Gender Performativity in Cynthia Ozick’s *Heir to the Glimmering World*

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Cynthia Ozick (1928 – ), widely acknowledged as the “leader of a revitalized Jewish-American literary movement”, [1] has often been discussed concerning either the Jewishness of her fiction, or the cultural collision her characters are situated within. *Heir to the Glimmering World* (2004) (hereafter *Heir*) is her latest novel which manifests Ozick’s insistence on American Jewish writing characterized by strong feminist thoughts and Judaist philosophy.

In the novel, Ozick has incubated several major characters, among whom Rosie Meadows serves not only as the narrator and heroin, but also a link for the main characters. Rosie, an 18-year-old orphan, abandoned by her pseudo cousin Bertram, leaves college to serve as secretary, caretaker, nanny, nurse, typist, confidante in the Mitwissers’ family. Rosie’s unstable and fluid job in the family is only an instance of modern people’s dynamic and multiple identities. Rosie is not the only character who is confused about her position with constant changes, which is mainly restricted in the accepted social gender norms; all protagonists present their bewilderment and make effort to seek a position for themselves. This paper will discuss three major
characters’ dislocated gender roles, whose performativity inverts not only the literary classic images, but also the gender prescriptions of patriarchal society, each with a fundamental problem: the placing within a society in which she or he has no place. Are they all victims under the hegemonic social regulations? What is Ozick’s purpose in describing subversive gender roles and how much control do these characters have in forming their identities will be elucidated in light of their gender performativity. This paper intends to explore the main characters’ searching for their social position from the perspective of gender performativity.

I. Mimesis and Deconstruction

Ninel, Bertram’s girlfriend, harbors ardent passion for communist activities mirrored in her performance of renaming, cross-dressing, and participating in those revolutionary movements, even at the cost of her life. Her transient life is destructive and subversive both to herself and her lover. Her performativity of masculinity is characterized by her recognition of man’s privilege and her admiration and pursuit of man’s roles which manifest the possibility of transgender performance.

Ninel, born Miriam, whose name “was a Party name, in honor of Lenin” was born in Miriam. It is Lenin spelled backwards. According to Wikipedia, Miriam is a Hebrew name, the sister of Moses and Aaron, and the daughter of Amram and Jochebed. She leads Pharaoh’s daughter to adopt Moses who later becomes the Hebrew’s savior. Miriam’s contribution to the national emancipation is absent in the Bible in which she works only as a follower or a servant. This allusion is familiar to Ninel. The way that she changes Miriam into Ninel construes her unsatisfactory attitude toward woman’s role in the religion and her ardor for the communist cause. “To be called a name is one of the first forms of linguistic injury that one learns.” This is true for Ninel who hates her given name because it comes out of the Bible and holds that the only invention worse than novels and movies is religion. Then what is the significance of the destabilization of gender through the renaming? Judith Butler says, “At issue is how to read the name as a site of identification, a site where the dynamic of identification is at play, and to read the name as an occasion for the retheorization of cross-identification or, rather, the crossing that is, it seems, at work in every identificatory practice.” In light of Butler’s idea, Ninel’s renaming is a kind of identification. Her choice of Ninel can be interpreted in three ways: first, it is her way of changing Miriam’s submissive and secondary role both in history and her present life; second, the new name, elucidating Ninel’s sexual
ambiguity, is her protest against being identified as a fixed sex; thirdly, that it is in honor of Lenin shows her admiration and respect for this great revolutionary. The naming of Ninel is full of tension, in which rebellion and identification coexist. Her rejection of her female name indicates her recognition of the meaning of social naming, in which a girl’s name will be required of a girlish action and social ritual. Thereby, her rejection of Miriam is her denial of female social roles and her choice of Ninel is to break away from the social norms for women. Ninel, as a symbol, is her recognition of male authority. Identifying with a male involves identifying with a set of norms. She rebels in subjection. Her identity is secured in and through the transfer of the name, and the name becomes a site of transference or substitution.

Cross-dressing is Ninel’s approach of realizing masculine performance. The scene that she breaks into Mitwisser’s house dressed like a man in order to get the money from Rosie given by Bertram has multiple significance. First, it shows Ninel’s successful performance as a man because all the family believed “Ninel in her cap and pants was a man”.[5] Her performance of man proves that gender identity is unfixed and culturally constructed with superficial appearance. More significant is the symbolic meaning of man here. “A man invading the house. A man storming in, a roughneck, howling, demanding, ordering! As before. As before.”[6] The word “man” is repeated several times, signifying those Nazis who invaded as before. Although they have settled in America for two years, the horrendous scene and men’s violent images cannot be forgotten. Man as a symbol is reenacted by Ninel’s performance. By acting as a man, Ninel once again threatens the family who has suffered those horrendous persecutions in Germany. Ninel’s performance of this type of man again consolidates the stereotyped images of roughneck, killer-machine, rapist, or robber. The scene corresponds with Nazi’s robbing behavior—Rosie’s five hundred dollars is robbed by Ninel who acts like a man and forces Rosie to give her the money. Little wonder then that the answer to the question “‘Is violence masculine?’ is commonly a resounding ‘Yes’”.[7] Cross gender enables Ninel to fulfill a man’s regulated role just as Portia in The Merchant of Venice acting as a judge with man’s appearance. Man has long been a symbol of law, who controls the world according to the patriarchal role distribution, women’s cross-dressing may strengthen men’s hegemonic role in the world even though she proves that she has the same capability. This stereotype cannot be easily broken up. Ninel’s superficial appearance is masculine to the Mitwissers, but her body is feminine, her cultural practices of cross-dressing dismantles the distinction between man and woman, but
simultaneously, the effects of her cross-dressing is problematic because it may once again enforce the stereotypes of man and woman in the world.

Renaming is one way of Ninel’s scheme for revolution; cross-dressing strengthens her outsider image as a man; and her participation in the revolutionary movements challenges the normative man’s roles in public sphere. Ninel and her gang go to Spain to join the civil war against the Fascists. In Barcelona, Ninel is wounded and got infection, then pneumonia, and later dies. Pursuing justice and joining wars seem to be man’s regulated cause in the literary and practical history; even women in the war are usually distributed as a nurse. Ninel invades man’s political area, subverts fixed gender role, and asserts her subjectivity as a human being. Ninel’s exploration of political identities as soldier and fighter, indeed claims woman’s potential in political power. Her final death may bring a gloomy prospect and also cause us to reconsider the meaning of her transgender behavior.

The gender Ninel intends to perform is masculine; her displacement denies the naturalized or essentialist gender categories and constitutes a fluidity of identities. However, her identification of male’s roles is not only a manifestation of the possible knowledge of transgender, but also a representation of fixed gender role distribution.

II. Withdrawal and Invasion

Bertram is Rosie’s pseudo cousin, who has experienced a journey from being a dignified pharmacist working in a hospital to becoming a bankrupted man acting as a domesticated servant in Mitwisser’s family. His shift from man’s regulated sphere to entering into woman’s domesticity has aroused Rosie’s initial embarrassment and later leaving of the Mitwisser’s family. Bertram’s soft personality and talent for housework make us reconsider the traditional gender role division. Is woman naturally belonging to and suitable for housework and is man in essence belonging to the working sphere outside the family?

Bertram is described as “soft” and criticized by Ninel. “Soft” is more seen as feminine rather than masculine. If he is “soft”, he will be despised. Ninel complains that he is too soft to help Rosie and her father, however, Rosie believes that Ninel is too hard. “Soft” is degraded by Ninel as femininity but is valued by Rosie who sees it as a quality of sympathy. Bertram is so angry to be called “soft” that he almost howls, “She wants me to go with her. And then the next thing she tells me, I’m too soft.” Bertram is deeply hurt by being called “soft” as it indicates something bad.
The connection of “soft” with femininity has a long history, and femininity has long been considered as inferior in contrast with masculinity in patriarchal society. In the Western ideology, “Asian men were seen as small, soft, and effeminate—hardly men at all”. Bertram is clear about the negative meaning of soft so he protests being called soft. “Soft” man may also be considered as a gay, despite in the novel, soft for Bertram is more a description of personality than a sexual orientation. All in all, the word “soft” has been endowed with more negative meanings than positive. Woman is easy to be linked with “soft” while man is often defined as “hard”. Bertram’s personality shows his soft quality which is ridiculed by Ninel and is affirmed by Rosie. Bertram’s softness dismantles the fixed concept of placing it as femininity and the meaning of soft is subverted. Soft should not always be connected with femininity or inferiority as woman could be hard like Ninel and man could be soft like Bertram; furthermore, it is not a humble quality as it is praised by Rosie. Therefore, the concept of universal femininity and masculinity should be scrutinized and redefined in order to establish more proper and comfortable gender relations.

Bertram shows not only the qualities of being “soft” but also talent in domesticity. At the first scene Bertram appears in the novel, Rosie tells us a detail about Bertram’s fastidious habit who “never left a dish on the table for more than five minutes before he got up to wash it”. This early description hints at his later choice of being a domestic man because he is an expert on it. When he loses his job, house and money, he chooses to go to Mitwasser’s family for shelter because his cousin Rosie works there. It seems to be schemed before he enters into this family. As soon as he is allowed to stay one night there, he begins to present his talent for housework to serve everyone in the family and satisfy them. Rosie observes that domesticity pleases Bertram. The assumption that certain behaviors (e.g., outside intense activity) are appropriate to males and other behaviors (e.g., domestic activity) are fitful for females has been subverted by Bertram. He is so skilled in doing washing, cooking, housekeeping, and even going to market that finally he has gained all members’ admission to settle down in this family. At first, Rosie feels embarrassed for “Bertram’s pacifications, his quickness to serve” because she unconsciously holds that “household tasks have simply been assumed to be women’s, not men’s, responsibility.” Labor division based on gender is deeply implanted in Rosie’s mind. Her adeptness at typing is a case in point because she holds that typing is woman’s normalized job as a secretary; her intuitive response toward Bertram’s becoming of a servant represents that she accepts the social norms. Later Rosie
desolately says, “By becoming a servant to all, he had made servants of all. I was displaced; once again I felt that Bertram had exiled me.”[12] Susanne Klingenstein believes that Bertram is turned into an opportunist, who seizes his chance in the Mitwisser household,[13] first by being a servant, then a son-in-law in the family and finally the guardian of the heir to James’s large fortune. Gender roles in public arena and domestic space have been regulated and accepted in the patriarchal societies. Bertram’s invasion into the family is his performance for survival and his talent for caring and domesticity proves that man could do housework as well, even better than woman. Obviously, the fixed gender role distribution is not proper as each individual has his or her interests and the fixed distribution will make both men and women victims under this institution.

Bertram’s performance tells us “the public-private dichotomy needs to be challenged”[14] and “power (and therefore politics) exists in both domestic and nondomestic life”[15]. The stereotyped role for woman “idealized as the protectors of domestic goodness and personal morals”[16] has been challenged by Bertram who shows that labor division based on gender need to be reconsidered.

III. Rivals between Man and Woman

Elsa Mitwisser is Rosie’s employer, whose life experiences fully represent woman’s struggle of pursuing their position in the world. Before immigrating to America, the Mitwissers are a prominent Jewish German family and the couple are in equal position in terms of their profession. Rudolf Mitwisser is a respectable scholar of Karaism[17] and Elsa is a senior fellowship at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in Berlin. Elsa’s dignified profession could not hide the discrimination in her work and the inharmonious relations with her husband because both of them are too keen on their work. Elsa’s challenge of traditional gender role distribution proves that woman could do as well as man does in the scientific job, but to what extent she is acknowledged has to be re-evaluated.

Firstly, Elsa’s working experiences manifest her intense desire for scientific work as well as the hard process of realizing her ideal which is hampered by her female body. Elsa is accepted reluctantly at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute. What Elsa engages in is a scientific job, generally relegated to be man’s field because women are not considered capable of rational thinking, or as autonomous minds in relation to their bodies.[18] As the novel indicates, “they could see no woman as their equal, but her papers could not be resisted, they could not be denied, she was there on the strength
of her papers.”[19] This description clearly denotes that Elsa has suffered gender oppression. Even if she is fully a colleague, they takes her to be Elwin Schrödinger’s subordinate, his designated assistant. Moira Gatens argues, “A philosophically common metaphor for the appropriate relation between the mind and the body is to posit a political relation, where one (the mind) should dominate, subjugate or govern the other (the body).”[20] The distinction between female and male bodies determines the political relation between them, in which woman will always be subordinated. Although Elsa suffers from gender discrimination, what she concerns is her enjoyment from those days. Elsa transcends the usual domestic field for woman who should “devote herself to children, husband, home, estate, country, church—this is her lot, the lot which the bourgeoisie has always assigned to her”[21] but she could not change her subordinated roles in her working sphere, no matter what contribution she will make. This is her true situation of being inside but with an outsider’s position.

Secondly, Elsa’s invasion of man’s working field put her in a rivaling state with men even though she is positioned as an assistant, because she is not reconciled to be a subordinate. Elsa recalls that during her husband’s leaving in the December holidays of 1925, when she and Erwin, her colleague also leave for Arosa to continue their work at a fine hotel. Their six-year-old daughter at that time is left in the care of a servant. She enjoys struggling to formulate the equation and arguing with Erwin just as her husband spends the whole time in Spain, searching after one of his beloved Egyptians. Elsa knows that they are suspected of being lovers, but actually, she and Erwin are not lovers; “they were competitors, rivals”[22]. As an outsider, Elsa has to prove herself to be competent in her job, while her competence in turn shows her as a threatening power to man’s occupation. Thereby, their sexual relation is only for sexual satisfaction, which will not erase their competitive relations. Whether there is love or not, competition is primary in their relations. Many years later, when Elsa knows that Erwin has won the Nobel Prize, what she cares for is that Erwin is lucky enough to obtain the opportunity to continue with his study, while she has to be confined in her attic as a madwoman. As a Jewish woman, she loses her chance to be recognized as a contributor to what Erwin has won.

Thirdly, in the process of pursuing her career, Elsa has to sacrifice her domestic role, which leads to an inharmonious relation with her husband. The ultimate event is her extramarital affair which is laid bare by the servant. Her husband will never forgive her as he believes that she has never regretted what she has done and he also
holds that Heinz is not his son, whose presence always reminds of her infidelity to him. When Elsa recalls what is wrong about the extramarital affair, she repents that the gifts both for her husband and her daughter Anneliese after the journey are not proper. Rudi feels the strangeness of the gift-painting, while Anneliese is not happy with the rocking horse. The scene of sending gifts as a way of compensation is a behavior more often done by man or more plotted by male writers to describe man’s behavior. The stereotyped scene is inverted by Elsa who has done what men usually do and represents Elsa’s claiming for equality in pursuing her desire. Elsa complains why he could not forgive her as this usually will be forgiven by a wife. Elsa constantly challenges “the roles of man and woman which are not exactly symmetrical, however. On the social level man’s primacy is evident”[23]. Elsa’s performativity is a way to subvert this fixed regulations but she is unrecognized by her husband who will never forgive her, because “Fidelity and loyalty are the greatest human virtues of the female vassal.”[24]

Last but not the least, Elsa’s resistant performance is fully presented in her disguise of being madness without actually being mad. Nazi’s persecution of the Jews forces Elsa and Rudi out of their jobs and Germany. Elsa collapses into a depressed and disoriented state, but her uneasiness is only temporary. Elsa is called mad by her husband but she is indeed a mad-masked woman, just as Richard Eder believes that Elsa “is initially the most puzzling, and eventually the most complex and significant figure in the book”[33]. In rebellion against being called mad, she pretends to be mad without fulfilling her domestic roles as she is still indulged in the sadness of her loss and complains about Rudi’s unforgiveness. Her defined madness reflects her inferior position in the family as Rudi, who is invited by a college and is sponsored by James after they settle down in America, is dominant in the whole family. Her way of rebellion against her husband’s oppression is ultimate in seizing the power from Rudi at the crucial moment. Even though Elsa is compared with Jane Eyre’s Bertha Mason, imprisoned in the attic, they have more differences than similarities. Most importantly, Elsa shows her scheme to gain the control of the family that faces a new crisis. Specifically speaking, the heir of James’ large fortune is first intended for James’ designated inheritor Rudi Mitwisser. Within just a few minutes, great changes happen as Elsa points out that James has an unborn child with her daughter. Then the lawyer reaffirms that the legal inheritor is James’ posthumous child, later named Miriam in honor of Elsa’s mother but also Ninel’s given name. Elsa makes Bertram her daughter’s husband, then later the legal
guardian of James’ large fortune. At the end of the novel, Elsa is healthy and shining, no longer fighting with madness or with the formula for thermodynamical equilibrium, while Rudi loses his rights of inheritance and stops his exploration of Karaism as no one in America could understand him. It seems that Elsa is compromised in her domestic area by occupying a dominant position in the family.

Elsa is always in a disadvantageous position but she attempts to gain the upper hand. She fails in the professional competition as she is deprived of the working opportunity and also she is pregnant again and again. Her life experience reflects women’s contradiction with her work and her domestic duties which make her involve in incessant struggles for desire and family duty. Her failure to perform gender roles in the right way is attributable to her husband’s isolation, naming madness and unforgiveness.

**Conclusion**

In this paper the suitability of gender roles has been discussed in the major characters’ gender performativity. These characters deny the social norms that demand them by acting in an abnormal manner which reveals that the social regulations for gender roles are problematic. The prescribed stereotypes are faced with constant challenge, transformation, and subversion, leading to blurred gender roles, in which gender is not regulated by sex. Identifying with a gender involves identifying with a set of norms, and it is indeed an ambivalent process, as mirrored in Ninel. Ninel and Bertram’s performance is a manifestation of this improper definition of binary opposition, which should be reconsidered and redistributed not according to the gender category. Elsa’s masquerade can be understood as her performative production of subversion of literary madwoman image, such as Bersha in *Jane Eyre*. To be mad is not only the denial of her desires, but also her being an object to be desired. Elsa’s subversion proves that she does not surrender her desires and she will do what she could under limited social context.

Sexual division of labor is actually a distribution of power. We are conscious that “each new development of the productive forces engenders a division of labour” and the constant advancement of technology renovates mode of living but not ideology. History seems to tell us the disjuncture of ideology, which lags far behind the technology in specific redefinition of gender labor roles. As the binary definition of male and female cannot be denied or changed, even with modern technological operation that the sex is inverted or even combined, the fixed gender discrimination
and oppression still exist. Therefore what we need to consider is to change the stereotyped view of gender ideology.

Notes:
[1] S. Lillian. Kremer, “Post-Alienation: Recent Directions in Jewish-American Literature”, Contemporary Literature 34.3 (Autumn 1993):572.
[2] Cynthia Ozick, Heir to the Glimmering World. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004, p. 23.
[3] Judith Butler, Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performatve. New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 2.
[4] Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”. New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 143.
[5] Cynthia Ozick, Heir to the Glimmering World. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004, p. 155.
[6] Ibid., 155.
[7] Tim Edward, Cultures of Masculinity. London: Routledge, 2006, p. 39.
[8] Cynthia Ozick, Heir to the Glimmering World. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004, p. 139.
[9] Michael S. Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity”, in Peter F. Murphy, ed., Feminism and Masculinity. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 192.
[10] Cynthia Ozick, Heir to the Glimmering World. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004, p. 252.
[11] Janet A. Kourany, Philosophy in a Feminist Voice: Critiques and Reconstructions. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 7.
[12] Cynthia Ozick, Heir to the Glimmering World. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004, p. 274.
[13] Suzanne Klingenstein, “Heir Snares Eyre’s Mahr: Murderous Idea vs. Thieving Interpretation: Cynthia Ozick’s Literary Theory in Heir to the Glimmering World” in An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies 26.2 (2008):103.
[14] Susan Moller Okin, “Political Philosophy: Feminism and Political Theory” in Janet A. Kourany, ed., Philosophy in a Feminist Voice: Critiques and Reconstructions. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 118.
[15] Ibid., 120.
[16] Carolyn Korsmeyer, “Perceptions, Pleasures, Arts: Considering Aesthetics” in Janet A. Kourany, ed., Philosophy in a Feminist Voice: Critiques and Reconstructions. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 151.
[17] Karaism is a Jewish movement characterized by the recognition of the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) alone as its supreme legal authority in Halakhah (Jewish law) and theology. Karaism is thought to have arisen in the 7th-9th centuries CE in Baghdad and possibly in Egypt. They reject the Talmud and its tradition of rabbinic interpretation.
[18] Cecilia Sjöholm, Kristeva and the Political. London: Routledge, 2005, p. 73.
[19] Cynthia Ozick, *Heir to the Glimmering World* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004): 113.

[20] Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality*. London: Routledge, 1996, p. 53.

[21] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans., H. M. Parshley. London: Jonathan Cape, 1956, p. 240.

[22] Cynthia Ozick, *Heir to the Glimmering World*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004, p. 113.

[23] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans., H. M. Parshley. London: Jonathan Cape, 1956, p. 237.

[24] Ibid., 238.

[25] Richard Eder, “A Home That’s a Cosmos of Shipwrecked Cultures”, *New York Times* (03 Sep. 2004): 23.

[26] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*. New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 126.

[27] Diana Coole, *Negativity and Politics: Dionysus and Dialectics from Kant to Poststructuralism*. London and New York: Routledge 2000, p. 65.

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