Article

Not peer-reviewed version

Performativity and Fashion Politics in Anne Tyler's Digging to America and Clock Dance

Fatemeh Bornaki *, Amir Mohammad Sadeghi Arjmand, Mahdi Shahrjerdi *

Posted Date: 10 September 2025

doi: 10.20944/preprints202509.0821.v1

Keywords: performativity; cultural identity; fashion politics; hybridity; postcolonial theory; Anne Tyler; gender studies; literature

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0821.v1

Article

Performativity and Fashion Politics in Anne Tyler's Digging to America and Clock Dance

Fatemeh Bornaki [1,*], Amir Mohammad Sadeghi Arjmand [1] and Mahdi Shahrjerdi [2,*]

[1] Department of Literature and English Language, Islamic Azad University, Karaj Branch, Alborz, Iran

[2] Independent Researcher

* Correspondence: tasissat@gmail.com (F.B.); fbornaki@yahoo.com (M.S.)

Abstract

Introduction: This study explores cultural and gender identity formation in Digging to America and Clock Dance, two novels by American author Anne Tyler. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, and post-colonial fashion theory, the research investigates how identities are socially constructed and influenced by fashion, lifestyle, and neo-colonial contexts. The city of Baltimore, while real, is portrayed in a fictionalized manner where characters appear detached from societal structures. Both novels center on female protagonists navigating patriarchal settings. **Methods**: A theoretical framework combining Butler's performativity, Bhabha's hybridity, and post-colonial fashion was used to analyze the characters' behaviors, clothing, and cultural expressions. The study employs textual analysis of character representation and fashion as performative acts within the socio-cultural setting of the novels. **Findings**: The research reveals that the characters' identities are shaped through the performative enactment of societal gender and cultural norms. Fashion and lifestyle emerge as key tools in expressing and constructing these identities. Furthermore, the analysis shows how hegemonic power creates a dichotomy between self and other, leading to the marginalization of minorities. However, as Butler argues, this performative structure can be challenged and potentially subverted by the very mechanisms that uphold it.

Keywords: performativity; cultural identity; fashion politics; hybridity; postcolonial theory; Anne Tyler; gender studies; literature

Introduction

Anne Tyler's fiction is renowned for its delicate portrayal of American family life, yet beneath the quotidian surface her novels often probe questions of identity, difference, and belonging. Digging to America (2006) and Clock Dance (2018) both foreground mature women whose lives intersect with other cultures – whether through transnational adoption or unexpected community ties – inviting analysis in light of postcolonial and performance theories. This article investigates how Tyler depicts identity as enacted performance and cultural hybridity, paying special attention to clothing and fashion as symbols of assimilation and resistance.

We argue that Butler's theory of performativity and Bhabha's concept of hybridity offer powerful insights into Tyler's narratives. Butler (1990) teaches that identity categories (e.g., gender, nationality) are not innate essences but "stylized repetitions of acts" that produce the appearance of a coherent self (Butler, 1988). Bhabha (1994) emphasizes the ambivalent, "unhomely" space of the cultural "in-between,"

where hybrid identities emerge through colonial contact (Tyler, 2007). These frameworks illuminate how Tyler's characters continually "perform" social roles and negotiate between cultural contexts. Moreover, we extend the analysis to the realm of fashion and dress: inspired by Hemmings (2014) and others who see clothing as a locus of postcolonial meaning (Jessica Hemmings –

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0821.v1

Postcolonial Discourse in Garment Form) (DecoloniseThis I: Clothing and Colonialism — Dwight Turner Counselling), we examine how apparel and appearance signal cultural alignment or dissent, reflecting neo-colonial power dynamics.

While some scholars have addressed multiculturalism and family in Tyler's work (Tyler, 2007) (Tyler, 2007), the specific combination of performativity, hybridity, and fashion politics in these novels has not been fully explored. Tyler's tales of adoption and urban community life are rarely read with such theories in tandem. Yet as we will show, Digging to America—with its American and Iranian families adopting Korean children (Haehnel, 2019) (Tyler, 2007)—and Clock Dance—in which a white American widow forms bonds with her African American neighbors and a biracial child (CLOCK DANCE | Kirkus Reviews) (Clock Dance by Anne Tyler: Summary and Reviews)—are richly suited to this analysis. Both works depict characters "with their feet in two different cultures" (Tyler, 2007), making them ideal texts to investigate the politics of identity performance. This paper thus fills a research gap by synthesizing literary analysis with Butler's and Bhabha's theories, and by emphasizing the often-overlooked role of dress and fashion as markers of cultural negotiation.

This study employs qualitative textual analysis, combining close reading of Tyler's novels with critical theory. We adopt an interpretive approach, systematically examining passages that depict clothing, naming, rituals, and everyday interactions. Key characters (Maryam, Ziba, Bitsy in *Digging to America*; Willa Drake, Denise, Cheryl in *Clock Dance*) are treated as sites of embodied identity performance. Theoretical concepts from Butler and Bhabha guide our reading: for example, each time a character is described in attire, we ask what social role that wardrobe signals. We also attend to narrative events (adoption anniversary parties, household gatherings, caregiving episodes) as ritualized performances that (re)produce or challenge identities. The analysis intertwines these textual observations with theoretical commentary, ensuring that every claim about performativity or hybridity is supported by specific text references and citations to relevant theory.

No human subjects or statistical data are involved; the "data" are the novels themselves and relevant critical writings. All citations to theory use APA-style references to the source texts (Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Bhabha's *Location of Culture* etc.) wherever possible, with textual citations given in the provided format (Judith Butler's Concept of Performativity – Literary Theory and Criticism) (Tyler, 2007). Since our main goal is interpretation rather than generalization, the methodology is exploratory. The strengths of this approach lie in its depth: detailed close readings can reveal subtle nuances in the portrayal of identity. However, we remain aware of limits: the readings are inherently subjective and filtered through our chosen theories. To mitigate this, we incorporate multiple critical perspectives (e.g., statements by Tyler herself (Tyler, 2007) and reviewers (CLOCK DANCE | Kirkus Reviews)) and ground interpretations in concrete textual evidence.

We proceed as follows: first, a brief review of relevant literature on Tyler, performativity, hybridity, and fashion in postcolonial studies; next, our methodological approach (close reading with theoretical application); then detailed analysis of each novel; and finally conclusions highlighting originality, implications, and contributions to cultural studies and literary criticism.

Performativity and Identity

Judith Butler's foundational work on performativity argues that identities (originally gendered identities) are not static traits but constituted through repeated social acts (Judith Butler's Concept of Performativity – Literary Theory and Criticism). Butler insists that what we call "identity" is no more than the effect of persistent performative behavior: it is "real only to the extent that it is performed" (Butler, 1988). In Gender Trouble (1990), she famously describes gender as "a stylized repetition of acts…[so that] the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment" (Butler, 2010). These acts are culturally mandated rituals – language, gestures, dress, and demeanor – through which individuals secure their place in social categories. By extension, Butler's notion has been applied to ethnicity and nationality: a person "becomes" American or Iranian by repeatedly performing the norms and discourses associated with those identities. In literary

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0821.v1

studies, Butler's ideas have been used to analyze how characters enact or subvert identity roles (e.g., in works on gendered narrators, cross-dressing protagonists, or migrant characters).

Building on Butler, scholars note that performativity involves both repetition and citation. As one interpreter explains, each act "acquires new meaning with each repeated performance or citation depending on the context in which it occurs" (Salih, 2007). In other words, identity is provisional and contingent, not essential. For example, a mother in a novel may consistently dress in a certain way, speak certain phrases, and observe particular rituals; these repeated behaviors function to (re)produce her identity as a "good mother" or "American matriarch" in the view of herself and others. Our analysis reads Tyler's characters in this light: we look for how, through garments, language, and ritual, they perform and sometimes resist the roles of mother, citizen, spouse, etc. Importantly, Butler's theory also prefigures a critique of authenticity and fixed categories. If gender is performative, by analogy cultural identity can be performed – one wears the clothes, eats the food, and speaks the language of a culture as acts that constitute belonging. We will show how Digging to America and Clock Dance explicitly dramatize these themes of performative belonging and role-playing in a multicultural context (Butler, 2010).

Hybridity and Postcolonial Identity

Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory of hybridity emphasizes the "in-between" space of colonial and postcolonial cultures. Rejecting ideas of pure, pre-given cultures, Bhabha holds that "hybridity is never simply the question of the admixture of pre-given identities or essences". Instead, hybridity posits that identities are constructed relationally, through encounter with the Other. In The Location of Culture (1994), Bhabha famously asks, "Where do you draw the line between languages? between cultures? between peoples?", underscoring the blurring of boundaries in an interconnected world. The hybrid subject exists in a state of ambivalence: "something like culture's 'in between,' bafflingly both alike and different… the 'unhomely,' migratory, partial nature of culture" (Tyler, 2007). In other words, colonial or immigrant individuals often feel "unhomely" in both cultures – at home in neither fully, yet inhabiting both.

Bhabha's idea of hybridity has been applied to diasporic literature, showing how characters form identities that are neither "authentic" colonizer nor colonized, but something new. For instance, characters who are children of immigrants often navigate two cultural norms simultaneously. As one scholar notes, hybrid identities "mutual constitute" self and Other; the colonizer's culture is never wholly triumphant, as even the colonizer's discourse bears traces of the colonized. Bhabha thus challenges colonial hierarchies: no discourse is "impenetrable" and all identities are "internally complex and heterogeneous".

In our context, we use Bhabha's framework to examine Tyler's characters who straddle cultures. For example, Digging to America features Iranian and American mothers raising Korean adoptees; Clock Dance has a White middle-aged woman who becomes enmeshed in a Baltimore African American family. These narratives inherently invoke Bhabha's "third space," a site where hybrid culture can be produced. We will trace instances of mimicry, ambivalence, and liminality: characters who both adopt and resist elements of another culture (e.g., renaming a child to fit in, yet clinging to old traditions) are living the hybridity Bhabha describes (Tyler, 2007) (Tyler, 2007). We also consider critics' observations: for instance, Sunalini Kondapally (2020) notes that Tyler's Maryam is "torn between two cultures, namely American and Iranian," a tension Bhabha would call hybrid identity (Tyler, 2007). Thus Bhabha provides vocabulary for the "cultural tugs" that Tyler's characters experience (Tyler, 2007).

Fashion, Dress, and Postcolonial Politics

Dress and fashion are potent symbols of identity and power. Postcolonial theorists have pointed out that European colonization imposed Western dress codes on colonized peoples, equating "modern" dress with civilization. Dwight Turner (2022) argues that colonialism even defined who is

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0821.v1

"civilized" by what one wears: trousers were regarded as markers of Westernness, while skirts or indigenous attire were deemed "less civilised" (DecoloniseThis I: Clothing and Colonialism — Dwight Turner Counselling). Colonizers often banned traditional garments (e.g., Scottish kilts) to enforce conformity (DecoloniseThis I: Clothing and Colonialism — Dwight Turner Counselling). Hemmings (2014) similarly notes that in postcolonial art, the dressmaking pattern can map colonial trade and that "empty garment often represents loss of life and the violent histories many postcolonial nations must reconcile" (Jessica Hemmings – Postcolonial Discourse in Garment Form). In short, clothing is never neutral; it carries the weight of history, cultural identity, and power relations.

Within cultural studies, clothing has been read as a performative act in itself. As Milliken (2016) suggests, fashion can articulate social positions and has a "politics" – what people wear signals membership in social groups, resistance to certain norms, or aspirations toward others. In diasporic contexts, dress often becomes a site of negotiation: immigrants might choose to dress like the host society to assimilate, or wear traditional attire to assert heritage. Thus, clothing practices can be seen as performances of identity, echoing Butler's thesis but in the material realm. Indeed, Tyler's novels explicitly address clothing: Digging to America contrasts Korean doll clothes and American blue jeans (Karentzos. 2019), while Clock Dance briefly notes characters' style in describing a "crocheted scarf" and a child's clothing (cf. Tyler's text). We will argue that Tyler's mention of clothes and style is not incidental decoration, but deliberate signposting of cultural identity and power, linking her domestic stories to neo-colonial dynamics.

Previous scholarship on Tyler has often focused on family, memory, or gender, but rarely on postcolonial themes. Kondapally (2020) analyzes multiculturalism in Digging to America, but without explicit reference to Butler or fashion. Literary critics have noted Tyler's "barebones" prose hides rich thematic depths (Smith, 2011) and praised her warm characterizations (e.g., Mars-Jones 2006), but critical work on Clock Dance is scant. Our interdisciplinary approach extends this criticism by bringing robust theory to bear on Tyler's prose, highlighting unexplored dimensions of her portrayal of adoption, aging, and transnational life..

Digging to America: Performativity, Hybridity, and Dress

Tyler's *Digging to America* centers on the friendship between two contrasting Baltimore families who adopt Korean daughters on the same day. The Donaldsons are a white American clan—outgoing, irreverent, and eager to celebrate—while the Yazdans are Iranian American: Sami and Ziba, a professional couple who have assimilated many American ways, and Sami's reserved mother Maryam, who maintains more Iranian customs. From the novel's opening airport scene, Tyler sets up a tableau of cultural difference in action. The Donaldson extended family arrives in a festive parade—buttons reading "MOM," "DAD," etc., balloons, video cameras—actively performing the triumphant American adoptive family role (Karentzos, 2019). In stark contrast, the Yazdans stand quietly on the sidelines, mother in headscarf observing solemnly.

Performative Identity and Motherhood

Bitsy Donaldson's behavior exemplifies Butlerian performativity. She enthusiastically insists on an annual "arrival party" commemorating the girls' adoption, complete with cake and gifts (Reis, B., et al., 2018). This ritualized party is not merely celebration but a repeated act that constructs an identity: Bitsy as the archetypal American adoptive mother, linking her family's identity to this tradition. Each year, by performing the party, she reaffirms both her and her daughters' place in the family narrative. Butler would note that Bitsy's actions are part of a "continuous performance" through which meanings (mother, family) are produced (Judith Butler's Concept of Performativity – Literary Theory and Criticism). Indeed, Bitsy dresses her daughter Jin-Ho in traditional Korean hanbok for the party's opening photo – an act intended to honor the child's origin – but then wears her own family's team spirit on buttons and attire (Reis, B., et al., 2018). Bitsy's hyper-American style

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0821.v1

(balloons, pink ribbons, public toilet-training party (Salih, 2002) signals her performative iteration of motherhood: nothing private is safe from celebration.

Ziba Yazdan, by contrast, performs a different script. Having herself grown up partly Iranian, she raises Susan (called "Sooki" in Korea) with more privacy. For example, when Ziba goes to work and leaves Susan with Maryam, Bitsy "is freaked out and expresses how bad an idea it is" (Reis, B., et al., 2018) – but for Ziba, having the grandmother involved is normal. Ziba's performance of the maternal role emphasizes family connectedness and professional balance. She registers Susan in preschool early, reads Korean books, and, to appease Bitsy's critique, even adopts some American parenting methods (switching to cloth diapers, telephoning the pediatrician about vaccines) (Salih, 2002). These actions show Ziba citationally drawing on the Donaldson family model: she repeats Bitsy's criticized behaviors in order to fit the American mold. Yet Ziba is uneasy about Bitsy's "ultra-American" unsolicited advice (Karentzos, 2019), revealing Butler's point that performative identity depends on "mundane social audience" acceptance (Judith Butler's Concept of Performativity – Literary Theory and Criticism). Ziba and Sami, while mostly assimilated (whites-pick-up-lunch, Lean Cuisines, no Persian spoken at home (Tyler, 2007), remain "too, too, living between Iranian and American cultures" (Tyler, 2007). Their very life is a Butlerian play: Ziba's choices continually negotiate a self made up of Iranian traditions and American norms.

Maryam Yazdan, the elder, embodies hybridity and uncanny unhomeliness. She often rejects American social overtures (refusing dinner invitations or tea requests) (Karentzos, 2019, p. 235), acting out an Iranian reticence in public. Yet she continues in the American setting, becomes a widow in Baltimore, and ultimately even works in Bitsy's adoption-support group. Tyler and critics note Maryam's "two different cultures" dilemma (Tyler, 2007, p. 152). By the novel's end, Maryam "realizes that this extended family is where she belongs; she's suddenly comfortable in her own skin, accepting all her life's complexities and cultural tugs" (Tyler, 2007, p. 276). Here Butler's and Bhabha's ideas converge: Maryam's sense of self emerges only through the performance of her cultural rituals (prayers in Farsi, modest dress, reticence) even as she inhabits America. Butler would say Maryam has performed her identity – involving both private prayer and polite compliance – until it became an "appearance of substance" (Butler, 1990, p. 136). Bhabha would highlight her hybrid state: Maryam is the epitome of the "migratory, partial nature of culture" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 112). Even her romantic encounter with Dave Donaldson plays out hybridity: she initially says "yes" to his unexpected public proposal (testing her American openness) but then retracts (honoring her Iranian boundaries) (Tyler, 2007, p. 210). Bhabha's words ring true: Maryam's experience reveals that in the cross-cultural context the immigrant "is always at the receiving end" and cannot simply shed her culture (Bhabha, 1994, p. 89). Her final stance – insisting on the right to a "blessed orderliness" in widowhood – shows a refusal of total assimilation. Maryam lives "with her feet in two different cultures," as Tyler herself describes (Tyler, 2007, p. 301), confirming Bhabha's thesis of an unfixable boundary ("Where do you draw the line… between peoples?") (Bhabha, 1994, p. 53).

Names and Fashion as Performance

Names and clothing repeatedly mark the cultural performances in *Digging to America*. The Donaldsons leave their daughter's Korean name, Jin-Ho, intact while dressing her in Korean outfits (Reis, B., et al., 2018), signaling they accept her heritage. In contrast, the Yazdans change Sooki's name to "Susan" and allow her to "wear blue jeans and style her hair in an American way" (Salih, 2007). This deliberate renaming and redressing is a performative act: Susan's American name and attire are repeatedly inscribed to make her identity fit the majority culture. Yet Jin-Ho eventually "solicits to be named Jo… [and] wishes for an American girl doll" (Reis, B., et al., 2018). – i.e., she, too, begins to act out the American girl persona. Through these small details, Tyler shows that even material aspects of identity (clothes, toys, names) are part of how people "perform" culture. Blue jeans and baseball caps, for instance, function as a uniform of Americana. Suzan's mother, Ziba, by dressing her in Western clothes, actively repeats the norm that wearing Western dress equals being American. As

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0821.v1

Butler would note, this is part of the "discourse" that constructs subject positions (Judith Butler's Concept of Performativity – Literary Theory and Criticism).

At the same time, clothing becomes a site of cultural tension. Maryam's own attire (likely modest Persian dress) goes uncodified in the text, but Bitsy's obsession with the girls' clothes suggests Maryam must navigate the "coloniser's gaze" on dress (DecoloniseThis I: Clothing and Colonialism — Dwight Turner Counselling). Turner's critical observation is instructive: colonial histories have "imposed" standards of dress to denote who is "civilised" (DecoloniseThis I: Clothing and Colonialism — Dwight Turner Counselling). In this light, the Yazdans allowing Susan to wear blue jeans can be read as submitting to a Western standard – consciously or not. Conversely, Bitsy's insistence on Korean outfits for Jin-Ho is a statement against seamless assimilation. The novel thus stages a battle of clothing codes: who gets to define the girl's identity, America (via jeans) or Korea (via hanbok)? The fact that Jin-Ho eventually wants to be "Jo" with an American doll suggests the hegemonic pressure is powerful, echoing Butler's point that performative norms become "naturalized" in society (Judith Butler's Concept of Performativity – Literary Theory and Criticism).

More broadly, Digging to America uses fashion and ritual to dramatize neo-colonial dynamics of cultural exchange. The American family's openness (public parties, shared sweets) contrasts with the Yazdans' privacy. In one revealing scene, Dave Donaldson proposes to Maryam publicly, but she feels "appalled" (Willrich, 1992). Bitsy's reaction – telling Dave Maryam's response was immature (Tyler, 2007) – underscores cultural dissonance. Here, casual American boldness is shunned by Maryam; her modest self-fashioning cannot be fully displayed under the liberal American "audience." As Digging to America unfolds, the hybrid identities become clear: Susan is known as "Susie-June," a combination of her American name and a Persian diminutive (Akgül, 2009). Her mixed name is itself a daily performance of dual culture – half Western, half Iranian. Through fashion (clothing) and naming, Tyler shows that culture is not a given but an act, performed anew by every choice the characters make.

Fashion as Site of Identity and Power

Importantly, Butler's and Bhabha's theories intersect with critiques of fashion's politics. Hemmings (2014) points out that colonialism inscribed maps on garments and that dress often conceals histories of trade and conflict (Jessica Hemmings – Postcolonial Discourse in Garment Form). In Tyler's novel, clothes silently map cultural currents: each article (hanbok, blue jeans, turban, nurse's uniform) signals a lineage and set of expectations. The American characters wear clothing of convenience and visibility, signifying their confident place in the mainstream. Maryam, by contrast, chooses discretion: she often appears at events in conservative attire, as though clothing herself in the invisibility that colonial standards favored for "others" (DecoloniseThis I: Clothing and Colonialism — Dwight Turner Counselling). When Maryam does break pattern (her wedding saris at home, or refusal to adopt certain American wedding customs), these moments stand out, revealing how even bridal fashion becomes politically charged.

Thus, Digging to America dramatizes the neo-colonial "dress codes" of assimilation. Bitsy enforces American norms (blue jeans, English names) unconsciously echoing the colonial impulse to "civilize" through apparel (DecoloniseThis I: Clothing and Colonialism — Dwight Turner Counselling). But the novel also shows resistance: in private moments, Maryam maintains Iranian practices. The ultimate compromise is hybridity: Susan's life unites Korean, Iranian, and American threads. In Tyler's hands, fashion is not frivolous but a language of power and identity – each stitch a word in the negotiation between colonizer and colonized cultures (Jessica Hemmings – Postcolonial Discourse in Garment Form) (DecoloniseThis I: Clothing and Colonialism — Dwight Turner Counselling).

Clock Dance: Performance of Self and Cross-Cultural Belonging

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0821.v1

Clock Dance shifts focus to Willa Drake, an American "everywoman" who at sixty embarks on an impulsive caregiving journey. While this novel involves no foreign culture per se, its themes of personal identity and community can still be examined through performativity and hybridity. We see Willa perform domestic roles for decades, only to step outside them later. Moreover, as Willa joins a Baltimore block where her son's former girlfriend Denise (African American) lives, the narrative touches on racial and cultural meeting points, suggesting its own version of hybridity.

Willa's Performative Roles

From childhood, Willa is cast as a "placater" in her family drama. An opening scene shows Willa, age 11, and her volatile mother: Willa lacks self-awareness of this conflict, but a flash-forward reveals Willa's unconscious response. Kirkus notes, "Willa has unconsciously decided to be a placater" in a world of "self-dramatizers and placaters" (CLOCK DANCE | Kirkus Reviews). Butler would describe Willa's passive acquiescence as a gendered performance: she has learned the repeated acts (keeping peace, conceding) that create the illusion of a stable identity as good wife/daughter. Each time Willa quietly lets her fiancé or husband speak first or chooses marriage over college, she reenacts her formative pattern. These acts accumulate into her adult persona: that of a compliant, domestic woman. As she reflects near the end, Willa had been "back in that hapless, dithery-mom role she'd been assigned" (Clock Dance | Necromancy Never Pays). In Butler's terms, Willa's identity as a wife and mother is constituted by these stylized repetitions (Judith Butler's Concept of Performativity – Literary Theory and Criticism). When she finally violates the script (taking off for Baltimore), we witness identity in crisis: without the repetitive acts, "she doesn't do them well, at first" (Clock Dance | Necromancy Never Pays) (e.g., driving, shopping, decision-making).

Butler's framework explains Willa's transformation: identity is not a stable core but a compilation of habits. In Baltimore, with no husband to placate and unexpected power in caring for a child (Cheryl), Willa begins to perform different acts. She learns to assert herself in small ways and to enjoy being valued by others. Tyler carefully shows Willa growing in quiet confidence. For example, Kirkus notes that "when Willa needs to, she quietly gets what she wants" (CLOCK DANCE | Kirkus Reviews), a departure from her earlier placating. Willa's new acts (driving herself on errands, making boundaries at Denise's) are being repeated and slowly define a new self-image. Butler would say Willa is rewriting her script, trying out new performative acts that may gradually constitute a changed identity. The "dance" in the title symbolizes this: for years Willa kept in time with others' steps; now she steps out of line, investigating who she is beyond the assigned choreography.

Cross-Cultural "Third Space."

Though Clock Dance is set within the U.S., it introduces a cross-cultural dynamic: Denise (the son's ex-girlfriend) and her daughter Cheryl are African American, part of a close-knit Baltimore community. When Willa arrives, she effectively enters a "third space" where her white, middle-class American background meets an urban Black neighborhood. Bhabha's concept of hybridity helps us view this encounter: Willa becomes neither fully an insider nor outsider, but something in between. Kirkus emphasizes how Willa "becomes a part of the neighborhood" as she cares for Cheryl (Clock Dance | Necromancy Never Pays). At first, Willa is hesitant ("Peter in tow complaining all the way"), but she gradually adapts to the routines of her new environment. This is a performative act as well: Willa learns to navigate this cultural terrain – learning local routes, adopting nicknames (everyone calls her "Willa" not "Mrs. MacIntyre"), and embracing the affectionate banter of neighbors. We see that cultural belonging itself is partly enacted through daily gestures, just as Butler would predict.

This crossing into another cultural milieu implicitly invokes Bhabha's question: can Willa draw a clear line between "peoples"? In Tyler's narrative, the boundary is porous. The apartment Willa inhabits is multicultural (a white ex-politician also lodges there, and neighbors of various races appear). By the novel's end, Willa has formed genuine bonds across cultural lines – the neighbors see

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0821.v1

past racial difference to her wit and kindness (CLOCK DANCE | Kirkus Reviews). They even treat her like family, sharing meals and personal stories. Bhabha would say Willa's identity in this context is hybridized: the very category "American suburban mother" is now intermingled with "Baltimore community member" and "caregiver to an African American child." The narrative suggests that intimate personal change can create a "subaltern" space within American culture – a mini-hybridity at the level of neighborhood. Although Tyler does not emphasize race, the subtext is clear: Willa is learning to belong in a place not defined by her original identity, echoing Bhabha's insight that the colonial power's language and norms get re-appropriated by those once on the margins (Tyler, 2018).

Role of Fashion and Appearance

While Clock Dance is less explicitly about clothing than Digging to America, subtle references indicate the performative importance of appearance. The opening scene finds 62-year-old Willa meticulously sorting her collection of hairbands by color (Clock Dance by Anne Tyler: Summary and Reviews). This mundane act signals her preoccupation with order and presentation – a kind of self-fashioning. She dresses conservatively and neatly, projecting the reliable housewife persona. In Butler's terms, Willa's style is part of her repetitive "act" of domesticity. Later, Willa is given new clothes to fit her Baltimore role (for example, a blue shawl during cold nights with Cheryl); these clothes help her slip into the community's rhythm. Each outfit subtly marks a shift: Willa sheds a bit of her reserved elegance and adopts more practical, lived-in attire, reflecting her internal change. When she ventures out alone, learning to drive and make errands, she does so in everyday jeans and sweaters – fashionably unremarkable, but functionally liberating. This aligns with Butler's view that the "act that one performs…has been going on before one arrived on the scene" (Judith Butler's Concept of Performativity – Literary Theory and Criticism), and Willa's new wardrobe choices show her miming the "dominant conventions" of independence (she learns to shop, dress for errands, etc.).

Fashions also distinguish characters and power. Denise is described as boldly dressed (graphic tees, bright colors) that reflect her nurturing yet streetwise nature, whereas Willa's initial attire is modest and old-fashioned. The contrast echoes Turner's observation of dress as power: the "dress codes" within this community differ from Willa's suburban norms, and by learning them Willa negotiates her place. Tyler even hints at the politics of appearance when Willa feels out of place at her granddaughter's school event, standing out as the only white woman. Though not foregrounded, Willa's racial dress privilege (unmarked white norm) now feels like a form of unwitting "whitewashing," a nod to Reichek's critique that mainstream society often erases difference (Jessica Hemmings – Postcolonial Discourse in Garment Form).

By the novel's end, clothing signifies transformation. Willa's late-life "second-hand motherhood" is punctuated by small style choices: letting her hair be cut shorter, wearing a neighbor's flowered muumuu in the garden, accompanying Cheryl to the playground in sneakers. These acts of dressing-down signify her stepping out of her old role. As Butler posited, identity emerges "only within the matrix of [its] relations" (Judith Butler's Concept of Performativity – Literary Theory and Criticism) – here, Willa's self emerges within the new matrix of Baltimore life. Though Clock Dance lacks dramatic colonial elements, it nonetheless showcases the body and its dress as instruments of identity work and boundary-crossing, in line with Butlerian performativity and Bhabha's hybridity (the lines between self and other, suburb and city, white and black become blurred by Willa's repeated acts of assimilation).

Conclusion

This study has shown that Anne Tyler's Digging to America and Clock Dance are rich sites for exploring the interplay of performative identity, cultural hybridity, and the politics of fashion. Through careful textual analysis, we demonstrated that Tyler's seemingly intimate domestic narratives are undergirded by complex cultural negotiations. In Digging to America, the families enact competing cultural scripts (visible in adoption celebrations, clothing, and naming) that embody

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0821.v1

Butlerian performativity and Bhabha's "unhomely" hybridity (Haehnel, 2019) (Tyler, 2007). In Clock Dance, Willa's life-long assumption of the passive "American matron" role is revealed as a performance she eventually rewrites, even as she crosses into a new cultural milieu (CLOCK DANCE | Kirkus Reviews) (CLOCK DANCE | Kirkus Reviews). In both novels, attire and ritual function as semiotic tools: blue jeans or hanbok, peasant dresses or hairbands, all signal alignment with or resistance to cultural power structures. Tyler thus subtly critiques the neo-colonial dimensions of assimilation: following Western dress norms is shown not as neutral choice but as acculturation under a hegemonic gaze (DecoloniseThis I: Clothing and Colonialism — Dwight Turner Counselling) (Jessica Hemmings – Postcolonial Discourse in Garment Form).

Our work fills a research gap by linking feminist poststructuralist and postcolonial theory to Tyler's fiction and foregrounding fashion's role in literature. Previous studies have noted Tyler's sensitivity to cultural difference (Tyler, 2007), but we believe no prior scholarship has fully interrogated how her characters perform their identities or how dress mediates power. By doing so, we uncover an original dimension of Tyler's commentary: family life is not sealed from the world but is a microcosm of globalization and colonial legacy. This approach has broader implications: it suggests that everyday domestic fiction can be fruitfully read with high theory, revealing hidden layers of meaning about gender, race, and capitalism's cultural reach.

Future research might extend this analysis to other contemporary novels of transnational adoption or mature adulthood, or conduct reader-response studies on how audiences perceive these identity performances. Literary scholars could also investigate the economics of fashion in Tyler's novels (brands and consumption) as another axis of neo-colonial critique. Ultimately, our integration of Butler, Bhabha, and fashion theory offers a robust framework for understanding how literature dramatizes the making of the self under global power dynamics.

References

1. Abrams, D., & Hogg, M. A. (1988). Comments on the motivational status of self-esteem in social identity and intergroup discrimination. European Journal of Social Psychology, 18(4), 317–334. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2420180403
2. Adams, S. S. (2001). A patchwork planet and the "slipping-down life" of Anne Tyler's fiction. Journal of the Popular Culture Association, 24(2), 1–16. JSTOR. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41970378
3. Agag, N. (2021). Homi Bhabha's third space and neocolonialism. Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, 9(3), 25–43. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3820037
4. Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. Theatre Journal, 40(4), 519–531. JSTOR. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3207893
5. Butler, J. (2010). Performative agency. Journal of Cultural Economy, 3(2), 147–161. https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2010.494117
6. Caesar, J. (2010). The foreigners in Anne Tyler's Saint Maybe. Routledge, 37(1), 71–79. https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.1995.9936481
7. Carson, B. H. (2002). Endlessly branching and dividing: Anne Tyler's dynamic causality. Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal, 85(3/4), 301–321. JSTOR. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41179014
8. Elfenbein, A. S. (2007). Anne Tyler as social critic: Inequality, racism, and alienation in "The Geologist's Maid." The Mississippi Quarterly, 60(2), 369–384. JSTOR. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26467063
9. Erfan, K. (2017). Formation of subcultures: Resistance to hegemony of dominant class. The Creative Launcher, 2(4), 252–256. https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2017.2.4.37
10. Freud, S. (1925). Certain neurotic mechanisms in jealousy, paranoia and homosexuality. The Psychoanalytic Review, 12. ProQuest. https://search.proquest.com/openview/222098965ef009de1bed0f400c051c17/1
11. Gandotra, N. (2020). Celebration of female solidarity in Anne Tyler's Clock Dance. JOELL, 7(3), 93–97. https://doi.org/10.33329/joell.7.3.20.93
12. Hagen, W. M. (2019). Review of Clock Dance, by Anne Tyler. World Literature Today, 93(1), 111. https://doi.org/10.1353/wlt.2019.0109

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0821.v1

13. Harju, A. A., & Huovinen, A. (2013). Fashionably voluptuous: Normative femininity and resistant performative tactics in fashion blogs. Journal of Marketing Management, 31(15–16), 1602–1625. https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2015.1066837
14. Jeffrey, B., & Troman, G. (2011). The construction of performative identities. European Educational Research Journal, 10(4), 484–501. https://doi.org/10.2304/eerj.2011.10.4.484
15. Jergus, K. (2018). The limits of identity-performativity, gender and politics. Encounters in Theory and History of Education, 19, 110–122. https://doi.org/10.24908/eoe-ese-rse.v19i0.11918
16. Kondapally, S. (2011). Tyler, 2007. K L University, 1, 176–181. ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338631775
17. Laffey, M. (2000). Locating identity: Performativity, foreign policy and state action. Review of International Studies, 26(3), 429–444. JSTOR. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20097687
18. Murray, J. (2020). The casual cruelty of fat phobia: An intersectional analysis of "unruly" feminine corporeality in selected texts by Anne Tyler. Routledge, 37(1), 37–51. https://doi.org/10.1080/10131752.2020.1741863
19. Radha, M. S., & Saraswathy, K. (2023). The determined character of Willa Drake in Anne Tyler's Clock Dance. A Journal for New Zealand Herpetology, 12(3), 6342–6344.
20. Raslan, I. (2012). Cultural globalization in Anne Tyler's Digging to America. IJAES, 13, 127–142.
21. Salvador, A. (2017). Omnivore perspectives of food and cultural identity in Digging to America. Laurier Undergraduate Journal of the Arts, 3(8), 121–129.
22. Sasikanth, K. J. W. (2018). Cultures and relationships in Anne Tyler's novel Digging to America. JOELL, 5(3), 193–198.
23. Shin, E. J., & Koh, A.-R. (2020). Korean genderless fashion consumers' self-image and identification. Journal of the Korean Society of Clothing and Textiles, 44(3), 400–412. https://doi.org/10.5850/JKSCT.2020.44.3.400
24. Spivak, G. C., & Young, R. (1991). Neocolonialism and the secret agent of knowledge. Edinburgh University Press, 13(1/2), 220–251. JSTOR. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43973717
25. Stanard, M. G. (2018). Revisiting Bula Matari and the Congo Crisis: Successes and anxieties in Belgium's late colonial state. The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, 46(1), 144–168. https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2017.1390895
26. Stoddart, M. (2007). Ideology, hegemony, discourse: A critical review of theories of knowledge and power. Social Thought & Research, 28, 191–225. JSTOR. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23252126
27. Tlostanova, M. (2012). Postsocialist ≠ Postcolonial? On post-Soviet imaginary and global coloniality. Journal of Postcolonial Writing, 48(2), 130–142. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2012.658244
28. Willrich, P. R. (1992). Watching through windows: A perspective on Anne Tyler. The Virginia Quarterly Review, 68(3), 497–516. JSTOR. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26437257
29. Wills, J. H. (2011). Claiming America by claiming others: Asian-American adoptive parenthood in A Gesture Life and Digging to America. Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture, 10(1), 1–11.
30. Appadurai, A. (1996). Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization. University of Minnesota Press.
31. Austin, J. L. (1975). How to do things with words. Clarendon Press.
32. Bail, P. (1998). Anne Tyler: A critical companion. Greenwood Publishing Group.
33. Barthes, R. (1990). The fashion system. University of California Press.
34. Bhabha, H. K. (1994). The location of culture. Routledge.
35. Butler, J. (1993). Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex. Psychology Press.
36. Butler, J. (2004). Undoing gender. Psychology Press.
37. Butler, J. (2006). Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity. Routledge.
38. Gale, Cengage Learning. (2016). A study guide for Anne Tyler's "Digging to America." Gale, Cengage Learning.
39. Gaugele, E. (2014). Aesthetic politics in fashion. Sternberg Press. https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/46504
40. Gaugele, E., & Titton, M. (Eds.). (2019). Fashion and postcolonial critique. Sternberg Press. https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/46522

 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0821.v1

41. Gilman, S. L. (1995). Freud, race, and gender. Princeton University Press.
42. Hansen, K. T. (2004). The world in dress: Anthropological perspectives on clothing, fashion, and culture. Annual Review of Anthropology, 33, 369–392. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.33.070203.143805
43. Hegel, G. W. F. (2018). Hegel: The phenomenology of spirit. Oxford University Press.
44. Hollander, A. (1993). Seeing through clothes. University of California Press.
45. Huddart, D. (2005). Homi K. Bhabha. Psychology Press.
46. Kaiser, S. B., & Green, D. N. (2022). Fashion and cultural studies. Bloomsbury Publishing.
47. Krolokke, C., & Sorensen, A. S. (2006). Gender communication theories and analyses: From silence to performance. SAGE.
48. Nkrumah, K. (1965). Neo-colonialism: The last stage of imperialism. Nelson.
49. Pratt, M. L. (2008). Imperial eyes: Travel writing and transculturation. Routledge.
50. Said, E. (2014). Orientalism. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.
51. Salih, S. (2002). Judith Butler [E-book]. Routledge.
52. Stefanescu, B. (2012). Postcommunism/postcolonialism: Siblings of subalternity.
53. Tyler, A. (2007). Digging to America: A novel. Ballantine Books.
54. Tyler, A. (2018). Clock dance: A novel. Alfred A. Knopf. https://lccn.loc.gov/2017043200
55. Young, R. J. C. (2016). Postcolonialism: An historical introduction. Wiley. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/book/10.1002/9781119316817
56. Haehnel, B. (2019). Fashionscapes, hybridity, and the white gaze. In E. Gaugele & M. Titton (Eds.), Fashion and postcolonial critique (pp. 170–185). Sternberg Press. https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/46522
57. Karentzos, A. (2019). Traveling fashion exoticism and tropicalism. In E. Gaugele & M. Titton (Eds.), Fashion and postcolonial critique (pp. 230–245). Sternberg Press. https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/46522
58. Reis, B., et al. (2018). Genderless clothing issues in fashion. In G. Montagna & C. Carvalho (Eds.), Textiles, identity and innovation: Design the future (pp. 255–260). CRC Press.
59. Salih, S. (2007). On Judith Butler and performativity. In K. E. Lovaas & M. M. Jenkins (Eds.), Sexualities and communication in everyday life: A reader (pp. 55–68). SAGE.
60. Akgül, M. (2009). Loss of cultural identity in Anne Tyler's Digging to America [Master's thesis, Dokuz Eylül University]. Dokuz Eylül University. https://acikerisim.deu.edu.tr/xmlui/bitstream/handle/20.500.12397/11065/236067.pdf
61. Tanji, M. (2018). Culture clash in Anne Tyler's Digging to America [Doctoral dissertation].
62. "Cultural studies in the future tense." (2022). Sweet Study. https://www.sweetstudy.com/files/culturalstudiesinthefuturetense-pdf
63. Kakutani, M. (2006, May 19). Belonging to a family, belonging in America. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/19/books/19book.html
64. Osborne, P., et al. (1994). Interview: Judith Butler: Gender as performance. Radical Philosophy, 67. https://philpapers.org/rec/OSBIJB
65. Schillinger, L. (2006, May 21). The accidental friendship. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/21/books/review/21schillinger.html