


**A Study of Butlerian Gender Performativity in Azar Nafisi's Reading  
*Lolita in Tehran***

Atie Razzaghi Ghaziani<sup>1</sup>

Alireza Farahbakhsh<sup>2\*</sup> 

**Abstract**

The present study intends to investigate the contours of gender performativity in Azar Nafisi's Reading Lolita in Tehran (2003), which depicts Nafisi's life experiences in Iran in the 1970s and the 1980s. Drawing upon Judith Butler's conceptualization of gender performativity, this research probes into the notion of gender roles and gendered subjectivity during the period Nafisi's narrative covers. The central questions of this research are: 1. How do the contemporary codes of normativity define gender performativity in Nafisi's Reading Lolita in Tehran? 2. How do the major characters of Nafisi's memoir react to their gender roles, and to what effect? To answer the stated questions, this study adopts Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which pivots around her view of gender as a social construct. The study reveals that the regulative social structure defines certain gender-oriented roles for both sexes and monitors their implementation. It also shows that the contemporary political system, with its regulative and punitive laws and homogenizing strategies, normalizes and bolsters male domination, and propagates stereotypical gender roles. The characters' resistance, however, usually ends in the consolidation and absorption of a new set of gender clichés, which is mostly Westernized; put differently, the rejection of certain gender-based performances generally leads to the performance of another set of gender roles.

**Keywords:** gender performativity, gendered subjectivity, normativity, homogenization, resistance

---

1. Graduate Student, Department of English Language, University of Guilan, Rasht, Iran. (atierazaghi@gmail.com)

\*2. Associate Professor, University of Guilan, Rasht, Iran. (Corresponding Author: drfiroozfazeli@guilan.ac.ir)

## 1. Introduction

Nafisi was born in Tehran in 1948, traveled to Lancaster at the age of thirteen to continue her studies, received her PhD in English and American Literature from the University of Oklahoma, came back to Iran, and witnessed the Revolution of 1979 and the Iran-Iraq war. She started working at Tehran University at the time and taught English and American literature. She left Iran for the United States in 1997 and published her experiences of reading literary texts with her female students at Tehran University under the title *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003). Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which is written in English, has been translated into thirty-two languages, remained on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for more than two years, and won several literary awards, including the 2004 Book Sense non-fiction Book of the Year Award. Nafisi's *Lolita* depicts her life experiences after the Islamic revolution of Iran and also during the Iran-Iraq war. This study aims to investigate the memoir through Butler's theory of gender performativity.

In her influential book, *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Pamela Butler (1956) suggests that gender is performative, meaning that gender identity is recognized not because it is essential, but because we are socialized into certain behaviors that we are apt to repeatedly perform in our daily lives. Gender performativity is a ritualized reiteration of acts throughout our lives that are internalized over time. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler states that "gender proves to be performative—that is constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (25). Butler's observation indicates that the subject is not simply a person who is the subject of certain gendered acts; rather, subjectivity refers to the infinite potential of performing endless deeds. In both her *gender Trouble* and *the Psychic Life of Power* (1997), Butler insists that one of the operations of regulative power is to normalize particular gender-related behaviors as natural and accepted behaviors within society.

Adopting Butler's formulation of gender performativity, the researchers probe into agencies within a power structure that influence and shape the characters' gender performativity in a particular time and place in Iran's history. The study also examines the way male and female characters of Nafisi's memoir resist defined and prescribed gender roles by performing subversive acts. A relevant notion is the range of stereotypical gender identities that Nafisi reiterates, challenges, or deconstructs in her representation of the narrator as well as her male and female characters. The main questions of this study are: How do contemporary codes of normativity define gender performativity in Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*? how do the major characters of Nafisi's memoir react to their gender roles, and what are the upshots? To answer the questions, the present research adopts a Butlerian

reading of gender performativity and gender-based subjectivity and inspects the regulative or normative powers that assign and monitor gender roles. Butler's theory of gender performativity is extensively elaborated on in her *Gender Trouble* (1990) and is deeply interwoven with her ideas regarding the reciprocal impact of power and subject formation broached in her *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997). This research limits itself to the study of Butler's conception of gender performativity and gender-based subjectivity in Nafisi's memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, and excludes her other writings or other feminist debates.

the following pages, first, a number of in-depth previous readings of Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* will be introduced and then Butler's feminist assumptions on gender performativity will be briefly reviewed. In the analytical section, Butler's theories regarding gender performativity and subjectivity will be contextualized in Nafisi's memoir in four interrelated sub-sections, namely, "Constitutional Law," "The Homogenization of Subjects," "Regulative Mentality," and "Resistance." In the mainstream discussions, the researchers will delve into the strategies deployed by the contemporary power structure to set down and then safeguard the exercise of gender-oriented codes of conduct as well as the way Nafisi characters endeavor to bypass, undermine, or ignore them.

## 2. Literature Review

In the past decade, Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has been read from various critical perspectives, both domestically and globally. As a controversial work, it triggered numerous positive and negative views. What follows is a brief digest of what Nafisi scholars have written about her memoir. Here, the scholarship has been narrowed down to feminist or gender-oriented studies.

Hamid Dabashi is perhaps Nafisi's most vocal critic; to his eyes, Nafisi has re-enacted the orientalist stereotypes that Edward Said took pains to expose and dismantle. In "Native Informers and the Making of the American Empire" (2006), Dabashi argues that in Nafisi's *Lolita*, the female body is used as "a site of political contestation between two modes of ideological fanaticism by Islamists and anti-Islamists alike, one insisting on veiling and the other on unveiling it (4). He condemns Nafisi's *Lolita* as a "colonial project" driven by a "colonial agent" (3). Rachel Blumenthal shares Dabashi's critique of *Reading Lolita*. Her main argument, in her article, "Looking for Home in the Islamic Diaspora of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Azar Nafisi, and Khaled Hosseini" (2012), is that though Nafisi tries to depict the Western world as an ideological homeland where oppressed women are supposed to feel safe, she fails to endorse this ideological homeland, and frequently reveals her historical, intellectual, and political connections with Iran.

Scholar, teacher and poet, Fatemeh Keshavarz adopts a similar critical perspective and criticizes not only Azar Nafisi and her complicity in the discourse of orientalism but also the taste of the reading public that has rated *Reading Lolita* so highly. Keshavarz, in her *Jasmine and Stars: Reading more than Lolita in Tehran* (2007), does not approve of the bleak image Nafisi has presented about Iranian women as the victims of oppression, living in a joyless society. She claims that Nafisi's memoir is a new orientalist narrative in that "through its polarized vision of the world, it denies the value of listening. Instead, it contributes to the rising heat in the fiery East-West rhetoric" (11).

In their article "Why Americans Love Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*" (2008), Anne Donadey and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh, interpret the reception of *Reading Lolita* in America concerning the ideological content of the book. They argue that Azar Nafisi has deployed many orientalist tropes such as the veiled woman oppressed by the power system and that is why Americans have found *Reading Lolita* fascinating because it justifies the United States' dominion over Muslim countries. They argue that "pseudo-feminism has a long history of being used to bolster Western colonialist and imperialist agendas, and Nafisi's memoir has the potential to convince some American feminists that a U. S. military intervention in Iran would 'liberate' Iranian women" (643).

On the other end of the critical spectrum of *Lolita*, some scholars have looked at it with admiration. Kate Flint, in an article entitled "Women and Reading" (2006), conducts a survey of gendered readings mentioned in different books and novels and includes Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in her comprehensive review. She holds that *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is remarkable because it shows the impact of reading on women's empowerment. According to Flint, what makes Nafisi's representation of the reading experience significant is that she shows both the private and social functions of the experience. She is impressed by the way a reading group consisting of women in Nafisi's memoir, can convert reading into a conscious act of resistance, through which they destabilize social, cultural, and ideological norms.

Women's reading experience as a form of resistance has also been discussed by Colleen Luts Clemens who believes that one cannot expect Nafisi to represent all Iranian women and that her memoir should be taken as only one voice among numerous and disparate voices of the Iranian diaspora. In "Imagine Us in the Act of Reading: A Resistant Reading of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*" (2014), Clemens argues, in favor of Nafisi, that "even if the book plays into a western project of Orientalizing Iranian women and questions women's ability to be actors against oppression, Nafisi does have a right to give voice to her own experience" (585). Clemens acknowledges traces of orientalism in Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* but denies the cliché of the orientalization of Iranian women.

East-West duality in terms of different treatments of gender identity underlying Nafisi's memoir, the reiteration of orientalist tropes, and the liberating impact of reading literature for women are among the recurrent themes in studies dedicated to Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Nafisi's narrative, however, has never been read in the light of Butlerian gender performativity. The present analysis is the first research that takes it upon itself to realize how the consistent and repetitive use of gender-oriented injunctions fashion and regulate the identities of Iranian women and men in Nafisi's selected work and how men and women abide by or struggle to subvert gender performativity and subjectivity.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

Essentialism, a philosophical approach acknowledging the primacy of essence, attributes a set of fixed, unalterable, and permanent characteristics to individuals, and believes those attributes to be indispensable to their identity. In the late 1980s and 1990s, feminists like Judith Butler began to repudiate the essentialist approach to feminism, which emphasized that gender is a matter of biology and that a woman is born, as essentially is, a woman. In her article, "Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Philosophy," Alison Stone argues that essentialist doctrines were used to justify gender-based discrimination in society and disseminated or consolidated gender stereotypes (3). Butler reiterates that gender is a social construct rather than an essential quality and advocates the idea of the construction of gender roles and gender subjectivity within society. Therefore, constructivism emerged as an approach that opposed the old essentialist perception of gender and attached social, cultural, political, or ideological agencies to the definition of masculinity and femininity and the performance each necessitated or entailed.

Butler's idea of gender performativity, as she has proclaimed in her *Gender Trouble*, turns around the assumption that gender is socially and culturally constructed through the introduction and reiteration of certain discursive gendered practices which become normalized and naturalized by regulative ideologies and normative power structures (25). She asserts that "there is no gender behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results" (*Gender Trouble* 25). Therefore, for Butler, gender is not a being, but a doing behind which there is no performer who "preexist the deed" (*Gender Trouble* 25). Besides expression (doing), reiteration (repetition) is an indispensable exponent of gender performativity. She contends that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a

natural sort of being" (*Gender Trouble* 33). Expression and reiteration need time to consolidate and naturalize the gendered deed.

In her *Subject of Desire* (1987), Butler discusses the "regulatory discourses on sexuality ... that create the category of sex" (234-5), arguing that gender and sex are normalized through the influence of regulative systems. For Butler, as Li He has explained, gendered "subjects are tangible manifestations decided by the power" (683), and "gender is not inherent, but is produced by the pressure of discipline. This pressure regulates our performance" (684). Social power structures and normative systems generate homogenizing discourses that are specific to themselves as they are bound by time and place and are prone to change within the same culture. Each society forges its own value systems and utilizes strategies to secure their execution. Law enforcement, ratification and endorsement of codes of conduct and performativity, and the invocation of desired feelings, such as patriotism, hatred, or sympathy, are among the common tools power systems employ to control its members and manipulate subjectivation. The analytical section analyzes how certain regulative conventions, using typical normative strategies, affect Nafisi's characters' gender-based performativity.

This study draws upon Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to investigate the underlying ideologies of the Iranian society and the power structures which normalize particular gender roles or gendered acts in Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. To do so, it investigates the contours of gender performativity in the memoir by tracing the ideological processes through which gender identities are formed within power structures and through discursive practices. In other words, the present study endeavors to unmask the ideological and hegemonic unconscious of Nafisi's work to see how the regulative power structures of the time contribute to its characters' gender identity construction. It also seeks to realize in what ways Nafisi's characters attempt to resist normalized and regulated acts attributed to their gender roles and perform gendered acts in opposition to regulative systems in order to achieve agency or subjectivity. It also sheds light on how the construction of gender identity depends on the dynamics of complicity with and resistance against dominant gender ideologies. Another concern is to understand if Nafisi challenges stereotypical gendered identities or embraces them.

#### 4. Analysis and Discussion

This analytical section seeks to examine the applicability of Butler's understanding of gender identity to Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. The first subsection, "Constitutional Law," delineates the way the established conventions affect or form characters' gender identity. The second and third subsections, namely, "The Homogenization of the Subject" and

“Regulative Mentality,” elaborate on the influences of homogenizing agencies and ideologies on the characters’ gender performativity. The final analytical section, “Resistance,” deals with the characters’ attempt to resist gender-related regulation and normativity and the way they contribute to different performativity or the formation of a new identity.

#### **4.1 Constitutional Law**

Butler’s theory of gendered subjectivity is tightly interwoven with her idea of power which signifies the productive operation of law and prohibition. In her *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler redefines power as a juridic-discursive and prohibitory agency that generates certain expectations and presuppositions. Yoshiyuki Sato explains that in Butler’s reading of power, “the prohibitory law produces not only the subordinated subject but the gendered subject. The gendered subject, however, is related to a peculiar type of prohibition” (9). Although the term law, in the Butlerian sense of the word, addresses normality and morality, rather than constitution, the role of laws legislated by the government, as a disciplinary power in defining regulative norms is undeniable. In Nafisi’s work, the legislative power of the time accommodates the recently-written constitutional law into the new codes of moral conduct, thereby doubly reinforcing gender performativity. Morality on the one hand, and legislature on the other, establish new norms for acceptability and propriety. For Butler, gender should not be approached only in terms of biology as the reductionist attitude is both degrading and fallacious. In Nafisi’s memoir, however, it seems that the identification of gender with the body constitutes the general understanding of femininity and masculinity.

In the first section of her *Lolita*, Nafisi presents many instances of punitive and corrective aspects of the constitutional law; for instance, a girl as young as nine can legally get married, and “stoning became once again the punishment of adultery and prostitution” (27). Here, Nafisi is alluding to the age of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* as a physically and intellectually immature girl unfit and simply too young for marriage. Nafisi rages against the marriage of minor girls (or children) to much older men, since she believes that these marriages would deprive the girl of her childhood and leave her stranded on the shores of adult desperation, as it happened to *Lolita*. To Nafisi, Humbert (*Lolita*’s lover) typifies men who lust for underage girls, totally indifferent to the psychological and mental scars they inflict on them. Nafisi claims that both the feminine and masculine performances are approved by contemporary legislation as marriage is legalized by the dominant regulative system. Nafisi mimics Humbert’s dark humor in a comment directed at her readers, if *Lolita*

was born in Iran, she would have been legally marriageable by the age of nine, even to men much older than her Nabokovian predator (43).

In Nafisi's memoir, another gender-based performance that has a significant impact on people's gender identity is the code of dress. Nafisi mentions and recurrently addresses this motif as a significant factor in designating normalized and regulated appearance. Colored attire became limited, and women were required to wear chador and scarves, all in dark colors. The new code of dressing signals the advent of a new culture and a call for a collective identity, which presupposes certain performances. The dress code also applies to men, as the standard attire for men in the public sphere also underwent radical changes after new laws were enforced. Nafisi states that "In many important ways, the veil had gained a symbolic significance" (*Lolita* 112). In addition to the dress code, some norms concern eating and drinking, all of which find their way into performativity and subjectivity. To Nafisi, many of the norms are unfair and superficial as are many of the punishments, especially if the person is punished for a crime he/she never committed to ever intended to commit: "Disobedience was punished by fines ... and jail terms" (*Lolita* 167). In *Things I Have Been Silent About: Memories of a Prodigal Daughter*, Nafisi explains that as a girl and later as a mother she witnessed radical changes in the conception of femininity and prescribed gender roles:

By the time I was growing up, in the 1950s and '60s, we took our education and our books parties, and movies for granted. We witnessed women becoming active in all walks of life, governing in Parliament—among them, briefly, my own mother—and becoming ministers. But then, by 1984, my own daughter ... would witness the return of the same laws that had been repealed during my grandmother's and my mother's lifetimes. (xx)

Gender roles were further internalized after the outbreak of the Iraq-Iran imposed war, which inspired strong patriotic sentiments. As already mentioned, for Butler, gender is not a pre-existing phenomenon; rather, it is constructed through the reiteration and acceptance of prescribed and presupposed roles. Therefore, a radical change in the status quo can visibly transform gender roles and the way they should be played. This is what happened in Iran after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which discredited certain gender-related performances and replaced them with certain others. As an example, official clothes for men and women to wear at certain occasions or in governmental buildings, schools, or police stations were replaced by other official clothes for similar occasions or at similar places. It implies that gender roles and gender-based performativity are not limited to a particular time place or governing system. The transformation of these roles



always leads to confusion and identity change; that is why Butler keeps reminding us that identity is closely interlinked with performativity so that any change in either of them would invariably result in a change in the other. For instance, Sanaz, one of Nafisi's students, experiences a drastic personality change after the reinforcement of new dress codes. As Christine Grogan has argued, "focusing on the regulation of the female body, Nafisi notes how Sanaz is transformed from an energetic individual to an anonymous veiled figure" (65). In her new attire, Sanaz feels confused and awkward, and she prefers to hide away all the colors and accessories that define her as a young woman.

She says her goodbyes and puts on her black robe and scarf over her orange shirt and jeans, coiling her scarf around her neck to cover her huge gold earrings. She directs wayward strands of hair under the scarf, puts her notes in her large bag, straps it on over her shoulder, and walks out into the hall. She pauses a moment on top of the stairs to put on thin lacy black gloves to hide her nail polish. (*Lolita* 26)

According to Butler, gender and gender-based performativity are exposed and expressed through the performances individuals repeat over and over again, identify as a part of their personality, and associate with their gender. Constitutional Law recognized a new set of guidelines for personal and social conduct, which in many cases (as in Sanaz's case) went against the old ways of the preferred personal ways. In effect, the newly approved rules obliged the subjects to commence performing new gendered behaviors, and begin producing more and more fixed and essentialist gendered identities. Here the Constitutional Law appears as an irrefutable and authoritative source of creating, monitoring, and perpetuating the process of gender performativity.

#### **4.2 The Homogenization of Subjects**

Homogenization can be defined as a systematic strategy through which the superior gains and exerts control over the inferior. Homogeneity implies a rather more efficient power structure in the sense that the designation of norms and values are met with minimal resistance and maximum approval. Daniele Convers asserts that "throughout the modern era, states have forced their citizens to conform to common standards and cultural patterns" in pursuit of creating "congruent, cohesive, unified communities of citizens under governmental control" (1). In this process, the values of the dominant system are instilled in the public and respected as long as they are ratified by it or left unchallenged by another system. Compliance with the dominant system usually leads to conformity and homogeneity, which in turn makes performativity homogeneous and consistent. This section explores the ways through which post-revolution social systems tried to achieve homogeneity to unite the nation, bring people together, and set down norms for gender roles

and gender-related performance. In *Lolita*, Nafisi makes an analogy between Nabokov's foreword to *Invitation to a Beheading* (1959) and the mood of her narrative. In Nabokov's story, as Nafisi writes, the society's "uniformity is not only the norm but also the law" (20), the fragile hero is sentenced to death as he is "opaque" in "a place where all citizens are required to be transparent" (22), and "death becomes a spectacle for which the good citizens buy tickets" (22).

In Nafisi's *Lolita*, the homogeneity of appearance plays a crucial role in institutionalizing performativity. In a private literature class, Manna, one of Nafisi's students, confesses that the homogenous appearance has "coarsened my taste in colors ... I want to wear outrageous colors, like shocking pink or tomato red" (*Lolita* 14). The traditional conception of femininity decreed that women stay at home, raise children, cook for the family, and do household chores. The bread-winners should have been men, who had to work day in and day out to make the ends meet during the economically austere war years; this is pretty much the standard image of a happy family. Men should have been dressed in long-sleeve shirts, with buttons done up, and loose trousers; beard and rosary were also parts of the homogenous appearance. As men were usually family providers, they were treated by family members as the patriarchs of the house; nevertheless, regulated gender-based performances were quite dull for both men and women. In her memoir, Nafisi also mentions the homogenization of the education system, a good example of which is her expulsion from the University of Tehran. In the process of cultural and intellectual homogenization, universities, needless to say, were among the most important education centers. As Nafisi has written in *Lolita*, "Universities had once more become the targets of attack by the cultural purists who were busy imposing stricter sets of laws, going so far as to segregate men and women in classes and punishing disobedient professors" (9).

Nafisi marks the rapid changes the universities were going through in the first years of the Islamic revolution. She points to the systematic expulsion of university teachers and students as a means of achieving homogeneity in the educational system at its highest level. Nafisi also writes that a number of students and professors were discharged from the university for their leftist ideologies, several publishing houses were closed, and some of the best Persian classical poets such as Rumi and Khayyam were "banned or censored" (136), and students' curriculum underwent massive changes (147). The new system sought to eliminate any sign and symbol of the previous power structure; many of the decisions and regulations were later modified and some of them were permanently lifted. Nevertheless, each of these eventful transformations left its mark on the identity of the men and women who witnessed them and were supposed to adapt themselves to the new codes of

performativity. It must be added that elimination and substitution are the stable elements in any system transformation; the new system first obliterates the previous power structure and then supersedes it with its own, demanding full compliance with, and strict observation of, the new norms which includes the roles of each gender in the fresh social and cultural setting. According to Butler, "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" ("Performative Acts" 521). All the institutionalized attempts to create a homogeneous society embrace the imposition of standardized essential gender roles on the individuals, who by practicing and reiterating the roles assigned to them, become gendered subjects as either men or women. In Butler's view, since the rules and strategies employed are mainly male-dominated, they are more restrictive for women.

#### **4.3 Regulative Mentality**

In "The Subject and Power," Foucault points to incitement and conduction as operations of power, and writes that power "is a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult ... Perhaps the equivocal nature of the term 'conduct' is one of the best aids for coming to terms with the specificity of power relations" (789). In Nafisi's memoir, conduction, as an operation of power, occurs when the normative system is backed up and authenticated through patriotic feelings after the outbreak of the imposed war. This conduction, in turn, further advances the process of homogenization. Butler's interpretation of normativity is compatible with the Foucauldian notion of power; therefore, in the Butlerian sense, the dominant mentality of the time, incited or induced by nationalistic incentives, introduced and cultivated a moral principle with which the individuals had to comply. This mentality also embraced the essentialist beliefs regarding gender; consequently, they contributed to the internalization of contemporary gendered subjectivity.

In the third section of *Lolita*, "James," Nafisi gives an account of a number of significant social events that took place between 1980 and 1988, including massive cultural changes and the horrors of war. She claims that during the war years, the codes of dressing and conduct became increasingly mandatory and the contemporary normalizing system grew dramatically pervasive, radically changing people's lifestyles. Thousands of youths were martyred, went missing, were maimed, or were captured, houses were bombed, and cities were shelled, and the ongoing catastrophes shocked the nation and left people deeply depressed. All these developments also influenced the public's expectations of each gender and appropriate roles. Nafisi dedicates the third chapter of her book to Henry James's wartime works. James was an American

writer whose disappointment with the American neutrality in World War I led him to seek British citizenship in 1915. Nafisi chose James's work mostly to show the calamities of war and to share all the conflicts that she, along with many other women, experienced during the war years. At the beginning of the imposed war, Nafisi describes her feelings of patriotism in the following passage:

I had become an avid and insatiable collector. I saved pictures of martyrs, young men, some mere children, published in the daily papers beside the wills they had made before going to the front. I cut out Ayatollah Khomeini's praise of the thirteen-year old boy who had thrown himself in front of an enemy tank and collected accounts of young men who ... were sent off to the front ... What had begun with an impulse to record events in my diary turned gradually into a greedy and feverish act of hoarding. (159)

However, Nafisi confesses that her feelings of sympathy and pride were gradually replaced by fear, which she describes in her sleepless nights, fearing air raids and impending death: "Somehow, by staying awake, [she] might throw a jinx and divert the bomb from harming [their] house" (Nafisi, *Lolita* 186). The disastrous consequences of war deeply touched her and prompted in her a sense of "savage relief" when her neighborhood was hit. She experienced a sense of guilt as well, for she was aware that although she survived, others were killed.

Nafisi taught Henry James' *Daisy Miller* (1879) to students at Allameh Tabataba'i University. James's fictional character, a "mixture of vulnerability and courage" (*Lolita* 171), is similar to many female students who felt precarious in that turbulent period. Others, however, did not share Nafisi's sympathy since in many ways she was a nonconformist. For instance, Mr. Ghomi, the epitome of the inscribed value system, keeps bitterly criticizing the likes of Daisy Miller on every possible occasion:

Daisy Miller is obviously a bad girl; she is reactionary and decadent. We live in a revolutionary society and our revolutionary women are those who defy the decadence of Western culture by being modest. They do not make eyes at men. He continues almost breathlessly, with a sort of venom that is uncalled-for in relation to a work of fiction. He blurts out that Daisy is evil and deserves to die. (*Lolita* 195)

His speech is emblematic of the normative system which presupposed certain gender roles and their performativity; men and women were supposed to perform their gender roles in accordance to the dominant cultural system, otherwise, they are stigmatized as evil and corrupt. Mr. Ghomi's harsh reaction to James's fictional character is in fact a microcosm of a general mindset that walls out nonconformity and approves of extreme punishments. This is how Butler's performativity merges feminism with social, political, and cultural

studies. In her conceptualization of gendered subjectivity, Butler sought to move beyond feminism and to “expand the focus, to also examine masculinity and the social relations/structures between women and men” (Scarborough and Risman 41). To convince people like Mr Ghomi that Daisy did not deserve to die, Nafisi tried to underscore Daisy’s bravery and devotedness so as to preserve her sense of subjectivity. In her memoir, Nafisi acknowledges that like Daisy she did her best to hang on to her sense of subjectivity and avoid roles she could not morally justify. Daisy dies at the end of James’s narrative and her death can be regarded as one of the possible outcomes of nonconformity. She was reluctant to play her gender-based and stereotypical roles in a conservative European community. The death can be interpreted metaphorically, too – like the death of an old identity and the birth of another.

#### 4.4 Resistance

Butler believes that “there is no gender behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (*Gender Trouble* 25). For her, “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (*Gender Trouble* 33). Here, the term repetition is the keyword for resistance; as she has noted, “it is precisely the possibility of a repetition which does not consolidate that dissociated unity, the subject, but which proliferates effects which undermine the force of normalization” (*The Psychic Life of Power* 93).

The very complexity and multiplicity of the meaning of gender and its contingency upon the expression and reiteration of gendered acts normalized by the regulative power guarantees the possibility of subversive reconstruction of it and opposition to the dominant discourse. According to Butler, if gender is constituted through a set of repetitive gendered performances normalized by the regulative system, then men and women can subvert those prescribed performances through disruption, deviation, and various forms of protest (*Gender Trouble* 145). However, Butler asserts that “the risk of renormalization is persistently there” (*The Psychic Life of Power* 93), insinuating that in the discursive deviations targeted against the accepted norms, lies the risk of the reiteration and consolidation of a new set of norms. This section aims to realize if the gendered subjects in *Lolita* try to resist the accepted gender norms and if resistance lead to the renormalization of other gendered performances.

In her *Jasmin and Stars* (2007), Fatemeh Keshavarz observed that “It is true that a traditionalist wave in Iran has promoted (and continues to promote) the cult of domesticity and motherhood in the aftermath of the Revolution” (115).

In Nafisi's *Lolita*, there are numerous examples depicting men and women challenging their gender roles. They disregard normalized performativity associated with femininity and masculinity and seek possible venues for deviation and subversion. Commenting on *Lolita* in *Iranian Women in the Memoir* (2017), Emira Derbel states that "The memoir disengages Iranian women from the traditional Eastern stereotype of subservience and passivity" (4). It must be added that although a number of Nafisi's characters are unwilling to reiterate systematized and standardized gender performances, one way or another, they end up participating in the contemporary regulative system or another regulative system. For instance, women's antipathy with and resistance to homogenized feminine roles normalized by the normative social structure encourage them to practice westernized feminine roles some of which locate them, once again, within the confines of the essentialist beliefs regarding gender.

In *Lolita*, the attempt to resist gender performativity is observable in both her and her students' disregard for dominant norms, at least as far as they can. Manna, as an act of resistance, polishes her nails and removes her scarf whenever possible. She prefers to wear "outrageous colors" like "shocking pink" or "tomato red," that is, colors associated with femininity (Nafisi 14). Similarly, Sanaz and Mitra begin to wear their scarves loosely and show their hair. Sanaz shows interest in feminine forms of dressing and gestures: "Sanaz, in a red dress, her magnificent hair caressing her bare shoulders, looking up at this personable young man in his dark suit and pale blue shirt, and he gazing into her eyes with tender affection" (*Lolita* 278). The red color of her dress, her gesticulations, and her way of looking up at her fiancé all reveal that she is practically challenging the institutionalized feminine roles. The blue color of her fiancé's shirt, his dark suit, and the word "gaze," suggesting the notion of the male gaze, indicate that, unlike Sanaz, he has absorbed his gendered performances. The performances of the couple, though at times in conflict with the gender-oriented codes of conduct, disclose the essential male/female dichotomy; although they do not fit into the injunctions of their own culture, they represent the Western stereotypes of a beautiful charming lady and a passionate young man. The implication is that they have deliberately tried to replace certain gender performances with others and in doing so they have accepted to internalize expected and defined roles. In other words, resistance to the regulative system may entail the acceptance of another. Even in their appreciation of literary characters like Daisy Miller, an independent and daring girl who does not conform to the conventional norms of society, they still indirectly confirm Daisy's feminine performances such as her way of dressing and her affair with Mr. Winterbourne.

Although Daisy's character does not conform to the typical dignity of a European woman (she is American, for one reason) and is regarded as a rebellious character, her honesty and purity cannot be downplayed. Some scholars such as Judith Fryer and Peter Tristram Coffin believe that Daisy represents an American type of femininity. In her *The Faces of Eve* (1976), a review of women in nineteenth-century American novels, Fryer dubs Daisy as "the American Princess" (97). In his article, "Daisy Miller: Western Hero," Coffin highlights Daisy's American or Western charms (280). This can be indicative of Nafisi's character's allegiance to a specific type of femininity, practiced by American women, despite their non-conformity to the gender-based norms of their own culture. Her students began to practice alternative gendered acts to subvert the established performances. This is a double-edged sword; on the one hand, it implies resistance to reiteration, but on the other, it is characterized by reiteration. The norms or the manifestations of performativity change, but the desire or willingness to perform does not. Resistance, put differently, does not address performativity, but forms of it.

Nafisi herself refused to act by the normalized gender roles in many respects. She forfeited her position as a university lecturer, ran literature sessions in her apartment to introduce and discuss books that were not usually taught at universities, and started her private book club, supervising it for two years after her resignation. In the books and literary discussions she and her students sought the joy of "being, living, breathing" (*Lolita* 25). She professes that "Like Lolita, we tried to escape ... And like Lolita, we took every opportunity to flaunt our insubordination: by showing a little hair from under our scarves, insinuating a little color into the drab uniformity of our appearance, growing our nails ... and listening to forbidden music" (*Lolita* 25-26).

The quotation evidences that although Nafisi made the greatest effort possible to resist the gender performances, she still conforms to a set of modern or Western feminine acts such as showing hair, growing nails, or listening to Western music. Nafisi opposed the contemporary "cult of domesticity and motherhood" (Keshavarz 115); she defied university principles, resisted the regulative system, challenged homogenized gender performativity, migrated to the United States, and wrote her memoir as a means of self-expression and self-revelation. Nevertheless, she picked up new habits and adapted herself to a new social and cultural setting, which is marked by alternative and at times completely different norms compared to those at home. Butler's formulation of performativity, therefore, seems rather deterministic in the sense that every society obliges its members to adhere to its normalized and regularized codes of conduct both for men and women.

## 5. Conclusion

This research has been a survey of Azar Nafisi's memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in the light of Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity. In her work, Nafisi has supplied significant facts and details about her life, contemporary society, and eventful developments and massive cultural and political changes that took place in the 1970s and 1980s, especially as the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution and the subsequent imposed Iraq-Iran war. The present article has probed into the way the social regulative system of the time affected the conception of gender roles and brought about a new understanding of gender-related performance and gendered subjectivity. Nafisi's memoir shows that the new constitutional laws criminalized certain codes of personal and social conduct and implemented, instead, certain others, thereby redefining the roles and responsibilities of each gender. The policy of homogenization inscribed and safeguarded standardized and normalized performances and tried to absorb or change those who were unwilling to compromise with the new cultural system. The conception of masculinity and femininity, as a result, went through massive changes, as did the dominant value system and the expectations and presuppositions associated with it. The imposed war instigated strong nationalistic feelings, instilling in people a sense of sympathy and unity, which further advanced the homogenizing agency of the contemporary regulative structure. Constitutional laws, homogenization, and regulative mentality demanded that men and women should perform their gender-related roles by the kind of normativity that was endorsed and propagated in the new cultural and social ambiance.

The present research also demonstrates that Nafisi and many of the characters of her memoir sought to resist, challenge, or subvert the recognized gender-related norms. They ignored, for instance, dress codes or the regulative injunctions concerning reading, music, parties, or friendship. Nafisi, however, seems to be oblivious to the dark side of resistance since as she is resorting to or championing subversive acts as regards gender identity or regulated performativity, she is promulgating substituted regulated performativity. In other words, she is undermining contemporary normalized performances in favor of some other normalized performances, such as those regulated in the Western or American cultural systems. She is perpetuating the essentialist dichotomy of femininity/masculinity or reverting to a kind of gender performativity that is endorsed in another homogenizing structure. By resisting regulative normativity and recommending nonconformity, Nafisi is, in effect, setting up new norms for gender-oriented roles.



## References

- Blumenthal, Rachel. "LOOKING FOR HOME IN THE ISLAMIC DIASPORA OF AYAAN HIRSI ALI, AZAR NAFISI, AND KHALED HOSSEINI." *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2012, pp. 250-264.
- Butler, Judith. *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*. Columbia University Press, 1987.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1988, pp. 519-531.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. Routledge, 1993.
- Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford University Press, 1997.
- Clemens, Colleen Lutz. "'Imagine Us in the Act of Reading': A Resistant Reading of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 50, no. 5, pp. 584-95.
- Coffin, Peter Tristram. "Daisy Miller, Western Hero," *Western Folklore*, vol. 17, no. 4, pp. 273-285.
- Conversi, Daniele. "Cultural Homogenization, Ethnic Cleansing, and Genocide." *The International Studies Encyclopedias*. Oxford University Press, 2010. 719-742,
- Dabashi, Hamid. "Native Informers and the Making of the American Empire." *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 1 June 2006, pp. 1-9.
- DePaul, Amy. "Re-Reading 'Reading Lolita in Tehran'." *MELUS*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2008, pp. 73-92.
- Derbel, Emira. *Iranian Women in the Memoir: Comparing Reading Lolita in Tehran and Persepolis (1) and (2)*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017.
- Donadey, Anne, and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh. "Why Americans Love Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*." *Signs*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2008, pp. 623-646.
- Flint, Kate. "Women and Reading." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2006, pp. 511-536.
- Foucault, Michel. *Subjectivity and Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1980-1981*. Ed. Frederic Gros. Trans. Graham Burchell, Palgrave, 2017.
- Foucault, Michel. "The Subject and Power." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 4, 1982, pp. 777-795.
- Fryer, Judith. *The Faces of Eve*. Oxford University Press, 1976.
- Grogan, Christine. "*Lolita* Revisited: Reading Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A memoir in Books*." *Women's studies*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2014, pp. 52-72.

- He, Li. "The Construction of Gender: Judith Butler and Gender Performativity." *Proceedings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on Contemporary Education, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, vol. 124, no. 4, 2017, pp. 682-685.
- Keshavarz, Fatemeh. *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2007.
- Nafisi, Azar. *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*. Random House, 2003.
- Nafisi, Azar. *Things I Have Been Silent about: Memories of a Prodigal Daughter*. Random House, 2009.
- Risman, Barbara et al., eds. *Handbook of the Sociology of Gender*. Springer International Publishing, 2018.
- Sato, Yoshiyuki. "Prohibitory Law as Apparatus of Subjectivation: Butler's The Psychic Life of Power and Althusser." *Althusser and Law*. Ed. Laurent de Sutter. Routledge, 2013.
- Stone, Alison. "Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Philosophy." *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2004, pp. 135-153.

**How to cite:**

Razzaghi Ghaziani, A., & Farahbakhsh, A. 2023. "A Study of Butlerian Gender Performativity in Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*", *Naqd va Nazaryeh Adabi*, 17(3): 3-20. DOI:10.22124/naqd.2024.25306.2496

**Copyright:**

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to *Naqd va Nazaryeh Adabi (Literary Theory and Criticism)*.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided that the original work is properly cited.



پژوهشگاه علوم انسانی و مطالعات فرهنگی  
پرتال جامع علوم انسانی

## بررسی مفهوم «اجراگری جنسیتی» جودیث باتلر در رمان *لولیتا خوانی* در تهران آذر نفیسی

عطیه رزاقی قاضیانی<sup>۱</sup>

علیرضا فرح بخش<sup>۲\*</sup>

### چکیده

مطالعه حاضر بر آن است که به مفهوم اجراگری جنسیتی جودیث باتلر در *لولیتا خوانی* در تهران (۱۳۸۲) اثر آذر نفیسی بپردازد. این اثر، که شامل مجموعه خاطرات نویسنده می‌شود، تجربیات و زندگی نفیسی در ایران را در دهه‌های ۱۳۵۰ و ۱۳۶۰ به تصویر می‌کشد و سعی دارد با تکیه بر نظرات باتلر پیرامون اجراگری، هم ویژگی‌های اجراگری اثر منتخب و هم رفتارها و هنجارهای جنسیت-مدار غالب در بازه زمانی این اثر را معرفی نماید. پرسش‌های محوری این پژوهش عبارتند از: ۱. چه هنجارسازی‌های رفتاری و هویتی در شکل‌گیری اجراگری جنسیتی در شخصیت‌های اصلی اثر برگزیده نقش دارند؟ ۲. شخصیت‌ها چگونه در برابر اجراگری جنسیتی مقاومت می‌کنند و نتیجه‌ی آن چیست؟ برای پاسخ به سوالات مطرح شده، مطالعه حاضر کاربردپذیری شاخص‌های نظریه‌ی اجراگری جنسیتی جودیث باتلر و برداشت او از جنسیت به‌عنوان یک بر ساخت فرهنگی-اجتماعی را در اثر روایی نفیسی بررسی می‌کند. این جستار نشان می‌دهد که پس از انقلاب اسلامی و جنگ تحمیلی، قوانین نظارتی، سیاست‌های همگون‌ساز، هنجارسازی‌های نظام‌مند، نقش‌های جنسیت‌مدارانه جدیدی را عادی‌سازی کردند و رواج دادند. برخی از هنجارهای جنسیت‌مدار دچار تغییراتی بنیادین شدند و جای خود را به هنجارهای جنسیت‌مدار جدیدی دادند. در مواردی نیز، مقاومت شخصیت‌ها یا تلاش آن‌ها برای واژگون‌سازی هنجارهای جدید منجر به رفتارهای جنسیت‌مدار دیگری شد که عمدتاً از الگوهای اجراگرایی و کلیشه‌های جنسیتی غربی اقتباس شده بودند.

**واژگان کلیدی:** اجراگری جنسیتی، سوژه گی جنسیتی، موقعیت هنجار، همگون‌شدگی، تاب‌آوری

atierazaghi@gmail.com

۱. دانش‌آموخته کارشناسی ارشد گروه زبان و ادبیات انگلیسی دانشگاه گیلان، رشت، ایران.

\* farahbakhsh2000@yahoo.com

۲. دانشیار زبان و ادبیات انگلیسی دانشگاه گیلان، رشت، ایران (نویسنده مسئول)