

GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND THE THIRD SPACE IN AYSHA'S SHIFTING IDENTITIES IN UNICORNS (2023)

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Abstract

This study examines the shifting identity of Ashiq/Aysha in the British film *Unicorns* (2023) through Judith Butler's Gender Performativity and Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space. Ashiq, a British man of Indian-Muslim descent, maintains a masculine identity within his family and workplace while performing as Aysha, a drag queen, within London's Gaysian community. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this study analyzes selected dialogues, scenes, character actions, and visual symbols interpreted through Butler's concepts of performativity, the heteronormative matrix, subversion, as well as Bhabha's concepts of negotiation, in-betweenness, and hybridity. The findings show that Aysha's identity is shaped through performative acts repeated across social spaces rather than fixed by biological sex, demonstrating resistance to heteronormativity and to patriarchal and religious expectation. Findings also show that a third space forms through negotiation among Aysha's Muslim-Indian heritage, queer identity, and Western environment, producing a hybrid identity in which both cultures operate fully, exemplified in her relationship with Luke. Taken together, Aysha's identity is shaped primarily by repeated performative acts resisting heteronormative and patriarchal fixity, and further negotiated within the third space between cultures. Overall, *Unicorns* (2023) represents identity as fluid and continuously negotiated, thereby contributing to discussions of queer identity and cultural hybridity in film.

Keywords: Gender performativity, shifting identity, cultural hybridity, third space, queer film

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INTRODUCTION

Films play an important role in the space of expression and creativity, and are generally inspired by social norms; Films generally feature opposite-sex couples such as women and men or vice versa, known as heterosexual, couples that are socially considered normal. Heteronormativity refers to the structure that positions heterosexuality as natural and normal, formed from the social norm for different-sex pairs and treated as the only legitimate relationship in society. Individuals who are neither heterosexual nor cisgender, or who choose not to be confined to a fixed gender identity and sexuality category, perform what is referred to as a "queer" identity, a fluid formation that is not fixated on social norms such as heterosexuality or binary gender construction (Giesecking, 2008).

This research focuses on how repetitive actions in the main character conclude the relevance of shifting identity as part of gender performativity. According to Judith Butler, gender is a social construct performed and enforced through repeated acts of socialization and cultural norms; queer is not a fixed identity, but one created through repetitive and performative actions, and should be understood not as a noun, a state of being, but as a verb, a state of doing. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of "the Third Space," on the other hand, explains how identity can appear in the ambiguous interval formed between two cultures. These two theoretical approaches contribute to a deeper understanding of how literature and film can serve as a lens for resistance to cultural and gender hegemony, a lens that has also been applied to gender oppression in period drama (Aprilyani & Rahmawati, 2025) and to the representation of women's experience in song lyrics (Maemunah & Rahmawati, 2025).

This research, titled "Gender Performativity and The Third Space in Aysha's Shifting Identities in Unicorns (2023)," analyzes the gender issues represented in the film *Unicorns* (2023). The film presents a complex narrative of identity transformation, situated not only within family norms, religion, and ethnicity, but also in the way it constructs and performatively displays gender amid the friction of multiculturalism.

Six previous studies support and examine the important parts and structures that inform this research and help identify its research gap. None of these six studies combine Gender Performativity with the Third Space: five apply Butler's theory alone, sometimes together with the Male Gaze or Queer Theory (Kamila & Maulidya, 2025; Sirait et al., 2025; Mawarni, 2022; Djailani et al., 2024; Faidah & Rosida, 2022), while one applies Bhabha's Third Space alone (Wang, 2022). As a film released in 2023, *Unicorns* also still has limited research coverage. The novelty of this research therefore lies in four aspects: first, it is the first study to combine Gender Performativity as the grand theory with the Third Space as the supporting theory, rather than treating gender and cultural identity as separate lenses; second, it locates the site of identity conflict internally, within the main character's own repetitive psychological acts and desire, rather than in external patriarchal control or a clash between national cultures; third, its character trajectory and intersectional profile, a male-to-female transformation shaped by Islamic, South Asian, and queer identity together, has not been addressed by any single prior study; and fourth, it contributes to the study of a genuinely under-researched film to which no existing study has applied both theories together.

This research aims to examine, through the main character's performative actions and the friction between two contradictory cultures, how gender and societal background influence the formation of personal identity in the film. It is expected to provide a reference for further research examining shifting identity in film, particularly in the context of characters with two personalities and multicultural backgrounds, and to give insight into how queer identity is constructed in literature and film within a heteronormative, cisgender society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Film analysis examines how narrative and audiovisual elements produce meaning. Hornby (2006, p. 950) defines a movie as a sequence of images and recorded sounds organized into a story for presentation in a cinema or through another medium. Narrative analysis commonly considers the progression of plot, including exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. These elements are supported by technical features such as mise-en-scène, cinematography, and sound. In the present study, these narrative and visual elements provide the material through which gender performativity and the Third Space are interpreted.

The concept of gender performativity by Judith Butler emphasizes that gender is not created through nature or biology, but through a social construct formed by repeated actions. Gender is the stylization of the body, repeated many times; a stability of repeated action produces the substance of a new gender identity from an innate gender. This process is not mere mimicry but a continuous process of "becoming," through which a new identity is formed

rather than temporarily performed. Butler's concept has been affirmed by Kakoliris (2025), who states that gender is not a permanent essence but is continuously produced through repeated performances of bodily expression and action. This repetition is also disciplined by a heteronormative matrix, a regulatory system of social norms and cultural hegemony that shapes gendered bodies and behavior, while drag itself has been described as a multifaceted phenomenon that functions less as a fixed identity than as an expressive action capable of disrupting established understandings of gender and sexuality (Litwiller, 2020, as cited in Maresch et al., 2025). At the same time, gender performativity is not simply a tool for free expression; it can also function as a political act of resistance that challenges the social hegemony of heteronormativity. This dynamic between gender norms, their social construction, and resistance to them recurs elsewhere in recent film scholarship: masculinity has been shown to be built and reinforced through ideological and cultural pressure rather than being innate (Hizkia & Rahmawati, 2025), while femininity has been shown to be reclaimed as resistance against patriarchal domination (Wirija & Rahmawati, 2025).

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the Third Space is a negotiation space formed between two cultures, an interval that connects two sides referred to as an in-between space; as Byrne (2009) explains, this space is not as simple as it first appears, but functions as a site of negotiation between several conditions (p. 42). The Third Space considers this negotiation space and intercultural encounter as the site where new, hybrid identities are created; through this space, new meanings and identities are formed, and identity, culture, and ways of thinking change (Bhandari, 2022). Bhabha (2004) further explains that the Third Space represents a hybrid and uncertain cultural environment located between a culture of origin and the norms of a dominant culture, a site where a subject continuously constructs and redefines their identity. Beyond its cultural function, the Third Space also operates as an emotional and psychological space that allows a subject to negotiate their identity and depart from rigid, binary cultural categories, and it is within this space that gender performativity itself is enacted and negotiated rather than resolved. Hybridity, in this framework, is defined as a mixing of two different cultures that forms a new identity through the process of cultural negotiation in the Third Space; the identity that results does not fully represent either original culture, and therefore rejects the notion that identity is fixed and derived solely from a single culture (Bhabha, 1994). These two theories relationship are continuously process rather than two separate analyses, is illustrated in Figure 1.

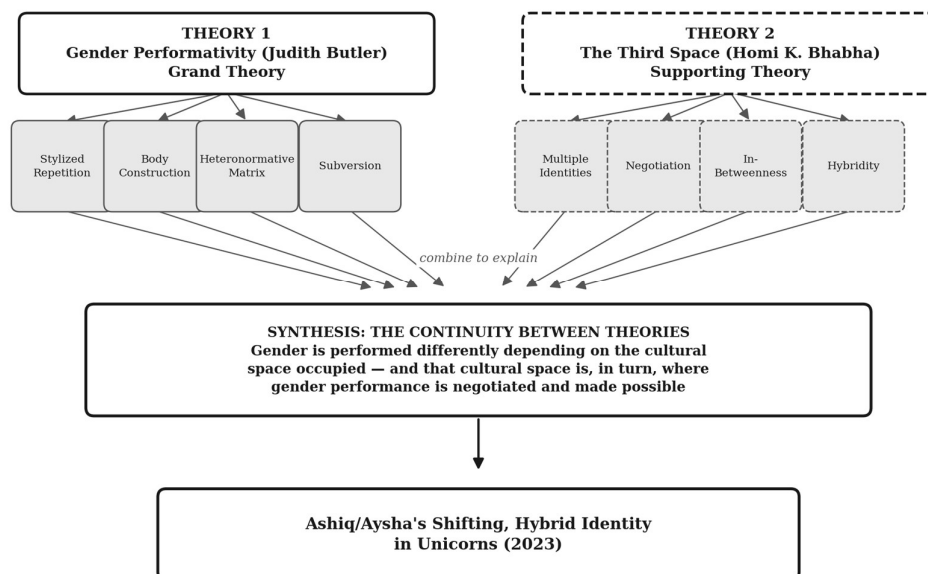


Figure 1. Conceptual Relationship Between Gender Performativity and The Third Space

The six previous studies introduced above are summarized in Table 1 for comparison.

Table 1. Summary of Six Previous Studies

Study & Film	Theory	Key Gap
Kamila & Maulidya (2025) – Vertigo (1958)	Gender Perf. + Male Gaze	External oppression vs. internal desire
Sirait et al. (2025) – Clueless (1995)	Gender Performativity	Teen hyperfemininity vs. active transformation
Mawarni (2022) – The Half of It (2020)	Gender Performativity	Female→male vs. male→female
Djailani et al. (2024) – True Spirit	Gender Performativity	Individual dev. vs. religious/family conflict
Faidah & Rosida (2022) – Call Me by Your Name	Gender Performativity + Queer Theory	Sexual gesture vs. intersectionality
Wang (2022) – Mulan adaptations	The Third Space	National culture-clash vs. internal negotiation

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative research approach. Miles & Huberman stated narrative text is data that is often used in presenting data in qualitative research. The steps undertaken the three concurrent flows; 1) Data condensation; by selecting or simplifying dialogues, scenes, and character moments in the film, 2) Data display; through organizing them into matrices or narrative form connected and described by the theories, and 3) Conclusion drawing or verification; followed by the data results of the research conclusion drawing and verification, based on the resulting data (Miles et al., 2020).

The primary data source is the film *Unicorns* (2023), a British LGBTQIA+ drama and romance film directed by Sally El Hosaini and James Krishna Floyd. The film stars Jason Patel as Ashiq (Aysha), a young Muslim man of Indian descent living in London who works as a beauty advisor by day and performs as a drag queen by night. The data in this research consist of selected scenes and dialogues that portray repetitive acts and shifting identities, including dress, make-up, body language, and verbal expression, that demonstrate how gender identity is constructed through social action.

Data were collected through repeated viewing and transcription of the film to recognize essential dialogues, scenes, and moments of repetitive action, categorized according to cinematography and mise-en-scène. The data were then analyzed by identifying symbols and specific moments in which the main character's behavior and performance shift, examining these elements in relation to the character's cultural and gender background, and exploring the narrative strategy and character development through the lens of Gender Performativity and the Third Space.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Stylized Repetition: The Dual Identity of Ashiq and Aysha. The findings show that Ashiq and Aysha are not two separate individuals but a single body constituted through Butler's stylized repetition of gendered acts. As Ashiq, the character enacts masculinity through his name tag, plain dress, and assertive, dutiful behavior toward his family, religion, and workplace; as the same body performing Aysha, it enacts femininity through make-up, wigs, feminine dress, and expressive, affectionate behavior within the Gaysian community and his relationship with Luke, as shown in Figure 2. Neither performance expresses an inner, essential gender; both are constituted through the repetition of stylized bodily acts, consistent with

Butler's claim that gender is a doing rather than a being, and this performance shifts consistently according to social space, as summarized in Table 2.



Figure 2. Ashiq's Masculine Performance at Work (left) and Aysha's Feminine Performance with Luke (right)

Source: Unicorns (2023), dir. Sally El Hosaini & James Krishna Floyd.

Table 2. Ashiq/Aysha's Gender Performance Across Social Spaces

Social Space	Identity Shown	Performance
Family	Ashiq	Masculinity
Religion (Islam)	Ashiq	Masculinity
Workplace	Ashiq	Masculinity
Luke	Aysha	Femininity
Gaysian community	Aysha	Femininity

Body Construction and the Heteronormative Matrix: Masculinity. Family and religious settings consistently discipline Ashiq's body toward masculine construction, expressed through respectful gestures toward his father and shared prayer with the male members of his family, as shown in Figure 3, while Luke and the Gaysian community consistently invite Aysha's feminine construction and the open expression of homosexual desire toward Luke. This pattern illustrates the heteronormative matrix at work among the social space itself regulates which gendered body, fashion, and desire are permitted to surface, and which must be concealed.



Figure 3. Ashiq's Masculine Performance with Family (left) and Religion (right)

Source: Unicorns (2023), dir. Sally El Hosaini & James Krishna Floyd.

Body Construction and the Heteronormative Matrix: Femininity. Where masculinity is disciplined by family and religious space, femininity is correspondingly invited and elaborated within Luke's company and the Gaysian community, as shown in Figure 4. Aysha's performance of drag before her community, and her flirtatious confidence when asking Luke whether he liked her show, are not private indulgences but performances staged specifically for social spaces that reward rather than discipline feminine expression, reinforcing that gendered body construction is space-dependent in both directions.



Figure 4. Aysha's Feminine Performance with Luke (left) and the Gaysian Community (right)

Source: Unicorns (2023), dir. Sally El Hosaini & James Krishna Floyd.

Subversion Through Repetition: Switching Gender Performances. The transition between the two identities follows a consistent, learnable process, beginning with make-up, a wig, and the concealment of male biological characteristics, as shown in Figure 5, and reversing when the character returns to Ashiq. Because this transformation can be performed, learned, and repeated at will, it demonstrates Butler's argument that drag functions as a subversive repetition: by imitating gender so precisely, the performance exposes gender's constructed nature and destabilizes any claim to an original, natural gender underneath it.

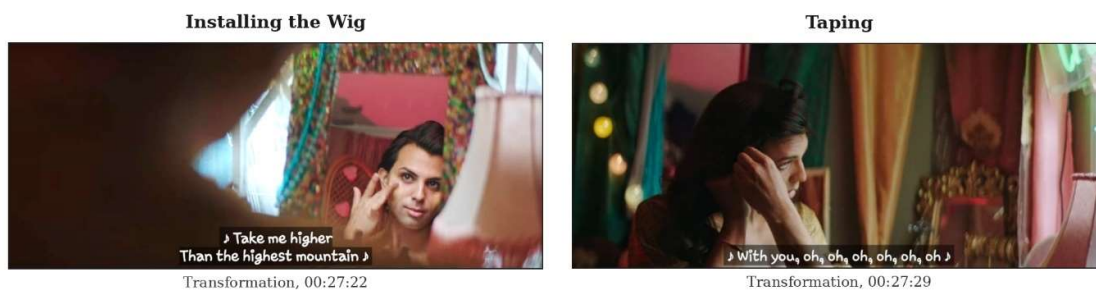


Figure 5. Ashiq's Transformation into Aysha: Wig (left) and Concealment (right)

Source: Unicorns (2023), dir. Sally El Hosaini & James Krishna Floyd.

Multiple Cultural Identities. Beyond gender performance, the findings show that Ashiq/Aysha carries multiple cultural identities at once: a Muslim of Indian descent, a British resident, and a drag performer within the Gaysian community. Within this community, members greet each other with Islamic phrases such as "Salam alaikum" while speaking in both Hindi and English and openly presenting queer identities, as shown in Figure 6, demonstrating that religious, linguistic, and queer belonging coexist rather than cancel each other out.



Figure 6. Multiple Cultural Identities Within the Gaysian Community

Source: Unicorns (2023), dir. Sally El Hosaini & James Krishna Floyd.

Negotiation Across Cultural Spaces. Building on this coexistence, the relationship between Aysha and Luke provides the clearest evidence of identity negotiation in the film, Luke represents a clear process of identity negotiation, built through small acts of mutual adjustment, as shown in Figure 7: Luke tries Aysha's favorite fruit-flavored vape despite admitting it is not something he usually does, and later introduces Aysha to his son, extending acceptance from the romantic into the familial sphere. Negotiation here is not a single decisive event but an accumulation of small, reciprocal adjustments between two people from different cultural backgrounds.

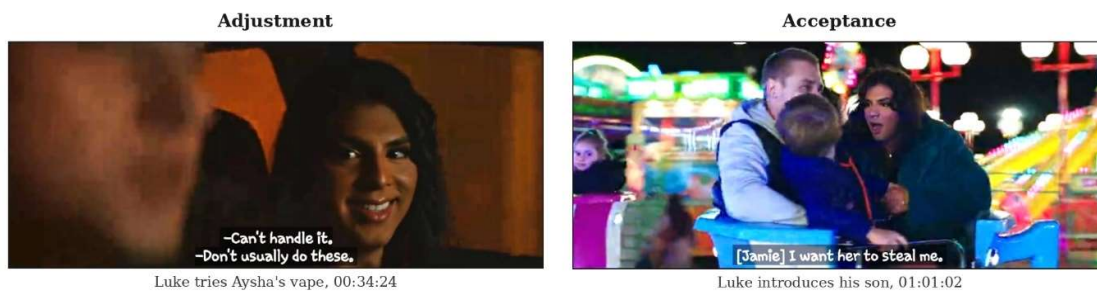


Figure 7. Negotiation Through Adjustment (left) and Acceptance (right)
Source: Unicorns (2023), dir. Sally El Hosaini & James Krishna Floyd.

In-Betweenness. Beyond individual negotiation, the Gaysian club itself functions as a literal Third Space, a physical environment where South Asian heritage and queer expression are allowed to coexist freely, as shown in Figure 8. This in-betweenness is made explicit in Ashiq's statement to Luke: "Don't make me choose between you and my family," a refusal to resolve his position into either side of the binary he is expected to choose from.



Figure 8. The Gaysian Club as Literal Third Space (left) and Ashiq's In-Between Statement (right)
Source: Unicorns (2023), dir. Sally El Hosaini & James Krishna Floyd.

Hybridity. Taken together, these findings converge on hybridity as the identity that ultimately results, shown visually in Figure 9 through Aysha's blending of Indian and Western fashion within a single drag performance. Ashiq/Aysha's identity does not resolve into a choice between cultures or between Ashiq and Aysha, but continues to exist as a hybrid formation in which both cultural and gendered elements operate simultaneously rather than being divided back into original, separable parts.

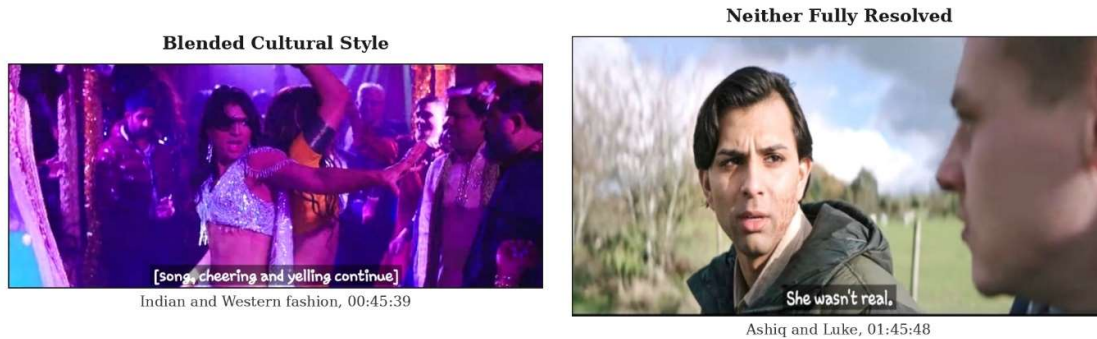


Figure 9. Blended Cultural Style (left) and the Unresolved Ending Between Ashiq and Luke (right)

Source: Unicorns (2023), dir. Sally El Hosaini & James Krishna Floyd.

These findings answer the first research question by showing that Butler's concept of gender performativity explains Aysha's shifting identity as a continuous process of becoming, rather than a fixed state. Ashiq/Aysha's identity is constituted through repetition rather than revealed as a pre-existing truth: the masculine name tag worn at the cosmetics counter and the feminine persona introduced at night are not two separate, static roles, but two points within a single, continuously repeated process, consistent with Kakoliris's (2025) argument that gender is continuously produced through repeated performance. This repetition is disciplined by a heteronormative matrix rooted in family, culture, and religion, and it is ultimately reclaimed through Aysha's feminine performance as a repeated act of resistance against patriarchal and religious expectation.

The findings answer the second research question by showing that the Third Space of multicultural hybridity is represented through the coexistence of multiple cultural identities, their negotiation through relationships such as the one with Luke, and a lived in-betweenness embodied most literally in the Gaysian community. This is consistent with Bhabha's (2004) view of the Third Space as a hybrid and uncertain cultural environment in which a subject continuously constructs and redefines their identity, and with the concept of hybridity as a new identity produced through the negotiation of two or more cultures, rather than a simple mixture that can later be divided back into its original parts (Bhabha, 1994). Taken together, these findings show that Ashiq/Aysha's identity does not resolve into a choice between Ashiq and Aysha, or between East and West, but continues to exist within the hybrid identity that the Third Space makes possible.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Aysha's identity in *Unicorns* (2023) is not fixed or determined by biological sex, but is shaped through repeated performative actions and a continuous process of cultural negotiation. Based on Judith Butler's Gender Performativity, Aysha's identity is constructed through performative actions repeated across social spaces, demonstrating that gender is not a natural or innate identity but the result of repeated social action, and serving as a critique of the heteronormative system that treats biological sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation as fixed. Based on Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space, Aysha's identity develops through an ongoing negotiation between cultural backgrounds, religions, and social environments, resulting in a hybrid identity that is neither fully situated in Eastern nor Western culture, but exists in-between as an intersection of multiple cultural systems. Overall, this study shows that the film *Unicorns* (2023) represents Aysha's identity as someone who has a fluid, dynamic, and constantly changing identity between Gender Performativity and Third Space. Further research can add and examine this film through other theoretical perspectives, suggestions for other studies such as Queer Theory, Intersectionality, Postcolonial Theory, or Masculinity Studies, and to analyze other characters, such as Luke and Ashiq's family, to

broaden the understanding of cultural negotiation and acceptance of identities represented in the film.

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