparent, yet she cannot make any progress. She feels disappointed, restricted, and 'paralyzed'. From the perspective of the individual, submission trumps empowerment. Culturally, hierarchy outmanoeuvres anarchy. Thus, the narrative proposes that Edie and other characters in the novel feel alienated from their sense of self. McClung (2024, 53) notes that Japanese female authors "question the causes, types, and consequences of alienation, both from a feminist perspective and as a broader commentary on social norms". The latter can also be true in Leilani's case, as she portrays an apparent contradiction with the character's sense of self within the relationship governed by gendered identities and social norms. The personal and the cultural never drift far from each other in Leilani's narrative. Pignagnoli (2022, 46) notices similar tendencies in the protagonist of the novel: "[i]n her intimate exposition of her consciousness, Edie is always aware of the political issues at stake". However, as I will now demonstrate, Leilani takes things a step further. Rather than merely settling to point out the conflict, the characters are offered the possibility to break these social norms and connect with their true identities.

So far, everything I have examined indicates a clear connection between a character's assumed identity and a traditional gender role culturally associated with that identity. In the relationships Leilani's narrative draws on, nothing seems to suggest that there is anything that challenges the traditional gender roles within those relationships. However, it is helpful to consider Butler's conclusion on gender and identity:

The parodic repetition of gender exposes as well the illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance. As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an 'act,' as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of 'the natural' that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmic status. (2007, 187)

As I proposed in the first chapter, it is possible to conclude that what Gleeson-White refers to as "*deliberate* masquerade" (2010, 69) is similar to Butler's proposal of gender as an 'act'. This notion would imply that in addition to the performative act of being or submitting to a role in a set relationship with specific culturally assigned gender roles and ideals, the gender roles themselves that guide the performance are fraudulent and set to change or alter when imposed on the characters in another setting. This act would allow the characters to acquire characteristics contradicting traditional gender roles despite power relations and cultural ideals. In other words, identity is not gendered or situationally dependent and allows for establishing an identity outside gender boundaries through the subversion of identity. According to Falla (2002, 51), "normative gender and sexual identities can be subverted

through the very signifying repetition that not only disguises identity as an effect of signifying cause but also issues from the very identities they propose to precede". In *Luster*, the subversion of identity happens through performative distancing from the prevailing reality. Again, there are two underlying reasons for this, and the narrative powerfully demonstrates the contrast between these two states of being for the characters. Firstly, the subversion of identity through performative acts empowers the character's sense of self. Secondly, in an environment where identity is not attached to gender, the subversion of identity deconstructs the culturally constructed ideals for traditional gender roles and thus strengthens the notion of authentic identity outside gender norms.

Although identities are individually performed and altered, the significance of power relations and the established relationships in *Luster* remain significant. Butler (2007, 180) reminds us that "gender reality created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of essential sex and true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted". Leilani is very aware of the connection between these social performances and the character identities in *Luster*. It is justified to conclude in this context that the narrative intentionally hints that character identities that draw from social performances in the novel reflect the character's actual identity and sense of self. It makes sense because it is considered appropriate and socially acceptable that characters in fiction, and people in the real world, behave according to culturally constructed ideals.

Relatedly, another thing to consider is that by highlighting how social relationships and gender roles influence identity, the narrative has created an environment where the deconstruction process of the relationships and gender roles can occur. Deconstruction using the subversion of identity is now ready to be applied in the narrative to question traditional gender roles effectively. In the context of *Luster*, it is inevitable that without these existing relationships and cultural ideals, there would be nothing to deconstruct regarding gender roles. Leilani's narrative thus prepares the scene and provides the resources to challenge traditional gender roles. With this thought, I now move to the final section of this thesis, where I examine the now-established performative act of the subversion of identity through the lens of character relationships and the challenging of traditional gender roles.

4 Showdown: Masks, Costumes, and Real-Life Superheroes

Leilani's narrative devotes a specific trait for each character to experiment with the subversion of identity. This trait provides an environment outside the culturally constructed ideals and traditional gender roles for identity to develop without external influence. Aronson-Lehavi (2017, 24) points out that "[t]his kind of constructed "performance-subjectivity" enables [...] to give voice to a multitude of "individual" identities rather than dramatic characters that represent social stereotypes". This outlet for a character is a common feature in Leilani's narrative. It signals that if a character has accessed such an environment, it will have significant consequences on the development of the character in the narrative. In *Luster*, such environments exist for all the main characters. They provide a necessary outlet, a space of self-reflection for the characters to escape the submissive nature of their existence within the relationships. Leilani's intention seems to follow a strategy implemented by Lou Andreas-Salome, as Cormican (2009, 163) notes in her discussion of Adine, a female character from Andreas-Salome's novels, "her recovery depends on an ability to play different roles, to move back and forth between the submission that a love relationship sometimes requires". For Edie, that space is her paintings: "[a]s we work, the light changes in the room, and the painting becomes a composite of contradictory shadows" (Leilani [2020] 2021, 226). Edie experiences reality through her art; it offers a sense of self that reveals itself with each brush stroke on the empty canvas.

Throughout the novel, she develops an identity by depicting her experiences in relationships that follow strict cultural ideals. It is a tool for deconstructing gendered identities and power relations in the relationships that are her reality. After her first dates with Eric, Edie is back at her apartment sketching a portrait of Eric:

I work with the paint, let the acrylic dry, and when it isn't right I rework it again. I remain as faithful as I can to scale. I mix thirteen shades of green, five shades of purple I don't need. My palette knife breaks in two. When it is almost 5:00 a.m., I have a passable replication of Eric's face. The slope of his nose in the soft red light of the dash. I rinse my brushes and watch dawn come in its smoky metropolitan form. Somewhere in Essex County, Eric is in bed with his wife. (Leilani [2020] 2021, 17)

For Edie, painting becomes a form of subverting identity. By capturing the dominant force of the 'the other' in her paintings, she physically distances herself from the position of the oppressed. Distancing allows for a separation of the body and the self, which now become free of culturally constructed ideals and gendered identities. Brooks (2011, 197) notes that

“[w]e need to keep saying what our identity might be and where it might lie, and how we might find it authenticated by other identities”, which offers an alternative viewpoint to Edie’s paintings. What the subversion of identity initially presents as a form of distancing could equally mean getting closer to the other person. Does Edie move closer towards Eric and Eric’s identity? Capturing a specific element of the other character is present in both scenarios (distancing/getting closer), but to somehow haul or get authenticated by another identity seems to suggest an underestimation of the person in question. Distancing oneself from the role of the oppressed, as Edie in *Luster* does by painting, arguably brings the two characters closer together. However, in terms of this thesis, the significance of the performative act and its effect, empowerment in the character’s terms to rebuild a sense of self and identity, is prioritised instead of examining details of the subversion of identity act to the core.

Ginsberg (1974, 398) expresses similar views on the falsehood of the body as a governing entity: “the body itself may be the by-product of a large scale conspiracy by certain forces”. Falsehood in the context of Leilani’s narrative is to focus too much on gender and other physical elements of the novel and ignore the abstract force that drives the physical reality. In *Luster*, those specific forces are the expectations of cultural norms and ideals. Edie continues her relationship with Eric, but by acknowledging that her identity does not need to interconnect with the expected dynamics of their relationship, the power relations take an unavoidable turn:

Eric takes off from work so we can have a picnic. I see him before he sees me. He is on his hands and knees smoothing the wrinkles from the picnic blanket, and there is something so undignified about him that I return to the bus stop and come back in ten minutes when he is waiting with a bottle of wine. (Leilani [2020] 2021, 171-172)

Edie’s loath towards Eric becomes apparent as their relationship progresses. Through the subversion of identity, she has acquired the traditionally masculine role of the dominant and robust by questioning the norms on which these characteristics typically operate in a female-male relationship. What happens in Leilani’s narrative is not an accidental reversal in relationship dynamics; instead, it is a conscious and performed act of deconstructing traditional gender roles in the context of cultural norms and expectations.

Similarly to Edie, other characters in the novel are assigned similar spaces to escape reality and reflect on their identities. Rebecca escapes her role as a mother and wife to attend trash-metal concerts: “[s]he removes her ring, slides it into her pocket, and tells me not to make a big deal of it” (Leilani [2020] 2021, 138). Akila examines her identity by writing fan

fiction: “losing the auction to a black, omniscient sprite that is clearly Akila’s surrogate” (129). Notably, but less surprisingly, the masculine main character, Eric, finds escape in the prevailing reality. The protagonist makes a telling observation as she examines Eric in his natural environment working as an archivist: “[i]n the basement, I look through a thick pane of glass and count a dozen archivists. All of them are women” (149). Eric’s identity is hidden in the basement of a library. More importantly, Eric’s identity retains a connection to reality while the other main characters turn to different art forms to grasp a sense of their true selves. This distinguishable difference between a male character and the female character’s experience of identity and reality in the novel is the base for Leilani’s narrative to portray reversed gender roles. However, if multiple versions of identity are available, is it reasonable or justified to make conclusions based on any of them?

In Leilani’s writing, identification becomes a vital term to draw any connection between character relationships, subverted identities, and traditional gender roles. Wyatt (2004, 50) defines identification in a literary narrative as something that “rests on a conflation of self and other, on a fusion of the self-representation with the representation of the other”. In Leilani’s narrative, the subversion of identity generates a complex blend of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ in a single character. Although Edie as the protagonist is in the focus, the two sides of each character are identifiable. However, there are significant differences in how Leilani’s narrative represents the two sides of each character. Throughout the main narrative, the female characters identify as the ‘other’ because they appear through relationships in which they fulfil traditional gender roles. The male character, Eric, represents the ‘self’ since he has a role he fulfils by being a man. This task is the only expectation of him in terms of cultural norms. Alongside this narrative, through the subversion of identity, Leilani introduces the possibility of another reality where traditional gender roles no longer exist. The characters achieve a state of being where they are allowed and encouraged to behave against the expected gender roles. Although these two sides of each character are present throughout the narrative, after Leilani introduces the performative act required for the subversion of identity, she zooms in on the flickering difference between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’. The scene at Comic Con, which all the characters in their costumes attend, is a fitting analogy for the multidimensional essence of identity that Leilani targets in her novel:

Every person in the room is shiny and taut, breathing through their mouths and looking towards the stage, where the actors, writers, or producers are either very excited or very put off by the energy in the room. [...] There is the feeling of conspiracy, glitches in the matrix abundant and kept like an inside joke, the same eight fans who make it to the mics, the villains who gather to admire themselves,

universes flattened and set beside each other, long anime sagas truncated by the overlap, nine Gokus and three Kid Flashes, some costumes so professional that for a moment you believe a bandicoot might be able to wear jeans. And all the Harley Quinns. I keep thinking I see Rebecca, but none of them are her (Leilani [2020] 2021, 204).

Comic Con, a popular comic book fan convention celebrating masks and costumes, represents the manifold range of identities a person can obtain to escape reality. The protagonist's observation of this 'masquerade' in Rebecca on the eve of Comic Con accentuates Leilani's separation between the 'self' and the 'other': "this cosplay does not really suit her" (198). In *Luster*, the scene at Comic Con and the 'masquerade' theme also serves as a reminder of the prevailing expectations of reality in 'the real world', with traditional gender roles and power relations created by social norms that the narrative tries to challenge. Felski (2003, 99) has suggested that "reversing sexual roles in fiction [...] is ludicrous in terms of serious literature. Culture is male. Our literary myths are for heroes, not heroines". Be that as it may, in *Luster* Leilani sets out to challenge that culture in a solemn manner.

5 Conclusion: Challenging the Theatrics of Gender Roles

Confronting traditional gender roles in a literary context to expose culturally constructed defects is a delicate deed. Raven Leilani's *Luster* showcases the disadvantageous effects of harnessing gender as a tool to aggravate the juxtaposition between the male and the female genders. Adapting a comprehensive evaluation of gender that incorporates the concept of identity is essential for an apparent status of gender and gender roles in fiction. In *Luster*, Leilani acknowledges that culturally constructed power imbalances are a factor, especially in character relationships, and the narrative surrenders to the premise that gender dynamics are vulnerable to inequality and submission. The way Leilani portrays elements of character relationships in the novel indicates a strong resemblance with stereotypical cultural ideals of certain types of relationships. However, Leilani is also keen to indicate that gender is not the root cause for the state and the dynamics of these relationships since similar dynamics apply to all the relationships in the novel regardless of gender. In *Luster*, therefore, gender is not about exclusive authority but an acknowledgement of prevailing conditions.

Instead of a traditional gender versus gender approach, Leilani equips the concept of identity to object to the culturally constructed ideals of gender roles. As pointed out above, in addition to the fact that all the relationships in *Luster* follow cultural ideals in character relationships, the relationships materialise traditionally. In other words, a relationship forms and functions according to traditional expectations. To question this development, Leilani develops the narrative by intertwining gender roles with the concept of identity. Again, the results follow the traditional model and the trajectory of Leilani's narrative regarding gender and identity reaches its apex when the characters associate their identities based on cultural expectations of the relationships. This causality is the definition of a gendered identity in *Luster*.

To effectively challenge traditional gender roles in *Luster*, Leilani chooses to incorporate three main elements into her narrative. After combining the concepts of gender and identity to establish the groundwork from which to function, the narrative critically reveals that the characters in the novel are aware of the disadvantages the gendered identity creates. This narrative choice questions the ideals society draws on the relationships with established and gendered identity roles. Another objective of this narrative choice is to open a possibility for the subversion of identity, which materialises in the novel as performative acts. Each character in the novel is supplied with an act that distances them from the prevailing reality, empowers the character's sense of self, and deconstructs the culturally constructed

ideals for traditional gender roles. The subversion of identity thus becomes the dominant element in *Luster* to challenge traditional gender roles.

Finally, to understand the subversion of identity in the context of challenging traditional gender roles in *Luster*, it is required to consider the concept of identification as an essential factor in Leilani's narrative. The narrative seeks to represent two sides of each character, who form identities from different environments. These two sides of each character continuously interact with each other throughout the novel. To distinguish between the 'self' and the 'other' of each character is the base from which the subversion of identity that challenges the traditional gender roles emerges. In this regard, Leilani's narrative intentionally differentiates the male and female characters to highlight the problematic and gendered issues of power.

As a 'masquerade' of gender roles, *Luster* effectively questions and challenges traditional gender roles in a dissimilar fashion. Instead of a gender-based approach, Leilani's decision to extend the scope of gender and increase the influence of identity as a concept in the novel offers a fresh viewpoint to examine profound questions of gender representation and the position of traditional gender roles in fiction.

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