

NARRATIVITY, PERFORMATIVITY OF MUSIC AND GENDER IN ELFRIEDE JELINEK'S THE PIANO TEACHER

Sarita*

ABSTRACT

In her 1983 novel The Piano Teacher, Elfriede Jelinek delves into the life of Erika Kohut, a piano teacher in Vienna, examining her complex relationship with music, sexuality, and societal expectations. Through her unique narrative style, Jelinek challenges traditional storytelling and mirrors the dissonance and complexity of Erika's internal world. Themes of narrativity, performativity of music, and gender are intricately woven into the storyline. The technique used in the narrative mirrors Erika's internal turmoil as she navigates her identity and yearnings. By presenting a fragmented storyline, readers are encouraged to take an active role in deciphering the plot and understanding the complexities of Erika's existence. The novel further delves into the concept of music as a performing art and the accompanying societal pressures - especially those that seek conformation with traditional gender roles. Ultimately, playing music serves as a metaphor for conforming to social constructs of gender and expected behaviors. Erika's musical performances serve not only as forms of creativity but also represent her compliance with societal norms, mirroring the performative nature of gender roles.

Keywords: Music, Gender Roles, Performance, Narrativity

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Jonathan Dunsby, music cannot exist without performance (Dunsby, 1989). Whether listening to or playing a piece of music, the concept of time and physical presence holds a distinct significance compared to when experiencing written literature. However, once this contrast is recognized, it also reveals potential parallels between different forms, such as the significance of performance in oral literature or spoken poetry (Bernhart, 2011; Harris & Reichl, 2012). This type of comparison through different mediums often leads to discovering similarities that may have previously gone unnoticed. Nevertheless, performance is less prominent in literary fiction. Gender performativity, on the other hand, has been explored in literature – especially feminist literature. According to Butler (1990), gender is not simply related to biological sex. Instead, it is an ongoing process of repeating and practicing certain behaviors, as Simone de Beauvoir also suggests with her quote: "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one." This process of "becoming" is constant, as women observe and mimic the actions of other women around them. These cultural expectations and norms are like cues for gender performance that are placed on individuals based on their assigned sex. Butler examines de Beauvoir's concept of becoming a woman and states that the body is seen as a passive platform for cultural meanings or a tool used by society to define its own cultural significance. In other words, the body acts as a lens through which individuals observe and imitate gender cues created by culture. These external signals become markers for an individual's internal biology or sex.

Certain inquiries hold significance when exploring Elfriede Jelinek's novel, *The Piano Teacher (Die Klavierspielerin)*, (1983). For instance, what role does music play in literary performativity and vice versa? Do the narrative techniques used in the prose contribute to the performance of gender? If yes, then how so? The protagonist in this novel is a pianist and music plays a recurring role in the storyline. By examining the intermedial references to music within the narrative, we can observe how performance is self-referential, and how Jelinek's writing style reflects this nature of performing gender. The emphasis on physicality and performance in the novel greatly impacts its use of both the literary language used as well as narrative techniques employed. Taking an intermedial approach to this early work provides fresh understanding of how Jelinek's writing not only yields to performativity, but also performance of gender.

This article aims to examine how narrativity in the plot can enhance the notions of performance or challenge it. Narrated performance allows us to emphasize aspects of language that rely on bodily presence. It emphasizes how the narrating text itself refers to the performer, and in doing so, sets the

*Assistant Professor (German Studies), Department of Germanic and Romance Studies, University of Delhi

stage for the performance and creates the actual performativity of gender. It is argued that in *The Piano Teacher*, the performance of music described in the novel is intertwined with various forms of performativity within the text. Before delving into this further, it is important to note that Jelinek's texts are known for their strong sense of performativity, which will be briefly discussed.

2. PERFORMATIVITY, PERFORMANCE AND GENDER

In recent years, performance and performativity have emerged as important concepts for understanding a variety of societal and cultural practices. They have become essential in many academic fields, such as linguistics, ritual studies, theatre studies, literary criticism, gender studies, and other social sciences. These terms are also significant in the realms of contemporary art, theatre, and dance. While they originate from different disciplines, they often overlap or are seen as closely interconnected depending on the theoretical approach and subject matter being examined. This can lead to their unintentional interchangeable use, resulting in confusion in research methods and an overextension of their definitions. The question then arises – what is the relationship between performance and performativity? However, before we answer this question, it is important to look at what gender is.

Butler (2011a) reveals that the term "gender" was coined by Western feminist scholars and activists in the 1970s and has since gained widespread use. The first known usage of this term can be traced back to Gaye Rubin (Butler, 2011a). The idea of a "natural" and unquestioned sexed body has been ingrained since ancient times and serves as a vital foundation for constructions of gender and sexuality. Butler argues that this construct of "sex" may be just as culturally constructed as gender itself, blurring the distinction between the two (2011a). In other words, identity is heavily influenced by culture, and while our physiological attributes are firmly established, our understanding of gender is fluid and subject to change.

Butler (2011a) argues that gender, as a cultural construct, is not determined by an oppressive social power structure. Rather, it should be seen as a cultural interpretation of a person's biological sex. In her book *Gender Trouble*, she emphasizes the concept of performativity and how it shapes our understanding of gender (Butler, 2011a). According to Butler (2011a), gender is not a fixed or innate identity but rather something that is constantly performed and influenced by time and location. Drawing on the ideas of Derrida and Foucault, she challenges the notion of an original "identity" and suggests that it is constructed through repetition and societal norms. This regulatory discourse dictates what is considered the "acceptable" gender, sex, and sexuality, creating limited possibilities for expression and requiring adherence to certain norms. Butler sees gender as a signifying practice that shapes our identities within a rule-bound discourse. This concept is reminiscent of Foucault's (2016) *Discipline and Punish* where he discusses the ways in which societal rules control our behaviors and shape our sense of self. Overall, Butler's argument calls for a reconsideration of how we think about gender in relation to power structures and social norms.

In her work "*Critically Queer*", Judith Butler (2003, p. 159) writes that performativity cannot be reduced to performance. In "*Bodies that Matter*", Butler (2011b) further elucidates this statement, arguing that performativity is not a singular or deliberate act, but instead a "reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names". Gender performativity, therefore, is not a voluntary act and the performer does not have agency over it. Gender performativity, according to Butler (2011b), must be viewed as an ongoing and repetitive process of becoming. The most fundamental difference in the performativity and performance of gender, therefore, is that while gender performativity entails a ritual practice or a compulsory act on which the subject has no control, the term gender performance indicates agency.

3. EMPLOYING LITERARY LANGUAGE TO WRITE GENDER PERFORMATIVITY

The world-creating aspect of writing and reading involves the performativity of literary language, as seen in self-referential performative acts and the construction of imaginary worlds (Loxley, 2006). Within a poststructuralist perspective, there is a focus on the performative nature of literary discourse and its ability to embody what it says. This has led to less emphasis on its connection to social and

non-linguistic action. (Fort, 2021) The power of literary language to create precise worlds lies in its performative capabilities, as performative utterances and acts within a fictional world do not directly impact the social world.

According to Gullestad, Lombardo and Saetre (2010), the way in which performance is narrated can impact the effectiveness of literary discourse. When performance is self-reflexive and presented in a performative manner, it blurs the line between what is happening within the story and what is being presented by the literary discourse itself. This causes a shift in focus from the meaning or representation of the narrative to its actual presentation and effects on the reader. Erickson (2009) also suggests that while some plots may initially seem to reflect the social world, they can actually be better understood as self-reflexive presentations of literary discourse. The blending of representation and presentation leads readers to view the entire text from a performative perspective, where language's performative acts interact with theatrical elements typically found in performing arts. This highlights Fort's (2021) conclusion that language and literature are a form of performance.

In *The Piano Teacher*, the protagonist is Erika Kohut, a failed pianist trying to make a living as a piano teacher. The challenge with her, however, is that she is extremely strict as she passes on the relentless piano training she received from her mother down to her students. Through music teaching, Jelinek explores Kohut's complex relationship with her mother, who restricted and controlled her social life to a large extent. This control also extended to Kohut's sexual and emotional existence, which is limited by her mother to perverse voyeurism, extending to self-harm. Deeply impacted by this, Kohut fantasizes about bondage and discipline through a complex BDSM-based relationship with the opposite sex. As Jelinek explores Kohut's complex sexuality and sexual desires, the narrative spills onto her complicated relationship with her student Walter Klemmer, who sees Erika as his sexual conquest and responds to her sexual desires for BDSM by raping her. This relationship takes a significant toll on Kohut, who in turn, plans to avenge herself, but in the process, ends up harming herself more.

Jelinek's novel displays a coherent plot and intricate characters, and while music is often examined in her writing, it is not the primary focus, unlike other texts. Additionally, her prose frequently features a self-referential discourse that overshadows the development of the plot and characters and instead presents a body defined by performativity (Honegger, 2007; Neelsen, 2014). In essence, Jelinek's writing can be seen as a continuous flow of voices and counter-voices, with each word, sentence, and paragraph serving as a dual or even multiple perspectives (Kecht, 2007). In Jelinek's literary style, vague and open-ended expressions function to both reiterate and challenge conventional interpretations. This polysemy continuously presents various associations, much like the layered harmonies of a musical polyphony. Henrotte (1984) propose that this "dissonant music" highlights the physicality of language, which they refer to as an "ideological materiality." This materiality is not solely based on words, sounds and written symbols, but also on the societal beliefs that shape our use of language.

4. NARRATIVITY AND GENDER PERFORMANCE IN THE PIANO TEACHER

Despite being more accessible than Jelinek's later works such as *Ein Sportstück* (which examines how the society obsesses over the public spectacle of sports), *Wolken. Heim.* (which explores how German identity developed from language and the politics of memory) and *Die Kontrakte des Kaufmanns: Eine Wirtschaftskomödie* (which acts as a scathing attack on the speculators within the financial markets and the language they use), *The Piano Teacher* still employs deliberate ambiguity and instability. Right from the title, this ambiguity is clear as the titular character – Erika Kohut, is someone who is a pianist, pursuing the dream of her mother – who wanted to see her rise as an artist. Kohut, by no means relinquishes this dream of being an artist, though she is only a piano teacher, she never acts like one, and the same is evident in the text. Though Jelinek's later works deliberate upon the use of language and their role within the natural world, these works are underscored by both a lucidity and a fierce humor. It's different with *The Piano Teacher*, which is much more layered and devoid of the strong political engagement that her later works have elicited. One example is how the ambiguities of Kohut's aspirations and sexual desires are presented within the text. For instance, within a single sentence,

Jelinek conveys multiple meanings. In the phrase "the intricate crocheted patterns of contrapuntal tissue,"¹ the word "tissue" carries both metaphorical and literal connotations. While it can refer to a textile fabric that has been crocheted, it also invokes thoughts of bodily tissue. This dual interpretation adds a web-like, organic element to the concept of counterpoint, challenging the conventional view of it as a rigid, rule-based structure. There are several instances where this happens – especially where Jelinek uses the technique of metasemantic destabilization. Metasemantics is a branch of philosophy that delves into the exploration and evaluation of semantic properties and concepts. While semantics focuses on understanding the meaning behind linguistic expressions, metasemantics goes beyond to investigate their origins and essence. In simpler terms, destabilization refers to reducing stability or causing something to become unsteady. This can also apply within a philosophical or theoretical framework, where it involves questioning or disrupting established concepts, frameworks, or assumptions. The term metasemantics destabilization therefore, refers to a process in the study of metasemantics that involves challenging traditional ideas about semantic properties and their foundations. It aims to foster a reevaluation of how we understand the underpinnings of meaning in language by destabilizing or reconsidering traditional views in the field. An example of the use of metasemantic destabilization in *The Piano Teacher* is when "Erika shakes the pearl strand of a trill out of her white blouse cuffs; she is loaded with nervous haste" (Jelinek, 1983; p. 125), the passage's meaning is further complicated by polysemy: the German word "Lauf," which can mean "run," also means run up and down a musical scale, which is menacing when paired with the verb "load." The link between music and violence is a metonymic connection. In fact, Jelinek's use of music in connection to violence can be interpreted in various ways. It serves as a potent form of emotional communication for characters like Erika Kohut, who use their musical talents to express their suppressed desires and inner turmoil. In this way, the piano acts as a symbol for a wide range of emotions, including those that are turbulent or aggressive. Furthermore, Jelinek uses music as a figurative language to depict the psychological violence faced by Kohut. For example, the physical and emotional demands of playing the piano serve as a metaphor for Kohut's internal battles and conflicts caused by her oppressive mother's strict sexual values.

The examples demonstrate that in Jelinek's writing, music is often used to comment on our perceptions. While Jelinek typically portrays music as a crucial aspect of her writing, she also connects it to themes of violence, bondage, and self-harm. These seemingly contradictory portrayals can be seen as a means for Jelinek to expose societal myths and ideologies (Janz, 2016). Throughout her texts, violent actions and metaphors are utilized to reveal the underlying structural violence in areas such as gender and class relations. In *The Piano Teacher*, Erika Kohut engages in self-mutilation as a manifestation of her internal turmoil and the societal pressures she faces. This serves as a powerful symbol for the violence imposed on those who defy societal norms, particularly regarding gender roles. Erika's fraught relationship with her mother, Mrs. Kohut, is characterized by power struggles as her mother attempts to control and dictate her actions. These family dynamics mirror larger class struggles, exposing the inherent violence in hierarchical relationships. For instance, Jelinek frequently utilizes the pronoun "SHE" to depict the adolescent Erika. The capitalization serves as a means to demonstrate how she stands out from the oppressive norm that surrounds her, as explained by her mother in great detail. This rarity lies in the fact that Erika is not only Mother's sole child, but also a prodigy. Despite this, after a significant and catastrophic public performance, she is forced to abandon her dream of becoming a concert pianist as an unmissable career opportunity presents itself. Subsequently, Erika must settle for being a piano instructor as there seems to be no other viable option available to her at the time. In other instances, The author portrays Erika's sexual experiences with rawness, highlighting the damaging effects of societal expectations surrounding women's sexuality. Ultimately, the novel critiques repressive social norms that contribute to the suffering of those who challenge traditional gender roles.

The use of music in *The Piano Teacher* has primarily been seen as a tool for exposing society's falsehoods. It has been assumed that Jelinek uses musical references to critique social norms and ideals,

¹“des verschlungenen zu Mustern gehäkelten Kontrapunktgewebes” (Jelinek, 1983; pp. 63–64). Though this passage is in the original German language text, it is eliminated from the popular translation by Heidi Hart in 1999.

such as the pursuit of progress or Austrian cultural identity (Janz, 2016). While some studies have focused on Erika's gender and sexuality (Janz, 2016), others have briefly noted the connection between her performance of gender and her musical profession (Solibakke, 2007). Further exploration has shown how Erika's role as a pianist is intertwined with her repressed sexuality and how the novel actively explores how music can become instrumental to other primal experiences (Powell & Bethman, 2008; da Sousa Correa, 2006).

5. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NARRATIVITY AND PERFORMATIVITY

In *The Piano Teacher*, Jelinek explores the challenging process of making music through depictions of lessons, recitals, practices, rehearsals and concerts. However, the focus is not on the auditory elements of music. Instead, Jelinek emphasizes the physical strain and effort involved in its production. Musical performances are portrayed by highlighting the performer's body and the exertion required to play. Unlike traditional techniques, Jelinek's descriptions rely heavily on visual-musical connections. For instance, when Walter Klemmer watches his teacher perform a Bach concerto, he pays more attention to her movements than the actual sound of the music. For instance, consider the following:

“He unselfishly admires Erika’s technique, he admires the way her back moves to the beat, the way her head sways, judiciously weighing the nuances she produces. He sees the play of muscles in her upper arm, he is excited by the collision of flesh and motion” (Jelinek, 1983; p. 23)

The above passage is clearly also an objectification of the female body – though Jelenik focuses on the body asexually also. For instance, when Erika is practicing as an adolescent, there is a persistent focus on her bodily movements, lending a corporeality to music.

“She gathers all her energy, spreads her wings and then plunges forward, towards the keys which zoom up to her like the earth toward a crashing plane” (Jelinek, 1983; p. 32)

and,

“Reluctantly, the violin finally moves under her chin, heaved up by an unwilling arm [...] Her fingers press the painful steel strings down the fingerboard. Mozart’s tormented spirit, moaning and choking, is forced out of the resonator.” (Jelinek, 1983; p. 30).

Despite the passage's description of sounds, it seems they are primarily perceived as painful noises, and all that is required is moving the body correctly according to directions. The performer does so by emphasizing the performer's perspective on music, rather than the listener's focus on auditory pleasure. Western art music requires discipline and submission from the female performer's perspective.

Jelenik uses other fascinating techniques to bring about the performance of gender – which itself opens doors to both pain and pleasure. In addition to being straining and coercive, playing instruments is seen as a feminine occupation - mundane as housework, and therefore described through metaphors relating to needlework - which is usually considered a feminine pursuit. Erika Kohut “corrects the Bach, mends and patches it” (Jelenik, 1983; p. 84). In her Beethoven lectures, needlework metaphors are again used, as Erika renders them in “regular knit two/purl two” or “loosely crocheted air stitches” (Jelenik, 1983; p. 118). As a result, the literary discourse that conveys musical performance tends to be intrinsically linked to performance. These gendering metaphors are repeatedly used throughout the text.

Furthermore, as a female piano student first and then a female piano teacher, Erika Kohut embodies the traditional European notion of musicality and music learning as a largely female occupation, wherein while musical genius was a male prerogative, musical learning and perhaps even teaching was a female pursuit. In his article on textual performativity, Schirmacher (2016) emphasizes how women were denied direct access to music in composition but were encouraged to access music through the act of performing. It appears that discipline of the (female) body is at odds with the idealization of music as transcendental and spiritual, and musical education has been viewed as an appropriate form of self-discipline for women as a way to establish women's symbolic status.

In his article on textual performativity, Schirmacher (2016) highlights how women were denied direct

access to music in composition but encouraged to access music through the act of performing. Music's idealization as transcendental and spiritual appears to conflict with the discipline of the female body, and musical education has been viewed as a way to establish women's symbolic status through self-discipline. Erika, a piano student and teacher, embodies the traditional female gender role. As she strives for success as a pianist, she navigates her own complex gender identity and seeks to reshape the expectations of her role as a musical performer. This act of artistic creation is evident in her personal touch on every performance, as she "spices up" her playing with originality (14). Through her writing, Jelenik emphasizes the connection between music-making and gender expression through a performative literary lens.

6. CONCLUSION

Using household metaphors, *The Piano Teacher* cleverly links its themes to literary discourse. Erika's actions within the story serve as a performative embodiment of the ideas discussed in the literature, enabling criticism of musical usage and enacting typically unspoken concepts. Jelenik skillfully uses actions within the fictional world as a stage to challenge gender roles and societal expectations embedded in language. Thus, literary discourse not only allows for performance in literature but also illuminates the ideological assumptions inherent in our language.

This article initially raised the question of how intermedial references to musical performance can impact literary narration. Utilizing the belief that such references always highlight shared characteristics between different media, the analysis focused on aspects of the text that exhibit similarities between literary language and gender performance. These connections are particularly evident through references to music in literature. Significant elements were revealed by exploring the portrayal of female representation and performance within the plot. The depiction of performance as a performative act challenges traditional notions of musical transcendence and spirituality. Instead, it emphasizes the physical exertion and control required from performers, which has often been used to manipulate and regulate women's bodies.

Elfriede Jelinek's writing is not solely characterized by self-referential literary discourse. Instead, it explores the connections between music and gender without simply critiquing the instrumentalization of music or focusing on performance. By referencing multiple forms of media, the novel highlights the shared features between them and emphasizes how language can physically impact readers. In *The Piano Teacher*, both musical performers and language take the spotlight as examples of performance and gender performativity.

REFERENCES

- Bernhart, W. (2011). Rhythmical Ambivalence of Poetry Performance: The Case of Elizabethan Verse. In *Word and Music Studies: Essays on Performativity and on Surveying the Field* (pp. 87-100). Brill.
- Butler, J. (2003). Critically queer. In *Performance studies* (pp. 152-165). Palgrave, London.
- Butler, J. (2011a). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Butler, J. (2011b). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- da Sousa Correa, D. (2006). *Phrase and subject: studies in literature and music*. Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing.
- Dunsby, J. (1989). Guest editorial: performance and analysis of music. *Music Analysis*, 5-20.
- Erickson, J. (2009). On Mimesis (and Truth) in Performance. *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 23(2), 21-38.
- Forť, B. (2021). Self-referentiality in Narrative Literary Fiction: A Strategy of Autopoiesis or Autodestruction?. *Bohemica Olomucensia*, 13(1), 200-213.
- Foucault, M. (2016). Discipline and punish. In *Social theory re-wired* (pp. 319-329). New York: Routledge.

- Gokcesu, B. S. (2007). *Metaphor processing and polysemy* (Doctoral dissertation, Indiana University).
- Gullestad, A. M., Lombardo, P., & Saetre, L. (Eds.). (2010). *Exploring Textual Action* (Vol. 1). Aarhus Universitetsforlag.
- Harris, J., & Reichl, K. (2012). Performance and Performers. *Medieval Oral Literature*, 141-202.
- Henrotte, G. A. (1984). Music as Language: A Semiotic Paradigm?. *Semiotics*, 163-170.
- Honegger, G. (2007). Staging memory: The drama inside the language of Elfriede Jelinek. *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*, 31(1). Available at <https://newprairiepress.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1653&context=sttcl>. Accessed on 6 November 2023.
- Janz, M. (2016). *Elfriede Jelinek*. Springer-Verlag.
- Kecht, M. R. (2007). The Polyphony of Remembrance: Reading Die Kinder der Toten. *Elfriede Jelinek: Writing Woman, Nation, and Identity*, 189-217.
- Loxley, J. (2006). *Performativity*. Routledge.
- Neelsen, S. (2014). Jelinek's Essays Framed by Translation and Collection. *Austrian Studies*, 22(1), 139-151.
- Powell, L., & Bethman, B. (2008). "One must have tradition in oneself, to hate it properly": Elfriede Jelinek's Musicality. *Journal of Modern Literature*, 163-183.
- Schirmacher, B. (2016). Musical performance and textual performativity in Elfriede Jelinek's the piano teacher. *Danish Musicology Online*, 85-99.
- Solibakke, K. I. (2007). Musical discourse in Elfriede Jelinek's Die Klavierspielerin [The Piano Teacher]. *Elfriede Jelinek: Writing Woman, Nation, and Identity: A Critical Anthology*, eds Matthias Konzett and Margarete Lamb-Faffelberger, 250-269.