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Performing the “Low-Maintenance” Woman: Desire, Self-Effacement, and Feminine Respectability in Harnidh Kaur’s *The Girls Are Not Fine*

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Abstract:

The Girls Are Not Fine: The Cost of Ambition, Careers and Becoming by Harnidh Kaur offers a contemporary feminist critique of the emotional, social, and cultural negotiations through which Indian women are conditioned to be agreeable, undemanding, and endlessly accommodating. This paper examines Kaur’s concept of the “low-maintenance” woman through her ThePrint extract, where the “chill girl” is presented as a refined performance of femininity rather than a personality. The woman who asks for little, avoids conflict, suppresses pain, and appears effortless is celebrated as mature, desirable, and respectable, while this performance conceals emotional deprivation, denial of desire, and loss of selfhood. Drawing on Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, the study analyses how repeated acts of adjustment, silence, emotional restraint, and self-sacrifice construct the “chill girl” identity. It argues that feminine respectability functions as a subtle form of social control, demanding women remain independent but not threatening, ambitious but not disruptive. Kaur’s non-fiction challenges these cultural scripts, exposing self-denial as a manufactured virtue and affirming women’s right to desire, demand, and live without remorse.

Keywords: Gender Performativity, Low-Maintenance Femininity, Chill Girl, Feminine Respectability and Self-Effacement.

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INTRODUCTION:

The emerging Indian feminist literature focuses on the everyday, personal and unspoken experiences that impact women.

Many of the recent feminist texts, rather than warning about the seemingly monstrous violence, explore the lesser-known forms of

women's violence: soft speaking, careful desiring, earning without menacing, loving without demanding, succeeding without being an inconvenience. *The Girls Are Not Fine: The Cost of Ambition, Careers and Becoming* by Harnidh Kaur is in this crucial realm. It is an ethnography of the new India that traverses' themes of labour, currency, family, body, friendship, love and emotional labour. Penguin Random House India has called *The Girls Are Not Fine*, a vocabulary of experiences that women carry but are never afforded the chance to name. That this is important is essential since Kaur's feminist project is not just to counsel women, but to call them out on the social scripts that regulate them.

Here we will focus on one such script: the "low maintenance" script. The popular social definition of a low-maintenance woman is a relaxed, mature, flexible and emotionally unresponsive woman. She does not need to be patted on the back all the time. She does not need to be clear. She does not cause any discomfort in expressing hurt, dissatisfaction, ambition or expectations. She is admired for her lack of demands on others. On first impression, this could appear as self-assurance or self-discipline. But Kaur's work elicits a tougher question: What if the woman

who is easy to deal with is not free, but trained? What if her carefree nature is not natural, but acted out? Is her silence rather than peace, fear?

ThePrint's Kaur piece titled *Every Woman Must Be High Maintenance*. The 'Chill Girl' is 'Just a Performance' is a direct link to this discussion. The narration starts with Kaur's

admission that, "I was very chill in my twenties" (Kaur, "Every Woman"). The admission is very simple, but deceptive. It is more than just a personal stage: it suggests a cultural type. The "chill girl" is the woman who does not seem to need much. She is pliable, relaxed and non-threatening. But Kaur unearths its glitz and glamour in a flash by throwing in, "I was, too miserable" (Kaur, "Every Woman"). This contradiction between "chill" and miserable is the emotional focus of the essay. Not only does Kaur reveal that the ease of performance often demands a burying of desire, but she also demonstrates this in her performance.

This paper proposes that Kaur's concept of "low maintenance" woman can be explained by looking into the study of Judith Butler on the theory of performativity of the gender. Butler, of course, disputes the notion of an inner truth of gender. Throughout the book,

Butler's thesis is that "gender is always a doing," and never a reflection of a pre-existing self (25). Gender is created through behaviours, gestures, acts and social expectations that are repeated. In this context, femininity isn't just a state for women to be, but one that they are continually asked to enact. In this paper, this "low-maintenance" woman is interpreted as a performative construction that is created through numerous gestures of adjustment, silence, tolerance and emotional minimisation. What Kaur reveals in her writing is that this performance is acknowledged in the language of respectability/desirability, and the woman's self is being further cloaked.

Judith Butler and the Theory of Gender Performativity

The concept of gender performativity is still one of the most influential theories in feminist and gender studies and Judith Butler is still regarded as one of the most influential theorists within these fields. The main thesis of Butler is that there is no biology or interior identity that defines gender. Instead, gender is performed and is produced socially. According to

Butler, the institution of gender identity in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution"

is a "stylised repetition of acts" (519). They are not acts of violence and seem natural because they are repeated over time; they are "sanctioned" by society. These are thus not natural feminine or masculine characteristics, but rather socially constructed.

This theory comes in handy when reading Kaur, since this "low maintenance" woman isn't born that way, she is made that way. She is bred by a culture which encourages women to be agreeable and penalises them for being demanding. The first lesson a girl can learn is that she should not ask too many questions, she should not seem disappointed, she should not look angry, she should not seem to expect emotional regularity, or she should not seem to be so ambitious as to make others feel uneasy. As these behaviours are repeated, over time these are misinterpreted as personality. Instead, society deems her to be "easy-going," "mature," or "low-maintenance," while she actually has simply swallowed the price of asking.

Butler's concept also really helps us to understand why performing is hard to give up. Gender performances cannot be just about personal preference. These are formed by social rewards and punishments. The woman who does not play the role of a woman who does not require much is deemed difficult,

needy, arrogant, aggressive or ungrateful. The performance goes on and on because it keeps her safe from others' rejection. But it also separates her from her own desires as well. Kaur's work is effective in capturing this tension: that the performance does not make the woman not liked, but at the same time it also does not allow for her to be seen fully.

The "Chill Girl" as a Cultural Performance

The term "chill girl" is important because it is used in the current slang of society particularly in contexts of dating, working, friendship and urban femininity. This "chill girl"

seems contemporary and liberated. In a traditional sense, she is no shrinking violet. She can be educated, self-supporting, articulate and professional. But she persists in her sex and makes others feel comfortable. But she is not passive in the traditional sense; she is expected to be convenient for her emotions.

The Print (Kaur, "Every Woman") excerpt reads: "The chill girl is a performance. The sentence seems to be almost begging for a Butlerian reading. The chill girl isn't just a woman with a laid back attitude. She is a character that is invented in front of a group of people. Kaur defines this audience as men,

bosses, families and social structures that are rejecting when women are seen as "too much" (Kaur, "Every Woman"). The girl learns to edit herself. Her walls never go away, but instead they become called tolerance and her expectations are disciplined to be silenced.

This performance is particularly effective as it passes for freedom. If a woman will not admit she needs a commitment, reassurance, recognition, fair pay, and emotional responsibility, she seems free from the traditional female dependency. But, Kaur writes, such "freedom" can also be another kind of discipline. The woman is not unchained as she has none. She is caught up in the fact that "needs" make her "not-lovely". Women do not need to ask for help or attention. The dilemma is that women are pushed to think that any time they ask for respect, clarity, fairness, care, etc., is too much.

The "chill girl" is thus an ideal object of patriarchy, in that she regulates herself, rather than waiting for someone else to regulate her. She expects to be rejected and adapts accordingly. She waits not to be silenced; she silences herself. She does not have to wait for them to say her

asking is too much; she lowers her asking before it is said. This is what Kaur reveals as

subtle violence. A low-maintenance woman is praised, not for her wholeness, but for her digestibility.

Desire and the Fear of Asking

The best thing about Kaur's argument, is her handling of desire. Desire is not just a sexual or romantic desire. It has to do with wanting time, recognition, money, communication, care, safety, ambition and respect. Women's desire is deemed to be dangerous in a Patriarchal culture where it will disturb others' comfort. When a woman is too eager becomes "needy"; when she seeks professional achievement, it becomes 'aggressive'; when she seeks 'fairness' at home, it becomes 'ungrateful'; when a woman seeks 'pleasure' or 'autonomy', it becomes 'too modern'. The low-maintenance performance resolves the social issue by making the ladies look unappealing.

Butler's theory gives us a way to recognise this seeming "lack of desire" as not being natural. It is carried out by repetitively repeating it. When it is not okay, a woman keeps saying "It's okay." She endlessly takes up unplanned invitations, fuzzy connections, uncompensated emotional work and the invisibility of her work at the job. All of these acts may seem insignificant, but collectively it

forms a gender identity. Now she is "the woman who does not mind." Eventually, others think that she doesn't really care. Worse, she could start to think it is true.

Kaur's writing does not allow this erasure, and brings back desire to the woman. In the extract, the speaker is telling us that she did need clarity, consideration and prioritisation, but she has learned not to ask for them (Kaur, "Every Woman"). That is the admission that is so important because it is the one that gets you to make things right between desire and shame. The

problem is not the number of needs women have; the problem is that women are taught to feel their normal human needs are failures. Kaur's feminist move is to make desire a legitimate desire, not an excess.

In India, it is more crucial as feminine respectability is linked with restraint. It is expected that the "good" woman will adapt. She should not talk too much or too openly, earn too openly, love too openly, or speak too directly. Even in the modern era, women are expected to combine softness and assertiveness with ambition and availability to emotions. Kaur's low-maintenance woman is at this juncture of modernity and respectability. She can have her own say, but

not get in the way. She may want, but as long as it does not throw off the balance of society.

Feminine Respectability and the Politics of Being “Difficult”

The one of the most effective ways of controlling femininity is respectability. Does not necessarily work via explicit ban. It often operates by means of tags. It is not always put in the most explicit terms that women are to be silent, it is sometimes stated that they might be considered difficult. They do not always prohibit them from asking for money, they are told to wait. They do not always have to be channeled or not be allowed to want to be great, they are told not to look like they are trying to be great. In this manner, respectability converts into social control to moral counseling.

This is evident in Kaur’s extract, be it in the personal or professional domain. The low maintenance woman is valued in relationships for not asking for their emotional responsibility. At home she is rewarded from the family for not being too opinionated, not being too successful. In the workplace, she gets punished when she asks for fair recognition and compensation. Words like not a team player, demanding or aggressive are used to substitute for the dating label of

“High maintenance” in professional settings, notes Kaur (Every Woman). The meaning does not change, only the vocabulary.

That is where Butler’s theory comes in. Whereas gender is a product of the cumulative and ongoing nature of social practices, so is femininity in the workplace. The “good” woman employee is expected to have competence, but without having the rights of the employee. She will have to work, but not to request any reward in particular. She needs to be dedicated yet not overworked. She has to be a woman who has a vision but also has the capacity to not be threatening. This double standard comes out in Kaur’s talk about the woman who is asking for a promotion. What many people consider as confident in a man, many women consider as pushy. The action remains the same, with the difference in the female and male roles.

Labeling is thus a form of discipline, the “difficult” label. It cautions women to not get out of the script. A woman asking for what she deserves is not just requesting anything; she’s interfering with the “routine” of feminine accommodation. She will NOT be low maintenance. Society reacts by telling her that it is her fault for not having the right character; it is not the structures that are the problem. Kaur’s efforts question this flip. She

demonstrates that the woman is not hard, but is hard because she asks; that she is made hard because she asks, that she is made hard by asking.

Self-Effacement as Social Currency

Important to this paper is the term, “self-effacement”, given that it embodies the price of low maintenance femininity. Effacing the self means to diminish, obscure or erase oneself. In Kaur’s work, the self-effacement is not represented in a dramatic way of disappearing. It occurs at normal times: when someone does not say “no thanks,” when no one corrects for disrespect,

when no one asks for clarification, when no one tells about hurt, when no one tells about expectation, when no one asks to be paid for something. It is socially rewarded when they carry out these acts as they make it easier for women to be fitted into the existing structure.

Femininity, then, is a cost of social currency. Low maintenance femininity is thus an aspect of social currency. The woman is approved by giving up herself. She is lovable because she asks for a minimum of. She becomes respectable since she does not disturb others. This is because she bears the discomfort without complaint, making her professional.

She is made mature because she hides her disappointment. She is only approved, though. Requires the continuation of the performance.

According to the description from Penguin, Kaur’s book has a lot to do with the ways women constrict themselves into spaces that were not designed for them. This one is important to bear in mind when thinking about shrinking. It is not the woman’s size, it is the design of the room. It is often women that are requested to fit into smaller and smaller spaces rather than the structures that are too small. The low maintenance woman is the woman who has taken the room in her hands.

Butler’s framework enables us to discern this shrinkage as performative as opposed to natural. Through repetition, a series of reductions, the woman becomes low-maintenance. She reads the script, acts it out, gets it approved and re-reads it. With time, the performance illusion is created of identity. Others remark, “She is of that ilk.” She can also say, “I’m just like that. But Kaur breaks this out of the trance with the realization that it might be adaptation instead of personality.

The Indian Feminist Context of Kaur’s Non-Fiction

Kaur's writing can be considered important in the context of the non-fiction writings of Indian feminists in the present day as her work communicates with the generation of women who are struggling with education, job, expectations of the family, romanticism, financial duties and visibility in public. In modern times, Indian women are being encouraged to learn, earn and be self-reliant. But this support can also exist alongside the more traditional ideas of adjustment, respect, marriageability and service to emotions. Women's career is advised but not at the compromise of family's comforts. They are instructed to stand on their own, but not stand on anyone else. They are encouraged to express their point of view, but not too much. They are encouraged to perform well, without upsetting gender equilibrium.

The Girls Are Not Fine is about this paradox. The subtitle *The Cost of Ambition, Careers and Becoming* portrays ambition as not being a straightforward success tale. Kaur wants to know how the drive to become an Indian leader comes at a price to women's emotional and social lives. One of the costs of this low-maintenance woman is that she is low maintenance. She might be ambitious and educated and capable, but she is nonetheless supposed to soften up so that she will be

approved. She has to transform her strength to pleasantness and her desire to patience.

The narrative style enhances Kaur's argument, as it is not fictional. Kaur's prose is not like a novel, in which a gender might be represented through fictional characters, but rather a mode of confession and cultural critique, which is also addressed directly. This style gives the sense of familiarity. Kaur's writing is thus a part of a feminist tradition that gives expression to the discomfort of one, the critique of the many.

The short extract in *The Print* is particularly helpful as it allows a reader to get a feel of the whole work – intimate, direct and analytical. Kaur starts the book from a personal level, but is not limited to a personal perspective. She takes her no-fuss approach to performance from dating to family and to the workplace. A general social script. The woman who will not ask questions in love, may not ask questions when it comes to getting recognised at work. A sense of "too much" spreads from institution to institution.

Reclaiming the Right to Be "High Maintenance"

Kaur's controversial statement that all women are high maintenance does not mean they are

supposed to be selfish or entitled. Instead, it is a feminist take care of a patriarchal insult. When a woman is said to be “high maintenance” it typically refers to when she asks for too much. Kaur takes the term back and offers that woman should not be embarrassed to be cared for, respected, fair and recognized. The issue is not about high maintenance women, it is about that society has normalized low-maintenance women.

It is a significant political shift. Feminist writing often is a process of reclaiming negative labels and unmasking the power structures that underlie them. If women have taken on the title of “difficult”, “too much”, or “high maintenance”, they can change the shameful to the critical. Kaur’s claim implies that women are still being restricted in performances that are harmful to their well-being by fear of such labels. It is not to simply change one narrow identity for another, it is to allow women to be women without having to constantly reduce themselves.

Butler’s theory can provide an explanation for the reclamation in terms of a disruption to gender performance. Repeatedly repeating different gender norms can also challenge repeated gender norms. They show us that being a woman doesn’t have to mean that you have to be silent.

But, Kaur is also aware that it does not come easily to say no. It is not weakness and naivety on their part that makes women do low maintenance femininity. There is a reality to the social effects of refusal, which is why they do so. Being rejected, losing your job, being disapproved by your family, and being dumped by your girlfriend or boyfriend are strong influences. Hence, care needs to be taken in interpreting Kaur’s critique. It doesn’t fault the woman doing the performance, it faults the structures that make performing necessary.

Conclusion

Harnidh Kaur’s book *The Girls Are Not Fine* gives a critique of how culture teaches women to be agreeable downplay themselves and be emotionally easy to handle. The idea of the “maintenance” or “chill” woman shows how being a woman today often means hiding self-sacrifice as confidence and emotional numbness as maturity. Her writing shows that women are not born without needs; they are taught to see their needs as a burden.

Using Judith Butler’s theory of gender performance this paper argues that being a low-maintenance woman is an act. It is produced through repeated acts of adjusting, being silent tolerating and managing desires.

This act is kept going by the rewards of being respectable as a woman and the fear of being called difficult, needy aggressive or too much. Harnidh Kaur's work shows that these labels are not just descriptions but tools used to control women. The importance of Harnidh Kaur's non-fiction lies in naming things. By calling the "chill girl" an act she lets readers question what has been seen as normal. By calling low-maintenance femininity self-sacrifice she shows the cost behind social approval. By taking back the right to be "maintenance" she challenges the idea that women must earn love and respect by asking for less than they need.

The Girls Are Not Fine is not about women being tired. It is about the system that makes women tired and then praises them for handling it well. Harnidh Kaur's feminist work lies in refusing to see being graceful as the expectation for women. Her work says that women have the right to want things without apology to ask for things without shame and to be without shrinking. *The Girls Are Not Fine* challenges women to rethink their roles. Harnidh Kaur's work is a call to action for women to be more, than agreeable.

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