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Being Gender/Doing Gender, in Alice Munro and Pedro Almadovar

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Graduate Program in Comparative Literature
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts
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Abstract

In this thesis, I compare the short stories, “Boys and Girls” and “The Albanian Virgin”, by Alice Munro, with two films, *La Mala Educación* and *La Piel Que Habito*, by Pedro Almodóvar. This comparison analyzes how these authors conceive gender as a doing and a performance, and as culturally constructed rather than biologically determined. My main theoretical framework is Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity as developed in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. In my first chapter, I compare “Boys and Girls” with *La Mala Educación*, and in the second chapter, I compare “The Albanian Virgin” with *La Piel Que Habito*, to illustrate the multiple ways in which gender is constructed according to Munro and Almodóvar. I argue that both Alice Munro and Pedro Almodóvar not only perceive gender as non-essential, but they also locate various possibilities of resistance through gender performance, drag, impersonation and masquerade.

Keywords

Alice Munro, Pedro Almodóvar, Judith Butler, Gender Performativity, Childhood Trauma, Gender Resistance, Drag, Masquerade

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to my incredible supervisor Professor Chris Roulston for her great advice, patience, and meticulousness. I would also like to thank my teacher Professor Cristina Caracchini and Sylvia Kontra, our graduate assistant, who has been kind and supportive from the moment I started my studies at Western University. I am also extremely grateful of my parents' support and love.

I thank my friends Pari and Gaby for always being there for me.

This thesis is dedicated to my awesome partner, Houshmand, and to my dogs, Johnny Depp and To-Be.

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Introduction

Simplicity and at the same time denial of that simplicity. Simplicity in order to talk about what is complex, about what happens in front of our eyes without us being able to appreciate at first glance what is extraordinary, bizarre, terrible, grotesque, and mysterious about it...Despite the cultural and geographic distance, I have always felt very close to Alice Munro's themes: the family and family relationships in a rural, provincial, or urban setting. And also, the desire, the need to escape from all that; always one thing and the opposite, without that meaning the slightest contradiction. ("Pedro Almodóvar on Adapting Alice Munro")

These are the words of Pedro Almodóvar, the Spanish director and screenwriter, admiring the work of Alice Munro, the renowned Canadian short story writer. Alice Munro is appreciated "for her spare and psychologically astute fiction that is deeply revealing of human nature" (Bosman). She has changed "the architecture of short stories" with her "subtle" style, writing about life often through portraying the lives of women and girls in rural Ontario, where she grew up (Bosman).

Pedro Almodóvar started his career as a director and screenwriter in the late 1970s; his films featured transvestites, transgender people, bondage, rape, and lots of drug use and sex. His stories blurred the lines between gay and straight, coerced and consensual, comedy and melodrama, the funny and the repulsive, high and low art. It was all delivered with a puzzling cheerfulness that made the movies far more transgressive than if their tone had been serious. (Max)

His films are an important part of a post-Francoist artistic movement called La Movida, an artistic movement that took place after the Franco Era. Most of this movement took place in Madrid “in Malasaña, a barrio of run-down warehouses and dingy clubs” (Max).

Munro and Almodóvar seem to be worlds apart, both in terms of their medium and their style. As shown in the opening quotation, however, Almodóvar greatly admires Munro. He explains his state of mind upon reading “Chance”, one of the stories in the short story collection, *Runaway*, he says: “I remember I was completely hooked with the part on the train, what happens on the train. I was very surprised by that section in that story, and I found it particularly cinematic” (Champagne and Champagne). He adapted this story and two more stories from the same collection, “Soon” and “Silent”, both of which feature the character of Juliet, Almodóvar shot his twentieth feature film, *Julieta*. Almodóvar continues to praise Munro, saying:

I love her...and I love her work, but once I decided my way, the feeling was almost as when you become independent from your family. Once I had chosen my path, I then had to remain faithful to my own path. I was not completely faithful to Munro, but even in the case when I changed [something] completely, I have a very strong link with her. (qtd. in Champagne and Champagne)

Munro’s *Runaway* is also physically shown in the film, *La Piel Que Habito* (*The Skin I Live In*) as one of the books Marilia sends Vera/Vincent by means of the dumbwaiter. The *Runaway* short story collection is filled with women who are trapped in convoluted situations, and who have been abandoned by their loved ones, highlighting the theme of loss.

Almodóvar and Munro both feature parts of themselves in their works. Many of Munro’s stories have been considered to be semi-autobiographical: “She writes of turkey gutting and fox farming, of trees felled in the Ontario wilderness, of harsh country schools and lingering

illnesses, of familiar violence and obscure shame, and above all, of the lives of girls and women” (Edemariam). The narrator of “Boys and Girls”, with a fox farmer father, echoes Munro’s childhood; Munro’s father was also a fox farmer in a small town in Southern Ontario. Almodóvar, in turn, attended Catholic boarding school, just like Ignacio and Enrique, and one of the priests used to sexually abuse the boys. As Almodóvar reminisces: “The act of kissing the priest’s ring filled [me] with repulsion; [I] could almost literally see their hands dirtied with sperm” (Max). Similar to the female narrator of the short story, “Boys and Girls”, Munro struggled with the imposed gender roles and the pressure of being ‘appropriate’: “I had a lot of conflict with [my mother], from the time I was a very young child, because she had an ideal of good behavior. She wanted her daughters to be successful, but also, she wanted us to be sexually very pure. And ladylike; being a lady was very important. She wanted me to shine in a way I was not prepared to” (Edemariam). Munro’s short stories are “capacious” and concise and they are as extensive as novels (Hollinghurst).

This thesis is a comparative study of Pedro Almodóvar’s two films, *La Mala Educación* (2004) and *La Piel Que Habito* (2013), and Alice Munro’s two short stories, “Boys and Girls” (1968) and “The Albanian Virgin” (1994). *La Mala Educación* is Almodóvar’s fourteenth feature film, and encompasses the themes of child abuse by the Spanish Catholic church, this patriarchal church functioning as the locus of trauma and of multiple identities. Within this context, Almodóvar creates a film within film, and a narrative of gender ambiguity and murder. *La Piel Que Habito* is Almodóvar’s seventeenth film. The main themes of the film are transition and transgenderism, gender resistance and “gender doing” *versus* gender essence, and an exploration of the multiple layers of human identity within a misogynistic society. Munro’s “Boys and Girls” was published in the short story collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*. The

main themes of this story are gender roles and the imposition of gender roles, the inevitability of the process of gendering by cultural and societal rules, and childhood trauma. “The Albanian Virgin”, which was published within the short story collection, *Open Secrets*, focuses on the themes of transitioning and transgenderism, gender ambiguity, and the possibility of resistance in difficult situations. I will analyze these works in the context of Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, illustrated in her seminal work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). I will argue that these works demonstrate the cultural construction of gender and its flux and fluidity as opposed to a fixed binary idea of gender.

As the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2013, Alice Munro is a renowned author, and numerous studies have been done of her work. However, I have not come across a critique focused on her specific view of gender as a social and cultural construct, and as a precarious and mutable state. In contrast, Pedro Almodóvar has always been known for challenging the hegemonic system of gender and sexuality, and for promoting a transitory and shifting approach to these categories. These authors are perfect for this study because of their different ways of critiquing gender, and, as importantly, because of the different media each creator has used: the short story and film.

Both Munro and Almodóvar use a nonlinear form of narration in the works I will be discussing. *The Bad Education (La Mala Educación)*, “The Albanian Virgin”, and (*The Skin I Live In*) *La Piel Que Habito* have more than two narrators. “Boys and Girls” is narrated by just one person, but it also has another layer. The unnamed female narrator of the story is an adult woman reminiscing about the events of one year in her childhood. Therefore, the story is sometimes narrated by her and sometimes by her young preadolescent persona. In all of these works, there are multiple narrators with different points of view and different perspectives on the

events that take place. This multiplicity corresponds to the underlying presence of multiple identities and to the presence of multiple selves within the context of these works.

However, Munro's and Almodóvar's methods are quite different. Munro tends to be subtle and understated; she deliberately leaves some crucial details untold. For instance, in "The Albanian Virgin", Claire's young clerks tell her, "[t]here's something I ought to tell you about that woman" (Munro, *Open Secrets* 124), meaning Charlotte. The clerk never gets the chance to tell Claire anything, but the reader must infer from the end of the story that the clerk was probably going to say something about Charlotte's back story. And it is again inferred that Gjurdhi/The Franciscan has robbed the notary, because Gjurdhi goes to get Charlotte out of the hospital with a lot of money, and the notary had been robbed the night before (Munro, *Open Secrets* 126). Munro also writes retrospectively. Many of her stories have first person narrators who allow the reader to gain access to their thoughts and feelings; she creates an intimate space for the reader to connect with the characters and to analyze them through their own words. In contrast, Almodóvar is more of an extravagant and flashy author. He creates distance between the audience and the characters. His use of multiple personae and lack of interiority contributes to a less intimate experience. In *La Mala Educación* for instance, Almodóvar continues the storyline after the film is over, using newspaper as windows on the door, when the scene is frozen on Enrique. Through this extradiegetic method, he imposes his presence on the viewer and interrupts the diegetic flow of the film.

The different methods of these authors fit well into the framework of this thesis. Munro's introspective eye within a short narrative space, the 18 pages of "Boys and Girls" and the 48 pages of "The Albanian Virgin", provides the reader with the inner world of the characters and their struggle with imposed gender roles/rules, with insight into the character's traumatic

experiences and with their ways of dealing with and resisting their difficult circumstances.

Almodóvar, in contrast, uses cinematic tools, music, dissolve, framing, voice-over, the overlap of dream and reality, allusions to other works, etc., to create a world where characters have multiple sexualities and gender identities, where there are multiple versions of one story and little fixity and certainty.

In the first chapter, I will compare Munro's "Boys and Girls" with Almodóvar's *La Mala Educación*, since they both demonstrate the imposition of strict gender roles and the traditional rules of their society on young persons. "Boys and Girls" is set in southern Ontario in the 1940s. This small society is very traditional and has strict rules concerning gender propriety and gender spaces. The household is run according to patriarchal traditions, and there are expected forms of behavior that are supposed to be followed upon reaching puberty. Similarly, *La Mala Educación* portrays the very patriarchal and rigid society of Franco's Spain. The administrators of the Catholic boarding school have complete authority and control over the boys. They punish homosexual eroticism while also sexually abusing the boys. While Almodóvar demonstrates the hypocrisy and abuse of the patriarchal Catholic Church, Munro exposes the abuse and hypocrisy of the patriarchal system in rural Ontario. This is represented through the narrator's realization of what lies behind her father's fox farm when she witnesses the heartless killing of the horses which are to be fed to the foxes.

The reason for comparing *La Piel Que Habito* with "The Albanian Virgin" is more thematic than cultural. In both works, two characters, Charlotte/Lottar and Vincent/Vera, are forced to shift their gender identity. Both characters undergo a gender change; Vincent's transition to Vera is literal, as he undergoes an involuntary Sexy Reassignment Surgery in the hands of Dr. Ledgard; Charlotte's transition is symbolic, as she is forced to 'become' a virgin,

which in Albanian Culture means a woman who forsakes her sexuality and ‘becomes’ a man. Both works illustrate gender resistance in complex and bizarre scenarios.

I have chosen Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, as it best illustrates the functioning of gender in my corpus. Butler argues that gender is not an independent essentiality; we as gendered beings only act out our genders. According to Butler, gender traits and our perception of the differences between male and female are socially constructed and there is nothing inherently natural about them. The anticipated obviousness of gender as a natural and biological fact can facilitate baseless judgments and impose values on how the female and male body should behave and what each gender should desire. So as soon as the body is assigned as male or female, there is an alibi. Biological sex serves to impose ideas about gender and sexual orientation.

As illustrated in *Gender Trouble*, Butler challenges and disrupts the idea of gender as an essential part of the self. There is no self or subject that precedes gender; Butler believes that the “regulatory regimes” produce gendered subjects and naturalize them through the same system. Gender is a construct, a result of culture, law and hegemonic regulatory systems. Gender is performative as it is shaped through deed, performance and repetition. Therefore, the ‘truth’ of gender is not an internal essentiality; gender is a product of the subject’s bodily acts of repetition within a cultural context that seeks to sell gender as natural and essential. As Butler argues, “[g]ender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 34). Gender is doing, a performance that needs a doer, but to think that the doer precedes the deed is an illusion. The doer or the subject itself is produced through doing, through performance. According to Butler: “That the gendered body is

performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 185).

Overall, gender roles, codes and attributes, normative masculinity and femininity, are constructed performatively and through “sustained social performances” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 192) in a cultural context that renders them natural, original and essential. The subject or the doer is ‘doing’ the gender in this context, repeats it and naturalizes it in a heteronormative and phallogentric system that depends on a coherent and essential ‘true’ gender. The self develops a ‘gender mold’ through the cultural process of ‘gendering’. This development proceeds by repeating the normative acts and performances that are already present in the background while the process of gendering is taking place.

Butler’s theory of gender performativity is well suited for my comparative analysis. Munro and Almodóvar both maintain the non-essentiality of gender and the construction of gender as a cultural and hegemonic regulatory system. “Boys and Girls” is Munro’s tale of the process of gendering a preadolescent girl through the imposition of gender rules. Munro reveals the process of gendering to be inevitable and unavoidable, although as we shall see, Munro also acknowledges the possibility of resistance. Munro highlights the important role of repetition and gender rituals in the construction of gender. In *La Mala Educación*, Almodóvar pinpoints the patriarchal and hegemonic system of the Catholic Church as a tyrannical “regulatory system”, which not only controls the sexual desire of a generation of young boys, but also traumatizes them permanently. He also undermines the naturalness of the normative system of gender by introducing characters that do not fit into the normative binary system of gender and sexuality. Butler's theory helps to foreground how Almodóvar exposes the fictive nature of the normative construction of gender and sexuality. In *La Piel Que Habito*, Almodóvar, in line with Butler’s

theory of performativity, depicts gender as a doing and a performance. Dr. Ledgard does a sex reassignment surgery on Vincent, as a revenge for Vincent's raping of Dr. Ledgard's daughter, and 'turns' Vincent into Vera. Vera/Vincent then performs femininity as an act of resistance against Dr. Ledgard's tyranny. His/her performance of gender confuses the viewers, deceives his/her captor, and exposes the precariousness of gender constructions. Almodóvar showcases "new forms of gendering" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* xii) by making the processes of recognition and gendering very difficult and uncertain. This film is more about the transitory position of all genders. Similarly, Munro's "The Albanian Virgin" is concerned with the ephemerality of gender. In line with Butler's theory of gender performativity, Munro depicts gender as mere imitation. Munro parodies culturally bound gender rituals and questions the essentiality of gender. Both works exhibit the potentiality of gender crossing as a form of resistance--even if it is imposed--and as a way of undermining the hegemonic system of the gender binary.

As mentioned earlier, according to Butler, gender is a form of repetitive 'doing'. But this does not mean that you can wake up one morning and choose to do a certain gender. In Butler's own words, "[g]ender is... a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (*Gender Trouble* 44). The regulatory systems often conceal themselves behind the "contingent acts" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 45) that produce the fiction of the naturality of gender performances. The doing of gender happens in an already constructed frame of gender significations; the doing of gender is a propagation of these significations. There is no essential "ground" for this repetitive doing; instead, the gendered individual legitimizes the system by the performance of gender within the hegemonic system that has constructed the individual. Butler calls this

repetition a “compulsion” (*Gender Trouble* 198) and not a choice, since acceptable gender performances are subtly regulated in a mandatory system of illusory grounds and origins.

Although Butler argues that the process of gendering is inevitable, she acknowledges that there is room for resistance. Drag is one potential locus of resistance. Butler suggests that while drag is not necessarily subversive, it has the potential to expose the imitative nature of gender. By parodying gender traits and characteristics, drag shows that there is no origin of gender. Drag performs gender self-consciously in a way that reveals gender to be the imitation of imitation. In Butler’s own words, “[d]rag is an example that is meant to establish that ‘reality’ is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be. The purpose of the example is to expose the tenuousness of gender ‘reality’” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* xxv).

By parodying the dramatic act of gender performance, drag exposes the fiction of an essential and internal gender essence, so that, “[i]n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself, as well as its contingency” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 187). Drag also exposes the arbitrary connection between sex and gender. A drag queen imitates the female gender to which their biological sex does not conform. This reveals the masquerade of the naturality of gender and challenges the unity of sex/gender continuum. I believe that both Munro and Almodóvar 'perform' Butler’s theory of gender performativity in their work. Both reject gender as an essence and show it as a form of doing, of repetition, and as a possible locus of resistance.

Chapter 1

1. (Un)Becoming: Learning Gender in Alice Munro's "Boys and Girls" and Pedro Almodóvar's *La Mala Educación*

In this chapter, Munro's "Boys and Girls" and Almodóvar's *La Mala Educación* will be analyzed and compared. Both works exhibit the pressure of strict gender roles on preadolescent persons in traditional and patriarchal societies. The primary base of this comparison is to explore the effects of heteronormativity, patriarchy and oppressive rules on gendering and identity formation on persons at a young age. Furthermore, at the heart of both works are traumatic experiences that affect the characters, alter their views, and even determine their fates. The presence of childhood trauma and its effects on the protagonists as children and as adults will be discussed. Also, the notion of surrender and the (im)possibility of survival will be investigated in both works. The narrative and visual styles of these two authors will also be explored in order to show their effect on readers and viewers. Both works will also be studied in the context of Judith Butler's theory of gender Performativity.

In Alice Munro's work, the title of the short story is plain and straightforward; "Boys and Girls". It is clearly pointing to the binary gender roles and the division between male and female from a young age. The title of Pedro Almodóvar's film, *The Bad Education*, however, is equivocal. The one obvious meaning is the corrupt Catholic Church, which instead of protecting the boys, violates them; and the educator, Padre Manolo, is the corruptor. The other meaning might be the heteronormative rules and teachings of society that makes homosexual desire taboo and sinful. These two sorts of 'bad education' ruin Ignacio, the sexually abused boy in the film, hand in hand.

1.1. Chests with Airholes: Becoming a Girl in Alice Munro's Short Story, "Boys and Girls"

In "Penning the Bodies: The Construction of Gendered Subjects in Alice Munro's 'Boys and Girls'", Marlene Goldman states that it is "a narrative which highlights the almost invisible societal forces which shape children, in this case, the narrator and her brother Laird, into gendered adults" (62). The short story, "Boys and Girls", was first published in 1964 and then as part of the short story collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, in 1968. The narrator of the story is an 11-year old preadolescent girl who is caught in a world of social and cultural gender roles that force her into 'becoming' a girl. The un-named protagonist/narrator of the story lives with her parents and her little brother Laird. The father is a fox fur farmer and the mother is a housewife. Throughout the story she expresses her love and admiration for her father and his line of work. In contrast, she talks about her mother scornfully and in an unkind light. She does not respect her mother and her damp apron and household preoccupations. Also, the mother is the main source of pressure for her to 'become' a girl. The narrator spends most of her day with her father and helps him around the fox farm. The narration captures the protagonist around the time when girls are no longer allowed to be tomboys and the process of 'becoming a girl' should be wrapped up. This section will analyze the themes of gender roles and the imposition of gender roles on the unnamed female narrator. It will show how Munro perceives gender roles as culturally and socially established, and how she depicts the course of 'becoming' a gender as inevitable and inescapable. Munro's representation of gender is well illustrated by Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which Butler outlines in her seminal work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990).

I will argue that Munro also locates a 'feminine' resistance in the protagonist; this resistance is only activated when the narrator becomes aware of the hypocrisy and cruelty of the

patriarchal order that rules the world around her. Furthermore, I will analyze how Munro depicts preadolescence as a gender ‘free zone’ for girls, where a sort of gender queerness is allowed and girls can be tomboys and cross gender boundaries without creating any concerns. In this light, I will liken the time when gender roles are supposed to be obeyed as an imposed transgenderism, using the skinning of the foxes as a metaphor for what is effectively an involuntary sex reassignment surgery.

1.1.1. The Imposition of Gender Roles/Rules

The narrator of the short story, “Boys and Girls” is an unnamed girl on the verge of ‘becoming’ or rather ‘being coerced into becoming’ a girl. She is pulled by the social and cultural gender roles and normative definitions of gender into a feminine/female mold. Social determinism has a strong presence in the atmosphere of this story; Munro’s gloomy and helpless ambiance allegorizes the young girl’s crisis, so that finding her gender identity is represented as a lost battle.

The story starts with these words: “[m]y father was a fox farmer. That is, he raised silver foxes, in pens; and in the fall and early winter, when their fur was prime, he killed them and skinned them and sold their pelts to the Hudson’s Bay Company or the Montreal Fur Traders” (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 111). Munro sets up the whole story with this first paragraph. The father is the ruler; he raises the foxes, kills them, and skins them. Yes, the father is a fox fur farmer but these words are not just about his occupation. The father is the patriarchy, the controlling force behind everyone’s fate, the girl’s, and the foxes’; I will return to this. The first sentence has “father”, and “kill, and “skin” in it. The narrator talks about how her father’s job provides them with “heroic calendars”, which are green against the cold and “treacherous” life they have (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 111). Her brother and she used to watch their

father skin the foxes. The narrator strips the foxes of their beauty and life as she describes the father's skinning activity. They have “pointed, malevolent faces” and they are “drawn exquisitely sharp in pure hostility” (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 115).

The narrator makes up stories when lying in bed before falling asleep. In these stories, she is a hero who rescues the villagers from bombed buildings, shoots rabid wolves and rides a horse victoriously like a king. These stories are all about “courage, boldness, self-sacrifice” (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 113); an imaginary world, where she can be whatever she chooses. She is a king in her dreams, a place where she can imagine she is a male person. Munro shows how the arbitrary gender rules can permeate one's psyche even when one is not aware of them.

Throughout the story, the narrator identifies with the foxes despite her attempt not to feel for them. She is just like the foxes, which are “[a]live...[inhabiting] a world [her] father made for them” (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 114). Like the foxes, she is trapped in a world that patriarchal society has fashioned for her. However, right until the ending of the story, she strives to keep her bond with her father and to keep her distance from her mother. Her mother does not belong to her father's and her world; she thinks of her mother as an intruder in their work place. On one occasion when her mother comes to the workshop looking for her, she describes her mother as an irrelevant stranger; “[s]he looked out of place, with her bare lumpy legs, not touched by the sun, her apron still on and damp across the stomach from the supper dishes” (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 116). For her, the mother is an extension of the gloomy and boring house that represents feminine, domestic space: “It seemed to me that work in the house was endless, dreary and peculiarly depressing; work done out of doors, and in my father's service, was ritualistically important” (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 117).

More importantly, she considers her mother to be the force that pulls her into the trap of being a girl. She is the “enemy” who is “plotting” to make her stay inside the house and away from the father and ‘their’ world (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 118). As time passes, she increasingly feels the pressure to act in a certain way and be a certain sort of person:

The word girl had formerly seemed to me innocent and unburdened, like the word child; now it appeared that it was no such thing. A girl was not, as I had supposed, simply what I was; it was what I had to become. It was a definition, always touched with emphasis, with reproach and disappointment. Also, it was a joke on me. (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 119)

These lines echo Butler’s analysis of gender, in that, in line with Simon de Beauvoir’s famous claim that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 283), gender is not a form of ‘being’, but rather of ‘becoming’. Butler emphasizes the ‘process’ of gendering rather than the being of gender. She problematizes the assumed natural link between one’s sex and one’s gender. This assumed naturalized relationship takes it for granted that a female body shows ‘feminine’ characteristics and desires. Here the narrator senses a controversy between what she thought she was, a girl, and who she feels she must become, which is a restrictive “definition”. As she gets closer to puberty, she realizes that she should ‘become’ a girl, something she associates with “reproach” and “disappointment” (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 119).

At first, the narrator keeps disobeying and interrupting the rules; in order to “keep herself free”, she rebels by acting unladylike, “slamming doors” and “sitting awkwardly” (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 119). But this freedom does not last for long. The changes occur both inside and outside. As the outside pressure becomes more apparent and powerful, the narrator increasingly realizes the ugliness of the world ruled by the patriarchal order. Ironically,

it is her father's job, the one that she admired so much, that drives her away from him. It is customary for them to feed the foxes with horsemeat. The father brings in old and 'useless' horses and slaughters them whenever necessary (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 118). Sometimes the horses stay with them and the narrator gets used to them. This time, they have two horses, one male named Mack and one female named Flora. On the day that the father is supposed to kill Mack, the narrator asks if it is time, and Henry the handyman's reaction is both chilling for the reader and eye opening for the narrator: "Henry didn't answer me. Instead he started to sing in a high, trembly, mocking-sorrowful voice, Oh, there's no more work, for poor Uncle Ned, he's gone where the good darkies go" (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 120). Here Munro draws a connection between the patriarchal systems of slavery and capitalism, the exploitation of animals, and the entrapment of women in a gendered society. When the narrator witnesses how her father and Henry kill Mack cruelly and in a disturbingly nonchalant, almost amused, manner, something changes in her. This time she cannot and does not want to demonize what her father kills; the bond that connected her to her father breaks. Munro beautifully juxtaposes the cruel rules of the patriarchy with the girl's realization of the truth concerning the world governed and fashioned by her father. This realization amounts to her trying to help Flora, the female horse, to escape; even if this is just for an afternoon, and even if Flora cannot escape from her death. The narrator disobeys the father and leaves the padlock open: "I had never disobeyed my father before, and I could not understand why I had done it" (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 125).

The narrator's surrender to 'becoming' a girl is demonstrated with a further metaphor; the themes of the nighttime stories she makes up begin to change; now she is a girl in need of rescuing: "[a] story might start off in the old way, with a spectacular danger, a fire or wild

animals, and for a while I might rescue people; then things would change around, and instead, somebody would be rescuing me” (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 126). The story ends with the narrator in tears and ashamed of her decision to help Flora’s unsuccessful escape:

“‘[s]he’s only a girl,’ [her father] said. I didn’t protest that, even in my heart. Maybe it was true” (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 127).

1.1.2. Gendered Spaces and gender Rituals

The gender segregation in this story is demonstrated not only by traits and characteristics but also by gendered spaces. When the narrator is still a tomboy and has not yet succumbed to ‘becoming’ a girl, she feels extremely territorial about her father and her space, which is the fox fur workshop. She feels her mother does not belong there, and that the mother is an intruder: “it was an odd thing to see my mother down at the barn. She did not often come out of the house unless it was to do something, hang out the wash or dig potatoes in the garden” (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 116). There is also a stark contrast between the role and place of the woman and the role and place of the man in the household. The woman in the household, the mother, rarely comes outside and always works inside the house, whereas the man, the father, is always working outside. Because of this visible divide in the different work of the man and the woman and the narrator working with her father instead of her mother, this once again solidifies the idea that the narrator has not yet ‘become’ a girl.

In the context of the story, working inside the house seems to be a form of confinement that the narrator tries to escape; whereas working outside has value. Therefore, the narrator at first believes that she needs to be outside working with her father and not trapped inside the house. On several occasions, she expresses her disgust at the housewife’s job, which is perceived as female territory. The narrator does not fear the outside world: “[w]e were not afraid of outside

though this was the time of year when snowdrifts curled around our house like sleeping whales and the wind harassed us all night, coming up from the buried fields, the frozen swamp, with its old bugbear chorus of threats and misery” (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 112). Instead, she thinks of the old corner with the old household junk as scary and worthless. She is afraid of the inside; she connects the inside to the imposed gender roles of femininity. The inside also represents a confined space without any possibilities. There is no adventure in the inside, no new discoveries, or experiences. The inside is a place for old and discarded things that should remain in the dark. Furthermore, the old scary corner can be a metaphor for the social rules and conventions that are looming on the female narrator. She can have her rebellion and temporarily escape the old system of gender roles, but they are not going away. Sooner or later, she has to face the old corner and she knows it deep inside.

According to Butler’s theory of gender performativity, gender is a performance that constructs itself through repetition. The agency of the subject is not discredited, but the subject itself cannot be separated from the action and the performance. So, it is safe to say that, according to Butler, gender formation is ritualistic, a result of “the effects of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* xxxi). Practice entails repetition; these repetitions become ritualized. In Munro’s story, in order for the narrator to ‘become’ a girl, she forsakes her gender-neutral rituals and creates new and ‘gender-appropriate’ rituals. Butler writes that “repetition is bound to persist as the mechanism of the cultural reproduction of identities” (*Gender Trouble* 44). The narrator’s gender identity here is “bound” to repeated ‘girlish’ rituals that she succumbs to repeating.

In the beginning of the story, Munro depicts the children’s bedroom as a gender-neutral space. Before falling asleep, the narrator and his brother Laird sing together and have gender-

neutral rituals. There are no gender-coded paraphernalia and their beds and spaces seem quite alike. Towards the end of the story, however, the narrator begins to add ‘female’ objects like pink kerchiefs to her space. Their gender-neutral rituals cease to exist too; one night, Laird begins to make fun of his sister’s singing voice and her song of choice; they never sing together from that point on. In contrast, the little brother seems to have no transitional crisis. Although the reader sees Laird only through the eyes of the narrator, who is an adult woman reminiscing about her transition to becoming a fully gendered subject, Laird seems to seamlessly fit into his gendered being. One explanation for this is that Laird himself is an inheritor of patriarchal law. As the narrator feels hopeless and without any control over her choices and identity, Laird gains increasing amounts of control and power. He is a ‘normal’ male subject who does not question or disrupt gendered society; he plays by its rules and gains from it too. He does not have to change or acquire new rituals. His ‘being’ is the canonical being. His name indicates his authorized position too; Laird means lord in Scottish Language, a man with power and authority. But the female narrator is nameless; she does not inherit anything by birth, she is “just a girl” (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 127).

1.1.3. Feminine Consciousness

Butler argues not only that gender is a social and cultural construct, but also that it is perceived as tied to sex. According to Butler, gender identity is forever postponed, so that there is no time when a gender fully ‘is’. The “being of gender” is not an essentiality but an outcome. Social and cultural norms impose themselves as the truths of gender and assert their dominion by self-habitation. Munro’s idea of gender identity echoes Butler’s, as both take into account the effect of “a phallogocentric language” on the formation and representation of “the feminine” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* xxxii). Butler also locates how “the construction of the category of

women as a coherent and stable subject” serves the ideals of a heteronormative and phallogentric society (*Gender Trouble* 7). Furthermore, Butler firmly declares that “whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex” (*Gender Trouble* 8). While Munro supports gender construction, she does acknowledge the presence of a feminine consciousness. Flora’s alertness, for example, metaphorically brings about the girl’s understanding of the truth about her father’s world: “I did not have any great feeling of horror and opposition, such as a city child might have had; I was too used to seeing the death of animals as a necessity by which we lived. Yet I felt a little ashamed, and there was a new wariness, a sense of holding-off, in my attitude to my father and his work” (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 124). The narrator gradually becomes aware of the forced path of ‘becoming’ a woman. Also, in line with Butler, Munro shows the performance of gender to be involuntary. As if what the narrator performs is a result of imposed gender roles, subtle or articulated, which pushes her into acting a certain way.

1.1.4. Preadolescences/ Gender Queerness

In “Boys and Girls”, there is a power assigned to pre-adolescent girls. In Munro’s genderqueer spatiality, the girl is allowed to act like a boy, dress like a boy, to be unladylike and have boyish interests such as playing soccer in the muds. However, in this gender-gray area, these masculine interests, traits, and behaviors do not alarm either society or parents. Unlike boys, who are supposed to be boys from the beginning, girls can wear trousers and cross the gender line, but not forever. This story catches the protagonist at this critical temporal point. She feels the looming invisible ropes of gender roles pulling her; she feels under attack. She sees her mother as the enemy, as someone who pulls her into the tedious miserable life of girlhood: “[a]s soon as I was done I ran out of the house, trying to get out of earshot before my mother thought

of what she wanted me to do next ... I heard my mother saying, ‘Wait till Laird gets a little bigger, then you’ll have a real help’” (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 117). By saying this, the narrator’s mother devalues what the narrator has been doing as a “help” to her father. At the same time, she is reinforcing the gender divide that is supposed to be practiced by the female narrator and her brother. In this gendered naturalized system, it neither matters whether the narrator loves working for her father, nor what the narrator thinks of her work; her help is not “real”. Furthermore, it is assumed that Laird will be “a real help” not because he has shown any interest or promise; it is simply because he is a boy (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 117).

Although the narrator’s mother is the main incarnation of what the narrator should become, there is another source of anxiety and a constant reminder of the narrator’s gendered place in the household; Henry the hired man. He is coarse and unpleasant and does not overlook any opportunity to remind the protagonist of her gendered and social status. He teases her with the fox carcasses and threatens her: “[o]ne time the hired man, Henry Bailey, had taken a swipe at me with [the sack of the fox’s carcasses] saying, “Christmas present!” (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 111). The female narrator has the lowest status in the power pyramid of this household and Henry the hired man knows this. Henry himself works for this family and has little power in its patriarchal structure. He cannot disrespect the narrator’s father or mother. Laird is young but he is a boy and soon he will be as powerful as his father, and have a higher status than his mother, his sister or Henry. The only person whom Henry can pick on and feel semi-superior to is the female narrator.

1.1.5. Transgenderism/Imposed SRS

When the narrator talks about the slippery naked bodies of foxes that should be buried in the dump, she may also be talking about herself and how she feels. Munro again describes the

process of “killing, skinning”, and it is unusual to witness a 10-year-old girl talking about pelting so nonchalantly: “removing the little clotted webs of blood vessels, the bubbles of fat; the smell of blood and animal fat, with the strong primitive odor of the fox itself, penetrated all parts of the house”. She goes on to describe the gruesome process of pelting. While these images are disturbingly unsettling, they do not seem to bother her; “I found it reassuring, seasonal, like pine needles and oranges” (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 112). Here, she likens the process of pelting to the pleasantness and warmth of Christmas; it is ceremonial and “reassuring” and it happens periodically. Pelting has become a ritual for the narrator. She is accustomed to it and feels comfortable around it, because this ritual connects her to her father; it is their ‘bonding act’. Pelting is a part of her identity construction as her father's daughter, rather than as a ‘feminine’ subject. This happens before she is forced to be ‘skinned’, metaphorically, and turned into a naturalized gendered subject.

In another scene, she describes the life situation of the foxes, what they do in winter and how they breed. “[There was a] chest with airholes, where they slept and stayed in winter and had their young” (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 114). There is a clear parallel between the foxes’ living conditions and those of the narrator. Just as the foxes are confined in chests with only airholes for breathing, barely enough to survive, the narrator will be confined by restrictive gender roles and normativity. The excessive description of the foxes’ kennels is indicative of the feeling of entrapment that scares and at the same time subdues the narrator. Ostensibly, she admires her father for his inventiveness, in his career as a trapper. But this admiration is also a façade for what she really feels; she gradually becomes conscious of the foxes’, and of her own, terror.

In this sense, the process of skinning and pelting the foxes can be read as an involuntary form of sex reassignment surgery. Just like the foxes, the female narrator of the story does not have a choice. She is trapped in figurative boxes and must ‘become’ a girl. Her tomboy behavior is no longer tolerated and she is expected to change her manners, rituals and body in a way that echoes unwanted sex reassignment surgery: “[m]y father removed the pelt inside-out from the body of the fox, which looked surprisingly small, mean and rat-like, deprived of its arrogant weight of fur. The naked, slippery bodies were collected in a sack and buried at the dump” (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 111). The narrator’s gendered skin is also figuratively becoming ‘inside-out’. As with Butler’s goal to “decenter [...] phallogocentrism and compulsory heterosexuality” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* xxxi), Munro creates a map of ‘compulsory femininity’. The narrator echoes the “bloody sack” handled by her father; she becomes an animal on which her father depends to survive. The narrator’s father’s livelihood depends on the foxes. But he needs his daughter on a deeper psychological level. He needs her daughter to consolidate his heteronormative masculinity. He needs the narrator to “be the phallus”, to be the “signifier of the desire of the Other and to appear as this signifier . . . to be the object, the Other of a (heterosexualized) masculine desire” (Butler 59). The bloody sack also resembles a castrated and ‘inside-out’ phallus. As Butler states: “[w]omen are said to ‘be’ the Phallus in the sense that they maintain the power to reflect or represent the ‘reality’ of the self-grounding postures of the masculine subject, a power which, if withdrawn, would break up the foundational illusions of the masculine subject position” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 61). In this way, the narrator’s embodying of the female gender consolidates her father’s illusory position of power. Metaphorically, he handles the narrator’s gender in the same way he handles his foxes and his phallic power.

Symbolically, the narrator becomes the altered phallus, a phallus who is ‘inside-out’ in a metaphorical and involuntary sex reassignment surgery.

This story happens exactly on the brink of girlhood. Throughout the story Munro illustrates how the protagonist is besieged with culturally imposed gender rules; her gender formation is a result of outer pressure and her own realization of the power structure of patriarchal society. At first, she has no sympathy for her mother and sees her as the enemy. Her father is her hero but in the end, she decides to ‘be’ a girl, to let Flora flee, although she knows that Flora ultimately cannot escape her fate. As with Flora, the narrator is bound to a certain fate. Although the story ends on a very sour and sad note, the narrator is now aware of and alert to her surroundings, as was Flora. Of equal importance, her imagination makes up stories before falling asleep and alludes to the ritual changes that occur as gender constraints submerge her. At first, she is a hero, then she is a fragile object who needs rescuing. In line with Butler’s theories of gender performativity, Munro effectively shows the power of repetition and rituals in forming gender. The story ends with the narrator’s complete defeat and acceptance of her fate as an involuntarily reassigned girl. Similarly, In *La Mala Educación*, the patriarchal rules of the Spanish Catholic Church defeat Ignacio.

1.2. “It Is Me”; The Impossibility of Recognition in Pedro Almodóvar’s *La Mala Educación*

In his essay, “Pedro Almodóvar and the New Politics of Spain”, Geoff Pingree states that *The Bad Education* is a prosopography, “a collective biography that reflects essential elements of Spain's consciousness as a country”, and argues that “the director’s past fictional characters have served to dramatize his different selves [and] his evolution as filmmaker” (Pingree 5). *The Bad Education* (*La Mala Educación*) is Pedro Almodóvar’s fourteenth film as a writer and director. It

was released in 2004 and received critical acclaim. This film is a pure Almodóvarian product with the usual burst of colors, kitsch, and campy characters. Two men who used to be lovers as young boys are reunited, as Ignacio (Gael García Bernal), a young actor looking for a part in a film, comes to Enrique (Fele Martínez), a film director who has writer's block. Ignacio brings a short story, "La Visita", which is based on their childhood together in a Catholic boarding school, as a possible script for Enrique's next film. The past is revealed through this script, which has multiple narrations and points of view, as well as several avatars, which unfold in a nonlinear fashion.

Transgression and transition are leitmotifs of Almodóvar's oeuvre. Through this, he approaches transgenderism as an equivocal and shifty process with no clean beginning and ending, thereby interrupting the binary idea of gender. This section will demonstrate the ways in which Almodóvar subverts normative views on gender and the patriarchal power structure in three separate sections. First, it will examine how he shows the difficulty and even impossibility of assigning gender identity; he does this by introducing mutable versions and layers of narration and characters. Secondly, it will discuss Almodóvar's portrayal of the patriarchal church as a locus of trauma that contributes to the downfall of Ignacio. Lastly, based on Butler's theory of gender performativity, it will discuss the fragility of the naturalized gendered subject.

A lot has happened in the trans and genderqueer movements since 2004 when Almodóvar made *La Mala Educación*. These movements are most visible and most prevalent in North America and Europe. An increasing number of young people now reject the gender binary system and identify as non-binary; they may identify as agender, pangender, trans man/woman, thirdgender, trigender, two-spirit, etc. However, even in 2017, the world is still more inclined to a gender binary system of male and female. For instance, a recent study shows that the

representation of LGBTQ characters in Hollywood has hardly improved since 2007 (Frank). Almodóvar has been portraying non-normative and queer characters for decades. He disrupts these deeply rooted normative concepts; he also rejects the hegemonic view that heterosexuality is the norm and makes no effort to disambiguate the gender and sexual orientation of most of his characters.

Butler acknowledges that Simone de Beauvoir also differentiated between sex and gender: “for Beauvoir, sex is immutably factic, but gender acquired, and whereas sex cannot be changed, or so she thought, gender is the variable cultural construction of sex, the myriad and open possibilities of cultural meaning occasioned by a sexed body” (152). Butler problematizes the assumed natural chain of sex-gender-desire. She does not accept male and female gender traits and behaviors as the natural and stable consequence of one’s biology. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), she urges the reader to question “what we take to be real” and to entertain the idea of gender as a “changeable and revisable reality” (xxiv). She calls the confusion of gender and sex “naïve”, a confusion that results in upholding an “internal coherence among sex, gender and desire” (*Gender Trouble* 29). She asserts that “whether as a naturalistic paradigm which establishes a causal continuity among sex, gender, and desire, or as an authentic-expressive paradigm in which some true self is said to be revealed simultaneously or successively in sex, gender, and desire, here ‘the old dream of symmetry,’ as Irigaray has called it, is presupposed, reified, and rationalized” (*Gender Trouble* 31). Butler theorizes how a mandatory system of heterosexuality depends on “gender as a binary relation”, which in its turn reinforces the assumed natural chain of “sex, gender and desire” (*Gender Trouble* 31). With his marginalized and non-normative characters, his use of parody and ironic situations, Almodóvar has also “denaturalized” the “presumed fixity of sex” and gender. (Butler 136)

Butler further adds that “the category of sex and the naturalized institution of heterosexuality are constructs, socially instituted and socially regulated fantasies or 'fetishes,' not natural categories, but political ones (categories that prove that recourse to the 'natural' in such contexts is always political)” (172). Almodóvar also questions the arbitrariness of heterosexuality as ‘natural’ and normal. In *La Mala Educación*, for example, almost all the characters are non-normative; there are male homosexuals, transsexuals and drag queens. Butler states that “the psychoanalytic notion of gender identification is constituted by a fantasy of a fantasy,” (*Gender Trouble* 180) so that there is no “original gender” (*Gender Trouble* 180).

Butler points to the “myth of originality” (*Gender Trouble* 187). She believes that gender “fashions itself as an imitation without an origin” (*Gender Trouble* 188), meaning there is no ‘original’ marker of gender; gender is constructed and reinforced through mere acts of imitating the imitations. Almodóvar exposes this “myth of originality” in *La Mala Educación*; not only is it impossible for the spectator to thoroughly understand and figure out the characters, but also the multiple points of view and narrations make the spectators question the possibility of a fixed ‘true’ chain of events. Almodóvar’s non-normative transgender characters do not fit into the clear definition of ‘living in the wrong body’; they are complex gender performers who choose their own gender and sexual personas.

Geoff Pingree argues that: “[w]hile *Bad Education* may be his [Almodóvar’s] most intimately playful and privately self-conscious film, it is also perhaps his most politically relevant . . . the film is noticeably informed by the cultures that it describes and that confine the body in a heteronormative critique” (qtd. in Pérez-Vides and Carrasco-Carrasco 24). Almodóvar exposes the constraints of heteronormativity, in particular by showing the corruption of the Church which, in Franco's era, was a hegemonic institution in Spain. The viewers see the

vulnerability of young boys caught in a system from which they have no escape. The Catholic Church of Spain supported the civil war that General Franco declared finished in 1939. The Catholic Church “blessed the Nationalistic uprising as a crusade” and benefited from the Francoist regime after its triumph. It proposed the “return to Castilian centralism and the elimination of other ideologies”. Franco’s tyranny and the Spanish Catholic Church’s ‘spiritual hegemony’ reinforced and fortified one another. For instance, Catholic instruction became mandatory, and the Catholic Church was guaranteed “representation in press and radio”; in return, Franco “was granted the right to participate in the selection of bishops” (*Franco and the Catholic Church*).

1.2.1. The Impossibility of Recognition: Several Versions, Multiple Avatars

In *La Mala Educación*, Almodóvar actively misleads us by playing with our ‘natural’ instinct for categorizing people and putting them in ready-made boxes. The non-normative characters are placed in the foreground for the spectator’s judgment; at the same time, the multiple layers of narration, the use of multiple avatars for one character, and the building of a story/film within a story/film confuse the viewer and expose the arbitrariness of gender identification and gender assignment. In “Queer Sound: Musical Otherness in Three Films,” Kathleen M. Vernon describes the film in terms of “complex chronologies, crossed identities, and story within a story structure” (Epps and Kakoudaki 60). Almodóvar uses these tropes to create an oasis where gender and sexuality are volatile and forever in flux. Critics all note Almodóvar’s passion for flux, instability, and the futility of identification. He uses complex and nonlinear narration, stories within stories and non-normative characters to highlight the fluidity of identity and to question the idea of ‘truth’.

In *Bad Education*, Almodóvar's splitting of characters is more extreme than in any of his previous films. Ignacio has four avatars: Juan, Ángel, Zahara, and Ignacio. Enrique is split into three avatars: the child, the filmmaker, and the biker, each played by a different actor, all using the same name. A third character is split into two avatars, Father Manolo, and Mr. Berenguer, who are then renamed and recast so as to bear little resemblance to one another, except for their desire for boys and young men (Epps and Kakoudaki 289). Perez-Vides and Carrasco-Carrasco describe this plurality of identities as a "shifting corporality that conflates the boundaries between male and female, the public and private" (21). They add that by means of "flashbacks", Ignacio's body changes depending on the narrator: "Zahara is a cross-dressing character who imitates Spanish actress Sara Montiel on stage and who is also impersonated by actor Gael Garcia Bernal (who performs four different characters in the film)" (Pérez-Vides and Carrasco-Carrasco 22). In line with Butler's theory of gender performativity, Perez-Vides and Carrasco-Carrasco argue that "different levels of reality" create a space for the characters to be multiple and perform several 'I's. While the viewer is made to feel confused in this space, they can also "adopt shifting points of view" and engage in a more fluid and less rigid process of identification (22).

In "The Queer Children of Almodóvar: *La Mala Educación* and the Re-sexualization of Biopolitical Bodies," Jorge Perez sees Ignacio as being "forever unattainable to Enrique and the spectators" when, as a child, Ignacio tries to escape from Padre Manolo's abuse, falls, and a streak of blood runs down his face (see fig. 1), dividing it into two parts:

[This is] what Ignacio interprets in voice-over narration as a premonition of the inevitable division that would accompany him for the rest of his life. The adult Ignacio will indeed appear in multiple versions, forever unattainable for Enrique

and for spectators: [...] through his brother's impersonation, [...] the fictional figure as the transvestite Zahara in the cinematographic adaptation [...] and finally in the visualization of Señor Berenguer's narration of Ignacio's last days as a drug addict. (152)



Fig. 1. Ignacio's Split Face

Because of his traumatic experience in the Catholic school, Ignacio loses his subjectivity and control over what he is and what he wants to be. The viewer never has the chance to see and hear the 'real' Ignacio. The only Ignacio that is shown by Almodóvar is a picture on the wall of his mother's house. Almodóvar only lets the viewers gain access to him through others; the people who molested, betrayed, or killed him. The Ignacio of "La Visita" is impersonated by Juan, his brother, who betrayed and murdered him, accompanied by Padre Manolo. The Ignacio in Padre Manolo's version is played by the same actor whose picture was hanging on the wall of their mother's house. Nevertheless, the viewer only gets to see Ignacio through the disgusted eyes of Padre Manolo, who has been blackmailed by Ignacio, and who cannot find any trace of the boy he used to love in the adult Ignacio.

In “Learning Nothing: *Bad Education*”, Lee Edelman states that because of the abuse, Ignacio is drained of his subjectivity and is reduced to the anal opening, the hole, that renders him unintelligible, a zero instead of a one (139). Ignacio’s split is not one of a dynamic, healthy, and volatile gender identity and sexuality. It is of a broken individuality. Ignacio dies prematurely without having the chance to ‘fix’ his/her appearance and be reunited with his/her childhood lover. The broken parts of his subjectivity are scattered and each of the characters keep some part of Ignacio. S/he is not a vigorous whole in flux; s/he is in pieces, torn, like the opening scene of the film (see fig. 2). As Edelman adds, “[f]rom the perspective of Almodóvar’s film, these envisionings [of Ignacio], Enrique’s and Father Manolo’s, find their common provenance ‘in a fiction, in a dream of passion,’ making them as insubstantial as . . . ‘nothing’” (153).



Fig. 2. Ignacio's Broken Subjectivity

1.2.2. Trauma; The Catholic Church

In *La Mala Educación*, Christianity and the church are portrayed in a negative light. The priest who is the protagonists' teacher in the Christian boarding school is a pedophile.

Almodóvar portrays Padre Manolo's attraction to Ignacio as a wild and uncontrollable force.

When Ignacio is singing a song, *El Jardinero*, for Padre Manolo's birthday, a close-up shot of Padre Manolo's face shows his sexual desire, love, and guilt as he tries to hold back his tears; it seems that Padre Manolo is in a state of holy revelation, sexual arousal, and shame. This wild desire ruins Ignacio's rather short life; s/he is never able to erase the traumatic experience s/he had as a child. Ignacio remains forever obsessed with his/her appearance, and his/her "divine" breasts, and is fixated on making his/her skin and teeth beautiful. S/he also drowns themselves in the illusory world of drugs, maybe in order not to have to face his/her reality. In one scene, Ángel, playing Zahara in the script, "La Visita", confronts Padre Manolo and shouts three times: "because of you"; s/he is clearly blaming Padre Manolo and his sexual abuse for his/her miserable life (Almodóvar, *Bad Education* 00:20:55-00:21:5).

Almodóvar highlights religion as a crucial part of the patriarchal exploitative system. The Spanish Church suffocated Spain during the Francoist era by reinforcing and legitimizing a patriarchal structure of control. In the script of "La Visita", when Padre Manolo sees Zahara for the first time in the church, he tells her, "you cannot be here" (Almodóvar, *Bad Education* 00:22:40-00:22:50). It is not clear what he means; is it because she is a woman, a transgender woman, or simply an intruder? It seems he means all of the above. The Church is shown as an exclusive male patriarchal space that does not allow any 'intruders'. Exclusivity is a way of remaining inaccessible and of covering the abuse and immorality perpetrated by the Spanish Catholic Church.

As a child, Ignacio has a beautiful soprano voice and the spectators hear him singing on two occasions; on Padre Manolo's birthday and on the beach behind the bushes. Vernon believes that "the recurring use of such striking vocal types testifies to Almodóvar's fascination with androgynous and uncanny voices, with 'feminine' sounds that issue from male bodies (or the

reverse) and with the disturbing power over listeners that ensues” (Epps and Kakoudaki 59). This mixing of gender traits and characteristics is one of Almodóvar’s tropes for disrupting the hegemonic view of gender. As Butler states: “[w]hen the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one” (*Gender Trouble* 9).

In one scene of the film, Padre Manolo and the boys are outside having a picnic by the river. Young Ignacio voices over this story as adult Enrique is reading the script of “La Visita”. The young Ignacio says that this was a prize for the best students; they went to the country for a day and Padre Manolo always accompanied the boys. The other boys are playing and swimming in the river, but Padre Manolo and young Ignacio are sitting by the river. Padre Manolo is playing the tune of *Moon River* and Ignacio is singing this song with different lyrics. Almodóvar himself states that “[t]here is something hypnotic and perverse about the fact that a child is singing it” (qtd. in Edelman 145). Whereas the original lyric of the song is about dreams, rainbows and adventures, the new lyrics are about dark places and have remarkably different connotations: “I’m longing to know what is hidden in the dark, and you’ll find it”. As Ignacio sings this line, the camera zooms out and the viewer can only see the bushes behind which Ignacio and Padre Manolo are hidden. We cannot see what is happening with Padre Manolo and Ignacio (Almodóvar, *Bad Education* 00:26:48-00:28:08). As Kinder observes: “In *Bad Education*, the worst seems to be a priest molesting a child, the notorious patriarchal crime, which, despite its recent prominence in the press, still remains largely hidden in the bushes” (Epps and Kakoudaki 273). Only after Ignacio is already traumatized are we able to see what has happened. As mentioned, the blood streak metaphorically cuts Ignacio’s face in two, an

indication of his split identity and broken fate: “a trickle of blood divided my forehead in two. I had a feeling the same thing would happen with my life. It would always be divided and I couldn’t help it” (Almodóvar, *Bad Education* 00:28:00-00:28:21).

There is a scene in which Almodóvar juxtaposes the boys masturbating each other as they watch *Esa Mujer*, a film about a repentant woman longing to be accepted into the embrace of the Church. This juxtaposition ridicules Christianity and its oppressive rules (see fig. 3). Ignacio later feels guilty and expresses his fear of getting punished by God. Interestingly, Enrique says he does not believe in God. The one who turns out to be happy and successful is the one not restrained by guilt and religious remorse and fear. Years later, Padre Manolo is a publisher rather than a priest, but as Kinder suggests, this represents “a more secular version of the same censorship and exploitation that he exercised as principal of Ignacio’s religious school: for, the tyrannical publisher quite literally fucks the author, whose story undergoes a chain of appropriations and accommodations” (Epps and Kakoudaki 282).



Fig. 3. Ignacio and Enrique in the Movies

According to Perez-Vides and Carrasco-Carrasco,

Almodóvar himself has been considered on many occasions a cultural symbol of the restoration of democracy in Spain. Moreover, and directly related to the topic of the film, it was precisely in the mid-1980s when sex abuse by Catholic priests began to come to the public's attention, and the hypocritical teaching system of Franco's church was gradually condemned by a sector of Spanish society. (24)

Yet we need to examine how Almodóvar portrays the process of the possible healing of Ignacio. I agree with Perez-Vides and Carrasco-Carrasco that Ignacio's whole life becomes an endeavor to take back what Padre Manolo took away. Ignacio decides to blackmail Padre Manolo using "the power of language" to "ironically inflict violence on him, which inevitably leads to his tragic death" (Pérez-Vides and Carrasco-Carrasco 23). As Perez-Vides and Carrasco-Carrasco argue, Ignacio does not have much luck and before being able to use the extorted money to 'fix' themselves, s/he overdoses and dies, unable to reconnect with her childhood lover Enrique. Ignacio's fate "[i]ndicate[s] the impossibility of disembodying pain at that stage of his life. This also suggests that the ghost of child abuse haunts him until the very end of his shifting life" (Perez-Vides and Carrasco-Carrasco 23).

1.2.3. Performativity and the (Im)possibility of Subjectivity

For Almodóvar, sex and gender are arbitrary and contingent; they are shifting and forever mutating. It is impossible to place his characters within a solid gender or sex frame. Not only do they change their gender and sexuality through time, but they can also perform different genders at any given time. For Almodóvar, gender and sexuality are precarious; they are performances not essences. There are two specific episodes I would like to highlight. First is the scene where we initially see Zahara as a drag performer in the script of "La Visita". Zahara's female skin suit is funny, sarcastic, and ironic. The idea that Ángel's femininity was 'worn' outside the body and

was not flowing from the inside shows the flimsiness of gender ‘essence’. Ángel literally wears a woman’s skin and displays gender as performance in her/his performance of Sarita Montiel’s song *Quizás, quizás, quizás*. Furthermore, this scene also functions as a parody of masculinity. Instead of a large phallus, we see a bulging pubic area; a shimmering display of the female pubis (see fig. 4). Here it is the female skin that is proud and out, not the phallus. Almodóvar treats transgenderism as a state of ‘being’ and ‘acting’, rather than one of ‘becoming’. Hence, most of his transgender characters move across the gender spectrum rather than ‘coming out’ as fully transitioned subjects. Almodóvar does not believe in a fixed gender dichotomy or clear-cut unchanging sexual desire. Instead, he showcases the defects of the sex/gender system through parodies, exaggerated sexual performances and making fun of so-called normativity.



Fig. 4. Zahara as Sara Montiel

Another scene is when Ángel is trying to ‘learn’ how to be a woman in order to convince Enrique to cast him in the film as Zahara. Ángel chooses a drag queen that impersonates Sarita Montiel, the same actress who played in *Esa Mujer*, and explicitly studies the drag queen’s

performance. Almodóvar presents gender as performance, and as something that is acquired and is reinforced and internalized by practice and repetition. Therefore, Almodóvar sees gender roles as learnt and as a culturally normative structure into which male and female bodies are sculpted. Almodóvar visibly presents gender as imitation. In order to ‘be’ a woman, Ángel is going to imitate the drag queen’s behavior, the way she talks and the words she uses (Almodóvar, *Bad Education* 55:25-58:30). These scenes echo Butler’s view on gender imitation and the power of drag in highlighting and making fun of gender constructs. Butler notes that “[i]n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself, as well as its contingency” (*Gender Trouble* 187). This scene is parodic and subtly funny, and shows “the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance” invoked by Butler (*Gender Trouble* 187). Ángel is literally sitting there with a pen and paper ‘taking notes’ on how to be a woman (see fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Juan Studying a Drag Queen

Almodóvar pushes his point further by a chilling twist in the story, which is when Enrique and the spectators find out that Ignacio died a few years back and the young actor is

actually his younger brother Juan. Through this twist, the spectator is faced with the extra dilemma of identification and the assigning of identity. As noted before, multiple avatars and narrative lines and flashbacks are Almodóvar's method of throwing off the spectator and demonstrating the complexities of gender and sexuality construction. Here, another level is added, as Ignacio, who wanted to be called Ángel, is now Juan. So, what was the function of the art name Ángel? It explicitly points to the figure of the angel, an innocent pure being without any past. In this way, Juan can start over as he chooses; he can 'perform' any role and therefore 'be' anyone. Furthermore, this name is paradoxical regarding its religious connotation. Ángel is far from innocent; he lies, he does anything to advance his goals, he betrays Ignacio and kills Padre Manolo/Mr. Berenguer. Almodóvar lampoons the proclaimed innocence of the Catholic Church by naming this shady character Ángel.

Butler asserts that through the "performative construction of gender" (*Gender Trouble* 35), we perform our gender in social settings; for example, Zahara and her drag queen friend, Paquita, perform femininity by wearing makeup and women's clothes. In discussing drag, Butler acknowledges that "drag creates a unified picture of 'woman'", but she also notes that drag "reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence" (*Gender Trouble* 187). This fiction of heterosexual coherence is parodied and played with by Almodóvar in *La Mala Educación*, and in his other films. Almodóvar centers his films on not easily graspable characters, such as Juan in *Bad Education*. Among all the characters, Juan is the one who eschews naturalized categories the most. He may not be homosexual, as he marries a woman, but he has a passionate sexual relationship with Padre Manolo. Here, as Butler argues, "we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and

dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity” (180). The most interesting part of Juan’s character is that he is never fully understood: is he a heterosexual man posing as a homosexual with Padre Manolo simply in order to advance his career? Does he marry a girl for appearance’s sake? Which of his sexual personas is the ‘real’ one? None? All?

In *La Mala Educación*, Almodóvar stands against the normative view of sexuality and patriarchal gender roles by showing their flimsiness, by exposing the abuse of the Church and finally by constructing gender as performative rather than seeing it as naturalized and innate. He subverts heteronormativity and its enforcers, such as the Catholic Church and patriarchy, and opens a new cultural horizon in confirming the performativity of gender and transgenderism. His use of multiple narrative points of view, of metafiction, of a story within a story, and of avatars, confuses the spectators and prevents them from assuming fixed identifications. He criticizes the patriarchy and especially the Spanish Catholic Church for its hypocrisy and abuse, and portrays the devastating and irreversible consequences of its life-long corruption and oppression. He exposes the trauma that extends to generations and that does not vanish even with the death of the abused person. Juan cries in the closing scene of Enrique’s film; it seems that the trauma was passed on to him and this scene was a cathartic experience for him. But in the end, he does not get to be the famous actor he wanted to be; his wrongdoings, his killing of Ignacio, his sleeping with Padre Manolo, and all the deceit and lying do not pay off.

In comparing the fate of Ignacio with the unnamed female narrator of Munro’s “Boys and Girls” and analyzing the effect of trauma on them, it is important to note that in “Boys and Girls”, the story is narrated by an adult female subject reminiscing about her childhood. The reader does not know the current situation of the narrator, but it can be inferred that she is now aware of the social forces that construct gender. Unlike her earlier sentiments toward her father,

which were admiration and love, and toward her mother, which were disgust and a lack of appreciation, she now understands that her mother may have felt lonely and needed her company. She now sees that her mother most definitely has herself been the victim of the patriarchal system. And maybe the mother did not know any other way. Maybe her mother was trying to spare her from pain and suffering, and maybe she was trying to create an ally in her daughter in their male-dominated household and society. The adult narrator now appreciates her mother, who was “kinder than [her] father”, who “would tell [her] all sorts of [intimate] things” about her childhood and youth, and who “sat up late at night making a dress of the difficult style [she] wanted, for [her] to wear when school started” (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 117).

Furthermore, Margaret Atwood notes that, “the society Munro writes about is a Christian one. This Christianity is not often overt; it's merely the general background” (Alice Munro: an appreciation). Alice Munro barely incorporates religion as a separate agent. As she said in an interview regarding religion, she is more concerned with class: “[a]nd what church you belong to has something to do with your class” (qtd. in Awano). In this story also, there is no obvious mention of religion; it is incorporated as part of patriarchal society and is not a separate form of oppression. The trauma inflicted on the narrator is that of the realization of the cruelty of her father’s world. The patriarchal system has pinned a place, a status for the narrator as a female. Similarly, Flora is used and then devoured by the ruling capitalistic system. The horses are no longer just the meat for the foxes; they are peers, victims of the same power and class structure.

In contrast to Munro’s story, in *Bad Education*, institutional religion is the main culprit in traumatizing Ignacio. According to Edelman: “In the narrative of Almodóvar’s film, that badness finds its referent first and foremost in Father Manolo, the educator whose fixation on Ignacio leads, in the moment simultaneously announced and elided by the blacking out of the screen, to

the Child's undoing as meaning" (142). As a child, Ignacio is completely helpless. Even his one rebellion, his short-lived love affair with Enrique, is infected with fear and guilt. He is terrified of Padre Manolo, whose advances he has so far rejected. He has also been raised with Catholic 'values' and feels extremely guilty about his love and sexual desire for Enrique. It is not just about the latent and underlying heteronormative and patriarchal rules. It was actual sexual and emotional abuse, which was sanctioned, perpetuated, and covered up by a powerful ruling structure, the Spanish Catholic Church.

The narrative styles of the two works are also contrasting; Munro's narration is a linear one. An adult female narrator is looking back on her preadolescent self in her childhood home. It is a first-person narration and the reader has access to the narrator's thoughts and feelings. The point of view fluctuates between the narrator as a girl and the narrator as an adult woman. This style helps the reader understand what was going on in the narrator's mind as a girl and what has been changed since then and what she thinks as an adult. Conversely, Almodóvar's narrative style is not intimate but extravagant; it is nonlinear, there are multiple points of view, multiple avatars representing one character and most importantly no voice for Ignacio. As mentioned, Almodóvar does not give Ignacio any chance to tell his/her side of the story.

In "Boys and Girls" and *The Bad Education*, the female narrator and Ignacio both surrender their subjectivity and individuality, although on different levels. They both give in to the pressure of patriarchal society. Munro's narrator surrenders to 'becoming' a girl in the end. She is defeated under the pressure exercised by her domestic world, and finally she accepts her inferior position of being "just a girl" (Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades* 127). However, she stages a final fight, a last rebellion against her father who metaphorically represents the patriarchy. By leaving the padlock open and letting Flora flee, the narrator enacts a form of

defiance, although a hopeless one, against her father, and shows her solidarity with Flora. Furthermore, before approaching preadolescence, the narrator has autonomy and power. She takes pride in her daily work in the fox farm with her father. She disrupts and disobeys, and possesses agency. As an adult, this narrator is also aware and alert. She has individuality and can analyze the events of that year and what contributed to her ‘self’ and her identity. Although she used to feel powerless and felt that she was “just a girl”, as a narrator she is not that helpless girl. She now has possession of a ‘self’ that enables her to tell her story.

In contrast, the young Ignacio surrenders and gives in to Padre Manolo’s sexual desire, although there is also a hint of defiance in his surrender. When Padre Manolo catches Ignacio and Enrique in the bathroom in the middle of the night, he threatens to punish them. Ignacio tells Padre Manolo that he will let him do what he wants if he does not expel Enrique. Padre Manolo accepts this condition, but breaks his promise after all, and expels Enrique. As with Munro's narrator, Ignacio’s act of resistance does not pay off. However, unlike the female narrator of "Boys and Girls", he remains defeated up to the end of his short life. Ignacio becomes a drug addict, and obsessed with how s/he looks. His/her lust for revenge consumes him/her till the end, and finally brings about his/her death, when s/he overdoses with an extremely pure heroine that Manolo and Juan supply him with. Ignacio dies while writing a letter to Enrique, which reads “Dear Enrique, I think I’ve succeeded” (Almodóvar, *Bad Education* 1:39:00-1:40:10); it is a letter s/he never completes.

Ignacio has neither control nor subjective agency, neither as a child nor as an adult. S/he does not have any independent ‘I’. S/he does not get to tell his/her story in his/her voice. S/he does not have a voice. Almodóvar makes this film in such a way that Ignacio is only ‘heard’ and ‘imagined’ by others. The spectator gets to see the adult Ignacio only through others’ gazes.

Almodóvar does not allow Ignacio any chance of redemption or survival. He portrays the trauma the Catholic Church produces as too devastating to be overcome.

In the short story, “Boys and Girls,” family members impose suffocating gender roles on the young narrator as she approaches puberty, a point beyond which she is no longer allowed to ‘be’ gender-neutral; instead, she must ‘become’ a girl. The threat of these looming forces is revealed to her gradually and consistently. The invisible threat is shaped by the narrator’s mother trying to keep her inside and away from the ‘masculine’ space, which is her father’s fox fur workshop. The narrator feels this threat in the words of her grandmother, who encourages her to ‘act like a girl’; she also feels her impending ‘becoming’ through Henry, the handyman’s, teasing.

In *The Bad Education*, the gender imposition lies in the hands of a powerful institution and oppressive system. The patriarchal system is configured through one of its most powerful allies, institutional religion, in this case the Catholic Church of Spain during the Francoist era. Ignacio and the other boys from the Catholic boarding school are powerless and utterly at the ‘mercy’ of the church administration. Similar to the female narrator in “Boys and Girls”, Ignacio is at a critical age; the age when puberty has not yet emerged and preadolescent boys still have their treble voice, the soprano singing voice that has not been ‘soiled’ by puberty. Unlike the female narrator who, as a preadolescent, gets to enjoy freedom from the imposing gender rules of the patriarchal system, Ignacio’s age actually puts him in danger and harm’s way. Padre Manolo is only interested in preadolescent boys and is infatuated with Ignacio because of his youth and ‘heavenly’ soprano voice.

Here, the Church needs the boys to stay young in order to have control over them and to be available for exploitation at a time when they cannot resist. Therefore, Padre Manolo’s sexual

interest in young boys acts as a metaphor for the Catholic Church of Spain, which is afraid of losing its authority over a mature and intellectually developed nation. The Church can only have its reign while the nation is helpless and ignorant, infested with fear and religious guilt. Religious guilt and shame are bestowed upon Ignacio because of his homosexual desire and love for his classmate, Enrique. Ironically, the same Catholic Church that sexually abuses young boys declares homosexual desire to be sinful and forbidden. Almodóvar highlights this hypocrisy and abuse. In Munro's short story and Almodóvar's film, abusive patriarchal models destroy emerging adolescence.

Chapter 2

2. Gender Performance / Gender Resistance in “The Albanian Virgin” and *La Piel Que Habito*

“The Albanian Virgin” and *La Piel Que Habito* (*The Skin I Live In*) are both anomalies in the works of Alice Munro and Pedro Almodóvar respectively. Within Munro's work, “The Albanian Virgin” is a peculiar story. Unlike most of Munro's stories, it is not set in a small town in southern Ontario. Part of this story happens in an exotic faraway land in Albania with a complex set of societal and cultural rules compared to that of Canada. Andrea F. Szabó points out that there are only three stories in Munro's work between the 1960s and the 1990s that take place outside of Canada (“Crossing the Border”). Central to “The Albanian Virgin” are the themes of crossing borders and transitioning, and not just physical ones. For instance, Szabó states that the transition in the story is not just about entering a foreign land; it is about “overstepping socially articulated boundaries ... as well as venturing into the ... territory of the taboo” (“Crossing the Border”). In fact, both the film and the story center around transgression, the boundaries and ambiguities of gender and the possibility of resistance in difficult and convoluted circumstances.

Equally, *The Skin I Live In* stands out among Almodóvar's oeuvre, since it does not follow the usual Almodóvarian cinematic signature of camp, kitsch, open violence, and sexual scenes and burst of colors. The film is relatively tame in terms of showing violence and sexually explicit imagery, and it is minimalistic with understated acting. However, the central theme of the film is still Almodóvarian: to challenge and transgress the hegemonic ideas of gender and sexuality.

2.1. Let's Make a Virgin: Gender in Process in Alice Munro's "The Albanian Virgin"

"Gender awareness" is a central theme in Alice Munro's writing (Filipczak 13). In her essay "Gender and Space in 'The Albanian Virgin'", Dorota Filipczak states that "gender awareness" and "the ensuing refusal to accept the post-Victorian double standards in light of which freedom to shape one's own life comes naturally to a man, but is denied to a woman," are "basic concern[s] of many Munrovian heroines" (15). In the short story, "The Albanian Virgin", Alice Munro analyzes "the gender agenda" by telling the story of Charlotte/Lottar, a young Canadian woman who is forced to join an Albanian tribe in the 1920s (15).

Charlotte is an independent woman who travels to the Dalmatian Coast, in Croatia, by steamer. Bored with the dull routine of her fellow travelers, she decides to explore the historical landmark beside Mount Levchen. She sets off with a local guide who is coincidentally a runaway from a rival tribe which was "in blood" (Munro, *Open Secrets* 83) with the Kula, the tribe that will capture her. The Kula people kill the guide and injure Charlotte by accident. They take her to the Kula with them. This story is nested within the story of Claire, a young woman who has just moved to the small town of Victoria and opened a bookstore. Charlotte tells Claire the story of Lottar, who is Charlotte herself, when Claire comes to visit her during her hospitalization.

The character of Charlotte/Lottar is based on the true story of a librarian who was captured by "The Albanian bandits" circa 1900 (Filipczak 15). "The Albanian Virgin" was published in 1994 in the short story collection, *Open Secrets*, which was nominated for the 1994 Governor General's Award for English Fiction. "The Albanian Virgin" is a story within a story with one first-person and one third-person narrator who tell the story in a non-linear way. The first-person narrator is Claire, a young woman who has just opened a bookstore in Victoria, British Columbia. Claire has just left her husband and her lover after her affair was revealed and

when she realizes she could not live with either one. Charlotte, a mature woman and Claire's eccentric friend, is the narrator of the other story. Charlotte has been hospitalized, and tells her story to Claire during Claire's daily visits. The story in question is that of the Albanian Virgin, namely, of Lottar, a young Canadian woman who has been captured by the members of an Albanian tribe during an expedition, who is 'made into' a virgin, and who finally flees and becomes a Canadian woman again. During her ordeal, Lottar learns the language of the Kula tribe as well as their way of life in a visibly gender-segregated society, where they live according to laws and rules that appear primitive to the Canadian captive.

This section of the second chapter will discuss the themes of misunderstanding and of the complexities of communication, gender and space, in a defamiliarized environment. It will also examine gender roles/rules and show their dependence on cultural values and religion, notions of death and rebirth, and of transition. It will analyze how Munro depicts gender and identity as culturally and socially bound constructions. Also, it will analyze "The Albanian Virgin" in the context of Judith Butler's theories of gender and identity. In light of Butler's theory, it will show how Munro disputes the universality of identity and gender, and how she perceives gender as a process of becoming and transitioning.

2.1.1. (Mis)communication

"The Albanian Virgin" begins abruptly with the following sentence: "In the mountains, in Maltsia e Madhe, she must have tried to tell them her name, and 'Lottar' was what they made of it" (Munro, *Open Secrets* 81). Filipczak states that "the [opening] sentence spells out the basic difficulty encountered by the Canadian character, i.e. her failure to stick to her foreign identity among strangers" (Filipczak 15). The story begins with both miscommunication and loss of identity. The mountaineers who shoot the protagonist's guide and mistakenly injure her, also try

to communicate with her. The people of the tribe, named the Kula, cannot place her name because they are not familiar with English. Yet the protagonist is in pain and cannot utter her name, Charlotte, intelligibly. The tribe makes up the name Lottar, one that is more familiar to their ears and easier for them to pronounce. The first attempt at communication is unsuccessful and part of Charlotte/Lottar's character changes as a result of this failure to communicate. As she becomes familiar with the Kula's culture and language, Lottar can gradually communicate more, but she never becomes fully assimilated. For instance, she is utterly unaware when the women of the Kula are trying to 'make her beautiful' in order to marry her off to a Muslim. These people are poor and since Lottar has no land or money, they try to make some money out of her. Their plan is interrupted by the Franciscan, a priest who lives with the Kula and makes sure they act according to Christian values. The Franciscan cannot bear the idea of a Christian being married off to a Muslim; he also knows the Kula and is sure that they will try to sell her again. Therefore, he decides that the only option for Lottar is to 'become' a virgin, meaning she has to pledge never to marry or have sexual relations with men. Also, she should dress like a man, sit with the men of Kula and act like them. After she 'becomes' a virgin, she has to move to a stone shelter: "at the top of the meadow, about half an hour's climb from the Kula, was a small stone shelter, a primitive place with no window, a low doorway and no door, a corner hearth without a chimney. A shelter in the heights far from the Kula tribe" (Munro, *Open Secrets* 97). At this point, she can no longer stay with the women because she has been made into a virgin. The men of Kula visit Lottar often but she cannot live with the men either, since she has no land. She gets used to her new surroundings, but when she finds out the stone shelter will be uninhabitable in winter, because of the heavy snow and cold weather, she becomes aware of the fragility of her status. The men of the Kula explain the situation: "[w]hen a Virgin belongs to the Kula she gets a bit of

land, usually, where she can live on her own. But this one doesn't really belong to the Kula, she has no father to give her anything. What will she do?" (Munro, *Open Secrets* 101). The Franciscan knows this already; therefore, he comes for her so that he can take her to the Bishop's house in the nearest city and she can go back to Canada.

Another instance of miscommunication is the interaction between Claire and Charlotte's husband, Gjurdhi. They seem to never understand each other in spite of the fact that they both speak English. On several occasions, Gjurdhi tries to sell old travel books to Charlotte. She always refuses, saying she only sells new books, but Gjurdhi seems to never understand her. In their few awkward encounters, even at a dinner party, Claire and Gjurdhi never have an intelligible, uninterrupted conversation; Claire always feels ashamed and awkward afterwards.

2.1.2. Death and Rebirth

From the moment the mountaineers injure Charlotte/Lottar and bring her to the Kula, Charlotte's/Lottar's transition begins. Metaphorically, it is as if she is reborn into this new person and has no control or choice over her life. She needs to be carried by the people of Kula because she is wounded; at the end of the journey she is placed in a hut: "it was the hut of the sick and dying. Not of giving birth, which these women did in the cornfields, or beside the path when they were carrying a load to market" (Munro, *Open Secrets* 82). These lines indicate two important points: first, the tribe values death more than life. They have a special place for those facing death, but giving birth is not an event worthy of special attention. It is something mundane and specific to women; it is of no particular importance; the women can give birth as they are doing their daily routine.

Also, the Kula value death because they make a connection between death and the Kula's honor. They resolve their dispute with the rival tribes through killing the other tribe's men

and their men are killed too. Killing and being killed is their way of restoring the honor of the Kula. In a way, death is sacred because it creates value for the Kula; the birth of a person has no value in itself: “They are always ready to die for their honor” (Munro, *Open Secrets* 83). These references to death and birth come exactly after the end of Lottar's journey, and the beginning of her new life. It is as if she has been reborn to this new identity, and as if the woman whose name they could not understand dies in the mountains and is reborn again into Lottar. Since the Kula's mountaineers injured Lottar by “an embarrassing mistake”, and because it is “shameful beyond belief to attack a woman” (Munro, *Open Secrets* 83), they do not abandon Lottar, and instead carry her to Kula, “bound up in a rug and strapped to a horse's back” (Munro, *Open Secrets* 81). On the way, she wakes up occasionally finding herself suspended and calm in spite of the pain, and perhaps because of the Raki, a kind of very strong brandy, she is lulled into a disbelieving surrender. This “disbelieving surrender” is Lottar's way of accepting a fate in which she had no say and which she could not prevent or change. She is placed in a hut, “an outbuilding of the big house, called the Kula. “It was the hut of the sick and dying” (Munro, *Open Secrets* 82). The fact that the injured Lottar is placed in the “outbuilding” means that she is already in transit, moving either toward death or a change of status; at this moment, she is a liminal figure on the periphery of the community.

In the part of the story narrated by Claire, the reader sees Charlotte for the first time in a near-death situation and in an environment similar to Lottar's. Charlotte is bed-ridden and surrounded by death: “[t]here were two other women in the room. One was just a thatch of yellow-gray hair on the pillow, and the other was tied into a chair, wriggling and grunting” (Munro, *Open Secrets* 86). In Charlotte's own words, “a terrible place” (Munro, *Open Secrets* 86). Claire is in a similar situation, in that she has ventured into a new life; she has also changed

her life path, but this time it is about choice not enforcement: “I had made a desperate change in my life, and in spite of the regrets I suffered every day, I was proud of that. I felt as if I had finally come out into the world in a new, true skin” (Munro, *Open Secrets* 106). The transitory nature of the narrator, Lottar, and of Claire, brings them together; they are connected through a chain of tales. Lottar, who is Charlotte, coming from the 1920s, and the Claire of 1964, all inhabit the same frame. Claire is also in a foreign land, among people who do not appreciate the meticulous arrangement of the books she has worked so hard on in order to “reflect a more or less natural ambling of the mind, in which treasures new and forgotten might be continually surfacing” (*Open Secrets* 105). Her intellectualism is a foreign language to the people of her town, just as the language of Lottar was unintelligible to the Kula people.

In Charlotte’s story, when Lottar and the Franciscan, the Kula’s priest, arrive at the Bishop’s place, Lottar goes through another abrupt and involuntary transformation. She is ‘handled’ by the Bishop’s servant and later by the British Council. Munro uses only passive verbs in these lines: “[h]er clothes taken away. Probably burned. Her greasy black, vermin infested hair cut off. Kerosene poured on her scalp” (*Open Secrets* 109). This transformation happens outside the council in the courtyard, echoing the place for the sick and dying in the tribe. Munro highlights the outcast position of Lottar as a tribeswoman and a Canadian. However, she is also neither of them; she is Lottar, something less than Charlotte and something more. As represented in the story, Charlotte/ Lottar never forsakes this transitional state.

2.1.3. Death and Religion

As mentioned earlier, when the mountaineers shoot Lottar’s guide and inadvertently injure Lottar, they do not leave her for dead, but carry her to the Kula. She is feverish and delirious and cannot discern the place and the events around her. For instance, she mistakes the

“ancient cobwebs” (Munro, *Open Secrets* 82), dangling from the rafters for curtains in her home. She also misunderstands another object: “also in her delirium, she had the sensation of some wide board being pushed against her face, something like a coffin plank. But when she came to her senses she learned that it was nothing but a crucifix, a wooden crucifix that a man was trying to get her to kiss” (*Open Secrets* 86). Munro makes a dichotomy of coffin/crucifix and death/religion. This crucifix is being thrust upon her by another Franciscan priest. He carries the crucifix beside a revolver that once again draws a connection between death and religion. The more important point here is the imposition of religion on Lottar as a newcomer. In her transitional limbo, when she is floundering between life and death, and delirium and reality, the burden of religion is imposed on her. The priest does not know anything about her, except that she is not a Muslim: “[h]e knew by the look of her that she was a giaour, not a Muslim, but he did not understand that she might be a heretic” (*Open Secrets* 82). In this state, Lottar seems like a newborn baby and the first law imposed on her is that of religion.

2.1.4. Gender: A Cultural Construct

According to Filipczak, “Munro, who consistently returns to the issue of what is and what is not accepted in a woman in the West ... has found an interesting point of reference in an exotic and additionally exoticized context” (15). Munro uses this completely gender-segregated society to highlight the role of gender and women’s situations in a cultural background that contrasts with the Western world. This disparity undercuts the belief that a human and a woman are universal and self-evident beings. The life of Lottar/Carlote as a young woman in the 1920s of Western culture is very different from the life of the women of the Kula. Whereas womanhood in ‘the West’ means being passive, non-adventurous and ‘appropriate’, the women of the Kula are hardworking, breadwinning and tough. As we shall see, beauty and femininity,

according to the people of Kula, are also very different from what is considered beautiful and feminine in Canada in the 1920s.

This echoes Butler's theory, which refuses a universal meaning for the categories of gender: “[a]s a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations” (*Gender Trouble* 14). Munro’s short story illustrates how specific cultural and historical convergences produce gender markers. Munro contrasts the life of Lottar in three periods: prior to being captured by the mountaineers, during her time in captivity as Lottar, and forty years later as Charlotte, with Claire as the narrator of the story in Victoria, British Columbia, in 1964. She thus highlights the unstable meaning of ‘woman’ both diachronically and synchronically, and underlines how femininity and womanhood are capricious and culturally constructed categories. One feature of womanhood in the Kula is that of hard work, so that “women’s hands must never be idle” (Munro, *Open Secrets* 87). According to Filipczak:

Munro observes here a regulatory mechanism that plays into male hands, for while women compete and work incessantly, the men do nothing in particular, and whatever they do is not the women’s concern. While women decorate the clothes, they sew or knit for the men, their recipients clean the guns or ornament them, and take part in the blood feuds which punctuate their lives. (17)

The women have no time to contemplate their lives, they are always busy doing something, either working in the tobacco farm, knitting, going to the market, or giving birth. According to Munro, they are content and happy: “the women looked stern but they were not so, really. They were only preoccupied, and proud of themselves, and eager for competition. Who could carry the heaviest load of wood, knit the fastest, who has the most rows of cornstalks?”

(Munro, *Open Secrets* 88). Munro uses the “bobbin contraption” (*Open Secrets* 87) as a metaphor for circular and repetitive lives; a circular process without a beginning or an end. Munro may be representing the Kula women’s way of life to point out that they are made busy in order not to think about their inferior position to men, lest they have the time to understand what is happening, let alone fight against it. They are deluged by this system of oppression and contribute to it too. When Lottar ‘chooses’ to become a virgin, the only regret the women have is that Lottar is not going to give birth to sons. Their whole lives’ purpose appears to serve men and ‘create’ more men to serve. The only time of freedom that the women have is when they bathe together in the river. Only then do they seem to be emancipated from the burden of their hard work. Interestingly, it is only then that they consider Lottar one of their own and not a silly stranger with a strange accent: “[a]t dusk, they went down to the river and scrubbed themselves clean. They splashed in the cold water, girls and big, broad women together. They tried to push each other off balance, and Lottar heard her name cried then, in warning and triumph, without contempt, like any other name: ‘Lottar, watch out! Lottar!’” (Munro, *Open Secrets* 90).

The barrier between the women of Kula and Lottar will break down once the women of the Kula are temporarily away from their tribe. The burden of the Kula’s strict traditions and gender rules is lifted when no men are around them; at that point, they consider Lottar another woman just like themselves. Gradually, Munro reveals the culture and laws of the Kula. This is a tribe with primitive rules where the individuals are less important than the honor of the tribe. Lottar’s new life is a result of “an embarrassing mistake”. The tribesmen wanted to kill the guide because “they were in blood with his house” (Munro, *Open Secrets* 83). The guide had tried but failed to escape. As the priest remarks, “even if he had gone to America, it would not have made any difference” (Munro, *Open Secrets* 84). As in “Boys and Girls”, Munro reveals her view on

the determinacy of human fate and how little one has control over one's fate and how social and cultural rules dictate human lives. Even Lottar's accidental capture was the result of her reaction to the mundane routine of her voyage and the uninteresting people who accompanied her: "the [bad] weather" made her choose a guide and the guide happened to be a man who was supposed to be killed for the tribe's honor (*Open Secrets* 84). This also highlights the contingency of human identity. Munro's story illustrates Butler's notion of "the contingent cultural constitution" (*Gender Trouble* 153) and "historically contingent structures" (159) of gender and identity. Therefore, both Munro and Butler recognize normalized rules as contingent and culturally bound phenomena.

2.1.5. Drag and Gender Rituals

Munro's use of gender practices in this story supports Butler's theory of drag in "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in which she states that "[d]rag ... implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation...there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original" (313). Butler observes the function of drag as showing the imitative nature of "gendering". Therefore, as a practice, drag can interrupt and subvert the so-called 'naturalness' of gendering and gender roles. In Munro, the juxtaposition of Western femininity with what constitutes femininity in the Kula's culture shows how changeable and culturally constrained the codes of gender are. Butler emphasizes the role of "repetition", through which "power works to construct the illusion of a seamless heterosexual identity" (315). She adds that the fact that "there is a need for a repetition at all is a sign that identity is not self-identical. It requires to be instituted again and again" (315). Munro's use of the image of the bobbin highlights this metaphorical model of circular repetition.

Each turn of the bobbin starts and finishes another turn; as with the bobbin, the women of the tribe repeat their daily routine and their gender roles again and again.

The scene in which the women of the Kula prepare Lottar for being a bride functions as a parody of the beauty and femininity standards that cultures and traditions impose on women. Although their ideals of beauty may seem grotesque to the Western/modern reader, at the same time Munro is creating a mirror for us to question the universality of the system of femininity and of womanhood. In this sense, Munro confirms Butler's theory of gender performativity. Munro demonstrates it in an ironic way in the scene when the women of the tribe try to marry Lottar off, or rather sell her, to a wealthy Muslim:

There, with great ceremony and delight, they shaved off the hair above her forehead.

Then they combed some black, bubbling dye through the hair that remained. The dye was greasy—the hair became so stiff that they could shape it into wings and buns as firm as blood puddings. Everybody thronged about, criticizing and admiring. They put flour on her face and dressed her up in clothes they had pulled out of one of the great carved chests. What for, she asked, as she found herself disappearing into a white blouse with gold embroidery, a red bodice with fringed epaulets, a sash of striped silk a yard wide and a dozen yards long, a black-and-red wool skirt, with chain after chain of false gold being thrown over her hair and around her neck. For beauty, they said. And they said when they had finished, 'See! She is beautiful!'" (Munro, *Open Secrets* 91)

This ritualistic practice of making a bride "beautiful" sheds light on the arbitrary nature of beauty and femininity. What seems pretty to the tribeswomen is made to look ludicrous and foolish in the way the narrator describes it. It is a "ceremony", a competition in transferring Lottar from being a lost cause to a "beautiful" bride. The carnivalesque tone of these descriptions

adds to Munro's point regarding the ridiculousness of the standards of beauty and femininity: funny, chaotic, and grotesque.

As Filipczak argues: "Munro repeatedly insists upon the theatricality of gender, disguises and costumes. It is particularly clear in the various rites of passage that her heroine Lottar undergoes within one day" (19). Lottar is completely helpless under "the weight of her greased hair and finery, under this weight she struggled as you do to rouse yourself to a danger out of sleep" (Munro 92). She cannot even speak well. The suffocation of arbitrary gender-based rituals is shown here as a burden, a suffocating strain on Lottar. Besides, she has to 'become' a virgin. The priest then states that he is "going to make [Lottar] a virgin" (Munro, *Open Secrets* 93). It is a very peculiar statement. A man is going to metaphorically 'restore' the virginity of a woman and make her promise to discard her sexuality, so that she obtains some male privileges. The irony is that it is male intercourse that stops women from being virgins in the first place. Here, a priest who is forbidden to have sexual relations with women is the one who metaphorically reverses Lottar's womanhood and 'makes' her a virgin. Now she has to swear on the stone and the cross in front of twelve witnesses. With these primitive rituals, Munro taunts the contingency of the meaning of gender and how it has no 'core' meaning or essentiality. The swearing and the whole ritual is also a parody of institutional heterosexual marriage.

At this point, Lottar is in a state of numbness and surrender. This helplessness is shown in several ways. From the moment she is captured, she has no say in her fate. She is a woman and a captive, and therefore has very low social status. She forsakes her sexuality for survival: "Slowly and sulkily the women removed all the rich clothes. They brought out men's trousers, worn and with no braid, and a shirt and head scarf. Lottar put them on" (93). Lottar removes her femininity and changes her clothes to 'masculine' attire. This superficial change starts her metaphorical

transition from womanhood to ‘manhood’. But it is only metaphorical. She does not actually ‘become’ a man and there is no actual gender transition. This change from woman to man, and the becoming woman is very superficial and abrupt. Using Butler’s theory of performativity, Rodriguez argues that “normative conceptions of gender and sexuality can be so constraining and restrictive for some people that their personhood, their identity, their sense of self, becomes undone” (267). Although Lottar loses her personhood, she does not really change her gender.

2.1.6. Albanian Virgin: a Third Gender

According to the narrator, total gender segregation is the rule of the Kula: “women were with women and men were with men, except at times in the night (women teased about such times were full of shame and denial, and sometimes there would be a slapping) and at meals, when the women served the men their food and women have no right knowing the men’s ‘business’ when the men are in” (Munro, *Open Secrets* 88). However, I would like to suggest that the category of the ‘virgin’ constitutes a third gender in this tribe. A woman who has sworn never to marry becomes a ‘virgin’. On one occasion, Lottar sees a virgin for the first time. The women of the tribe explain that a virgin is a woman who swears never to marry and who becomes like a man. A virgin should dress like a man and can be in their company, have a gun and eat with men (Munro, *Open Secrets* 90). Later in the story, when the women of the Kula want to marry Lottar off to a Muslim, she has no choice but to ‘become’ a virgin. It does not matter whether she is actually a virgin or not. By the ceremony, she symbolically becomes a virgin; the only condition is never to be with a man from that point on. She has to forsake her sexuality in order to be left alone and to have a little bit of quasi-freedom. Although this third ambiguous gender has some privileges equal to men’s, the virgin becomes an outcast, a being who slips through the fractures of the binary system of gender. ‘Becoming’ a virgin is only

superficially a choice; the “regulatory practice of identity” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 44) designs the binary system and if a woman is not suited for the roles assigned to her, she will be forcibly thrown out of the system.

This third gender is a gender grey zone. Lottar resides in a shelter far away from the women, so that “she no longer saw the women” (Munro, *Open Secrets* 98). However, little girls visit her, preadolescent girls who “come up in the evening to get the milk” (Munro, *Open Secrets* 98). And they do whatever they want there: “this far away from the Kula and their mothers, they became quite wild. They climbed up on the roof, often smashing through the arrangement of branches which Lottar had contrived” (Munro, *Open Secrets* 98). The little girls get to enjoy themselves and to be freed of their daily hard work and the rules of the tribe that dictate them to be quiet in front of the men. Lottar is neither man nor woman, rather, Lottar is both a man and a woman. The men of the tribe also visit her after dark. They smoke and talk about guns, “killings and [telling] jokes” (Munro, *Open Secrets* 100). This third gender applies to men as much as to women. On the way to the Bishop’s house, in sympathy with Lottar’s predicament, the Franciscan tells her that once he had to sit in a room for days, because he did not have a mustache. When he was in Italy away from Madhe to become a priest, he had shaved his mustache because the Italian villagers had made fun of his mustache, for it was not customary to have a mustache in that village. When he went back to Madhe, he could not show up in public because: “a hairless man there is a disgrace” (Munro, *Open Secrets* 103). Once again, Munro points out the absurdity of gender codes and shows how they are being conditioned by cultural differences. It turns out that the men of this patriarchal society are equally conditioned by arbitrary gender rules and regulations.

According to Filipczak: “the construction of the virgin is the only way to bridge the gap between the segregated worlds of men and women. This is how a woman can enter the male space, by forsaking the communal space of women, and their concerns, labor and emotions” (Filipczak 19). However, this view can also be contested. The virgin, as a third gender, does not “bridge” the segregated space; the virgin does not disrupt any rule, neither does the virgin have a stable position. It is true that Lottar can smoke with men and eat with them, but her status is always fragile. When the winter arrives, the men and women of the Kula once more think of her as a woman who can be a commodity, a source of money. All those rituals and swearing in front of twelve witnesses are not bonding enough; she is still ‘just’ a woman.

At the same time, the Canadian Charlotte/Lottar, the one who took her inheritance and opted for an adventure in the distant lands of Southern Europe, was fed up with the gender roles of her own post-Victorian society. She was fed up with the mundane routine of her fellow travelers, who “ate too much and then had to take pills. And they worried about being in strange places,” so that Lottar wonders, “what had they come for?” (Munro, *Open Secrets* 84).

According to Filipczak, “[s]he is ready to run the risk of an expedition into the unknown with the guide in order to disrupt the monotony of imperial routine” (16). At the time, Charlotte is also fleeing an impending marriage proposal.

Among the Kula people, Lottar does not disrupt the sex segregation; instead she is merely coerced into different gendered spaces. She begins to forget her mother tongue and to learn the Kula’s language. In the process of shifting from one world to another, and one gender to another, she loses parts of her identity and also gains some new parts. Her name, for example, becomes ‘amputated’ by losing its first syllable, but as Filipczak points out, it is also extended (16). She loses one syllable from the beginning of her name but another syllable is also added to it. She

loses some of herself and gains another identity. Nor can Charlotte's identity ever be solid or homogenized. Charlotte/Lottar is excluded in both modern and traditional settings; as an aristocratic woman and as a virgin. In her dual identity, she has become too eccentric and strange, and forever abject.

2.1.7. Drag and Gender Performance as Resistance

In "The Tyranny of Gendered spaces, Reflections from Beyond the Gender Dichotomy," Petra L. Doan states that "[f]eminist geographers and urban theorists have argued that space is gendered and that gendering has profound consequences for women" (635). In this autoethnographic work, Doan discloses that "[she] came to realize that [she] could never be 'just a girl'; [she] would always be something more and something less" (637), which is exactly what happens to Lottar. Charlotte can be seen as a metaphor for a visibly gender-variant person; although she has accepted some of the roles of 'propriety', she "refuses to reenter the closet of some post-operative transsexuals who live in fear they will be 'outed' as once having lived as some other gender" (Doan 637). Charlotte does not fit into ready-made boxes of identity, she makes the people in her vicinity uncomfortable and she does it on purpose and by choice. To continue the metaphor, Charlotte has a greater affinity with Butler's theory of drag, which exposes how any given gender/identity can resist and ridicule rigid gender definitions and expectations. As a mature woman, Charlotte can be considered 'identity queer'; she does not fit into any naturalized gender category. She speaks sarcastically and expresses her opinion without the fear of being judged. Yet another indication of Charlotte's 'queerness' is the way she dresses: "Though the weather was warm, she was wearing a cape of dark-gray velvet with a scanty gray fur trim—a garment that looked as if it belonged, or had once belonged, on the stage. A loose shirt and a pair of plaid wool slacks showed underneath, and there were open sandals on her

broad, bare, dusty feet" (Munro, *Open Secrets* 116). Interestingly, when Charlotte and Gjurrdhi invite Claire to their house for dinner, Charlotte tells Claire that her dream job is to "[get] work in the movies. As extras. Or maybe we are not bland enough types to be extras, maybe they would have found bit parts for us. I believe extras have to be the sort that don't stand out in a crowd, so you can use them over and over again" (Munro, *Open Secrets* 122). Charlotte longs for 'performance', to be plural, to live multiple lives and put on multiple skins. She is aware and somewhat proud of her uniqueness and queerness. She indicates that she cannot be the same person when she is performing. In Butlerian terms, she is forever "deferred, never fully what [she] is at any given juncture in time" (*Gender Trouble* 22).

Munro also introduces Mary Shelley into her story, an author who acts as a disruptor of the normative, and whose impetuosity and fearlessness are appealing to Claire. The introduction of Shelley is an indication of Munro's interest in the Gothic. The daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *The Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* which, like "The Albanian Virgin", is a story within a story. Mary Shelley also lived a very controversial life with the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. Claire and Charlotte are both fascinated by the non-normative life of Mary Shelley and the web of entangled love affairs and tragic deaths that encompass her life. Things that may dismay the 'regular women' of their society instead fascinate and excite them, making them 'threshold' characters.

Claire and Charlotte, unlike Lottar, both engage in different forms of social disobedience and rule disruption. Claire refuses to stick to mundane books in order to attract more customers. She has opened a bookstore, an intellectual place, that according to Filipczak, was typically a male space: "Claire now spends most of her day in the space that used to be an enclave of male privilege in Victorian times, a space full of books that are not just supposed to please the

common taste, but include sophisticated works not necessarily meant for average customers” (15). Charlotte remains forever in transition; she is subversive; she disobeys social rules and interrupts the codes of propriety. She thinks that paying tax for books is “immoral” and refuses to pay them (Munro, *Open Secrets* 118). It is rumored that she and her husband steal things and sell the stolen goods. It can be inferred that Gjurdhi stole money from the Notary Public in order to get her out of hospital: “He brought her a pile of money, and she was throwing it up in the air. I don’t know maybe it was only dollar bills. But we haven’t a clue where they’ve got to” (Munro, *Open Secrets* 126).

In addition, the narration is elusive and ephemeral. Besides being a story within a story, with two narrators, the narration slides from one story to another with multiple cuts and interruptions. The whole story only comes together with the last sentence: “She called him and called him, and when the boat came into the harbor at Trieste he was waiting on the dock” (Munro 128). After getting Lottar/Charlotte to the Bishop’s house and informing the British consulate, the Franciscan accompanies Charlotte back to Canada. We learn that the outlandish Gjurdhi, Charlotte’s husband, and the Franciscan are the same person.

Through Charlotte, Munro shows the process of gendered becoming; in Butler’s words, “a process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end” (*Gender Trouble* 45). From being a young woman who, fed up with the limitations of post-Victorian Canada, goes on an adventurous expedition, to Lottar, a helpless captive in the hands of an Albanian tribe, to becoming a virgin, fleeing the tribe with a Franciscan Priest, marrying the Franciscan, to the outlandish middle-aged Charlotte who befriends Claire and who finally vanishes into thin air, she is ever changing and in process.

2.2. Being and Becoming; Gender Representation in Pedro Almodóvar's *La Piel Que Habito* [*The Skin I Live In*]

In “Doing justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality”, Judith Butler argues that “[t]he very criterion by which we judge a person to be a gendered being . . . a coherent gender as a presupposition of humanness . . . governs the recognizability of the human [and] informs the ways we do or do not recognize ourselves” (58). *La Piel Que Habito* is Pedro Almodóvar's seventeenth film and as in his other films, he challenges normative views of gender and sexuality. The film is narrated nonlinearly and in a back and forth manner. The story happens in 2012 to the halfway point, jumps back to 2006, and then goes back and forth a few times until the end. But to tell the story chronologically, Dr. Robert Ledgard (Antonio Banderas) is a renowned plastic surgeon who kidnaps Vincent (Jan Cornet), who raped/assaulted Dr. Ledgard's Daughter, Norma (Blanca Suárez). Dr. Ledgard holds Vincent captive for six years. During this time, Dr. Ledgard performs sex reassignment surgery on Vincent, giving him a complete female body and a face that looks like Dr. Ledgard's late wife. Vincent ‘becomes’ Vera, a woman. From the Latin 'vincere' meaning to concur, the name Vincent means concurring. Dr. Ledgard ‘erases’ this masculine name and names him Vera, which means truth and faith. Dr. Ledgard tells Vincent: “I cannot call you Vincent, from now on you are Vera” (*The Skin I Live In* 1:28:00-1:28:30). For Dr. Ledgard, this act is a way to further demasculinize Vincent, but there is a new strength in the new name of which he is not aware. This lies in Vincent's conviction and ‘faith’ in resisting Dr. Ledgard's tyranny over his gender reassignment.

Dr. Ledgard also creates a perfect skin for Vincent by combining human's and pig's DNA through bioengineering. This skin is immune to burns, cuts and bruises, yet looks and feels to the touch exactly like human skin. Finally, Vincent kills Dr. Ledgard and Marilia (Marisa Paredes), a silent accomplice and Ledgard's unbeknownst mother, and flees from the house to

end his captivity.

This section will discuss the relationship between the inversion of the horror genre and gender transition. It will also discuss the connection between Vincent/Vera's multiple layers of identity in relation to the film's elusive narration. Furthermore, the meaning of gender for Almodóvar in relation to the question of essence and of Butler's theory of performativity will be investigated. This section will argue that although Almodóvar has deviated from his usual style, *The Skin I Live In* still interrupts and subverts normative views on gender and performativity.

2.2.1. Inverted Transgenderism, Inverted Horror Genre

According to Carla Marcantonio, "Almodóvar has consistently deployed the transsexual transgender figure as a means through which to trouble sanctioned ideological structures . . . Vera represents at once the most recent incarnation of this trope and a radical deviation from it" (52). By this "deviation" in form, Almodóvar further challenges naturalized gender identities.

Transgender is an 'umbrella term' which may refer to all people who are "gender-variant". Joanne Meyerowitz defines transgender as "an umbrella term used for those with various forms and degrees of cross gender practices and identifications . . . the categories are not hermetically sealed, and to a certain extent the boundaries are permeable" (qtd. in Valentine 37). The personal experience of some trans people can be articulated as 'being in the wrong body' as their gender identity does not comply with their assigned gender. For instance, as Sandy Stone argues, "accounts of the 'wrong body' lie at the heart of many personal accounts of transition" (qtd. in Hines). James I. Prosser also states that "the 'wrong body' narrative reflects a genuine transsexual emotion" (qtd. in Hines). Transsexual subjects may or may not opt for reassignment surgery, yet in this film, the reassignment surgery's direction is inverted; it is the cisgender

Vincent who is made transgender. Therefore, Almodóvar further complicates an already controversial and complicated matter.

The impetus for this action is the suicide of Norma, Dr. Ledgard's daughter, has already kidnapped Vincent, but apparently, he could not decide what to do with him. When Norma throws herself out of the window of the psychiatric hospital, where she has been kept since her traumatic assault, Dr. Ledgard decides to castrate Vincent and 'make' him a woman. By this savage act, Dr. Ledgard strips the 'murderer' of his weapon. He also finds compensation for his helplessness and incompetence in failing to rescue his daughter.

Almodóvar also inverts the genre of slash horror, which is based on people's thirst to see the breaking of the skin of another person, usually a woman, on the screen. Cult horror films such as *Heels Have Eyes* (1977), *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), and *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), are all about satisfying the lust for watching another person being cut, severed and disemboweled. Here, in contrast, the horror is in Vera's unbreakable skin. Almodóvar works this genre inversion on two levels. Almodóvar blocks the viewers' gaze by stripping them of their expectations of quenching their bloodthirsty appetite (see fig. 6). Instead, the greater horror is bestowed upon the viewers when they find themselves identifying with Vincent/Vera. This psychological fear is greater than any fear of a masked man with a chainsaw running after a helpless girl. It is the fear of entrapment, a claustrophobic sense of dissociation and of invisible asphyxiation. Vincent/Vera tries to cut themselves to break free from this entrapping skin, which is not theirs. But this genetically engineered skin is impenetrable (see fig. 7).



Fig. 6. Vincent/Vera After the Vaginoplasty



Fig. 7. Vera/Vincent's New Skin

Zachary Price notes how “[t]he horror genre literalizes” the desire for “skin gazing by centering the plot around the spectacle of cutting skin” (305). As mentioned earlier, Almodóvar inverts the genre “by showcasing a villain who gives his victim impenetrable skin as a way to

pacify and torture him” (305). This inversion creates an intensified epistemological horror as the viewer identifies with the captive who not only lives in the wrong ‘skin,’ but who also cannot break free from it, not even by cutting. This ‘super-skin’ cannot be punctured and it creates an intense feeling of suffocation and claustrophobia. In “Skin Deep? Surgical Horror and the Impossibility of Becoming Woman in Almodóvar’s *The Skin I Live In*”, Xavier Aldana Reyes also points to the film’s “epistemic violence” (822). There is almost no trace of overt violence in this film and bloodshed is minimal. There is also little trace of the usual Almodóvarian parody and satire, although Almodóvar did not erase his favorite trope altogether. There are instances of satirical and parodic effects that I will discuss later.

Halfway through the film, Almodóvar cuts the narration of the story quite harshly, which may parallel Vincent’s sudden vaginoplasty without any hormone therapy. This operation is so shocking and sudden that castration may be a better word than vaginoplasty. But after the sudden flash back, the narration goes back and forth in time quite smoothly, which signals Vincent’s gradual ‘becoming’ the female Vera. In “Skin Suits, or *The (Transgender) Skin I Live In*,” Anson Koch-Rein points to the fact that this new body and appearance, which is played by a different actor, indicates “an extended transgender metaphor” and “arguably suggests that the character occupies a transgender narrative position at the end of this violent transition” (162). Therefore, the metaphor of ‘the wrong body’ is paradoxically the result of sex reassignment surgery.

2.2.2. Multilayer of Human Identity and Narrative Elusiveness

Almodóvar does not allow viewers to have a stable assessment of Vincent/Vera’s sexual identity and feelings. We can never develop a fixed or assured judgment of the character of Vincent/Vera. This character successfully throws off both the viewers and Dr. Ledgard. In some instances, Vincent/Vera seems to have accepted their new identity. Vera/Vincent knows that

Ledgard spies on them through cameras. Vera/Vincent looks back at the camera and at Ledgard suggestively, with their yearning beautiful sad eyes (see fig. 8). It is almost impossible to be sure about Vera/Vincent's intentions when s/he asks Ledgard to live as a couple and to be 'normal'. The final twist is when Vera/Vincent tells Ledgard's associate, Fulgencio (Eduard Fernández) that he has always been a woman, and that Ledgard has helped him become what he always was. This last ploy results in Vera/Vincent being able to kill Ledgard and Marilia and to flee. This difficulty of recognition highlights the flaws in the ways we "perceive and then inscribe gender onto bodies" (Price 308). Price rightfully calls the film's narration one of "perpetual gender and identity swapping" (308). Vera/Vincent is virtually living in multiple skins, so that "although Robert keeps tight surveillance on them, he consistently misrecognizes her for just one of her many layers" (Price 309). Dr. Ledgard has been putting Vera/Vincent under surveillance relentlessly for six years, but still cannot correctly identify them. Almodóvar challenges "the validity of a visually based identity" (Price 309). Dr. Ledgard is deceived into believing that Vera/Vincent has accepted their new gender and "agrees to have sex with [their] creator. But this idyllic situation is soon revealed to be an elaborate plot to murder Ledgard and his mother" (Aldana Reyes 823). This misrecognition costs Dr. Ledgard his life.



Fig. 8. Vera/Vincent on Dr. Ledgard's Big Screen

In this sense, the whole film plays with the viewers' gaze and how they perceive and assign gender. In parts of the film, the viewer perceives Vincent/Vera as a woman and in other parts as a man. Almodóvar subverts the very idea of gender perception. There are multiple layers of impersonation and the viewer can never be sure which version of Vincent/Vera is in play. This, in turn, makes it impossible to assign sexual desire, gender, and identity. As Price states, "[t]he entire film builds tension up to the moment Vera's transgender body is exposed, but in the last second, audiences are barred from seeing it . . . it is exactly the transgendered body that cannot be fully visualized" (312). In a crucial scene, Vincent/Vera is given a mirror after the vaginoplasty. S/he would need to stand on a chair in order to see themselves, but s/he can only see themselves from neck down. S/he disrobes in front of the mirror, but Almodóvar cuts the scene before the viewer can see the new vagina (see fig. 6). The significance of this scene is two-fold. First, Vincent is robbed of the moment of seeing himself as a whole, and as a complete and independent subject. Secondly, Almodóvar blocks our gaze and refuses to accommodate our

desire to see and explore the transgender body. In this sense, Almodóvar ‘tortures’ the viewers by not letting them observe the transgender body, just as Dr. Ledgard tortures Vincent. Almodóvar highlights the idea of gender being in flux and always ambiguous; during the film, Dr. Ledgard and the viewers fluctuate incessantly between seeing Vincent as Vera, a female patient, or as Vincent, a male imprisoned by a mad scientist. Dr. Ledgard does not want Vincent/Vera to be whole. He is only allowed to see the part of his body that is mutilated and violated. Dr. Ledgard’s way of dealing with Norma’s trauma, rape/sexual assault and her suicide is by making Vincent/Vera feel what Norma felt, dissociated, exposed, and invisible. He makes Vincent’s body ‘disappear’ not just physically, through the vaginoplasty and SRS, but also psychologically. He does not allow Vincent/Vera to have their own image, even the mutilated one. Vincent/Vera is constantly exposed and self-alienated. Also, Almodóvar’s use of cinematic tools “delay[s] the viewer’s realization of the truth” (Amago 99). The narration is so fragmented that the viewer can only be sure of Vera/Vincent’s situation just thirty minutes before the film’s conclusion.

Vincent/Vera has to survive living in an alien skin, since s/he feels like a violated woman, alienated and defamiliarized. And s/he must do it without being able to see themselves. Dr. Ledgard does not allow any mirror in the room and he is constantly surveying Vincent/Vera, methods that are used to torture his victim. Interestingly, Dr. Ledgard did not allow any mirror in the house when his wife Gal was recovering from a car accident that left her completely burnt and barely alive. Marilia tells Vincent/Vera the story of how Gal gets infatuated with Dr. Ledgard’s half-brother Zeca (Roberto Álamo), and tries to run away with him. This is followed by the car accident, when Zeca leaves Gal for dead. But Robert finds the body, barely alive. “The things that a mad man’s love can do,” (Almodóvar, *The Skin I Live In* 00:40:00-00:40:50) are

words Marilia utters with a sigh and an ominous look in her eyes. Out of love, Dr. Ledgard takes away all the mirrors and keeps the house in complete darkness, so that Gal cannot see her hideous reflection. But Gal does see the reflection of her disfigured face in the window, and this sudden encounter breaks her. Incapable of recognizing her 'self,' she commits suicide. Whether it is love for Gal or hatred/desire toward Vincent/Vera, Dr. Ledgard fails to control his objects of desire; he loses them regardless of his intentions. His wife, Gal, is disfigured after the car accident, and does not look human because of her burnt face and body; she has 'turned' into a monster (see fig. 9). Vincent/Vera, on the other hand, feels monstrous because of their transformed body, although Vera is extremely beautiful. Vera has psychologically turned into a monster. Dr. Ledgard's desired 'monsters' get out of his control, no matter how much he tries to dominate and control them.



Fig. 9. Gala's Monstrosity

2.2.3. The Question of an Essence

Almodóvar nevertheless maintains a resisting identity for Vincent. According to Almodóvar, Vincent's gender is a firm identity that he preserves despite the whole ordeal of bodily and identity transformation. In one scene, he is watching television where a yoga trainer discusses the power of yoga to preserve one's self and to retain a place that is only theirs. Throughout the film, Vincent/Vera never stops practicing yoga. Vincent/Vera resists what has been done to him, by attaching themselves to their earlier masculinity. Vincent/Vera's defiance and their resistant subjectivity are shown in several instances. At one point, s/he escapes and slits their throat and wrists with paper. S/he tears up the dresses that Dr. Ledgard wants them to wear and instead of doing makeup, s/he uses the eyeliners to write on the walls, an act of self-assurance and a reminder that s/he still exists under the skin that imprisons them. Instead of getting trapped under this fleshy prison, Vincent/Vera succeeds in finding, or rather in preserving, their earlier gender identity inside and outside their body. Yoga provides an escape towards an inner place, and by writing and drawing on the walls, Vincent/Vera communicates their subjectivity.

Although Vincent/Vera demonstrates several 'selves,' and wears multiple personas and disguise, s/he manages to retain some sort of inner constancy and durability. Therefore, according to Andrew O'Hehir, although Dr. Ledgard "operates the most atrocious changes on someone's body," he cannot affect "the inner soul, the inner spirit, what makes us truly human" (qtd. in Koch-Rein 161). Almodóvar sees a fixed signification of masculinity and femininity as flawed. Vincent/Vera performs femininity in order to resist Dr. Ledgard who took away their masculinity. The extremely beautiful feminine appearance of Vincent/Vera and their stamina for resistance are contradictory according to naturalized views on feminine as weak and fragile. Dr.

Ledgard's shortsightedness in seeing them as just a woman, and not a multilayered subject, is his undoing.

2.2.4. Underlying Misogyny

Almodóvar tends to portray the women in *The Skin I Live In* as victims and fragile beings, as irrational and impulsive and even evil. His wife kills herself after seeing her disfigured face on the window glass; the daughter who is mentally unstable is molested and possibly raped by Vincent. Furthermore, Marilia is not a very loving mother, as she tells Vincent/Vera, she abandoned Zeca as a child. Zeca's violent behavior towards Marilia and Vera reflects this abandonment. When Zeca sees Vera in the CCTVs in the kitchen, he mistakes Vera for Gal. Zeca fastens Marilia to a chair in front of the CCTVs and shoves a piece of cloth into her mouth. He finds Vincent/Vera's room and tries to have sex with them, despite their defiance and apathy. Although Vincent/Vera does not deny that they are Gal and goes along out of fear, this scene is virtually a second rape scene in the film. In this scene, Marilia encourages Dr. Ledgard to kill Zeca as she is watching the rape scene on the CCTV: "kill her! Kill both of them" (Almodóvar, *The Skin I Live In* 00:36:30-00:37:00). Waldron and Murray point to the fact that Almodóvar perpetuates the misogynistic stereotype that madness comes from the mother's womb (62). Marilia also holds herself responsible for her sons' mental instability, claiming that she carries madness in her intestines, thus coinciding with the common stereotype of insanity in women that recurs in gothic literature, and in horror and thriller genres, recalling, for example, the disturbing Mrs. Danvers in Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) (Waldron and Murray 62).

In addition, the fact that Dr. Ledgard's revenge is breaking Vincent by changing him into a woman indicates an assumption of female inferiority. Vincent/Vera rebels against their feminized 'surface' by attaching to their masculinity. The maid/mother is a silent accomplice.

The males of the film are stereotypically strong; at the same time, not all male figures represent power. In particular, the dichotomy between brain and brawn is apparent in the relationship between Dr. Ledgard and his brother, Zeca. Almodóvar portrays Zeca as a total idiot. He is far from articulate and is driven only by animal instincts. His tiger costume with the phallic-shaped tail and the bulging crotch, representing the head of a tiger, is an exaggerated parody of heteronormative masculinity (see fig. 10). The scene where Zeca tries to have sex with Vera/Vincent, because he mistakes them for Gal, is both disturbing and funny, and reveals Zeca to be a savage brute. We are left with the sight of the phallic-shaped tail torn off and lying on the ground, as a metaphor of castration (see fig. 11). Zeca symbolically loses his 'manhood,' since he cannot arouse Vera/Vincent. The viewer may also wonder how Gal would be attracted to this brute, and why she would have chosen to leave her handsome and intelligent husband and her daughter for this creature. Arguably, Almodóvar here is channeling a gay male gaze, in that he portrays Gal as being attracted to a form of hyper-masculinity often prized in gay male visual representations.



Fig. 10. Zeca in a Tiger Costume



Fig. 11. Zeca's Torn Costume Tail

Although a pioneer in his questioning of gender normativity, Almodóvar nevertheless reproduces certain ancient clichés concerning women. All three women in the film also “function

as media for the consolidation and consummation of male relationships” (Amago 100). Norma, Gal, and Vera function as media for sorting out fraternal and macho rivalry and revenge. Vincent rapes/sexually assaults Norma; as a result, she commits suicide. Not being able to protect and save his daughter, Dr. Ledgard transfers Norma’s experience, vulnerability and alienation, to Vincent’s body and psyche and deals with his own failure through his rage toward Vincent.

Dr. Ledgard sorts out his grudge against his brother through Vincent/Vera. Marilia is reduced to the insane womb, which gave birth to Robert Ledgard and Zeca. In “Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality”, Butler discusses the misconception that “a female body can be surgically constructed, as if femininity was always little more or less than a surgical construction, an elimination, a cutting away” (64). In *The Skin I Live In*, Almodóvar and his creation, Dr. Ledgard, both seem to have fallen for this misconception. Although Almodóvar shows at the film’s conclusion that Vincent has not really ‘become’ a woman, his handling of female sexual agency falls slightly short.

2.2.5. Gender as Performance

In her theory of gender performativity, Butler analyzes the concurrency of the doer and the deed. She does not deny the presence of an ‘I’, rather, she proposes that the ‘I’ is a product of the deed: “there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed,’ but the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed” (*Gender Trouble* 195). For Butler, “woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end” (*Gender Trouble* 45). Almodóvar echoes Butler’s theories on gender in *In the Skin I Live In*. First, as Price states, “the film is not privileging the ‘I’ over the skin, it is not about the skin one lives in but the skin one lives through” (314). The multiple layers that Almodóvar reveals in the character of Vincent/Vera, as well as their change through time, all comply with Butler’s theory of becoming.

According to Price, “the film argues that transgender bodies cannot be viewed by a single image, [but] they might better be figured as change over time” (Price 314). Almodóvar also questions the power of surgery to ‘create’ a gender (Aldana Reyes 824). Once the whole ordeal is finished (or is it?), and Vincent is reunited with their mother (or is he?), the last sentence s/he utters is, “Yo soy Vincent” (“I am Vincent”). Reyes states that, “[w]hat *The Skin I Live In* champions is the resistance of a body to accept an imposed sexuality or gender . . . Vera/Vincent has managed to resist assimilation despite having been physically converted into the ultimate image of male fantasy” (Aldana Reyes 829). The last scene of the film shows how Vincent/Vera has become a “shifting paradigm of fluid existence” (Aldana Reyes 831).

“The narrative process” of Vincent/Vera’s gendering also echoes Butler’s argument about “the performative basis of gender” (Waldron and Murray 61), which is highlighted by Vincent/Vera’s performances of gender resistance. For instance, s/he has made paper maché torsos that s/he covers with skin-colored fabrics from the clothes s/he tears up. Metaphorically, s/he is fashioning their own sort of ‘skin’ while Dr. Ledgard is ‘creating’ them. As Amago points out: “Vera the sculpture is also Vera the sculptor: at the same time that she is shaped, used, and utilized by her monstrous maker, she sculpts her own figurines based on the works of Louise Bourgeois, sculptures that in turn envision biomechanical mutation, decay, and reconstruction” (Amago 97). This further mirrors Butler’s theory of gender performativity, in terms of how the doer and the deed produce each other in a circular manner, for which there is neither a beginning nor an end. According to Butler, it concerns “the claim that there is no performer prior to the performed, that the performance is performative” (“Imitation and Gender Insubordination” 315). To this extent, both Almodóvar and Butler highlight the ‘process of becoming’ in gender creation. Vincent/Vera’s resistance to maintain their masculinity does not negate Butler’s theory

of gender performativity. Almodóvar does not emphasize an ontological ‘I’ that precedes the ‘being’ and ‘performing’ by gender rules and codes. He does not separate the deed from the doer. Instead, he shows Vincent/Vera’s resistance as a form of doing; performing femininity is Vincent/Vera’s way of resisting an enforced gender reassignment.

2.2.6. The Question of Subversion

Interrupting and subverting normative views on gender and sexuality is what most characterizes Almodóvar’s oeuvre. Considering the fact that he deviated from his former style of irony and camp comedy in this film, is this film subversive? I argue that it is. Almodóvar continues to subvert prevailing ideas about gender, even though his uses of parody and irony were much more apparent in *La Mala Educación*. In *In the Skin I Live In*, different techniques are used that, according to Price, “challenge [the film’s] own emphasis on the skin we must live in by showing the importance not of what our bodies look like, but of ways of looking” (Price 306). Furthermore, Zeca’s symbolic castration scene, for example, is the ultimate parody of the Oedipal complex. As Reyes points out, “[I]ack of consistency with regards to integrity of identity, as well as a dubious alignment with both crime perpetrator and victim, make for a decidedly ambiguous experience” (820). This “ambiguous experience” is disruptive in itself, as it prevents the viewer from having a clear-cut recognition of who Vincent/Vera really is in terms of identity and gender. The forced course of the gender transition is unsettling and “challeng[es] conventions of gender and sexuality” (Waldron and Murray 60).

Moreover, through the “reformulation of horror film conventions,” Almodóvar makes the viewer doubt “the bases on which the rudiments of sex and gender are positioned” (qtd. in Amago 92). Ultimately, Almodóvar challenges the heteronormative fantasy of a coherent and “seamless” gender and sexuality. Anson Koch-Rein points to this “‘fantasy’ that naturalizes the

identity that skin is supposed to mark as coherent, closed, and timeless” (Koch-Rein 159). The first time Vincent/Vera is seen after their full surgery, the scars of sutured skin are still visible. Dr. Ledgard tells Vincent/Vera that the marks are going to fade, while he admiringly examines his creation. However, this skin can never be “seamless” even without the suturing scars. The way Vincent/Vera will experience gender and identity will always be through flux and changeability.

The film also makes apparent the arbitrariness of our physical body. Vincent/Vera’s new body is not their choice, nor is the body Vincent was born into. Dr. Ledgard’s forcing of gender reassignment on Vincent is not entirely different from nature’s imposition of a specific gender. Furthermore, Almodóvar highlights the multilayered nature of transgender body and identity, or of any identity. Although the final scene when Vincent/Vera tells their mother “I am Vincent” can be seen as a dream sequence, and Almodóvar denies us a straightforward ending, Dr. Ledgard’s desire to frame Vincent/Vera is not successful.

The violence done to Vincent's body echoes the violence he did to Norma's body, and therefore that it has undone him in some way. It is not that he has an intact core of masculinity, but that masculinity is his only reference point for resisting Ledgard and creating a narrative that provides him with some agency. This, however, is still about using and doing gender as a form of resistance. Vincent/Vera refuses to give in to their captor’s desire to change them against their will, and they resist Dr. Ledgard by taking agency over their gender performance.

Vincent/Vera’s several acts of resistance- tearing the feminine dresses, refusing to do makeup, using the eyeliner to write on the walls, making those Louise Bourgeois- inspired busts out of the torn pieces of his skin-like bodysuit- re-construct their independent identity. The whole battle of

masculinity between Vincent/Vera and Dr. Ledgard becomes a stage for Vincent/Vera to ‘perform’ masculinity and to ‘do’ his identity.

2.2.7. The Gothic, the Masquerade and the Monstrous

In their exploration of the limits of gender expression and embodiment, both "The Albanian Virgin" and *The Skin I Live In* partake in elements of the gothic, of masquerade and of the monstrous. In relation to the gothic, Jelena Pataki introduces six “types of obscurity” (227), which are present in Munro and Almodóvar. “The Albanian Virgin” demonstrates the topographical, such as forests and mountains; the material, such as disguise and masquerade; the spiritual, such as the tales of the “striga” and “oras” (Munro, *Open Secrets* 91), and the psychological, for instance the mixing of dream and reality, delirium, and doubles. In contrast, *The Skin I Live In* has the architectural, such as the secluded mansion and the dungeon in the basement; the topographical, such as the surrounding dense forest, as well as the material and the psychological, such as disguise, dream doubles, drug and derangement respectively.

Almodóvar's film also features a Frankenstein-esque mad scientist and a young beautiful ‘woman’ in distress. The “claustrophobic and sinister atmosphere in the beginning of the movie” (Pataki 228) and the captivity of a ‘female’ character all point to the Gothic. Almodóvar's genius lies in disrupting this topos of the gothic and simultaneously advancing his ideas on the flux and movements of gender identities. In contrast, Munro demonstrates the “indeterminant” and “obscure” elements of gender as they relate to the Gothic, what Katrin Berndt defines as dealing with the “indeterminate, obscure, and subconscious spheres of life” (3). Jelena Pataki, quoting Smith and Wallace, also points to “images of perversion, transgression and the forbidden” as themes of the Gothic (qtd. in 228). The perversity of the film is in the twisted revenge Dr. Ledgard fashions for Vincent. Munro intentionally leaves out the “forbidden” act

Charlotte/Lottar and Gjurdhi/the Franciscan commit; they transgress and enter the realm of the forbidden and the taboo.

Another important theme of the Gothic is the simultaneity of dream and reality. In the part of the story when Lottar is being carried through the dark forest and when she is recovering from her injury, the lines between reality and dreaming are blurred. She dreams of her own home, talks to her dead mother, and mistakes the “ancient black cobwebs” for curtains and a crucifix for a coffin. (Munro, *Open Secrets* 82) In *The Skin I Live In*, Vera/Vincent’s dream sequences, which may or may not be induced by opium, are a cinematic tool Almodóvar uses to narrate his nonlinear story.

Furthermore, according to Andrea F. Szabó, “the difficulty, and even the impossibility, to find a voice and a language in which to speak . . . is a gothic topos” (Szabó, *Alice Munro’s Canadian Gothic*). “The Albanian Virgin” starts with miscommunication and loss of words; because of Charlotte’s injury and the difference of language, Charlotte loses part of her name, part of herself and her identity. She cannot communicate correctly for a great portion of her stay with the Kula. Also, she forgets English and needs to learn it again. In *The Skin I Live In*, Vera/Vincent speaks very little during their captivity, and Dr. Ledgard interrupts them when s/he wants to communicate (Almodóvar, *The Skin I Live In* 00:18:30-00:20:30). As in Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, where the monster cannot communicate at first, Vincent/Vera and Lottar metaphorically lose their voices as a result of losing their identity. They suffer from “agency panic” and the terror of the possibility of never finding themselves (Szabó, *Alice Munro’s Canadian Gothic*).

Pataki states that “Gothic literature is employed, and that is the mocking corruption of Christian values” (237); both Almodóvar and Munro use this in these two works. Marilia wears a

cross pendant, and asks Dr. Ledgard if he had prayed for Zeca, whom Robert killed with Marilia's blessing, before dumping his body (Almodóvar, *The Skin I Live In* 00:43:15-00:44:00). Munro mocks Christian values too. The Franciscan threatens the people of Kula with "burying their dead in unholy grounds" to make them listen to him. The Kula people's crucifixes are a grotesque version of Christianity: "Have you seen what they put up on the graves? The crosses? They make the cross into a very thin man with a rifle across his arms" (Munro, *Open Secrets* 103). The most important thing for the Franciscan is that they do not marry Lottar off to a Muslim: "If they could find [her] a Christian, it might not be so bad, but . . . it will be an infidel" (Munro, *Open Secrets* 101). He does not oppose the idea of Lottar being treated as a commodity, as long as she does not marry a non-Christian.

Dr. Ledgard's clinic is "a stylized, sterile yet deadly version of Frankenstein's workshop of filthy creation" (Sabbadini 1292). Also, the terror that is evoked from this very clean and modern looking clinic is a reminder of the dreadful hegemony of medicine surrounding transgenderism and pathologizing it as a mental disorder. As Susan Stryker points out, "the agenda that produced hormonal and surgical sex reassignment techniques is no less pretentious, and no more noble, than Frankenstein's" (242).

As mentioned, the presence of doubles is also apparent in both works. Dr. Ledgard 'creates' Vera in the image of his dead wife, Gal. Furthermore, Norma's trauma is projected onto Vincent, by a vicarious rape; Vincent could be considered a double for Norma. In addition, Norma duplicates her mother's suicide. In "The Albanian Virgin", Claire meets her lover, whom she has left unexpectedly:

As I entered the store, I was aware of a man standing near the door, half looking in the window, half looking up the street, then looking at me. He was a short man dressed in a

trenchcoat and a fedora. I had the impression of someone disguised. Jokingly disguised. He moved toward me and bumped my shoulder, and I cried out as if I had received the shock of my life, and indeed it was true that I had. For this really was Nelson, come to claim me. Or at least to accost me, and see what would happen. (Munro, *Open Secrets* 127)

This scene is a double for Lottar's unexpected meeting with the Franciscan "[Lottar] called him and called him, and when the boat came into the harbor at Trieste [The Franciscan/Gjurdhi] was waiting on the dock" (Munro, *Open Secrets* 128). Both Almodóvar and Munro also use the performative elements of masquerade and the use of multiple personae. Szabó points to the use of "masquerade [as] a perceived necessity and opportunity" (*Crossing the Border*), such as Charlotte's choice of incongruous items of clothing. She has "glistening white hair, worn like a girl's, wearing a cape of dark-gray velvet with a scanty gray fur trim, a garment that looked as if it belonged, or had once belonged to the stage: a loose shirt and a pair of plaid wool slacks showed underneath" (Munro, *Open Secrets* 115). This choice of clothing possesses an emancipative masquerading power; Charlotte flaunts her 'weirdness' proudly and reclaims her 'queerness'.

According to Szabó, masquerade has a liberating effect and lets the person perform outside the constraints of social rules (*Crossing the Border*). Charlotte, in her maturity, uses this function of the masquerade, reversing the fetishizing effect of masquerade on her when she was Lottar. In the bridal scene for example, "she is fetishized, fragmented and silent when the Franciscan priest arrives and tells her that she was almost sold as a wife to a Muslim" (Szabó, *Crossing the Border*). Interestingly, the part of the story which is left untold--as the narrator says, "this part is not of interest" (Munro, *Open Secrets* 124), is when Lottar and the Franciscan break

the taboo by marrying. Charlotte becomes “an unlikely femme fatale” who “poses a threat to order because she has learnt to inhabit her masquerades as masquerades. She does not wear any of them for real” (Szabó, *Crossing the Border*).

In contrast, in *The Skin I Live In*, Vincent/Vera chooses ‘masking’ as a means of disguise and resistance. Vincent/Vera uses their beauty as a mask for their true intention and feelings. Vincent/Vera knows Dr. Ledgard is watching; s/he puts on a show for him. Interestingly, Zeca is able to come back into Dr. Ledgard and Marilia’s lives, because of a masquerade festival in the city; he can disguise himself and not get caught by the police. Zeca also uses masquerade to flaunt a kind of hyper-masculinity he wants to advertise. Vincent/Vera’s immaculate skin ‘masks’ the horrific trauma, too; her “[b]eauty frames the horror and the horror is all the more brutal against this surfeit of beauty, which is but a corruption of the reality it masks” (Sabbadini 1299).

For both Munro and Almodóvar, there is a connection between trans and masquerade, in that Vera becomes the masquerade of a trans subject, rather than an authentic trans subject (since she is resisting it); Lottar also transitions to 'becoming a virgin', but this is also a form of masquerade. Charlotte/Lottar and Vincent/Vera both partake in the grotesque and monstrous. Munro’s depiction of the bridal scene with “shaved forehead”, greasy black hair dye and floured face, under that pile of false jewelry and ceremonial outfit, shows Lottar as a grotesque portrayal of gender-imposed codes of ‘beauty’, making the readers laugh at her and pity her at the same time. Lottar is a monster. Rather than suggesting feminine beauty, Lottar's wedding ‘masquerade’ offers hints of the monstrous for the Western reader; Lottar also becomes a figure with neither agency nor control. She is ‘made’ into a virgin and forced to forsake her sexuality in order to survive. Although she does not actually change her gender, her lack of agency, her grotesqueness

under the pressure of imposed gender and cultural rules, her loss of language and the ability to express herself, all make her monstrous. In Stryker's words, "[she is] too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of [her] embodiment" (238). Vincent/Vera, in contrast, is a monster because s/he underwent an involuntary sex reassignment surgery and literally lost their original body and skin. Vincent/Vera's flesh became "an assemblage of incongruous anatomical parts" (Stryker 240). Although s/he looks natural and stunningly beautiful, this monstrous beauty endangers their identity and authority. S/he has turned into a spectacle for Dr. Ledgard's heterosexual male gaze.

Citing Peter Brooks, Stryker suggests that a monster "may also be that which eludes gender definition" (Stryker 241), which is the case for Vincent/Vera, who comes to occupy a queer gender spatiality. This queerness and 'monstrosity' create new opportunities for finding, practicing, and performing new and interruptive gender performances. Almodóvar points to these opportunities in the film's final sequence, when Vincent/Vera is explaining to the lesbian character, Christina, what has happened to them during the last six years. In an earlier scene, Christina tells Vincent to put on a dress, and he shudders. But eventually s/he puts on the same dress, accepting it as a new skin. Here, Vincent/Vera has the opportunity to "make [their] monstrosity human" (Nordmarken 38). Vincent/Vera's monstrosity is not visible, it is inward; nevertheless, s/he will always remain a "betweenner" and a "liminal" being (Nordmarken 39).

Similarly, in Munro's story, Charlotte reclaims her strangeness and transforms herself from a victim to a survivor and to a subversive force, questioning social roles, and "destabilizing the foundational presupposition of fixed genders upon which a politics of personal identity depends" (Stryker 238). While Charlotte was never transgender in the same way as Vincent/Vera, being forced to 'become' a virgin created an opportunity to find new identity

embodiments. Charlotte asserts “[her] worth as a monster in spite of the conditions [her] monstrosity requires [her] to face, and redefine a life worth living” (Stryker 250). Charlotte rejects subjugation and takes back her subjectivity and femininity by the use of language. Ultimately, both Munro's Charlotte/Lottar and Almodóvar's Vincent/Vera are forced to engage with queer alternatives to their initially coherent and normative worlds.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I compared two short stories, “Boys and Girls” and “The Albanian Virgin”, written by Alice Munro, with two films, *La Mala Educación* and *La Piel Que Habito*, written and directed by Pedro Almodóvar. In the first chapter, “Boys and Girls” and *La Mala Educación* were analyzed based on the shared themes of the imposition of gender rules and roles on young people in the contrasting patriarchal systems of Catholic Spain and rural Ontario. The presence of childhood trauma and its effects were also analyzed. In line with Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, I showed that both authors foreground the ways in which gender is culturally and socially constructed while also being an inescapable process. In “Boys and Girls”, the underlying component forcing gender conformity is the patriarchal family. In *La Mala Educación*, the Catholic Church of Spain during the Franco era controls the lives of the boys in their Catholic boarding school. In both works, the idea of surrender and the possibility of survival were also analyzed, in that both the unnamed female narrator of “Boys and Girls”, and the character of Ignacio in *La Mala Educación*, struggle with the pressure of the patriarchal system. However, whereas the female narrator of Munro’s short story appears to be a functioning adult, Ignacio, in contrast, loses his/her authority over his/her life as a child and never seems able to find it again as an adult. In “Boys and Girls”, the young narrator's traumatic experience makes her aware of the cruelty of the patriarchal system and leads to her act of resistance of cutting the old horse, Flora, loose. While this is ultimately a helpless gesture, it signals the narrator's awareness of patriarchal forces. In *La Mala Educación*, Ignacio’s resistance is even more short-lived and helpless, and he ends up with a much worse fate than Munro's protagonist.

In the second chapter, I compared Almodóvar’s *La Piel Que Habito* with Munro’s “The Albanian Virgin”. While Munro mostly writes within the geographical limit of Canada, and

Almodóvar's films are full of bursts of colors, camp, kitsch and parody, both authors deviated from their usual style in these works. "The Albanian Virgin" happens in faraway Albania, and *La Piel Que Habito* is comparatively tame and underplayed. Furthermore, both works are about the involuntary crossings and transitions of gendered spaces. In *La Piel Que Habito*, Dr. Ledgard performs SRS on Vincent as an act of revenge for assaulting his daughter Norma. Vincent involuntarily 'becomes' Vera. In the short story, Charlotte, a young Canadian woman, is forced to 'become' a virgin in order to survive in an Albanian tribe with rigid rules and in an extremely gender segregated society. In both cases, this crossing over to other gendered spaces engenders acts of resistance. Vincent/Vera resists Dr. Ledgard's imposition by trying to sustain his/her subjectivity by practicing Yoga, adopting a persona and confusing Dr. Ledgard and the viewers over his/her acceptance of his/her 'new' gender. Charlotte/Lottar turns to masquerade and performs a constantly shifting gender. Even after she goes back to Canada, she continues to be a rule-bender and rebels against Canadian society's rules. In line with Butler's theory of gender performativity, Munro and Almodóvar demonstrate the performativity of gender by portraying gender as a doing rather than as being. Both authors have parodied gender rules, and made use of impersonation and masquerade. In "The Albanian Virgin", Munro satirizes the regulation of gender and shows its imitative nature in the Kula bridal scene, and later, when Charlotte is a mature woman back in Canada. In *La Piel Que Habito*, Almodóvar questions and subverts the whole idea of gender as a firm binary by exposing its precariousness and flux.

I started this analysis in Chapter One with "Boys and Girls", since it corresponds to Butler's theory of gender performativity in a broader sense. "Boys and Girls" is demonstrative rather than subversive in terms of its analysis of gender. The subversive possibility of gender performance becomes increasingly apparent in *La Mala Educación*, "The Albanian Virgin", and

La Piel Que Habito. La Mala Educación was chosen alongside “Boys and Girls”, as both works show how gender can become a prison and a traumatic experience at a young age. In Chapter Two, I compare “The Albanian Virgin” and *La Piel Que Habito*, because of the unique way Munro and Almodóvar deal with gender and transition. In both works, Munro and Almodóvar interrupt the viewer’s perception and make the process of recognition extremely difficult. Each author challenges the existence of just one ‘true’ self, and just one reality.

In my research for this thesis, I have found that the extensive body of scholarly work on Munro has not done justice to her presentation of gender. Future areas of research on Munro could include a greater focus on the question of gender performance and gender presentation. Furthermore, a greater focus on the intertextual connections between Munro and Almodóvar could offer productive avenues for research, particularly in light of Almodóvar's interest in Munro's work. Overall, these four works are linked in how they showcase gender as a cultural construct, as explained by Butler’s theory of gender performativity. An expansion of this analysis to include Munro's and Almodóvar's other work could further our understanding of their rich and complex approach to gender presentation and performance.

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