



Accepted: April 2023

Published: August 2023

Review Paper**Reconstruction of Identity in Modern Iranian Fiction****Fatemeh Pourjafari***Department of English Language and Literature, Kerman Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kerman,
Iran.*e.pourjafari@gmail.com***ABSTRACT**

Studying modern Iranian fiction demonstrates a gradual shift in gender identity formation. This transition includes the multiple perspectives towards the female by the male characters, dangling between their comprehension of women as either angels or witches. The emergence of womanly-men and manly-women literary characters is a sign of a gradual refusal of the conventional gender roles during the last decades. This study aims at developing a new perspective on reading modern Persian fiction in regard to the issue of gender and identity, based on Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of identity. The significance of the present research lies in its attempt to change the stereotyped image that the West has of the Iranian Muslim women and their social reality.

Keywords: Judith Butler, performativity, modern Persian fiction, identity

1. INTRODUCTION

This study aims at developing a new perspective on reading modern Persian fiction in regard to the issue of gender and identity. Classical Persian literature, dominated by masculine myths, considered mobility and assertiveness as the natural, featuring characteristic for males. The image of women in these works is usually associated with enclosure and domesticity and those women are appreciated who show modesty and purity of manner. While men are characterized as wise and rational, women are simple-minded creatures whose ambitions do not reach beyond the love of luxury and adornment: “women seek as adornment silver and gold/ men wisdom and action adornment called” (Nasser Khosrow [1004-1088] 87).

Discussion

The study of modern Iranian fiction demonstrates a gradual shift in gender identity formation. This transition includes the multiple perspectives towards the female by the male characters, dangling between their comprehension of women as either angels or witches. The emergence of womanly-men and manly-women literary characters is a sign of a gradual refusal of the conventional gender roles during the last decades. The defiance of identity traits, ascribed by the social institutions to force individuals to perform certain roles, results in a new characterization of female figures in some novels, who find their own ways of self-assertion against the imposing regulative forces of the external world. This process of gender construction reaches a stable point in a number of other novels, in which the characters – both male and female – begin to embrace new identities and to reform and reconstruct individual selves distinct from the social, familial and legal punitive rules. They show a reversal of gender roles and demonstrate female figures who break down the well-defined concepts of femininity, and also male figures who willingly take this transformation for granted. Therefore, the deconstruction of the constructed identities is not specified to women only. Males and females, both, as human beings give a new account of themselves.

The researcher has chosen modern works of fiction, written mainly through the period of the recent seventy years. The three chosen woman authors are, Ghazaleh Alizadeh (1947-1996), Goli Taraghi (b.1939), and Fariba Vafi (b.1963). As far as the planned research intends to move beyond a mere feminist reading of works of literature written by female authors, two major literary works by two prominent male authors are also chosen, namely *The Blind Owl* by Sadegh Hedayat (1903-1951) and *The Prince* by Houshang Golshiri (1938-2000).

The aim is to highlight a crucial shift inside modern Iranian society; a society characterized by its appreciation of patriarchy for centuries. If the Persian modern literature presents characters who are granted some degree of agency in creating their own ideal identities – whether hesitantly or willingly - , this might be an evidence that Iranian social contexts have been changing rapidly through the late half century. If we agree with Stephen Greenblatt that literature is “the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society” (12), then one can claim that the authors of these novels act as agents of the dynamic relation between the work of art and the norms, values, class struggles, cultural traits and all other types of social facts of their surrounding societies. The process seems to be even more intricate with Taraghi and Hedayat who have lived abroad (Paris), and might negotiate, through their works, different patterns of social interactions from those in their homeland and in this way affect the phenomenon of identity construction.

As far as the focus of this research is on the fluidity of the conventional social system and the discursive nature of gender identities, the most proper theoretical form will be post-structural feminism by its emphasis on the social construction of identity. The model which will be applied to this research is that of Judith Butler and her concepts of gender role and identity as performative acts. Butler rejects the long-held idea that gendered behaviors are natural and claims that they are culturally constructed in certain periods of time and are imposed on people as norm and value. By performativity, she means “the reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (2). This approach is an anti-



essentialist one because it questions the universality and essentiality of the concept of identity. The result of this emphasis on the fluidity of the individual's identity is the possibility to reconstruct it by subverting the existing power structure. Choosing novels by five well-known authors of Persian fiction, the research tends to explore – in the light of Butler's theory of gender and identity – the ways through which individuals subvert the existing power structure that supports the gender hierarchy within these novels.

Both the narrator of *The Blind Owl* and *The Prince* are men who are faced with the primary glimpses of change in Iranian culture in regard with the position of women. These male protagonists show ambivalent reactions to this social transformation. The reality is that lines of power cannot exercise domination anymore because the subjugated group is no more immobile. The narrator of Hedayat's masterpiece wonders over the multiple identities of the female figures in the story. The woman takes the role of an ethereal beauty, loveable but non-achievable, a mythic dancer in an Indian temple, a goddess figure with magic powers, and finally a whore, a woman of corporality. The prince of Golshiri's story is the representative of the decaying traditional system. His wife, beautiful and independent, acts as a bilateral agent for the prince: promising and threatening. She does not integrate herself to the traditional conventions and by her scrutinizing looks "through the thick glass of her spectacles" (22) reevaluates the old values disdainfully and so becomes a challenge to the prince. The social reality of Iran is changing rapidly and new forms of identities are reconstructed.

While the impotent patriarchal structure of the two former stories eventually suffocate this new voice and by it annihilate themselves, the female characters of Vafi's novels use various ways of resistance against the normal and legitimate constructions of identity, and experience "queerness" in a Butlerian sense. Mahrokh of *A secret in the Alleys* chooses silence to counter the inscription of patriarchy. Language, by which the symbolic order constitutes the individual's identity, becomes a means to defy the very same identity politics and define an independent and assertive self.

The gender myths of immobile and docile women in a male-oriented society are overturned in Targhi's and Alizadeh's works, where women perform roles of either maternal, destructive or life-giving goddesses. Shirin Khanoom in Targhi's *Winter Sleep* presents an ethereal woman whose gives meaning to the lives of the men around him. She does not belong to any definite time or place and in response to the question regarding her whereabouts, she points to somewhere far, beyond the trees, beyond the roofs, beyond the skies and says: "Form there, from behind those trees, from in there, from way over that way, from those depths – what differences does it make? I'm here now" (89). She is the "Grand Lady" of the soul of all the lonely and impotent men of her surroundings. In a more practical and tangible way, Alizadeh's female figures are presented not only as the nourishing agents of the souls but also the saviors who embody the collective dream of political and social freedom. Roxana is neither mother nor wife nor sister, but a combination of all. She belongs to the collective unconscious of the nation. She belongs to history.

Following the trend of the prefiguration of female characters in modern Persian fiction leads us to a new image of Iranian social context and identity politics, particularly regarding gender roles. The literary world has provided a telling document – more real and trustworthy than any media report article – of Iranian women's decades of struggle to redefine their patterns of identity and reconstruct their independent individualities.

Conclusion

The significance of the present research lies in its attempt to change the stereotyped image that the West has of the Iranian Muslim women and their social reality. Influenced by the mass media propaganda, Iranian women are usually presented as birds in the cage, passive and victims of an aggressive patriarchal system. This, Farzaneh Milani calls "the hostage narrative", referring to "the portrayal of Iranian women as ultimate prisoners in a giant gulag the size of Iran" (24) by the western media. Considering the scope of the research, almost seventy years of writing fiction and the number of the authors chosen, the study tends to prove this



supposition: Iranian women are no more associated with immobility, passive beauty and dependence. Their motherly dominance over the modern literary scene is a sign of their redefined identity.

References

- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York: Routledge, 1993. PDF File.
- Golshiri, Houshang. *The Prince*. James Buchan (Trans.), London: Harvill Secker, 2005. PDF File.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. "Towards a Poetics of Culture." *Southern Review* 20.1 (1986): 3-15. PDF File.
- Milani, Farzaneh. *Words, Not Swords: Iranian Women Writers and the Freedom of Movement*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2011. PDF File.
- Nasser Khosrow. *Collected Poetry*. Jafar Shoar and Kamel Ahmadnejad (Eds.), Tehran: Behzad, 1997. PDF File.
- Taraghi, Goli. *Winter Sleep*. Francine T. Mahak (Trans.), California: Mazd, 1994. Print.

