



Universidad de Valladolid

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras

Master en Estudios Ingleses Avanzados

**“Challenging Gender Norms: Performativity
and Identity in *Girl* by Jamaica Kincaid and
Recitatif by Toni Morrison”**

Siham El Jabboury

Tutor: Dr. CARLOS HERRERO QUIROS

Departamento de Filología Inglesa

2024-2025

The work presented in this MA thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original and my own work, except as acknowledged in the text. The work in this thesis has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master in Advanced English Studies:
Languages and Cultures in Contact

to
Universidad de Valladolid

by
Siham El Jabboury

..... September 2025

Approved
Dr. CARLOS HERRERO QUIROS

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
1.1 Research context and Relevance.....	1
1.2 Presentation of primary texts (<i>Girl</i> and <i>Recitatif</i>)	2
1.3 Overview of methodology and structure.....	2
2. Theoretical Framework.....	3
2.1 Gender as a social construct.....	3
2.2 Performativity by Judith Butler.....	4
2.3 Identity Formation.....	6
3. Gender Performance in Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl”	7
3.1 Social expectations and domestic roles.....	7
3.2 Language, control, and female identity.....	9
3.3 Internal conflict and emerging resistance.....	11
4. Ambiguity and Identity in Toni Morrison’s “Recitatif”	13
4.1 The fluidity of Race and Gender.....	13
4.2 Shifting identities over time (Twyla and Roberta)	14
4.3 Social context and personal development (class, race, and history)	15
5. Comparative Analysis.....	17
5.1 Approaches to Gender Performativity.....	17
5.2 Narrative strategies and ambiguity	19
5.3 Questioning established identities.....	20
5.4 Cultural Context and Gender Construction.....	23
6. Conclusion.....	26
6.1 Overall summary of key findings.....	26
6.2 Main contributions to gender discourse.....	27

Acknowledgment

I'd like to gratefully thank Dr. Carlos Herrero Quiros for his ongoing advice, patience, and insightful input during the process of preparing this thesis. His words of encouragement and knowledge have been beneficial in guiding me through hurdles and improving my research.

I'm also grateful to the University of Valladolid's English Department for offering a friendly and intellectual environment to work on this thesis, as well as access to the tools required for such work.

Abstract

In the close relationship between a mother's words and her daughter's listening, and from the purity of early authentic friendships to their unavoidable dissolution, gender manifests as both a constraint and an opportunity. This thesis examines the intricate construction of identity in Toni Morrison's *Recitatif*, which uses racial ambiguity to reveal identity development, and Jamaica Kincaid's *Girl*, where a mother's exhaustive list of directives delineates the boundaries of acceptable femininity. The analysis highlights how literary texts become a platform for challenging social norms, especially gender roles and identity. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of performativity, this study identifies widespread and intricate patterns of gender formation, from the drama of Caribbean womanhood in the household to the intersection of class, gender, and race in America's evolving culture. Morrison's unorthodox story highlights the fluidity of identities across various cultural contexts, whereas Kincaid's story reveals how gender roles are passed down from mother to daughter like an inherited cultural tradition. The study's comparative analysis demonstrates that both narratives illustrate the manufactured nature of gender identity by using creative language and ambiguity in storytelling to highlight the repetitive practices that either support or challenge fixed and conventional identities.

1. Introduction

1.1. Preliminary Context

Modern literary works have shown us that gender is not always determined by biology, but can also be a performative concept, prompting us to further examine identity creation in literature. As Butler debates, “gender is not something one is, it is something one does” (Butler 25). Jamaica Kincaid and Toni Morrison's stories give a common platform for reflecting on how gender identity and rules are shared, enforced, and occasionally questioned. This thesis will examine how Jamaica Kincaid's *Girl* and Toni Morrison's *Recitatif* challenge entrenched gender norms, demonstrating how literature can be used to challenge conventional perspectives on gender identity formation and expression, as well as to consider the complexities of gender identity and the impact of societal expectations on individual behavior. Analyzing Jamaica Kincaid's 1978 *Girl*, which reflects Caribbean traditional ideals of femininity, alongside Toni Morrison's 1983 *Recitatif*, where racial ambiguity highlights the influences of gender and class in post-civil rights America, facilitates an investigation into gender as a performative construct molded by acquired behaviors, while also emphasizing the potential for resistance against conventional gender frameworks within postcolonial and African American literary contexts.

Beyond literary analysis, this thesis will add to a larger conversation in society, particularly about gender expectations, norms, and resistance. It supports contemporary discussions on the fluidity of gender and the ability of literary narratives to subvert established social structures by emphasizing how Kincaid and Morrison view gender as a learned performance.

1.2 Presentation of Primary texts

Jamaica Kincaid's 1978 short story *Girl* tells the tale of a mother's lengthy monologue to her daughter. First published in *The New Yorker* in 1978, the tale was then included in Jamaica's *At the Bottom of the River* collection in 1983. The narrative centers on the performative demands placed on women by Antiguan society. The story underscores how recurrent traditions and directives construct gender identity and facilitate the intergenerational transmission of gender norms. The narrative is delivered in a single, lengthy sentence with rare interruptions from the daughter's character, emphasizing how gender rules are firmly handed from mother to daughter. *Girl*'s setting depicts a woman's identity through her femininity, which is impacted by factors such as housework, politeness, and maintaining a positive reputation.

Toni Morrison's 1983 short story *Recitatif* narrates the tale of Twyla and Roberta, two women who met as youngsters in an orphanage and will subsequently cross paths at various points in their lives. *Recitatif* is distinctive in that Morrison contemplates how readers would perceive both the characters and the narrative by concealing the protagonists' race. This alternative approach emphasizes the complex societal definition of race and the intersection of other identities, such as class and gender, with racial identity, influencing the protagonist's personal growth and relationships.

1.4 Methodology

Based on performativity theory, this thesis employs close textual analysis, concentrating on Butler's concept of gender as a culturally scripted notion influenced by a recurrence of societal actions (Butler 140). I investigate the representation and questioning of gender in literature by examining *Girl* and *Recitatif*'s literary devices, vocabulary, and character development across many contexts. The thesis will start by dissecting the theoretical framework of the study before delving deeper into the texts' analysis. The second chapter will examine the relationship between the principles of the concept of gender performativity and its applicability in literary contexts.

Furthermore, chapters three and four will look at each work separately to see how gender identity formation is represented and built in both. Chapter five will discuss how *Girl* and *Recitatif* address gender norms and identify important ways for reflecting and challenging them. Lastly, the conclusion will highlight the most important findings from deep investigation and assess their applicability to the current gender debates.

I opted to compare two works from different literary and cultural contexts because a study of the stories of African American and Caribbean-American authors contributes more to the cross-cultural conversation on gender while considering the various historical and social settings. Throughout the analysis of *Girl* and *Recitatif* special attention will be paid to how language and maternal links can either support or contradict gender norms, how intersecting identities can make gender performance more difficult, and how maternal relationships can affect gender performance. My goal is to draw attention to the way literature can be used as a platform for actively engaging with and challenging gender norms.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Gender as a Social Construct

The understanding of gender a social construct rather than a merely biological inherited trait has shifted modern literary criticism. Gender has evolved from being purely biological to being considered a manufactured concept influenced by social interactions, institutional procedures, cultural and societal standards, and more. This idea is supported by the social constructionist theory which views gender as a completely social practice that society employs to define the lines between masculinity and femininity.

In most societies gender is a status that is attained via socialization, which molds the attitude, actions, and duties that are associated with gender. Gender is not a fixed identity. “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” as Simone de Beauvoir once stated. Simon’s remarks established the framework for the perspective that states that gender identity is instilled at a young

age, formed by social experiences, and reinforced in various social contexts over the course of a woman's life.

The idea of Judith Lorber's "gender system", which emphasizes the non-biological aspects of gender identity that are primarily influenced by several social arrangements, helps to further support this idea of gender as a social construct. According to Judith, the social norms that uphold the gender gap are so ingrained in our cultures to the point they have become naturally accepted that it seems strange to question these hierarchies of power. Various social situations and settings, such as disparities in family structures, sexual orientation, and employment level, reinforce these rules.

When viewed through the lens of social constructionism, literature becomes a potent instrument and a cultural arena for the expression and questioning of gender norms and identity. Literary works give opportunity for revision and resistance against prevailing gender attitudes in a culture, in addition to reflecting these beliefs (Gilbert and Gubar 73).

2.2. Performativity by Judith Butler

Judith Butler goes a step further in her theory of gender's social construction, arguing that gender is defined by one's actions rather than by who they are. Butler claims in her book "Gender Trouble" that gender identity is a performance influenced by a range of social norms rather than having a fixed character or a single source of action (Butler 520). In addition to challenging the conventional definition of gender identity, which holds that gender is a natural and unchangeable trait, Butler's views on gender identity also challenge other ideas, particularly previous feminist theories that upheld a distinction between socially constructed gender and biological sex.

Butler developed her idea of gender by drawing on J.L. Austin's speech act theory, which argues that words can be used to create reality and not only to describe it. Austin's theory served as the foundation for Butler's theory that gender is not something we are born with but rather something we acquire through a sequence of repeated actions, such as dress, speech patterns, and

normalized behaviors. As Butler explains, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 25). This looping link between identity and performance is proof that gender is an ongoing process rather than a fixed identity.

Butler is credited with coining the concept of "citationality," which emphasizes how gender standards are constantly applied in everyday situations, giving the appearance of gender stability while in fact it just exposes how gender identity is built and susceptible. According to Butler, if gender demands constant commitment, as demonstrated by the repetition we display in everyday activities, then it is never a fixed identity but rather a performance that one must act on to maintain their so-called identity. This constant pursuit of gender through recurrently accepted social norms makes space for what Butler refers to as "subversive repetition," in which even little variations in how these behaviors are carried out can reveal and subvert established gender norms.

Butler's gender theory is important to literature because it emphasizes how literary texts serve as platforms for gender performance. It focuses on how characters enact gender through their behaviors, statements, and ideas. Butler's concept also demonstrates how narrative devices can either support or contradict conventional perceptions of gender norms. Because both demonstrate how repeated patterns can produce a world that is doomed to be real and natural. Butler's idea of gender creation through repeated behaviors aligns with literature's ability to create reality through storytelling.

Butler's concept of performativity demonstrates how gender norms are shaped by power since social constraints and taboos tightly enforce gender roles on people. Butler refers to this as "regulatory fiction," a collection of laws that uphold the social norms and further reinforce hierarchy. This is exemplified by the designations “man” and “woman”, which are promoted as natural but function to uphold the hierarchy. Butler argues that if gender must be policed and regulated by rewarding those who follow the rules and punishing those who do not, then this is

not as natural as society says, since a stable identity does not require much regulation.

2.3 Identity Formation

Contrary to popular belief that gender identity is created by innate traits, it is molded by a complex and overlapping collection of social situations. Contemporary perspectives have abandoned conventional notions of gender as an immutable self in favor of viewing gender as a continuous process in which people concurrently negotiate many, occasionally contradictory, facets of their identities.

A person's identity is greatly influenced by society. Louis Althusser first proposed the idea of "interpellation", which examines how society calls people into subjects. Through social pressure that appears in the media, social institutions, and interpersonal interactions, society educates people to perceive themselves as gendered. Man and woman are examples of labels that are not based on true natural differences but rather on an ideology that is influenced by societal conventions and beliefs. This classification is more of a social expectation than a natural recognition.

Gender and identity are closely related. Butler contends that gender is not something we are born with, but rather something we act out. Adopting these gender performances is part of identity formation. From a psychological perspective, even if we later in life decide to reject traditional roles, early exposure to gender roles creates strong, unconscious attachments to gender identities. This is what Hall refers to as "suture", which is when people believe they have voluntarily chosen their social positions, when in fact we are locked into them (Hall 6).

Gender is not always experienced in the same way as it intersects with other social elements. This is evident in Kimberlé's intersectionality theory, which examines how gender, when combined with other social factors such as race, class, and sexuality, makes identity creation more difficult for some and more diverse in general. This is relevant in this study as, in some

cases, such as the case of Twyla and Roberta from the story of *Recitatif*, we must navigate characters' overlapping identities to fully understand their identity experience, as simply looking at their gender is insufficient.

Storytelling is another way to create and express one's identity. Modern literary theory emphasizes the importance of organizing one's experiences into a meaningful life story on which to reflect in forming who we are. Storytelling evolves into what we call narrative identity-making. According to Paul Ricoeur, studying signs in cultural works helps us understand who we are (Ricoeur 143). Literature contributes by providing models of identity creation that readers can relate to through characters and themes.

Identity is an ongoing process that is never fixed. Gender is fluid as people navigate various social circumstances and experiences. As Judith Butler stated, gender is a collection of recurrent behaviors with room for both tiny and large alterations in between.

The key to understanding the characters' identity formation journey in literature is to recognize the fact that identity is fluid and never static. In this respect, literature's ability to reflect characters' inner thoughts and feelings makes it an effective tool for grasping the complexities of gender identity construction.

3. Gender Performance in Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl"

3.1. Social Expectations and Domestic Roles

Jamaica Kincaid's *Girl* is a stunning depiction of how gender norms are carried down generationally. The story, given in a single line of parental teachings and rarely interrupted by the daughter's voice, represents a never-ending list of instructions from mother to daughter. A situation that mirrors the reality of Caribbean femininity, which is primarily valued for following housework, duties, and social rules.

Girl's writing style, which echoes an infinite list of tasks put on women, particularly younger ones, reflects the reality of Caribbean women. It goes beyond domestic chores as simple

activities that must be completed to become a covert message about how women should act based on how society perceives them, underlining how sexism is buried in such demands.

The mother begins by outlining ordinary home chores, saying, “Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the colored clothes on Tuesday and hang them on the clothesline to dry” (Kincaid 3). These specific instructions are the path to becoming a real woman in this society. The emphasis on specifying which day to wash the clothes and how to dry them indicates that being a woman entails carefully following set rules. These tasks go beyond the nature of plain work to become recurrent lesson for the daughter and every other woman there.

According to Judith Butler, “citations” are acts that support, reinforce and mimic what society perceives as feminine. These repeated actions and behaviors are essential for preserving one’s feminine identity since successful repetition makes the chores feel like “natural” feminine behavior.

The domestic tasks in *Girl* go far beyond mere duties. They are ingrained instructions for authentic womanhood. The mother’s instructions range from simple laundry guidance to more explicit cooking recommendations, such as, “this is how to make bread pudding; this is how to make doukouna; this is how to make pepper pot” (Kincaid 1). These recipes do more than just teach the daughter how to cook, they also pass on cultural legacy by illustrating what a woman’s alleged profession is, and it is only by mastering these passed down talents that you will be recognized as a proper womanhood lady and receive the necessary community approval.

Through what Louis Althusser refers to as “ideological state apparatuses”, we might read Kincaid’s emphasis on domestic tasks as ingrained feminine rules. Kincaid sees the house as a setting that reinforces hierarchy by training women into gendered roles through tasks disguised as vital life skills for the daughter’s own welfare and feminine wisdom that must be passed down through generation.

Kincaid's story illustrates how gender intersects with class and economic necessity, mirroring the post-colonial Caribbean social context where women had far less economic freedom and opportunity than men. The imposed tasks are more than just basic instructions, they are also a way of economic survival. This is apparent at the end of the story when the mother says, "this is how to make ends meet" in a way that emphasizes the importance of mastering domestic skills as a means of escape. This is consistent with Judith Butler's theory that gender roles are the outcome of real-world constraints, which create both limits and opportunities for gender expression.

3.2. Language, Control, and Female Identity

Girl's writing style incorporates two crucial factors. First, the text provides confirmation of the method employed to teach gender roles, and second, the text conveys the lesson itself. *Girl* is proof that language and words may be used as a tool for social control. The mother uses a dominant tone, compelling the daughter to be a passive learner who must accept feminine lessons, as the mother herself asserts, "this is how to sew on a button, this is how to make a buttonhole" (Kincaid 1). This continuous use of the order phrase "this is how" is depicted as teaching and counsel, but it is an enforcement of conformity to accepted feminine chores and attributes. This is what Foucault refers to as "disciplinary discourse", in which the daughter's identity is formed through forceful orders disguised as compassionate teaching.

The mother's guide discourse extends beyond traditional teaching as it allows the mother to observe and monitor her daughter's actions and sayings. Along with the limitless teaching responsibilities, the daughter receives many cautions on multiple occasions about improper behavior that a lady should not exhibit, such as when the mother says, "Don't sing benna in Sunday school; you mustn't speak to wharf-rat boys" (Kincaid 1). This demonstrates that femininity is built not only through the dos and don'ts, but also through obligations and limits that women are exposed to from a young age. The mother's emphasis on maintaining a good reputation, in which

she says, “This is how to behave in the presence of men who don’t know you very well, and this way they won’t recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming” demonstrates that public opinion about women, which if negative, can lead to social isolation, is one of the major contributors to female identity formation.

We can see in *Girl* and what Austin refers to as “performative utterances” how words are not always used to describe reality, but to create it. The mother’s instructions function as speech actions that not only provide instructions but also shape her daughter’s feminine identity. For example, when the mother says, “This is how to set a table for tea,” she is not only providing instructions but also demonstrating right feminine behavior to her daughter, allowing her to follow suit and become an accepted woman in her community.

While *Girl* is primarily dominated by the mother's continuous demands and teachings, there are a few interruptions from the daughter, such as when she says, "But I don't sing Benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school" and "But what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?" These incidents demonstrate the daughter's rising self-awareness in the face of significant strain from her mother's tight standards. Not only does she break her mother's speech, but she also demonstrates critical thinking by questioning her mother's set ideas and exposing weaknesses in her strict gender teachings. Even though the daughter tries hard to have her own voice, the mother’s response is usually negative, as she says, “this is how to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you,” smacking her with more dominating teachings rather than creating space for a conversation.

In *Girl*, Kincaid employs several Caribbean vocabulary and cultural allusions to demonstrate how postcolonial identity shapes gender roles. Words like “benna” (Antiguan folk music) and “doukona” (traditional Caribbean food) instill gender messages in a local culture that disregards colonial linguistic authority. This demonstrates that gender roles vary across culture, making it more difficult to resist them while being true to one’s own cultural identity.

The uninterrupted sentence pattern of *Girl*'s writing emphasizes the oppressive nature of gender expectations imposed on the daughter and women in general in Antiguan culture. The lack of long gaps and pauses reflects the continual flow of the orders, which overwhelms both the daughter and the reader. The seemingly endless number of activities and restrictions emphasizes the tight nature of gender roles, which are maintained by repetitive actions that make it almost impossible to express any other form of change. This also highlights the daughter's role as a passive learner and listener who is unable to express any sort of major protest.

3.3 Internal Conflict and Emerging Resistance

While the mother's voice dominates *Girl*'s narrative through lectures, there are a few subtle indications in the text that reveal the daughter's internal struggle with imposed expectations. The daughter's two interruptions in the text go beyond simple interventions; They are utterances that convey the daughter's growing feeling of agency while also questioning the mother's dominant narrative. Scott refers to this as "hidden transcripts" or opposition camouflaged as agreement.

The daughter's first actual answer to the mother's rigorous order is "but I don't sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school" this demonstrates that while the daughter might pass as a passive listener, she also has a growing sense of agency, which is guided by personal ethical decisions. Her use of negation phrases like "not at all" and "never" demonstrates her ability to distinguish between good and bad in the face of the mother's cultural propaganda of what exclusively acceptable as feminine. Though not explicit, Butler defines "agency" as the process of acting out and speaking up, which can emerge quietly even within tight gender systems.

The daughter subsequently questions her mother's argument, saying, "But what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?" (Kincaid 1). In this case, the daughter questions the mother's advice's practical application. This showcases the daughter's critical thinking skills, as she evaluates her mother's discourse about gender roles to achieve anything she wants. Her use of the phrase "what

if...won't let me" indicates that the daughter is aware that conforming to femininity as described by her mother may not always provide her with the promised control and approval.

The daughter's numbered interruptions express what Bhabha refers to as "mimicry," which in this case is the daughter's internal conflict and is an imperfect repetition of dominant norms that create room for resistance. Without having to argue with her mother, the daughter is subtly establishing her own personality while understanding the flaws of such restrictions imposed.

Other examples of resistance in the story include the narrative's emphasis on reputation and sexual behavior. The mother's constant emphasis on the daughter avoiding being a "slut" creates a hostile approach to the daughter's emerging sexuality, the daughter is taught how to love a man but is strictly prohibited to explore her sexuality outside of the accepted frame, highlighting the conflicting nature of social expectations placed on women in which their sexuality is promoted but only in a limited way that aligns with set rules. A woman's sexuality, or in this case, the daughter's, becomes a source of power and independence because the necessity for such restriction indicates defiance of the mother's maternal control.

Kincaid's monologue driven story highlights the artificiality of gender stereotypes. The narrative concludes with the mother teaching the daughter "how to squeeze bread to make sure it's fresh," and the daughter wonders if the baker will allow it. This is where the daughter emphasizes the difference between the mother's theoretical ideas and real-life experiences, demonstrating that direct confrontation is not always the best way to rebel, but little everyday actions may be more effective. The ending in *Girl* implies that as the daughter grows older, she will have a challenge in balancing gender standards with her own critical based independence.

Michel de Certeau refers to "tactics" as the subtle type of resistance observed in modest actions taken within existing systems to oppose them. The daughter challenging her mother's dictatorship might not have been effective if it had been directly challenged, so subtly undermining her mother's authority is more realistic in this context, demonstrating that it is not

always easy to target powerful systems, but that does not mean it is impossible through subtle means. *Girl* demonstrates how little moments of inquiry can rise to larger forms of rebellion against dominance.

4. Ambiguity and Identity in Toni Morrison's *Recitatif*

4.1. The fluidity of Race and Gender

Recitatif by Morrison provides a platform for investigating identity when traditional categories and labels are blurred. Morrison's decision not to explicitly mention the protagonists' race in the narrative, even though they clearly have two different races, allows the reader to reflect on their own perspectives on identity. This demonstrates the intersectional nature of many identities, such as race and gender, which are strongly linked and can only be understood when considered together because they both impact on how society views individuals and how they view themselves.

The opening description of the girls' differences is based on gender assumptions. First, Twyla's comment that Roberta "smelled funny" and had different manners might be referencing typical behavior rules for girls on hygiene and behave (Morrison 13). However, the ambiguity of the text proves that such judgments are not based on nature, but they stem from stereotypes that link race and idealized womanhood.

In *Recitatif* motherhood can also be considered performative. The absence of the mother is judged differently depending on race. Twyla's mother is described as someone who "danced all night" and Roberta's mother as someone who was "sick", but these are a softer justification of their absence, an absence that is judged differently depending on race (Morrison 13). The ambiguity that dominates the plot might stop the reader from making racial assumptions about the mothers' absence, but it allows us to reflect on how race and gender influence how society accepts "bad mothers".

Morrison emphasizes how gender and race interact to influence sexual behavior through

the plot's deliberate ambiguity. Racial coded language is used to imply that one of the girls might be more sexually mature. It is based on racial stereotypes commonly stated regarding female sexuality. Morrison's method emphasizes how other facets of identity, like race, frequently impact gender performance, particularly sexuality. Morrison also demonstrates that gender and race are not a natural expression but rather the result of repeated performances.

4.2. Shifting Identities

The evolving narrative in *Recitatif*, which spans decades, allows for a deepened investigation of identity change over time as influenced by personal experiences and social conditions. Morrison's time gaps demonstrate that identities are fluid and change over time. The evolving nature of Twyla and Roberta's relationship emphasizes the importance of social position in determining identity performance and self-development.

The meeting at Howard Johnson's reveals how social class upgrade complicates female identity and its expression. Roberta's fancy look styled with "earrings the size of bracelets" contrasts with Twyla's understated look (Morrison 13). Morrison depicts certain displays of femininity as a luxury that requires big financial investments. The focus on class and the difference in social status in this scene shows how these two aspects affect gender performance. The difference in gender expression between Roberta who maintains a polish feminine look with a "big and wild" hair and "gorgeous" look suggest that her social upgrade helps her maintain this look, while Twyla with her limited resources struggles as she shows a simpler look that portrays her financial status (Morrison 136). These differences cannot be interpreted through race alone as Morrison withholds the races of both characters and we can't really decide who is who hence why we are prompted to look at other social factors like class that also contribute to shaping identity and its expression.

In the political demonstration scene, we can clearly see how Morrison challenges conventional gender roles and expectations revealing how political engagement complicates

expectations and rules forced upon women. When engaging with the school integration conflict both women step into public sphere moving beyond domestic environment. However, their different stand on political topics show that gender behavior can change depending on political opinions. Twyla, as a concerned mother, is worried about her children's education while Roberta advocates for civil rights. The ambiguity in *Recitatif* leaves readers uncertain which stance is the right expression of femininity.

The protest dispute shows how political views can intervene to ruin early relationships. Twyla alleges that Roberta "kicked a poor old black lady" back when they were together in the orphanage (Morrison 14). This accusation is full of racial language that portrays Roberta as a morally irresponsible individual and uses society's expectations of women as caring individuals to pass on a political agenda. However, the ambiguity surrounding this event highlights how women's morality can be formed by racial biases.

The final scene demonstrates how identities are changeable because assuming a person's identity is a continuous process, especially when they reach adulthood. Twyla and Roberta's gender performance is still being negotiated and occasionally even restricted, despite their respective social accomplishments. This scene shows that peak femininity is an identity that requires constant maintenance rather than a fixed state.

4.3 Social Context and Personal Development

Recitatif demonstrates how social processes within established systems shape women's growth. The lack of a conventional family context in the orphanage allows us to study how gender identities are established within an institutional environment, emphasizing that gender roles are neither fixed nor natural, and that in non-typical family settings, they require careful support and maintenance.

The discrimination Maggie suffers in *Recitatif* demonstrates how social vulnerability can lead to exclusion when linked to other parts of identity, such as gender. Though Maggie's race is

not directly stated in the story, making it even more difficult to examine whether her race is a contributing or primary reason for her discrimination, we can see that this exclusion is the result of overlapping aspects of her identity. This discrimination is evident throughout the story, particularly in Maggie's interactions with other girls, who use their relationship with her to negotiate their own social positioning.

Maggie is an example of failed femininity since she is unable to stand up for herself or claim the societal safety that is usually provided to women who conform. Maggie's abusive treatment exemplifies how gender norms are imposed on those who fail to meet expectations through punishment and exclusion. The possibility that other women were involved in Maggie's abuse highlights the significant role that some women play in enforcing established norms as they police the performances of other women.

Tywla and Roberta's interactions as adults show that their current relationship is shaped by their social positions, particularly economics. Twyla with the rooted working-class mindset and the Roberta's apparent wealth necessitate different approaches to their interactions. Twyla, as a mother, reflects the working-class concerns about improving their social positioning and that can be seen in her concern about her children's education, whereas Roberta's involvement in politics demonstrates an active reach to larger social networks that inspire activism. This shows how important economic context is in achieving adequate gender performance, as the latter demands sufficient economic resources, which are typically not allocated equally.

Recitatif demonstrates how our interpretation of the past drives personal progress. Twyla and Roberta's memories of the past shift as they age, influenced by current circumstances. Childhood relationships are not permanent, attachments may not always remain strong, and variables such as adult experiences might lead to dissolution. All this process of past interpretations impacted by the present demonstrates how identity is not fixed and is developed incrementally throughout life.

Morrison's focus on maternal links in the story offers a different perspective on how social situations influence personal growth. It highlights motherhood role as primary site of gender identity and how it can adapt to different social contexts. Both Twyla and Roberta face a complicated relationship with their mothers, the reasons behind these conflicts are not clearly stated but what is clear is the impact it had on the characters' development.

Morrison resists traditional gender conventions through her ambiguous narrative method. The plot's ambiguity is supported by refraining from the precise classifications that are typical in gender studies. Morrison hopes to provide the reader with a fresh perspective on texts concerning the interaction of gender with other identities by leaving the characters' racial identities ambiguous, departing from conventional methods. Instead of seeing identities as inherently occurring, Morrison's method enables us to see them as shifting performances impacted by a variety of social and economic forces.

5. Comparative Analysis

5.1. Approaches to Gender Performativity

Kincaid's *Girl* and Morrison's *Recitatif* use different ways to demonstrate how gender is performed. While both authors use a distinct storytelling methodology, each depicts gender as a sequence of repeated social habits rather than something we are born with, with the goal of demonstrating this in various ways. On the one hand, Kincaid emphasizes the artificiality of gender by depicting a mother giving her daughter severe instructions on how to be a "proper" woman. Morrison, on the other hand, emphasizes gender performance by excluding other identification factors. While the methodologies differ, they both serve the same goal of questioning the notion that gender is natural.

Kincaid's approach to gender performativity is based on what we call "performative saturation," an overwhelming condition that transforms social standards into daily habits. The family is the first institution in which gendered people are created. This approach emphasizes the role of authority people in setting societal norms, as well as the need to pass them down from generation to generation in maintaining gender performativity.

Kincaid gathered years of gender lessons into a short, dramatic, and powerful lecture. This deconstruction demonstrates the superficiality of what it means to be a "woman". It is an identity based mainly on social conditioning. This technique focuses on how a hierarchical social system artificially establishes gender growth, resulting in what is claimed to be "natural" gender roles.

Morrison's approach focuses on the interplay of gender and other identities. *Recitatif* reveals that race and gender are not distinct social categories, as they cross to generate a sense of "naturalness" in identification. *Recitatif* demonstrates that we cannot fully comprehend how gender is performed without considering how it interacts with other social elements, particularly race. Race and gender are inextricably linked systems, and we can't always make sense of gender performance in a context that excludes other identities like race.

Morrison's decision to stretch her narrative across time demonstrates that gender performance is an ongoing and lifelong process. It is a process that requires ongoing renewal because other social circumstances such as social surroundings, economic situations, and ages can influence it and so modify a person's identity performance.

Hierarchical societies maintain tight norms by excluding those who do not conform. Kincaid and Morrison's writings demonstrate how gender performance is policed, resulting in conformity out of fear of social penalty for not conforming. To Kincaid, femininity is associated with the avoidance of sexual shame, whereas Morrison associates it with the character Maggie, who is severely discriminated against for failing to comply properly.

Both *Girl* and *Recitatif* contend that society enforces gender roles. Kincaid's account demonstrates that this policing is vertical since it becomes a pedagogical model that the elderly transmit to the younger generation to maintain hierarchy. While in *Recitatif*, policing is horizontal as individuals police one another, as we see in the story, women of the same age observe and assess other women in a way that validates their status and gives them a sense of belonging. Though policing differs in some ways, it all operates together to maintain gender performance and societal norms.

5.2. Narrative Strategies and Ambiguity

Despite their differences, Kincaid and Morrison's storytelling tactics function as tools for challenging our perceptions of gender and identity creation. Both authors use ambiguity to produce various forms of pain for the reader, reflecting the protagonist's perspective and thereby providing the reader with a deeper understanding of the tale.

To reflect the daughter's terrible situation, Kincaid employs a one sentence style that eliminates typical narrative breaks. This style depicts the daughter's experience of being regularly and consistently informed how to behave as a girl, as well as what it feels like to have gender expectations built up over time. In this case, the writing itself served as part of the argument against strict gender standards, both in terms of the tale and design.

Kincaid's adds ambiguity to the plot by being exceedingly overwhelming. The text is an infinite succession of demands and warnings, punctuated by nearly perfect quiet from the daughter, leading readers to speculate on her likely rebellious response. This method has two meanings because it allows the reader to personally experience the heavy weight of gender conventions while also reflecting on the daughter's lack of agency.

Morrison's use of first-person viewpoint to convey Twyla's story creates a false intimacy that quickly becomes ambiguous, as she decides to hide the narrator's race, preventing readers

from knowing her motivations and social status. This technique questions the notion that we can never really grasp a character based just on assumptions. This sensation of disorientation caused by Morrison's purposeful ambiguity causes a sense of "vertigo" in the eyes of the readers, as they are deprived of any conventional tool that helps us identify identity. The subsequent uncertainty helps readers realize that the categories and racial assumptions are merely socially manufactured instruments for interpretation, not naturally real.

The use of dialogue in both stories illustrates the various ways in which gender is formed. Kincaid's *Girl* uses an authoritative voice throughout the long monologue to demonstrate how gender stereotypes are taught in this context with little possibility for rebellion. The daughter is a passive participant in this discourse, making only a few interruptions in the face of her mother's takeover speech. This technique reveals how society disguises the enforcement of gender roles as useful recommendations.

Morrison's conversation is shaped by careful disclosure and hiding information. She shapes Twyla and Roberta's life through interactions in which they never reveal their race identities. This demonstrates that identity is frequently shaped indirectly by the subtle ways in which social labels influence our daily interactions.

Kincaid and Morrison use time to show opposing views of identity creation. While Kincaid condenses lifetime teachings into a single intense moment to highlight the tension of learning gender standards at a young age, Morrison's development of her story across many years indicates that identity is not permanent and must be renegotiated throughout one's life. Both pieces allow the reader to experience identification as either a direct lesson or a lifelong process.

5.3. Questioning Established Identities

Kincaid and Morrison employ different but complementary strategies to challenge persistent gender stereotypes. Each narrative explores how various components of gender identity are produced. However, when we read them closely together, we can see how each method

contributes to a broader understanding of how literature can forcefully expose and question the performative nature of identity categories.

Kincaid's *Girl* teaches us that gender is a learned quality that can be taught, which challenges the traditional idea of femininity as inherent. The story of *Girl* reveals how rigorous training is required to perfect a correct gender performance and its so called "natural" behaviors. The mother's teachings on domestic tasks, social behavior, and sexual values demonstrate that gender identity is the outcome of ongoing coaching. Kincaid's method allows for more critical perspectives on gender as a social construct rather than an inherent attribute, as well as critical tools for interrogating other supposedly natural identity categories.

Morrison's story challenges our deeply held beliefs about identity by demonstrating that fixed identities rely on categorical systems that operate automatically in most social circumstances. She makes readers aware of the characters' gender identities while purposefully concealing their races, allowing the reader to observe how gender conventions interact based on socioeconomic standing. This approach demonstrates that our intersectional assumptions are frequently inconsistent, and that traditional interpretations of identities are based on static categorization.

Both writers argue that established identities are reinforced by exclusionary behaviors that distinguish what is appropriate female manifestation from what is not acceptable or legitimate. Kincaid emphasizes on how exercising gender performance helps to avoid social sanctions and rejection, but Morrison demonstrates how women who do not adhere to social standards are forcefully rejected. These visions demonstrate that gender identity is not a static identity, but rather one that requires ongoing support and reinforcement.

Recitatif and *Girl* highlight the obstacles to a true shift while offering several strategies for defying gender norms. The daughter's tiny disruptions in Kincaid's story demonstrate how resistance might begin with small gestures and eventually grow to open new ways of thinking and

living, but it must always be firmly kept inside the established hierarchy. The necessity to attain a particular social standing that will ensure their acceptability within existing social institutions limits the resistance of the female characters in *Recitatif*, who live with ambiguous identities.

Both narratives point out that revisiting the past and engaging in an ongoing conversation with it through changing viewpoints is essential to challenging and questioning fixed identities. In Kincaid's short story, conflicting gendered expectations necessitate going back in time to reassess childhood learning from an adult viewpoint. In contrast, Morrison's tale, which spans a lifetime, shows that a person's self has been and will continue to be reinterpreted over the course of their life. This interaction between the present and the past demonstrates that identity is a continual, ongoing process of analysis rather than a final destination.

The stories serve as a teaching instrument for a border lesson that teaches readers how gender is constructed around them, therefore their significance goes beyond basic storytelling. By drawing attention to the artificiality of notions of womanhood, Kincaid helps readers recognize comparable structures in their own contexts. Morrison challenges readers to examine and confront their preconceptions about various identities by upending rigid categorization. *Girl* and *Recitatif* are prime examples of how literature can act as a critical teacher, instructing readers on how to challenge accepted societal standards.

We learn from both *Girl* and *Recitatif* that although identities are more flexible than we may believe, a true identity shift necessitates enough work that involves both individual and broader societal transformation. Kincaid contends that identity can be learned in a variety of ways and that gender is taught. Morrison demonstrates how identities can evolve over time, demonstrating the greater intersection of social categories than previously thought. Every piece reveals the extensive web of social systems that support and strengthen traditional identities, suggesting that questioning established identities is the first stage of a lengthy quest for fresh avenues for community and how we define ourselves.

5.4. Cultural Context and Gender Construction

The cultural background of both stories reveals many perspectives on how gender performance functions based on cultural background, particularly in African American and postcolonial Caribbean contexts. Gender identity building is accomplished differently based on historical and cultural conventions, although sharing comparable shaping tendencies. This performance difference highlights the fragile nature of gender as a characteristic that varies based on the social setting and is not universal.

The Caribbean setting of Jamaica Kincaid's *Girl* demonstrates how gender formation is a combination of conserving native customs and fighting colonial forces. The mother's extensive teachings consist of a collection of traditional ideas about what it means to be an Antiguan lady, an identity shaped by a combination of local customs and ancient colonial influences. The use of local traditional cuisines like “doukona” and cultural forms like “benna” demonstrates how gender teachings help to conserve local culture in a world threatened by globalization. The mother's directives in the form of feminine abilities serve as a means of preserving and transmitting endangered cultural information across generations.

The emphasis on domestic life in *Girl* reflects the economic background of postcolonial Caribbean settings, where women faced limited career opportunities due to colonial past and newly gained independence. Female lessons in this economic setting serve not only to perform femininity, but also as a means of economic survival. The mother's emphasis on "making ends meet" situates gender performance within the context of economic necessity. This demonstrates that postcolonial Caribbean women had no choice but to learn practical skills to survive the economic uncertainty that plagued that era.

Morrison's *Recitatif* has a different context but still emphasizes the importance of gender formation. Because *Recitatif* is set in an African American community, it allows us to examine how the historical background of the civil rights era and the enduring racism of that era impact gender identity. The story, which took place between the 1950s and the 1980s, a time of desegregation and shifting racial dynamics, was nevertheless subject to numerous limitations because of the legacy system's continued exclusion. The protagonists deal with changing gender expectations, and even with certain advancements, they continue to encounter numerous limitations imposed by conventional norms. A classic example of how racial politics and gender expression collide is the argument over school integration in *Recitatif*. It demonstrates how African American women are frequently compelled to adopt a communal racial solidarity that impedes their own advancement.

An excellent illustration of how the post-civil rights movements affected Black Americans is Morrison's story. For instance, Roberta transforms from a destitute orphan to a multimillionaire. Nevertheless, social conventions continue to impact this economic achievement since Black women were still expected to behave in a way that was seen appropriate by the white middle class of the era. The disparity in wealth between wealthy Roberta and struggling working class Twyla emphasizes the wealth disruption and inequality that many Black Americans experienced at the time because they did not equally benefit from civil rights advancements, which further exacerbated class division within the African American community.

Recitatif demonstrates how African Americans' persistent exclusion from mainstream organizations prompted them to establish an unbiased support network of their own. The orphanage serves as the story's first support setting and is symbolic of the institutional care system that developed within the community because of meeting social needs that the rest of society disregarded. But as the story progresses, it becomes clear that these alternative mechanisms can end up serving to uphold the same discriminatory policies and power dynamics as traditional

institutions. This demonstrates that greater freedom and equality in interpreting social categories like gender may not always follow from the creation of distinct organizations.

Because each strategy represents particular cultural strategies for navigating social judgment in marginalized communities, reputation is treated differently in both stories. Although sexual virtue is the key to combating racist preconceptions about Black female sexuality being "improper," Caribbean women feel obligated to be "sexually proper" in Kincaid's work. Morrison, on the other hand, demonstrates how African women struggle to strike a balance between being loyal to their community and acting in a way that conforms to mainstream white society to fit in.

The works of Morrison and Kincaid demonstrate how persistent discrimination and past trauma have a role in the formation of gender roles within a particular group. Because of their history of slavery and colonization, the people in *Girl*'s Caribbean setting develop gender roles as a means of preserving and shielding their culture from the outside world, upholding their sense of place, and learning the skills they need to withstand unstable economic conditions. In *Recitatif*, the African American community, which had to undergo years of enslavement and social discrimination, uses gender roles to come together in the fight against racism.

The stories serve as a platform for contemplation on the relationship between individual choice and communal cultural loyalty. The daughter in Kincaid's work is torn between adhering to her mother's lessons, which stand in for social conventions, and attempting to adjust to changing lives. The characters in Morrison's story are under greater pressure because their race and gender norms both restrict their independence. Their position in society may be impacted if their personal decisions are viewed as reinforcing negative stereotypes about their own community. These conflicts demonstrate how cultural settings and what each group permits and forbids influence how gender norms are broken.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Overall Summary of Key Findings

Through an examination of Kincaid's *Girl* and *Recitatif* by Toni Morrison, this thesis has brought attention to the artificial and performative character of gender identity while demonstrating how literature can challenge conventional gender standards through certain narrative strategies. Morrison's racial ambiguity and Kincaid's powerful monologue have both offered methods to question rigid notions of gender roles through their distinct but complimentary approaches. *Recitatif* emphasizes how gender performance becomes ambiguous when it intersects with other aspects of identity, while *Girl* portrays gender as a lengthy, inflexible set of lessons that are passed down from mothers to daughters throughout generations.

The comparative examination of both stories constitutes a type of literary resistance as the stories are about more than just female characters who break traditional gender conventions. Instead, the use of literary skills to tell the story is a sort of resilience since it gently challenges the reader's beliefs about fixed identities and social categorization. Kincaid's rigorous list like writing style provides the reader with an overwhelming impression of gender standards, whereas Morrison's vagueness creates doubt, revealing how much we rely on labels to understand individuals and their relationships.

The assessment of the works' cultural backgrounds demonstrates that gender performances differ in African American and postcolonial Caribbean settings. Though the performance of gender is nearly same in both stories, the social relevance of gender varies according to the community's history and societal demands. Both narratives demonstrate that gender roles go beyond personal identity, they are vital instruments for preserving a culture, fostering economic resilience, and defending social boundaries. Both authors totally agree that gender is a societal construct that is not natural.

6.1 Main Contributions to Gender Discourse

This thesis contributes considerably to current conversations about gender by demonstrating how literature, rather than direct argumentation, can disclose the social construction nature of gender identity by how the narrative is delivered. While most feminist approaches focused on what characters or the author directly intended to say, this study, which focuses on how the story is told, structured, and styled, offers a new approach to criticizing gender roles, affecting readers through their experience with the text. Concepts such as "performative saturation" and "categorical vertigo" provide a unique perspective on how narrative might question our traditional notions about identity.

Butler's theory of performativity serves as the primary theoretical foundation for this thesis, highlighting how literary styles such as Kincaid's emphasis on gendered teachings and Morrison's ambiguity purposely disrupt the narrative to expose the artificial mechanisms utilized in identity creation. This demonstrates literature's importance as a vehicle for social criticism and awareness, which can result in social transformation.

The intersectional consideration of the ways in which gender is shaped differently in various cultural contexts adds to the continuing discussions among academics regarding the relationship between individual identity and cultural heritage. This thesis' emphasis on postcolonial and African American contexts shows that a healthy balance between self-expression and community belonging and the associated cultural responsibility is necessary for resilience against gender stereotypes. Successful gender critique must consider how identities function differently in various historical and cultural settings. These findings question fundamental ideas of gender liberation, which overlook the intersecting and varied functions that identities play.

Works cited

- Althusser, Louis. *"Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"*. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster, Monthly Review Press, 1971, pp. 128-186
- Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Harvard University Press, 1962.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *"Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,"* *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, 1994, pp 121-131.
- Butler Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of identity*. Routledge, 1990.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. *"Mapping the Margin: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color."* *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp 1241-1299.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*, translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage Books, 2011.
- De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall, University of California Press, 1984.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 1995.
- Gilber, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press, 1979.
- Morrison, Toni. *"Recitatif", Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women*, edited by Amiri Baraka and Amina Baraka, Plume, 1983.
- Hall, Stuart. *"Introduction: Who Needs Identity?" Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, Sage Publications, 1996.
- Kincaid, Jamaica. *"Girl" Literature and Gender*. Routledge. 2013.
- Lorber, Judith. *Paradoxes of Gender*. Yale University Press, 1994.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Oneself as Another*, translated by Kathleen Blamey, University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. Yale University Press, 1990.

Simmons, Dianas. “*Jamaica Kincaid and the Canon: In Dialogue with Paradise Lost and Jane Eyre*.” MELUS, vol. 23, no. 2, 1998.

Smith, Valeria. “*Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the Other*”. *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, edited by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, Rutgers University Press, 1997.