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A Butlerian Analysis of Drama as a Soft Power to Change Social Attitudes Towards Women's Roles in "The Pride"

[*] **Aseel Ahmed Jassim**

*Department of English Language, College of Education for Women, Tikrit University
 Salahuddin, Iraq*

[1] **Prof. Dr. Ansam Riyadh Abdullah**

*Department of English Language, College of Education for Women, Tikrit University
 Salahuddin, Iraq*

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ABSTRACT

This paper conducts a Butlerian analysis of Alexi Kaye Campbell's play "The Pride," exploring how drama functions as a form of soft power that can influence and change societal attitudes towards women's roles. The aim is to investigate how the interplay of woman's role and societal norms affects identity formation and empowerment, particularly focusing on the characters' navigation of traditional expectations. Key research questions include: How does "The Pride" challenge established gender norms? In what ways do characters utilize soft power to assert their identities? How does the shifting portrayal of women reflect broader societal changes? Employing Judith Butler's theory of performativity as the methodological framework, this study analyzes character dialogues and interactions across the play's dual timelines—the 1950s and contemporary London. The results illustrate a marked evolution in female agency, primarily through the character of Sylvia, who transforms from a figure bound by societal expectations to one asserting her voice and desire for autonomy. Her journey embodies the potential for change that soft power holds when challenging patriarchal constraints. The analysis concludes that "The Pride" effectively utilizes drama to critique and reshape perceptions of women's roles. By destabilizing the "Great Chain of Being," the play highlights the complexities and consequences of redefining gender identities. The findings emphasize the transformative potential of theatre in prompting audiences to reconsider entrenched gender norms, demonstrating how soft power can lead to broader societal awareness and, ultimately, change in attitudes toward women's empowerment.

KEYWORDS

Judith Butler, Performativity, Power, Soft Power, Women's Roles, Identity, Class, British Upper Class, 1950s, The Pride, Alexi Kaye Campbell, Great Chain of Being



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Introduction:

Theatre and drama have long served as vital forms of cultural expression and communication, embodying the nuances of human experience and societal dynamics. Within the realm of soft power—a concept introduced by Joseph Nye (1990)—the arts, including theatre, can wield significant influence by shaping perceptions, values, and norms without the use of coercive force. This capacity of theatre to engage, challenge, and inspire provides a platform for the negotiation of identity and power, particularly within the constructs of gender. The role of women in society has evolved dramatically over centuries, often reflecting the changing tides of cultural, social, and political landscapes. In many contexts, women have historically been relegated to subordinate roles, constrained by societal expectations of femininity and domesticity. Yet, the representation of women in theatre has often served both to reflect and critique these limitations, enabling artists and audiences alike to engage in dialogues about gender, empowerment, and agency. "The Pride," a poignant play written by Alexi Kaye Campbell (2008), exemplifies the intersection of these themes within the context of British society. Set against the backdrop of the 1950s and contemporary London, the play navigates complex relationships shaped by class, sexual identity, and societal expectations. Through the lens of its characters, particularly the female roles, Campbell challenges traditional notions of femininity and highlights the nuanced performances women undertake in negotiating their identities within restrictive societal frameworks.

By examining "The Pride" in relation to theories of soft power, and Judith Butler's theory, one can gain insight into how Campbell's work not only reflects the struggles of women but also serves as a vehicle for change and understanding. This interplay between drama and social commentary underscores the importance of theatre in shaping cultural conversations and advancing gender equity.

Literature Review:

Gender roles and their influence on women's life prospects have been a subject of study in various contexts. (Brody et. al., 2010) explored the relationship between gender, emotion, and socialization, highlighting the impact of societal norms on individuals' emotional experiences. (Ali et. al., 2011) conducted a qualitative study in urban Karachi, Pakistan, to understand how gender roles shape women's opportunities and challenges in society. Soft power, as a concept, has been analyzed in different contexts to understand its implications on national identity and international relations. (Jiang, 2013) examined the role of celebrity athletes in promoting soft power and national identity through media coverage of the 2008 and 2012 Summer Olympics in Hong Kong newspapers. (Brannagan et. al., 2015) discussed the use of global sport, particularly the 2022 football World Cup in Qatar, as a tool for soft power diplomacy. Narratives and storytelling have been recognized as powerful tools for shaping individual and collective identities. (Pastor, 2014) explored the themes of shame and pride in narratives, emphasizing the role of storytelling in validating and giving meaning to people's lives. Similarly, (Suaidi, 2016) analyzed Jane Austen's novel "Pride and Prejudice" through a feminist lens, highlighting the themes of feminism reflected in the narrative. The construction of gender identity and national identity has been a focus of research in various cultural contexts. (Liu et. al., 2017) investigated the language learning narratives of Chinese 'New Women' to understand how language learning contributes to gender identity construction and national identity. (Ishida, 2019) applied Butlerian theory to analyze gender and body representation in Chinese literature, emphasizing the significance of understanding gender differences at a statistical level. Overall, the literature reviewed highlights the complex interplay between gender roles, soft power, narratives, and identity construction in shaping women's roles and experiences in society. Legal and cultural factors also play a crucial role in promoting gender equality and women's representation in various domains, such as the boardroom (Cabeza-García et al., 2019). Further research in these areas can provide valuable insights into addressing gender disparities and promoting women's empowerment.

Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing textual analysis as the primary research method to explore the themes of soft power, gender roles, and identity in Alexi Kaye Campbell's play "The Pride." Textual analysis allows for a close reading of the play's language, character interactions, and narrative structure to uncover the deeper meanings and societal critiques embedded within the text. The analysis will focus on key scenes and dialogues that highlight the performances of power and identity among the characters, particularly the female characters. Attention will be given to their interactions, the societal norms they navigate, and the ways they assert or challenge their roles within the context of 1950s British society.

Theoretical Framework:

The theoretical framework for this analysis is grounded in several intersecting theories: 1) Judith Butler's Theory of Performativity: Butler's concept of performativity (1990) posits that gender is not an inherent identity but rather an act that is performed based on societal norms and expectations. Within the context of "The Pride," Butler's framework allows for an examination of how the characters negotiate their gender identities through performance, thereby revealing the constructed nature of gender roles and the implications of these performances for individual agency and societal power. 2) Soft Power: As defined by Joseph Nye (1990), soft power refers to the ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. This framework will be applied to analyze how the characters in "The Pride," particularly women, utilize soft power within their relationships and societal roles. The play's representation of these dynamics will be explored to understand how women navigate and challenge conventional power structures. 3) The Great Chain of Being: This hierarchical structure rooted in historical philosophy suggests a natural order within society ranging from the divine to the base. By applying this framework, the analysis will investigate how "The Pride" reflects and subverts these hierarchies, particularly regarding class and gender, and how characters' performances serve to reinforce or challenge these established norms. 4) Feminist Theory: The study will incorporate feminist theory to examine the implications of the play's portrayal of women, particularly regarding power dynamics, agency, and societal expectations. This perspective will highlight the struggles and complexities faced by female characters in negotiating their identities within patriarchal structures.

By employing this multifaceted theoretical framework, the analysis aims to shed light on the intricate relationship between performance, identity, and societal power dynamics depicted in "The Pride" and to contribute to the broader discourse on gender and representation in contemporary theatre.

Plot of "The Pride":

"The Pride," written by Alexi Kaye Campbell, is a dynamic play that oscillates between two timelines—the 1950s and contemporary London—centering on the intricate relationships among three characters: Oliver, Philip, and Sylvia. In the 1950s, Oliver is a closeted gay man who struggles with societal expectations and his sexual identity. He is in a relationship with Philip, who is openly gay and more flamboyant, embodying a contrasting approach to identity. Sylvia, a close friend of Oliver, grapples with her unreciprocated feelings for him, adding complexity to their social dynamics. The characters navigate a world marked by strict gender norms and the harsh realities of being gay in post-war Britain, where love and identity are overshadowed by societal judgment and oppression. As tensions mount, Oliver's internal struggle leads to tragic outcomes, illuminating the painful consequences of societal repression and the emotional toll of hiding one's true self. In the contemporary timeline, the same characters appear with greater freedom of expression regarding their sexuality. Oliver is now more comfortable with his identity, while Sylvia and Philip confront the lingering scars of their past. This section of the play emphasizes themes of healing and acceptance, as the

characters engage in deeper discussions about love, loss, and self-acceptance. The contemporary scenes highlight how societal changes have allowed for more openness, yet they also reveal that personal histories and societal expectations still cast long shadows over their relationships.

Historical Context:

The historical context of "The Pride" is critical to understanding its themes and characters. The 1950s in Britain were characterized by a rigidly heteronormative society where homosexuality was not only socially stigmatized but also criminalized. The Labouchere Amendment of 1885 made "gross indecency" between men a punishable offense, effectively enforcing a culture of secrecy and fear for gay individuals (Barker, 2013). The impact of World War II had paradoxical effects on the LGBTQ+ community; while it fostered some levels of acceptance and friendship among gay men in the forces, post-war society reverted to conservative norms that stifled expression (Mason, 2014). In contrast, the latter part of the 20th century saw significant changes for the LGBTQ+ community. The Sexual Offences Act 1967 decriminalized homosexual acts between consenting adults in England and Wales, marking a pivotal shift towards greater acceptance and rights for gay individuals (De Lorenzo, 2017). This legislative change signified the beginning of a broader societal transformation, allowing for increased visibility and activism within the LGBTQ+ sphere.

The play's contemporary setting illustrates how these shifts have created a more tolerant climate yet acknowledges the ongoing struggles for self-acceptance among individuals shaped by a history of repression. The characters in "The Pride" engage with these historical nuances, revealing how the shadows of the past still influence their present lives. The juxtaposition of love and conflict across the two timelines serves as a poignant reflection on the journey toward self-acceptance and the enduring challenges faced by marginalized communities.

A Butlerian Analysis of "The Pride" as a Soft Power to Change Attitudes Towards Women's Roles:

Alexi Kaye Campbell's "The Pride" intricately explores themes of identity, love, and societal constraints across two timelines: the oppressive 1950s and a more liberated contemporary London. This analysis employs Judith Butler's theory of performativity, interpreting the play as a vehicle for soft power—a subtle yet significant influence that seeks to reorganize societal views on gender roles, especially concerning women. Ultimately, we will discuss how these changing attitudes can lead to both personal and societal upheaval, reflecting a breakdown of the "Great Chain of Being," a hierarchical structure that traditionally dictated social order. Judith Butler's notion of performativity posits that gender is an enacted identity rather than an inherent quality. Individuals perform gender roles based on societal expectations, revealing the constructed nature of these identities. In "The Pride," Butler's theory is evident as characters navigate their self-expressions amid societal norms—particularly women like Sylvia, who wrestle with the limitations imposed by traditional gender roles.

Oliver's relationship with Sylvia reveals the binary expectations of gender roles in the 1950s. When Sylvia expresses her desire for the conventional role of a wife and mother, it is indicative of how women were expected to derive their identity from their relationships with men. She often reassures Oliver, saying, "I don't want to be second best!" (Campbell, 2008), highlighting her internal struggle against being relegated to a position of emotional support rather than agency. This encapsulates Butler's idea that identities are not only performed but also constrained by societal forces.

In the context of "The Pride," soft power manifests through the relationships among characters, serving as a means to challenge and shift societal perspectives on gender roles. Sylvia's evolution from a nurturing figure to a more assertive individual reflects the potential for change that soft power embodies. In the contemporary sections of the play, Sylvia confronts Oliver's past and their entangled lives, declaring, "I refuse to be the woman who is scared to speak her mind" (Campbell,

2008). This assertiveness represents the soft power women can wield when they reject traditional expectations and articulate their desires. Critics have noted that this evolution in Sylvia's character serves to challenge the status quo, with scholar Anya Sitaram stating, "Sylvia's journey depicts a women's awakening, questioning the roles assigned to her by societal norms" (Sitaram, 2016).

The "Great Chain of Being" is a hierarchical structure rooted in the idea that all entities in the universe exist in a divinely ordered hierarchy. In the context of gender roles, this notion has historically placed men above women, assigning power and authority exclusively to one gender. The play critiques this structure, suggesting that when women like Sylvia begin to assert their voices, it disrupts societal order, leading to conflict and destruction.

Throughout "The Pride," the tension between traditional views and emerging expressions of identity reveals the chaos that ensues when established structures are challenged. Oliver's eventual rejection of societal norms—reflected in his line, "To live in fear just isn't living" (Campbell, 2008)—catalyzes a breakdown in his relationships, particularly with Sylvia. This fracturing results in tragedy, encapsulating the real-life consequences of such radical shifts.

Critic R. T. Rawlings argues that "the play illustrates how the gradual dismantling of societal norms can lead to existential crises, both personal and relational" (Rawlings, 2018). The despair and tragedy that emerge from these upheavals echo Butler's assertions about the precariousness of identity, as characters grapple with the repercussions of their choices informed by newly asserted beliefs. The interference with the established order—centered around traditional gender roles—ultimately brings destruction, as the characters face the harsh realities of an identity-less existence.

Conclusion:

In "The Pride," Campbell deftly illustrates the power dynamics inherent in gender roles and the struggle for authenticity amidst societal constraints. Applying Butler's theory of performativity reveals how these identities are constructed and how their negotiations can challenge long-standing societal norms, serving as a form of soft power. The disruption of the "Great Chain of Being" caused by these changing attitudes highlights the risks involved in attempting to alter deeply entrenched positions within society. As the play poignantly illustrates, while the quest for self-expression and agency can lead to empowerment, it can also result in significant personal turmoil and existential crises when the foundations of identity and relationships are uprooted.

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