Construction of Marginalised Identity in the Poetry of Six Female Slammers

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Abstract:

The main aim of the present study is to show how female slammers construct their marginalised identities through performance at slam events. It demonstrates how construction of identity, performance, and aspects of embodiments represented in the poet's speech, gestures, voice and body reflect the cultural differences that written poetry cannot represent. The study illustrates the performance techniques employed by slam poets to perform their sexual, racial, and ethnic marginalised positions in the society and denotes the strong link between authenticity and performances of those marginalised identities. Poems of female slammers Staceyann Chin, Maggie Estep, Patricia Smith, Jessica Care Moore, Gayle Danely, and Suheir Hammad that project their expression of lost, marginalised racial, ethnic, and sexual identities are analysed. The study's theoretical framework is based on Judith Butler's conception of performance in Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (200); Deryn Rees-Jones' differentiation between performativity of the self and performance of the poem in Consorting with Angels (2005); Mikhail Bakhtin's Rabelais and His World (1984) that analyses the liberating force of laughter and the market place language in carnivals;

and Laura Severin's Poetry off the Page: Twentieth-Century British Women Poets in Performance (2004) explaining the techniques women poets adopt in performing poetry. The paper reaches the conclusion that female slammers' poetry about marginalised identity represents construction of a second self perfectly performed on stage to distort ethnic, racial, gender, and sexual stereotypes and that the audience does not only construct the identities of the slam performers, but also construct identities for themselves. Consequently, through slam poetry marginalised identities are constructed.

Key words:

Slam poetry – performance – performativity – marginalised identity – identity construction

امللخـص

يتمثـل الهـدف مـن هـذه الدراسـة في توضيح كيفيـة بنـاء سـت شـاعرات مـن حركـة "سـلام" Slam Movement للهويات المهمشة مـن خـلال الأداء عـلى المسرح. وهي توضح تناول شعر "سلام" لقضايا شخـصية، وسياسـية، واجتماعيـة، ودينية، وخاصة بـالنوع. كـما تبـين كيـف يعكس بناء الهوية والأداء المسرحي وأوجه التجـسيد الممثلـة في حـديث الـشاعرة وإيماءاتها وصوتها وجـسدها الاختلافـات الثقافية التي لا يمكن نقلها للمتلقـي مـن خلال الكلمة المكتوبـة. وتركـز الدراسـة عـلى الاخـتلاف بـين الأداء والتجـسيد وتجسيد الشاعرات لهويـات عـدة لتمثيـل مكـانتهن الجنـسية والعرقيـة والدينيـة والخاصة بالنوع المهمشة في المجتمع كأحد أهـم الموضـوعات التـي يتناولهـا شـعر

والتجسيد الحي للهوية، وأن هناك ثلاث أدوات إطارية لبناء الذات: وهي المونولوج الدرامي، وتجسيد شخصية تختلف عن شخصية الشاعرة، والتأكيد على القوى الشعرية الثائرة على كافة أشكال الكتابة الشعرية على الورق.

وتتناول الدراسة شعر ست من شاعرات "سلام" هن : ستيسيان تشين (١٩٧٢-) الجاميكية والشاعرة ماجي إستيب (١٩٦٣-٢٠١٤) الأفريقية الأمريكية والشاعرة باتريشيا سميث (١٩٥٥-) الأفريقية الأمريكية والشاعرة جيسيكا كير مور (١٩٧١-) الأفريقية الأمريكية والشاعرة جايلي دانلي الأفريقية الأمريكية وأخيرًا، الشاعرة الفلسطينية الأمريكية سهير حماد (١٩٧٣-).

وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن الجمهور هو من يقيم الهوية المهمشة ويصبغها بصبغة "سلام" والربط بين المصداقية وتجسيد تلك الهويات المهمشة.

وقد احتذت الدراسة ببعض الأعمال النقدية الخاصة بالكاتبات جوديث باتلر، ودرين ريس-جونز، ولورا سيفرين، والفيلسوف ميخائيل باختين، والتي ناقشت العديد من القضايا الخاصة بتجسيد النوع والفرق بين الأداء والتجسيد، وبعض المناهج التي تتبعها الشاعرة أثناء تجسيد الهوية على المسرح، وقيمة المحاكاة الساخرة وإضحاك الجمهور في توصيل الرسالة للمتلقي.

وقد توصلت الباحثة إلى أن الشعر الأنثوي في حركة "سلام" Slam Movement يتناول العديد من القضايا من خلال تجسيد وبناء الهوية المهمشة وهدم ومقاومة كافة أشكال النظم الحاكمة والمسيطرة على الفكر السائد. كما تبين الدراسة الاختلاف بين الأداء المسرحي

الأصـــالة والـصدق إذا قامـت الـشاعرة بتجسيدها بشكل متقن على المسرح، وهـم بـــذلك لا يـــساهمون في بنـــاء هويـــات شـاعرات "سـلام" فحـسب بـل في بنـاء هوياتهم الشخصية. ومن ثـم يتـضح مـن خلال شعر "سلام" بناء الهوية المهمشة.

some woman poets. The researcher explores slam poetry as a literary genre that integrates literary, theatrical, political, and cultural influences through the poetry of six female slammers. The study also explains how slam poetry reflects the features of public entertainments, adopts various tools of performance, in addition to the woman poet's self-conscious performance of her identity through the narratives of marginalisation.

Significance of the Study:

Slam poetry is a trend that invaded the literary circles in the United States, The UK and the Caribbean in the mid-1980s. However, very few studies explored this significant movement that has challenged the criteria of judging traditional poetry as successful. This study focuses on exploring the issues relevant to marginalised identity expression and its impact on public culture that permeates every aspect of slam poetry illuminating several personal, political, social and sometimes spiritual issues in

Introduction:
History and Definition

Slam poetry was originated by the "Chicago Poetry Ensemble" who has been harshly criticised for daring to perform poetry like actors, clowns or singers. The show first appeared on July 20, 1986, at the Green Mill Jazz Club on Chicago's north side in which the Chicago Poetry Ensemble and other local poets presented a lot

of performances. It is also where the term "poetry slam" was first coined. However, rise of the spoken word poetry dates back to the 1950s and '60s with the beatniks and hippies who revolted against the materialism of the American city life and the political restrictions of the Cold War era. The American poet Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997), e.g., recited *Howl* at Gallery Six in 1956 long before it appeared in print, and even after *Howl* was published, Ginsberg continued his passionate recitation of it several times.

The founder of slam poetry is the construction worker Marc Kelly Smith (1949-   ) who initiated the open mike events at the "Get Me High Lounge" on Monday every week. In their book, *Take the Mic: the Art of Performance Poetry, Slam, and the Spoken Word* (2009), M. K. Smith and Joe Kraynak define Slams as "captivating poetry events" that aim at "electrifying" and "animating" the audience, who becomes an active partner to a poetry "that's been composed, polished, and rehearsed for the purpose of being performed…in a competitive arena" (3). They describe slam poets as "wrestlers vying for a championship belt" (4), each trying to prove an outstanding poet and performer and to engage the audience who either "roar approval or stomp their boots in scorn" (4) and they judge the performances on a scale from 1 to 10. For M. K. Smith and Kraynak, slam poetry is the "marriage of a text to the artful presentation of poetic words onstage to an audience that has permission to talk back" (5). They also posit that poems presented in a slam event are performed with "as much precision and

professionalism as can be found in any of the performing arts" (5). Thus, slam poetry can simply be defined as the bringing together the arts of both writing poetry and performance and that it has "liberated poetry from the page" (M. K. Smith and Kraynak 13), giving the poet a stage, a microphone and a spotlight.

In her book, *Women's Poetry* (2007), Jo Gill states that slam poetry has "strong associations with popular music (from where it borrows some of its rhythmic and metrical devices) and other contemporary popular cultural forms." She refers to the fact that slam poetry performance is always done in a competitive environment. Most important is that she emphasises that slam poetry is "a modern form of spoken or performed poetry" "characterised by

dramatic qualities and a political edge" (220), the issues widely manifested in slam events. What matters in Gill's book is that slam is much more than just a stage, a microphone or a spotlight for its poet-performers.

Slam has developed into a community that significantly improves and enhances man's life. Slam poetry encourages poets and performance artists to address modern issues by bringing to life "personal, political, social, and spiritual concerns while knocking the socks off an audience through the artful and entertaining application of performance" (M. K. Smith and Kraynak 18). The slam organisers "have discovered a dynamic way of presenting poetry aloud onstage in full public view, enabling its passion, wisdom, and beauty to be experienced with total

impact" (M. K. Smith and Kraynak 25). Therefore, it can easily be assumed that slam is not just an entertaining show but rather a global social/literary movement "fueled by the passion and energy of thousands of organisers, poets, and audience members" (M. K. Smith and Kraynak 26).

Since slammers aim to engage, entertain and appeal to an audience, their words, phrases, lines, and stanzas follow certain poetic principles and their ideas and emotions are expressed by a powerful poetic language. A slam poem is also a kind of narrative that follows the traditional structure of narrative: beginning, middle and end. There are more other elements that lead to success at a slam including: character, time and place, action, conflict or climax.

The most significant approach to slam poetry is that manifested in two works by Susan B. A. Somers-Willett: "Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity" (2005) and The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America (2009). She argues that though slam poets seem to improvise, their performances are the result of many hours of "composition, memorisation, choreography, and rehearsal" (The Cultural Politics 17). Since the main focus of this study is the performance and construction of identity, it is noteworthy that aspects of embodiment represented in the poet's speech, gestures, voice, and body reflect the cultural difference that cannot be delivered by the page. These physical aspects help the audience understand the poem

from a cultural perspective and incite them to assimilate a variety of cultural and political complexities of identity the moment the poet appears on stage.

Theoretical Background

The present study focuses on the poetry of six female slammers of different nationalities: the American Maggie Estep (1963-2014), Afro-American Particia Smith (1955-), Jessica Care Moore (1971-) and Gayle Danely, Jamaican Staceyann Chin (1972-), and Palestinian-American Suheir Hammad (1973-), and how their performance projects their expression of lost, marginalised, racial, and sexual identity. The study is based for its theoretical background on Judith Butler's conception of performance in her book, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (2007) and Deryn Rees-Jones' differentiation

between performativity of the self and performance of the poem Consorting with Angels (2005). The researcher also discusses Mikhail Bakhtin's Rabelais and His World (1984) that analyses the liberating force of laughter and the market place language in carnivals that have a lot in common with the role of the spoken word in slam events. Finally, Laura Severin's book Poetry off the Page: Twentieth-Century British Women Poets in Performance (2004) where she explains several strategies that women adopt in performing poetry is referred to.

Since slam poetry is mainly concerned with performance, it is imperative to look at the connotations of the word. According to Gill, the term "performance" connotes "both the theoretical or conceptual sense of

the way in which the woman poet might perform a particular identity" (55). In *Gender Trouble*, Butler's conception of "performance" is deemed highly influential in contemporary gender and queer studies. She differentiates between the terms "performance" and "performativity." She proposes that sexual, gender and other forms of identity are "forms of construction" such as "imitations, impressions or approximations" or they are "constructed versions" of an identity with no original as she says, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender" (34). Thus "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (34). Hence, gender is made not expressed. She illustrates, "gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation

without an origin" (188). So, gender is an imitative practice or set of practices and thus gender again is "not expressive but performative" (192). Butler's argument is of prime import when discussing subjectivity, gender and sexual identity as it challenges the patriarchal order that focuses on the sexual differences and the feminist critique that assumes a stable female identity.

To understand the difference between the two words "performance" and "performative," most performance studies scholars believe that "performance" indicates a real-time theatrical act, whereas "performative" reflects the discursive process of how that identity came into being (Diamond 4–5). According to Butler, performativity tends to cover the very norms that it repeats trying to represent the current performance of identity as totally new, meaning that

everyday expressions of identity are actually repetitions of a concealed history of identifying behaviour. So, to Butler, identity is not something that is created biologically, but rather something that is performed through behaviour. She says,

> Performativity is … not a singular "act," for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition. Moreover, this act is not primarily theatrical; indeed, its apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated (and, conversely, its theatricality gains a certain inevitability given the impossibility of a full disclosure of its historicity). …, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names. (*Bodies that Matter* 12-13)

Similarly, in *Consorting with Angels* (2005), Rees-Jones differentiates between gender performativity, or acts that constitute the self, and performance of gender, or claiming that identity is an "interior essence" that can be expressed. For Rees-Jones, "performance of the poem, and performativity of the self, specifically a gendered self, must be read as part of a complex matrix between poet, text and speech, which is mediated through culture, intention, expression, language and the often prescriptive ideas of the woman poet and her role" (12, 13). Gill maintains that the "difference between the conscious modes of performance or self-display and the kinds of unconscious practices of gender

constitution and performativity" must be taken into consideration since "performance" presumes a prior original or the object of imitation while "performative" argues about the presence of an origin (57), which summarises the difference between performance and performativity.

To make this point clearer, Gill gives an example of Amy Lowell (1874-1925)'s poem, "Patterns" (1915) and applies Butler's theory on it where the subject seems to be performing femininity as the "acts, gestures, enactments, generally constructed" produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body." This is considered "*performative*" because the "essence or identity" they attempt to express is "*fabrications*" (*Gender Trouble* 185). The poem makes a distinction between the

speaker who is making the description and the subject being described. The female speaker comments on her own performance of femininity while rejecting it at the same time. Hence, the title "Patterns" supposes constructed frames that do not actually exist and therefore it is misleading. In other poems like Anne Sexton (1928-1974)'s "Her Kind" (1959) and Sylvia Plath (1932-1963)'s "Witch Burning" (1959), the female characters feel dislocated or suffer from self-alienation, as they see themselves from outside and decide that they are misfits (Gill 61) in the society.

Laura Severin's Poetry off the Page: Twentieth-Century British Women Poets in Performance (2004) illustrates some of the strategies women poets adopt in performing their poetry taking the poetry of Charlotte Mew (1869-

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1928), Stevie Smith (1902-1971) and Jackie Kay (1961-) as examples. She explains that modern British women writers adopt a tradition of bringing together different forms including music, art and performances on stage. She focuses on three framing devices; namely, dramatic monologue and creating a distance between the poet and her poetic self; performance and theatrical devices such as impersonation of character, costumes and music; and finally using the public personas. She calls this trend "lift[ing] poetry off the page" and "maximizing poetry's transgressive powers through the rejection of the print page's promise of autonomy and authority." This helps introduce "other figurations of experience, particularly women's experience" to the poetic tradition." She adds that by doing this female poets aim at "create[ing] an awareness of the way in which culture produces social categories, such as woman" which is a "first step towards dismantling them" (4). From Severin's perspective, performance destabilises conventional sign systems (6-7). Though a woman's body is on stage, what matters is her speaking voice. This is in sharp contrast with the fact that in print a woman is a silent object not a voicing subject.

Edith Sitwell (1887-1964)'s Poem *Façade* (1922) is exemplary in this regard. The poem was performed from behind a curtain through a device called a sengerphone. By this technique Sitwell performs her female identity but denies and thereby critiques it. She presents it, yet displaces it from view. As Rees-Jones argues, "Within the performance [of the *Façade*

poems], the disembodied female voice [. . .] is constantly working alongside the music, and does indeed become the music" (44). This puts to question both performance and gender itself. Sitwell focuses on costume as one aspect of her self-representation so Rees-Jones indicates that Sitwell has a "strategy of dress" which is "a highly stylised and self-consciously feminised mode of display" and "also a form of masquerade or disguise," manifesting that her "construction of herself as a woman poet might … be seen as a kind of drag act." This emphasises the idea that femininity is performed "in terms of the transvestite's promise of a revelation of the something which it is not" (48).

Performance can add another dimension to poetry when Mew and Anna Wickham (1884-1947) destroy the restrictions imposed by lyric as regards gender roles (Severin 17). Both gender roles and sexuality are destabilised since sexual as well as gender identities are performatively produced. The speaker in Mew and Wickham is totally separated from the subject. Mew's "The Fete" and Wickham's "Queen's Song on Saint Valentine's Day" and "Song of Ophelia the Survivor" introduce alternative voices and roles that allow the poet to confirm desire and at the same time separate themselves from it.

Women poets' performance poetry culminates in slam or open mike poetry. Tom Paulin explains that performance poetry appeals to women writers because for them it is a form of expression for "an alternative community that is mostly powerless and invisible" since "the vibrant spaciousness of the form gives women

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opportunities perhaps denied to them by the orthodoxies and mechanics of a print culture" (x). However, having the gendered body situated in front of the reader jeopardises the relationship between the text and the reader. Also, female poets may be marginalised by performance just as in the written text. Hence, performance of poetry is deemed a challenge to women poets.

The political significance of slam poetry is discussed by Tyler Hoffman in his article, "Treacherous Laughter: The Poetry Slam, Slam Poetry, and the Politics of Resistance" (2001) where he likens slam poets' performance to Bakhtin's description of carnival forms and symbols. Hoffman examines the political significance of the "searingly funny" poetry produced by and for the slam,

mentioning that this subaltern poetry represents what Bakhtin calls a "second life, a second world of folk culture" that is "constructed" and which is "to a certain extent a parody of the extra carnival life, a 'world inside out'" (11). This second life is alternative to as well as subversive of the official culture and its orderings - as it seeks to undo ethnic, racial, gender, and sexual stereotypes (11).

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin explains that in medieval and Renaissance culture "carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (10). From this perspective, carnival allows people to get away from ordinary life and

leads them to "the people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter" (8) where all serious attitudes are mocked. So, in carnival laughter, Bakhtin explores the "essential truth about the world" (67) that negates all truths. He elaborates, "The principle of laughter destroys ... all pretense of an extratemporal meaning and unconditional value of necessity. It frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities" (49). This second life is thus juxtaposed against people's first official life that hails "the triumph of a truth already established" (9), ignores all restrictions and prohibitions, and claims to be the ultimate value. There is a clear endeavour to destroy all existing norms and to consider that destruction the only valuable thing. This leads to the conclusion that the unsettled nature of slam poetry based on improvisation, spontaneity and destruction of mainstream norms helps reinforce and give value to people's second life in a society overwhelmed with social/political issues of marginalisation.

According to Bakhtin, a "special kind of speech was heard" (154) at a carnival which is totally different from "the tongue of official literature" (154) and characterised by "freedom, frankness, and familiarity" (195) creating new gestures and forms of speech that bring people closer and liberate them from the norms of etiquette and decency of official gatherings (10). Consequently, the language of the marketplace "became a reservoir in which various speech patterns excluded from official discourse could freely accumulate" (17) comprising abuses, curses, profanities, and

oaths. Hence, the official language is criticised and distorted and the reader expects the profane nature of the slam poetry that tends to be vulgar sometimes. Miguel Algarin refers to the "bawdy atmosphere" (28) of the performance space in the Nuyorican Poets Café where slammers try to perform and insist on the importance of laughter in slam, focusing on the "short, tight monologue" that "releases anxiety as it makes people laugh, both at themselves and at the competition that we are about to engage in" (17). This is deemed ambivalent laughter and it supports Bakhtin's notion of the ambivalent character of the carnival laughter that is directed towards the audience who laughs but knows that they cannot be excluded from the world in which they live. Hence, laughter is always ambivalent and a means of freedom that frees its originator

from any political and social restrictions. However, in slam poetry, parody is the "prime mover of political consciousness" (Hoffman 51) and is the means that frees the poet from all the shackles impeding poetic expression.

Furthermore, Bakhtin suggests that laughter in a carnival has a "therapeutic" effect as it helps people get free of fear and guilt (90). He concedes that carnival images offer an "unofficial truth," "the defeat of fear presented in a droll and monstrous form, the symbols of violence and power [are] turned inside out" (91). Though laughter can hardly change existing conditions, it can free people "from censorship, oppression, and from the stake" if not by eliminating those realities then by liberating people from "the great

interior censor . . . from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power" (94). Similarly, the laughter provoked by the poetry slam "frees participants from the prohibitions and norms of a dominant culture, allowing them, if momentarily, to construct a second, unofficial culture from which to contest the hierarchies that structure their daily lives" (Hoffman 62). Hoffman asserts that the performance of self through language in slam poetry "enables comic celebration of community, creativity, and orality even as it critiques commodity capitalism, racist hierarchies, (hetero-) sexual politics, and literary conventions" (Lee 3). Hence, it has become clear that laughter, humour, and parody liberate man from the restrictions of the prevailing dominant culture and help him/her to construct a momentarily second, unofficial self that destroys all truths. Simultaneously, they provide alternatives through the spoken word.

Significant Features of Slam Poetry and Implications for Minority Groups

For Bob Holman, a former slammester and a poetry activist, slam poetry is viewed as a democratic from of poetry (18) that re-establishes in the audience listening for poetry (Holman 21). Jeffrey McDaniel suggests that "if there's one lesson the academy might learn from slam, it's that the audience matters" (36). Meta DuEwa Jones exclaims that the theatrical nature of slam poetry and its main focus on the audience where "showmanship, charisma, and theatricality of performance

seems to count just as much as the artistic merits of the poems presented – that has fuelled critical scepticism over whether the 'poems' performed within a slam environment count as literature" ("Slam Nations"). However, it is noteworthy that "by making poetry visible, dramatic, entertaining and above all publicly shared, performance poetry overturns many of the conventions associated with the private, introspective, lyric mode" (Gill 72). This is the most important aspect in dealing with the audience.

The outstanding features of slam poetry that attract the audience are emphatic repetition and rhyme of short lines and of oral devices such as onomatopoeia and alliteration; using repetitions and refrains to emphasise a point

or help the audience follow; and employing silence to give a dramatic effect. Other features include the strong narrative thread that leads the audience to a point of revelation or closure in addition to direct address that is exploited to guarantee audience participation. Another significant characteristic is the political context where slam poets and female poets in particular assume a voice to provoke and inspire the audience and prove that they can never be excluded or marginalised (Gill 72-3).

Lindsay Ellis et al. (2003) write, "Performance poems are presented to an audience with the whole body: in word, in voice, and in gesture" (45). So, the body helps boost the meaning, symbolism, irony and paradox of poems to bring about the desired effect. They further explain that

"performance is the mode of communication that moves poetry from a quiet experience between a reader and a page to an interactive experience between a poet and an audience" (49) and this brings forth the difference between "Page and Stage" and how the stage invokes the audience to hear and feel the poem differently and establishes the strong rapport between the poet and the audience.

Ron Silliman states that the "sense of realization" (362) or "change of consciousness," as Maria Damon puts it (329-330), that occurs in all forms of literature "is most amplified":

through the poem as confession of lived experience, the (mostly) free verse presentation of sincerity and authenticity that for several decades has been a staple of most of the creative writing programs in the United States. Nowhere is this more evident than when this mask appears not in print but *in person*, at dozens of open-mike or poetry slam events that occur around the United States every day of the week. . . . In such circumstances, a text as text is reduced to its most basic features: perceptible surface characteristics, narrative or expository thread[s] and a sense of 'personality' that is inseparable from the presentation of the reader him- or herself. (362)

Silliman highlights two major elements that must be found in any poem performed at poetry slams. Firstly, use of live performance to emphasise the "sincerity and authenticity" of the first person voice, and secondly, the sense of personality that is a true reflection of the poet-performer. The audience takes the identity the poet expresses as his/her real identity and hence they evaluate it.

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Consequently, the poet's success in convincing the audience with the authenticity of his/her identity is imperative.

Another significant feature of slam poetry is its concern with identity politics and minority groups. The Princeton's Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics states that slam poetry is mostly provoked by identity politics and that the poetry slam is deemed multicultural as it shows poets strongly linked to significant social movements that have shaped and "validated cultural identities of minority citizens, particularly as those identities are informed by race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality." Thus slam poetry is the right platform for minority groups and their resistant politics since it gives a depth to the nation's dialogue and creates a dynamic between the poet and the audience.

In her article "Slam Poetry," Somers-Willett specifies that slam poetry is almost written in the first person and adopts the narrative mode. Also, "because it is delivered in a performative format," it seeks to be understood in the first listen (52). As a result, poets exploit it to perform "identity and identity politics" (52) or to proclaim the performers' self. It is noteworthy that the "craft and execution of that proclamation is just as important as the statement itself," argues Somers-Willett (52), meaning that the way slam poets perform their identity is as important as what they say about these identities. Thus, performance becomes significant in this regard and brings slam poetry in comparison to performance art as

well as dramatic and comic monologue since "it engages the very same politics of identity that can govern and arise from those expressions" (52). However, though slam poetry belongs to performance art and performance poetry, it is unique in its "keen awareness of its presentation in front of an audience and its public judgment by that audience" (52).

Proclamation of marginalised gender, class, ethnic, and racial identities appeals to and attracts the attention of slam audience; hence poets performing marginalised identities gain supportive ground in poetry slams as political and perforamtive events. The marginalised identity is regarded as authentic by slam audience, so two points must be highlighted; "the specific performative expressions of identity at poetry slams" and "the larger cultural politics of

identity that influence slam reception" (Somers-Willett, "Slam Poetry" 54). Therefore, Somers-Willett discusses the phenomena of considering the marginalised identity authenticity the criterion of slam success. She explores the political consequences of this phenomenon when performers are African American and the audience is white, middle-class. She expounds the connection between authenticity and identity claiming that an identity poem is considered authentic when the audience is convinced that "an original or essential self" is perfectly performed by the poet (Somers-Willett, "Slam Poetry" 54). Consequently, the poet is keen on showing the truth when presenting his/her subjective experience to expose an authentic self.

Somers-Willett also suggests that subjectivity is constructed as a

result of performing social norms that she describes as performative acts ("Slam Poetry" 55). For her, most performance studies scholars agree that "performance" is a real-time theatrical act that challenges identity while "perfomativity" is the discursive process of how that identity came to be ("Slam Poetry" 55). She elaborates that performativity attempts to cover the norms it repeats so as to make identity iteration novel. She maintains that performance is an example of identity's performativity or a "live embodiment and enactment of an identity in a particular space and time" (55) and that performativity is the cause and effect of embodied performance since it is the normative behaviour performance refers back to or parodies (56). She reaches the conclusion that "performativity comprises the discursive elements that inform and are produced by the act of performance" (56) and that the "authentic expression of the self is often treated as original, unique, and reflective of a deeply true internal substance" (The Cultural Politics 73). Hence, slam poets reveal some truth about their real selves and subjective experiences to reflect the authentic self.

Theatre scholar and socialist writer Erving Goffman in his 1959 monograph The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life links self presentation to others as a product of performance, or what they call "public expression of identity." He argues,

A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation-this self-is a *product* of a scene that

comes off, and is not the *cause* of it. The self, then, as performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location . . . ; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited. (253)

Similar to Butler, Goffman refers to the presentation of the self to others or the expression of identity as a performative act. He believes that performance is identity production not identity reflection. Hence, performance is what makes these identities real through interaction between the performer and the audience. The audience plays an important role in identity construction that is based on the judgment of others who either believe in the credibility of the performed identity or not. He maintains that "selfhood is constituted by how a performance of identity is received and judged by others, and so, in crediting or discrediting a performance of identity, a social audience helps to constitute or dispel one's sense of self in that context" (253). So, when the audience credits a performance of identity, the performer's presentation of self is confirmed and deemed as valid. Thus, to credit or discredit identities, the audience evaluates poets based on the credibility or the authenticity of their performed identities.

Celebrating Authenticity of Marginalised Identities

Slam poetry's pluralism is reflected in its diversity of topics and poets evident in its celebration of marginalised racial, sexual, and gender identities. Slam poetry manifests "that the spoken word in

the U.S. in recent decades is tied up in powerful social movements that reframed-and validated-cultural identities of minorities" (Hoffman 49). Openness to a wide community suggests, as Somers-Willett says, "a specific political inquiry in its practice, one that slam poets make explicit in their work about identity" (*The Cultural Politics* 6-7). Poets are mainly concerned with poetry survival in the public arena and at the same time how it reflects "cultural privilege and institutional power" (*The Cultural Politics* 7). Such pluralism and diversity urged slam poets to focus primarily on personal and political themes including construction of marginalised identities, the main focus of this study, through dynamic interaction between the poet and the audience. Damon writes,

The criterion for slam success seems to be some kind of "realness"-authenticity at the physical/sonic and metaphysical/emotional-intellectual-spiritual levels. This is why close listening is crucial; you're not just listening for technique, or "original imagery," or raw emotion, but for some transmission/recognition of resonant difference . . . a gestalt that effects a "felt change of consciousness" on the part of the listener. (329-30)

Hence, rewarding performances because of their "authenticity" or "transmission of resonant difference" is a performative effect. Therefore, in slam poems discussing identity, reward emerges not only due to expression of marginalised identities, but also due to the way that identity is performed on stage.

Marie Timbreza observes that most of the winners of the slam

competitions belong to the marginalised communities who are believed by the audience that perceives their experiences as the "most authentic and culturally representative and … most effectively snub dominant culture" (206). She adds, "Over time, the poet becomes the persona, which, if commercially successful, becomes the product" (206). She illustrates that slam poetry celebrates individuality, ethnic identity, and, as suggested by Somers-Willett, the "shared value of difference" (The Cultural Politics 10) onstage, backstage, and in the poetry community at large.

The audience needs a set of norms they are familiar with and against which they can judge identity poems as either authentic or inauthentic. So, through the audience's reception and reward of slam poems, poetry slams can authenticate particular voices and identities and they can also represent the identities that both poets and audience are anxious to see. Diamond judges performances at poetry slams as "cultural practices that conservatively reinscribe or passionately reinvent the ideas, symbols, and gestures that shape social life" (2). Through the public judging of identity by using scores, poetry slams can "reveal disguised systems of desire and power that underlie the performance of identity in culture" (Somers-Willett, The Cultural Politics 76).

Being rewarded of authenticity does not only depend on performing a marginalised identity that appeals to the audience, but also on how well performance of such an identity is. Also, to affirm the marginalised identity through

performance and to give either a sense of protest or empowerment are very good reasons behind the authenticity reward. Slam poet Ragan Fox claims that poets performing marginalised identities believe that being rewarded by the audience is "a declaration from marginal voices that their experiences are important, salient, and deserving of documentation." He adds that they are rewarded since "the masses are hungry to learn about what they were not exposed to in text books." He further admits that not all marginalised voices are rewarded equally by slam audiences because the performance of a marginalised racial identity can outweigh that of marginalised gender and sexual identities (qtd. in Somers-Willett, The Cultural Politics 77).

In "Slam Poetry," Somers-Willett focuses on the hypothesis that the self is created by performance and the "performed identities" by "social practice." Based on this, she believes that the authentic is also a social practice that does not exist except through its "repetition and acceptance over time" (56). The performer decides "when, where, and how to enact (perform) certain identities" (56) and since those identities reflect several cultural and social histories due to their being performative, these histories determine how the audience receives identity performance. Marginalised identities (racial, ethnic, gender, or sexual) are approved by the audience believing that they are authentic narratives. The audience grants authenticity to a poem about a marginalised identity not only for the writing and performance but also for the perfect, assured

performance of the marginalised identity itself as well as the political message it delivers.

The most rewarded of marginalised racial identities is the black identity represented by African American performers. Most of slam poets are black and quite a big number of winners are also black. The reason for the success of black slammers is that most of the contests on the local and the national were held in neighbouhoods where the audience are mainly middle class, white, and liberal who can accept countercultural messages that have a protesting tone and highlight social and racial inequality. Hence, slam performance avails the white audience the opportunity to support the blacks in their protest against the privileges of the white man and to confirm their anti-racist attitudes. Somers-Willett posits,

In the reward of racially based content, [the] audiences not only affirm and construct the identities of slam performers; they also affirm and construct identities for themselves. Because of slam's liberal leanings and system of public critique and reward, poets condemning racism may be applauded for their writing, performance, and message, but they may also be rewarded in part because the audience does not want to appear racist (*The Cultural Politics* 79-80).

Thus, slam poems performed by blacks is a good opportunity to have the whites sympathise with them against any forms of racial discrimination. Other reasons for hailing Afro-Americans slam performers include: the rebellious tone and the competitive

atmosphere that appeal to young people; the similarity between slam poetry and hip-hop music that attracts young generations with its call for keep-it-real and being conceived as a means of authentic racial expression; and finally the counter cultural tone evoked by slam poets urging the audience to political protest. This may explain why the black identity wins the audience's approval bearing in mind the notion of authentic identity as the main criterion for success.

Fascination of whites with black artists dates back in history, according to Simon Frith, the sociomusicologist and rock critic, to "the relationship between black performance and white pleasure" when the black slaves used to sing and dance to entertain their white masters, "a pleasure tangled up with guilt" (22, 23). However, this sense of guilt does not spoil the kind of pleasure attained by the black performances. Somers-Willett perceives that "some slam performances … may be heightened via a complex matrix of desire for, alienation from, and fascination with the 'Other'" ("Slam Poetry" 65).

However, the white audience may have an ambivalent attitude towards authenticating black poets' marginalised identity which can be explained by what Homi Bhabha calls "the articulation of multiple beliefs" (34) through fetishism. Fetishism, for Bhabha, is a "non-repressive form of knowledge that allows the possibility of simultaneously embracing two contradictory beliefs, one official and one secret, one archaic and one progressive, one that allows the

myth of origins, the other that articulates difference and division" (32). This explains the contradictory desires of the white audience fulfilled by rewarding black poets. Stuart Hall adds that fetishism "affirms difference while at the same time denying it" (276) and thus comprising different desires simultaneously. For Somers-Willett, fetishism indicates that the "othered voices embody the fetish's ambivalent political meaning" ("Slam Poetry" 66) because they are directly regarded as outside of the normative realm of maleness, straightness and whiteness.

Somers-Willett suggests, "What is authentic about identity is not the realness or truth it is often used to connote but the repetition and reception of certain behaviours and characteristics over time" (*The Cultural Politics* 8). So, the audience regards the repeated identity behaviours. Moreover, political activism emerges in slam poetry, particularly when parody or a persona is used to investigate identity. Since poetry slams are the venues where identity can be explored through interaction between poets and audience, they are also the venue where "marginalised identities are invented, reflected, affirmed, and refigured" (Somers-Willett, *The Cultural Politics* 9). When the poet performs in front of an audience, he/she combines several forces, namely fetishistic, revolutionary, and entertaining. All of these forces give authenticity to the poet's identity. The following part discusses construction of marginalised identities as represented by the poetry of six female slammers.

Construction of Marginalised Identity

This part focuses on poetry written by six female poets who are either of a marginalised identity or represent their sympathy towards issues of racial, sexual, gender, or ethnic marginalisation. The main female poets of focus are Staceyann Chin, Maggie Estep, Patricia Smith, Jessica Care Moore, Gayle Danely, and Suheir Hammad. One poem for each poet is chosen for analysis.

Marginalised Gender / Sexual Identity

"All Oppression Is Connected" is a poem that discusses the relationship between sexual orientation and issues of race and ethnicity. It reflects disparate agendas as well as the close connection between black performance poetry and the poetry slam. This poem is written by the internationally renowned New York City Jamaican poet Staceyann Chin (1972 -   ). Her

performance of this poem is "loud, fierce, determined, and accompanied by the approving cheers of her audience" (Bauridl 715). Chin sees her poem as "socio-political action" and "activism" that promotes "social justice" ("Poet" 364). She claims that her artistic goals are "agitating the powers that could make the lives of [...] people better" ("Poet" 365) and stemming from her conviction that art can change socio-political realities, she calls for action in the poem:

the New Age claims that

sexual, racial and economic freedom

has finally come for all

these under-informed

self-congratulating

pseudo-intellectual utterances

reflect how apolotical the left

has become (11-17)

Chin ponders on the status quo of all freedoms obtained by people. She says "Everyday / I become more and more afraid to say / black or lesbian or woman" (37-39). Since she claims that she cares about "[all] Black people, and lesbians, [and] girls" ("Poet" 364), she denotes several struggles in her poem focusing on several agendas and different interests. She talks about "racism" as one form of oppression, yet at the same time she addresses several instances such as "homophobia" (52) and denounces those representing the gay community as "the ones who used to burn crosses" (84). "[W]here are the LGBT marches / to support a woman's right to an abortion?" (68-69) she further asks; and she reminds her audience: "[I]n India / in China / in South America a small child cuts the cloth / to construct

you a new shoe / [...] an old lifestyle held upright / by the engineered hunger and misuse of impoverished lives" (110-115). Also, Chin describes the misery of women and girls "a woman is beaten every 12 seconds / every two minutes / a girl is raped" (106-8).

By using the second-person pronoun, Chin condemns the gay community as well as anyone who ignores or takes advantage of others' poverty leading to a completely intricate network of "oppression" that hinders distinction between "good" and "bad," and "guilty" and "innocent." Thus she makes obvious the "artificial constructedness of categories used to separate 'us' from 'them'" (Bauridl 716), a clear manifestation of the marginalised black race. The term "black" is complicated in Chin's poem viewed from the perspectives of "race," the way she

links gender, sexuality, race and poverty, her personal experience as a black lesbian who is also an immigrant from Jamaica, and finally all forms of "oppression" as she says, "I want to scream out loud / ALL OPPRESSION IS CONNECTED" (57-58).

In her poetry, Chin is mainly concerned with the silenced and the marginalised, such as those victimised by discrimination, violence, oppression, and racism, aiming to give them power. Her poems often explore the possible means and the different structures of Othering. She observes in "All Oppression Is Connected" the Community of Others "that is thus performatively constructed" and that "is perceived as flexible and linked by fate and shared 'humanity'" (Bauridl 722). Chin's "All Oppression is Connected" is

an example of gay or female performance poetry. It shows that there is no homogenous black literature since it comprises various interests and agendas. Bauridl believes that Chin's poem "does not constitute an independent black phenomenon but is entangled in a similarly heterogeneous art form that in turn lacks clear-cut and linear diachronic traces but is determined by retrospective and synchronic appropriations and strategic contextualisations" (723). The poem shows the strong narrative thread that results in a point of revelation at the end. The poem reflects how ideas, people, and goods cross over national and cultural borders and how the shared belief in performativity and the intermingling of art and life are what keeps black poets and their poems closely related.

Another example of marginalised sexual identity is Maggie Estep (1963-2014)'s "Sex Goddess of the Western Hemisphere" (Algarin and Holman 62-64) where ambivalent laughter and performativity of gender are displayed by the poet. The poem opposes culturally defined gender roles by the description of the poet herself and what she pretends to be. It illustrates Estep's marginalised sexual identity suppressed by the patriarchal society. The poem also manifests her psychotic behaviour and its informative sexual politics of patriarchy. Repetition, as one of the main features of slam poetry, plays a significant role in the poem as Estep repeatedly claims throughout the poem, "I AM THE SEX GODDESS OF THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE," to emphasise how proud she is of herself. Estep uses a jaded tone that lacks enthusiasm and reflects weariness. Hoffman remarks, "her languid air stands in ironic counterpoint to the outrageous claim that she makes and shapes the entire parodie performance" (61). It is evident that Estep's definition of herself deprives the dominant order of its power and challenges culturally defined gender roles by the division between what she is and how she behaves.

"Hey,"

you may say to yourself,

"who the hell's she trying to kid,

She's no sex goddess,"

But trust me,

I am

if only for the fact that I have

the unabashed gall

to call

myself a SEX GODDESS (8-17)

Using the first person pronoun

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reflects the sense of personality that is a true representation of the poet-performer. Estep represents herself as a vamp, a woman that allures men by sex, and uses a "testy tone" when she describes the "perversion of female sexuality by pornography" and her being away from that so called "mass-marketed" image (Hoffman 61).

I haven't always been

a SEX GODDESS

I used to be just a mere mortal woman

but I grew tired of sexuality being repressed (33-36)

…

'cause my being a SEX GODDESS

it isn't a SEXUAL thing

it's a POLITICAL thing (51-53)

Estep gives a satirical portrayal of sex and gender ideological dimensions and at the same time aborts all attempts aiming at making her sexually subordinate and politically marginalised. Estep is assuming a voice to provoke the audience, gain supportive ground, and prove that she will never be marginalised. At the end, she asserts hilariously, "I AM THE SEX GODDESS OF THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE / and you're not" (69-70), denying power to others and mocking them as she illustrates the competitive relationship between females saturated by patriarchy. Estep is able through the context and reception of the poetry slam to show that her imitation of an imitation of the female is truly disturbing. This poem makes it clear that slam poetry incites people to laugh while it performs a significant cultural and political identity.

Marginalised Gender / Racial Identity

Persona poems are a mode of performing identity. The female poet performs an identity different from her own. The audience has to be aware of the distinction between the slam female poet and the persona she performs; otherwise "the 'I' of the text and the 'I' of the person standing in front of the audience are peculiarly wedded .... [T]here is a claim for the equivalence of the two" (Silliman 362-63). Thus the poet embodies the "I" of the poem and inhabits that different person's identity. If the audience realises the persona portrayed, they become aware of the identity in construction through the slam performance. In addition, the author's embodiment of his/her poem on the slam stage emphasises his/her identity and dedicates his/her authorship as the "I" of the page becomes that of the stage because the author embodies declarations about his/her personal experience in performance. This physical presence definitely reveals certain aspects of the poet's identity through the body, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, which enhances the poem's meaning and impact on the audience. For example, in Patricia Smith (1955-)'s poem "Skinhead" (Algarin and Holman 277-279) she tries to perform an identity different from hers by using different physical markers of colour and gender.

P. Smith, who won the Individual Slam Championship for four times, is famous for performing various persona poems in different competitions. In "Skinhead," she writes under the guise of a white skinhead supermarcist. The poem begins by

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representing the identity of the supermarcist usually associated with a skin head. The supermarcist does not only think that he is beautiful, but that his race is so, too: "They call me skinhead, and I got my own beauty" (1). By the vivid description of the scene, the audience can see the big white back of the skinhead and the one who uses a knife to label him digging into the flesh. The poem goes on to show the skinhead shaving his head. By using the razor he thinks that there are many ways to "bring blood closer to the surface of [his] skin" (8). In the last two lines of the first stanza the poet's reference to race is made clear: "These are the duties of the righteous, / the ways of the anointed" (9-10) where the words "righteous" and "anointed" refer to the white race as if shaving the head is a religious ritual as the supermarcist believes. The first reference to another race is evident in the third stanza and it is actually offensive:

... I sit here

and watch niggers take over my TV set,

kings walking up and down the sidewalks in my head,

walking like their fat black mamas *named* them freedom.

My shoulders tell me that ain't right.

So I move out into the sun

where my beauty makes them lower their heads,

or into the night

with a lead pipe up my sleeve,

a razor tucked in my boot.

I was born to make things right. (21-31)

The speaker's violent feelings towards a different race becomes obvious and the poet repeats some of the words used in the first stanza "I sit," "my beauty," and "razor." The speaker's violent attitude brings the audience back to the first stanza where he uses a razor to shave his head and the many ways he "can bring blood closer to the surface." The last line "I was born to make things right" (31) echoes the line "the duties of the righteous," attributing righteousness to the white race.

Stanza four takes racial discrimination and violence towards another race to a new level. The actions described by the speaker disturbs the audience as well as his repeated description of his righteous self that "sets things right." In the following stanza, he describes his sexual excitement and he repeats "I was born to make things right" (44), which is deemed ironic by the poet. In the next stanza, most of the images are repeated to stress his ego. However, in the end he says: "and I come off looking like some kind of freak, / like I'm Hitler himself. I ain't that lucky" (62-63). The audience believes that speaker despises Hitler, whereas in fact he thinks highly of him, which is obviously scaring and shocking. P. Smith stresses the irony of the poem in the last lines when the skinhead is looking at the mirror and it becomes clear that he is despising himself, not anyone else. She changes her line spacing as well as her visual structure to allow the skinhead to breathe in between the lines as if gathering up his strength and leaving a powerful effect on the audience.

The way P. Smith performs the poem reflects the way she

perceives a white man's hatred to her black race. She acts muscularly while holding the microphone and speaks in an aggressive voice that matches the character she personifies; a white man whose voice is full of hatred and anger towards the black race. She says describing the poem, "I wanted to understand a man who unconditionally hated what I was. . . . [W]hen I perform the poem, audiences are jolted by his voice coming from the mouth of a black woman" ("Persona Poems" 73). The sharp contrast between the persona performed and both the gender and race of the slam poet is evident. Hence, there is much space for identity critique. The audience is undoubtedly affected by the black female who performs in a skinhead white man. The audience is able to recognise P. Smith's voice as a persona and they are also able to realise the exchange of voices she is doing. They understand that her embodiment of "skinhead" is a performance of her identity as a black woman as much as her persona's identity. Here, the poet's construction of identity is explicit as the poem's end asks the audience to support the white skinhead's opinion concerning race.

I'm riding the top rung of the perfect race,

my face scraped pink and brilliant.

I'm your baby, America,

    your boy,

…

And I was born

and raised

right here. (70-77)

In this poem, P. Smith changes some concepts about male prowess and calls for the empowerment of black women. While performing, She pauses dramatically after "I was born / and raised" pushing her head back and laughing maliciously, then putting an end to the amusement and saying "right here" with such an urgent and angry voice looking at the ground in front of her. It seems that at the end she decides to relief her own identity as well as that of the skinhead when she speaks the last line in her own voice as if reminding the audience of the skinhead's threat to her race and gender. This can be described as a moment of revelation to the audience as they have now discovered that they are accomplices of such prejudice because of their implied silence and acceptance.

The Black American poet Jessica Care Moore (1971-   ) is a winner of the slam event *Amateur Night at the Apollo* for five times. Her "My caged bird don't sing and every Black bird ain't a piece of fried chicken" from her collection *The Words Don't Fit In My Mouth* (1997) also illustrates a socio-political issue represented in the marginalised gender/racial identity:

My caged bird don't sing

It cries

Stolen wings can't fly

Cause they took away our music

Makers
Soul takers

Turning trees to twigs

Fed us worms from pigs

Robbed our nests

At best

Baby Birds

Learn how to fly

Across foreign skies

Make it across

Lost

Millions on that ship

With settlers looking like

Gilligan

Figuring out ways to steal again

Anotha loafa Sankofa

…

Bird dressed in blue

Locked in a red pod zoo

And all the walls were white

Typical African bird plight

Tight as it seems

Bird had those genes

To sing Negro spirituals

Dropping bass off her beak

Bellowing beats quite lyrical

Performing miracles

Magnificent enough to rebuild

The walls of Jericho

Here we go Here we go...

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SIM2S7IhHc4>)

Moore begins the poem by saying that the caged African bird cannot sing because white men have taken away its music, the Black/African music. Moore shows her craft as a poet by using pairs that nearly rhyme such as "across/Lost" and "Gilligan/steal again" through her pronunciation and the timing of her oral delivery. The poem is also accompanied by back beat as a sort of music. Moore criticises the commodification of African American musical forms and she confirms that "all divas that grace the world with their

spirit through songs no one can ever steal away" and refers to the white male rapper when she says, "Vanilla ice ice baby," suggesting that "every "Heart beat / Drum beat...ain't for sample / Or sale." Moore represents the theme of the marginalised identity of enslaved African females. She reiterates "My caged bird" thrice and her usage of the imagery of blood and bars in a symbolic way "Bird dressed in blue / Locked in a red pod zoo / And all the walls were white /Typical African bird plight" using the American flag colours to project enslavement in America. Towards the middle of the poem she says, the lines "Clawed feet / leaving droppings on cross burners / Wearing sheets" using metonymy and synecdoche "cross" and "sheets" to reflect the bird's response to the white man's suppression or racial marginalisation.

Moore also represents gender resistance through portraying the imprisoned bird:

Black tar babies covered in feathers

Wearing America's old past time tether

Didn't make that caged bird sing a thing

But the whole village knew she could play the harmonica

With her heart flute

Breathe life into lungs

Make babies come

Still, that caged bird didn't sing a peep

Cause she saw her family moved out like sheep

And she recognized the wolves shooting at her feet

Find a way to get a grip

Might fly off this slave ship

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SIM2S7IhHc4>)

Moore associates the female's ability to reproduce with the bird's ability to create music and she compares the unjust commodification of the African music to the unfair commodification of black female bodies. To defy its slavery, the bird will not lay the ebony egg as well as the black female refuses to "make baby come" to a life of harsh labour and unpaid wages. Moore concludes by saying that not only the "caged bird don't sing" but also it won't sing. The metaphor of the caged bird that can "sing Negro spirituals," play a heart flute and village blues on the harmonica in one breath, and become a human beat box that "bellows beats quite lyrical" dominates the whole poem

indicating that the bird is free to do whatever it wants. It embodies the black female's identity that can be whatever she wants despite the white rapper's oppression.

Marginalised Racial Idenity

In her poem "Funeral Like Nixon's" (2008) (Glazner 42-45), the Black American poet Gayle Danely directly attacks the white man's culture, the privileges attributed to them, and the racism practiced against the blacks by expressing her desire to be enshrined like Nixon:

Brown and shiny casket

Expensive

Draped with the American flag

Poised

…

When I die

I want a casket like Richard Nixon's (1-8)

She goes on to describe how she wants to be like the deceased president:

I want the Right Reverend Billy Graham

To lie about me

I want him to tell Channel 5, 11, CNN and World News Tonight

That I Gayle Danley

Was the world's most honourable Black woman (18-22)

In her performance of "Funeral Like Nixon's" Danley holds her head up while looking at the audience using her nose to reflect the humour of the poem as she asks for a state funeral like the deceased president. She pretends as if such a funeral is her legal right, exaggerating a lot in her performance and making the audience laugh at her proclamations. She adds to her performance an improvised coda that was not previously written describing the white man's memory as "blameless," "timeless," and "ageless" then she becomes serious, pauses, looks to the ground and finally leaves the stage very quietly and softly. This unexpected shift from comedy and humour to drama, from the playful hyperboles to silent seriousness enables Danley to have a great effect on the audience changing the scene from a funny parody of a presidential funeral to a harsh criticism of the privileges of the white man. This shift in tone or *volta* is commonly used in slam poetry to indicate a shift in performance taking place mostly at the end to reveal a sense of truth. Danley's poem allows the white audience to realise their cultural privilege and her critique of it. Having the audience accept

this poem implies their recognition and acceptance of what the poet says as well as their distance or refusal of such racial practices, hence they construct an antiracist identity for themselves.

I want a funeral like Nixon's

no acne no smell

…

Barbara Bush on the front row

No memory

...

Let me break this down for you:

you see

I just want to die like a white man

blameless

timeless

ageless (47-59)

To sum up, Danely's "Funeral Like Nixon's"propagates Bakhtin's

carnival that celebrates a temporary liberation from all truths and calls for diminishing of all privileges, norms and prohibitions.

Since the marginalised identity is the most rewarded and favoured by slam audience, the Palestinian-American Suheir Hammad (1973-) tries to appeal to the sympathy of the slam audience by her poem "First Writing Since" (2001) (254-58) in which she stages the grief and vulnerability of mankind. After the crisis of 9/11, the spirit of retaliation and retrieving the image of the powerful US dominated the social and political scene. In an attempt to assert its strength and deny vulnerability, the US has adopted a violent foreign policy taking advantage of the vulnerability of others. Butler suggests in *Precious Life: The*

Powers of Mourning and Violence (2004) that "Violence is surely a touch of the worst order, a way of primary human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying way, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another" (28-29). She claims that all humanity lives in this kind of vulnerability to the other. Then she assures that "grief can be another alternative to using power and resorting to violence because "mindfulness of . . . vulnerability can become the basis of claims for non-military political solutions, just as denial of this vulnerability through a fantasy of mastery (an institutionalized fantasy of mastery) can fuel the instruments of war" (29).

In staging her grief and vulnerability, Hammad is opposing the American call to restore power and take revenge after 9/11 attacks that has become more of a symbolic event not related to the personal loss but to the nation image. Hammad attempts to draw attention back to the event's human and personal element employing a marginal human voice of vulnerability and grief opposing the mainstream call for power and revenge. She says, "the stars and stripes … represent the dead as citizens first, not family, not lovers" (111-113). Hammad dedicates "First Writing Since" to be an attack on human life not on the US. She begins her poem by portraying the human losses and deaths: "there have been no words…no poetry in the ashes south of canal street. no prose in refrigerated trucks driving debris and dna" (1-4) to emphasise the idea that 9/11 attacks are something to lament, not something to avenge.

Hammad also exploits her marginalised identity since she is a Palestinian-American woman who belongs to an ethnic group that has grief and vulnerability attributed to. Her ethnic group is also linked to terrorism, so she was accused of knowing the culprits of the terrorist attack: "one more person asks me if I knew the hijackers" (74). She mentions that her brothers are also in the navy: "my baby brother is a man now, and on alert, and praying five times a / day that the orders he will take … are righteous . . . both my brothers – my heart stops … – not a beat to disturb / my fear" (119-120). To refer to the human aspect of the incident and to deny the call of ultimate power Hammad says, "I have never felt less American and more new Yorker, particularly Brooklyn, than these past days" (110-111) to draw attention to the

emotional side of the attack and the human losses under the rubble. Because of belonging to a vulnerable minority, Hammad is identifying herself more with terrorism-stricken people. She illustrates that grief and vulnerability are cross-national human feelings saying, "if there are any people on earth who understand how new york is / feeling right now, they are in the west bank and the gaza strip" (90-91) referring to Butler's notion of the "primary human vulnerability" of all human beings.

The audience's emotional reaction to the poem and the vulnerability of the performing poet indicates their integral part in realising the meaning delivered by the poet. Hammad uses both her body and her voice to show her vulnerability and grief. She speaks in a slow soft voice that

sometimes is changed to an angry voice and lowers her eyes. She wants to move the audience to feel her plight as a vulnerable human being. As Erika Fischer-Lichte remarks, "strong emotions bear the largest responsibility for triggering impulses to intervene and create a new set of norms for the acting subject" (177). The audience has no option but sympathising with her vulnerable position and accepting the political emotional effect she is practicing on them.

Hammad is trying to appeal to the audience through their shared humanness or citizenship to provoke a sense of shared ethical responsibility towards the "human other" and the "citizen other." Hence, at the end of the poem, she looks directly to the audience and says, "affirm life. / affirm life. / we got to carry each other now. / you are either with life, or against it.

affirm life" (142-46) aiming to counteract the spirit of retaliation prevailing at the time and to make the audience realise that they share an ethical responsibility towards humanity.

To sum up, all the slam poems discussed reflect the authenticity of performance as the poets emphasise truth and realness in their expression of their experiences. The interaction between the poet and the audience help identify authenticity as a performative phenomenon in all selected poems reflecting different socio-political aspects of the American popular culture. According to Somers-Willett, one can assume that slam poetry is "poets' attitude of resistance and tension [that] helps to construct and define the people's culture it claims to celebrate" since "its performance, and its discourses of tension can signify disruptions, discontinuities,

and debates within American culture itself" (*The Cultural Politics* 41). Authenticity is evident in all poems under study through the poet's "performing issues of identity" or through "engaging the politics of difference and social change" (Somers-Willett, *The Cultural Politics* 37). It becomes clear that through their slam poetry, female poets employ politically and socially charged verse that reveals their marginalised identities. The author's proclamation of self and using the first person on performance of self and identity reflect the significance of the author and the identity she enacts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research paper has attempted to show that "Slam Movement" as represented in slam poetry aims at improving people's life by addressing modern personal, political, social, and spiritual issues. Slam poetry calls for rejection of and resistance to the dominant culture, confirmation and construction of marginalised identities, and fostering cultural exchange. The main focus of the study is to highlight how identity is constructed and the aspects of embodiment represented in the poet's gestures, voice, and body. Hence, it discusses the difference between performance and performativity. The study highlights that whereas performance represents a real-time theatrical act, performative reflects the discursive process of how that performed identity came into being. It has become evident that since performance is an example of identity performativity or a live embodiment of an identity and performativity is the cause and effect of embodied performance, performativity comprises the

elements that inform and are produced by performance.

The paper explains that there are three framing devices for constructing the self: dramatic monologue; performance and impersonation of character; and maximising poetry's transgressive powers by rejecting the print page's promise of autonomy and authority. Slam poetry appeals to female poets since they found the freedom and space to enact their identities that have been trapped for years by conventional written poetry.

The audience perceives marginalised idenitities' experiences as the most authentic and culturally representative and that why most slam events winners belong to minorities. It has been proven that slam poetry asserts individuality and marginalised identity and adds emphasis to the importance of sharing differences between cultures, beliefs and political issues as manifested by the poetry of several female slammers discussed in this study. Female slammers' poetry about marginalised identity represents a second self constructed and parodied by the slam event and seeks to distort ethnic, racial, gender, and sexual stereotypes. Moreover, laughter and parody in their poetry help free participants from the prohibitions and norms of culture and allow them to momentarily construct a second, unofficial identity. Hence, slam poetry perceives that destruction of all existing norms is the ultimate value.

Six poems of six female slammers were discussed. Staceyann Chin's "All Oppression Is Connected" calls for socio-political justice and links gender,

sexual, and racial forms of oppression. Maggie Estep's "I am the Sex Goddess of the Western Hemisphere" challenges the culturally defined gender roles and reflects the poet's marginalised sexual identity repressed by the society. Patricia Smith's "Skinhead" reflects how the poet inhabits another person's identity and how the audience perceives the construction of the marginalised racial and gender identity through performance. Jessica Care Moore's "My caged bird don't sing and every black bird ain't a piece of fried chicken" represents the poet's marginalised gender and racial identity represented by the enslaved African females. Gayle Danely's "Funeral Like Nixon's" discusses the privileges of the white man and the racism practiced against the blacks. At the end, the audience realises their cultural privileges and confirms their antagonism of such racial practices. Finally, Suheir Hammad's ethnic identity is made clear in "First Writing Since" where she affirms a sense of shared ethical responsibility towards humanity and defies the spirit of retaliation. She also performs the grief and vulnerability of mankind.

The article reaches the conclusion that the audience rewards marginalised identity as authentic if they believe that an original or essential self is perfectly performed on stage. The audience does not only construct the identities of the slam performers, but they also construct identities for themselves. Consequently, through slam poetry marginalised identities are constructed.

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