

Representation of Women as Social Activists in the Field of Family Relations: Discourse Analysis of the Novels "I Turn Off the Lights" and "We Get Used to It" by Zoya Pirzad

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the mechanisms of women's activism in the private sphere of the family, analyzing two of Zoya Pirzad's landmark novels, titled "I Turn Off the Lights" (Pirzad, 2001) and "We Get Accustomed" (Pirzad, 2005). Relying on the framework of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the field and types of capital (Bourdieu, 2003; Bourdieu, 2012), as the central theoretical framework, it is argued that the central female characters in these works are not passive beings, but rather intelligent actors who compete and resist in the family sphere - as an arena of power relations - to acquire symbolic capital and redefine their identity. Using the method of discourse analysis and focusing on literary texts as data, this study shows how these characters use cultural capital (such as education and literary taste) as well as strategies such as "silent resistance" and "redefinition of emotion" as levers to increase their individual agency and create changes in the rules governing the field. The findings of this research indicate that the discourse formed in Pirzad's novels reflects the transition of Iranian women from the status of social "object" to "subject" with will and depicts the possibility of resistance within traditional structures through every day and seemingly mundane actions. This analysis ultimately reveals the deep connection between the sociology of literature and cultural studies in the rereading of contemporary Iranian fictional texts (Torkeman and Mehrabi, 2016).

Keywords: Sociology of Literature, Women's Activism, Zoya Pirzad, Pierre Bourdieu's Field Theory, Symbolic Capital, Cultural Capital, Agency, Discourse Analysis, Contemporary Persian Novel.

Introduction

Fiction literature is like a mirror that reflects deep social changes in its hidden layers (Ghaffari, 2022). Meanwhile, the contemporary Persian novel, by narrating the life of the urban middle class, has become a novel arena for representing the changes in the roles and social status of women. In this literary sphere, Zoya Pirzad, as one of the most prominent figures, has dedicated her fictional world to the lives of women of this class by creating profound and thought-provoking works and has presented a delicate and multi-layered picture of their position in contemporary Iranian society (Akbari Bayraq and Haj Mohammadi, 2025). Although at first glance, Pirzad's fictional characters seem to be ordinary and everyday women, upon closer examination of her texts, we find that behind their calm and ordinary appearance, these characters are the stage designers of a complex arena of social actions and reactions (Torkeman and Mehrabi, 2016). This is where the main issue of the present study takes shape: How can the process of transition from passive to active woman be reinterpreted in the context of family relations and through literary texts?

The research problem in this article is based on three basic axes: First, examining the question of how female characters in Pirzad's selected novels become active actors in the "family field" - as an arena full of power relations - who not only do not submit to existing structures, but also seek to change the rules of this field by employing different types of capital (Bourdieu, 1993). Second, analyzing the strategies that these characters use to increase their individual "agency". From cultural capital to silent resistance and the redefinition of emotional relationships, all of them indicate different forms of activism in the context of social constraints (Bourdieu, 1999). Third, to explain how fiction can act as a tool for representing the evolution of social discourses and what new "discursive possibilities" it provides for redefining female identity in contemporary Iranian society (Fakouhi, 2013). Focusing on two of Pirzad's landmark novels – "I Turn Off the Lights" (Pirzad, 2001) and "We Get Used to It" (Pirzad, 2005) – this research seeks to present a new reading of these works through the connection between the sociology of

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literature and discourse analysis, and to reveal their hidden potential in reflecting the social developments of contemporary Iranian women. Thus, this article, on the one hand, adds to the richness of literary studies and, on the other hand, provides a deeper understanding of the social dynamics governing the lives of women in contemporary Iran (Zakaei, 2002).

Main Research Questions

The present study seeks to answer the following main questions:

1. **Structure and Function of the Field:** What power structure, governing rules, and social relations does the family field in the novels under study follow, and how does this field provide an arena for competition and activism for female characters?
2. **Strategies of Activism:** What types of capital (cultural, social, symbolic) and what strategies (such as silent resistance, redefinition of emotion, or use of cultural capital) do the central female characters in these novels use to increase individual agency and influence the rules governing the family field?
3. **Reflection of Social Discourse:** What new discursive possibilities does the dominant discourse in these works provide for redefining female identity and the social role of women in contemporary Iranian society, and how does this discourse reflect social developments related to women?

Theoretical Framework

Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Field and Capitals The theoretical framework of this research is based on the theory of field and types of capitals of the prominent French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1993). Due to its ability to accurately explain power relations and social activism in different fields, this framework provides a powerful conceptual tool for the sociological analysis of literary texts, especially in the study of the family field and the role of women (Fakuhi, 2013). The central concepts of this framework are as follows:

1. **Field:** Bourdieu defines the field as a semi-independent arena of social competition and conflict in which actors compete with each other for control over valuable resources (capital) and the definition of legitimate rules (Bourdieu, 1993). In this study, the “family” is considered as a social field that has its own hierarchical structure and follows unwritten rules and specific power relations, so that this field has become a space for members to compete to acquire various capitals.
2. **Capital:** In Bourdieu's theory, capital is not limited to economic assets, but rather manifests itself in various forms, each of which plays a role in determining the position of actors in the social field (Bourdieu, 2020). In this study, four basic forms of capital have been considered: Economic capital, which includes financial and material assets, is mainly in the possession of men in the context of Pirzad's novels and acts as an efficient tool for exerting influence and consolidating power in the dynamics of the family field (Bourdieu, 2020). Cultural capital, which includes education, knowledge, skills, and cultural tastes, is a valuable resource available to female characters and is considered a determining factor in strengthening their agency and ability to act (Bourdieu, 2020). Social capital, which is based on a network of social connections and connections, enables them to achieve more favorable positions in the field. In the works under study, women expand their circle of influence and influence by utilizing this capital (Bourdieu, 2020). Symbolic capital, which includes credibility, prestige, dignity, and social legitimacy, is considered the ultimate goal of competition in the field. The female characters in these novels seek to acquire this symbolic capital and establish their position in the social hierarchy by employing other types of capital (Bourdieu, 2020).
3. **Character:** In Bourdieu's theory, character refers to a system of stable dispositions and tendencies that are internalized in individuals over time during the process of socialization. This theoretical construct operates in a dual position as both a producer of social actions and a product of social structures (Bourdieu, 1993). In the framework of this research, the specific character of middle-class women is examined as an analytical focus, because this character directly affects

their modes of activism, choices, and strategies in the family field and, at the same time, is a reflection of the social structures that govern their lives.

4. **Application of the theory in the present study:** Bourdieu's theoretical framework is used in this study as an analytical lens through which the family field is reinterpreted as an arena for analyzing power relations and social relationships (Fakouhi, 2013). This framework provides an opportunity to understand the seemingly small and everyday actions of female characters not as random behaviors, but as intelligent strategies for increasing symbolic capital and redistributing power in the family field. From this perspective, the dynamic confrontation between traditional structures and women's individual agency is brought into focus, and power relations within the family are scrutinized in light of the competition for the acquisition and accumulation of various types of capital. This approach ultimately enables a sociological reading of literary texts and leads to a deeper understanding of the social dynamics underlying Pirzad's novels (Torkeman and Mehrabi, 2016).

Research Methodology

This study, with the aim of analyzing the mechanisms of women's activism in Zoya Pirzad's novels, uses a qualitative approach and the method of discourse analysis (Zekaei, 2002). The choice of this method is due to the nature of the research problem and the type of data under study, which enables a deeper understanding of the hidden layers of literary texts and their relationship with the social context.

1. **Research Outline:** This study is of a descriptive-analytical type that analyzes the discourse governing narratives by using the framework of Bourdieu's field theory.
2. **Research Society and Sample:** In this study, the statistical society includes all of Zoya Pirzad's novels centered on female characters. Among them, two prominent novels, "I Turn Off the Lights" (Pirzad, 2002) and "We Get Used to It" (Pirzad, 2005), have been selected as targeted samples. This selection was made based on specific criteria, including: focusing on the lives of urban middle-class women, representing the family field and the power relations within it, having complex and multidimensional female characters, and also belonging to two different periods of the author's career, which allows for the examination of the evolution of Pirzad's views (Akbari Bayraq and Haj Mohammadi, 2025).
3. **Data collection method:** The data required for this research was collected using library studies and document review methods. In this regard, a set of reliable sources was analyzed, including the full text of selected novels, scientific articles and specialized sources related to Pierre Bourdieu's theories, as well as previous research in the field of sociology of literature and discourse analysis (Zakaei, 2002). This approach provides the possibility of achieving rich theoretical foundations as well as a deeper understanding of the social and discursive context governing the literary works under study.
4. **Data analysis method:** The main analysis method in this research is discourse analysis based on the fundamental concepts of Bourdieu's theory, which has been implemented in a systematic process (Zekaei, 2002). In this path, the units of analysis are dedicated to conversations between characters, the narrator's descriptions of actions and situations, the internal expression of the main characters, and the relationships between characters in different situations. These textual elements constitute the primary data of the research, which have been carefully examined. The analysis process is organized in three consecutive stages. In the first step, repeated and active reading of the selected texts was carried out to obtain a deep and comprehensive understanding of the works. In the second step, the initial coding of the data was carried out based on theoretical concepts, which includes identifying codes related to the structure of the family field (such as "male power"), types of capital (such as "cultural capital"), strategies of activism (such as "female resistance"), and the rules governing the field. Finally, discourse analysis was conducted focusing on how power relations are represented, methods of acquiring symbolic capital, methods of resistance to structures, and the process of redefining female identity. In order to ensure the validity of the research, a set of measurement criteria was considered. Internal validity was ensured through continuous review of texts and careful matching of findings with the theoretical framework. External validity was also achieved by providing rich

and documented descriptions of the texts under analysis. In addition, the reliability of the research was guaranteed through the use of systematic coding (using manual tools and recording codes in Excel tables) and complete documentation of the analysis process. This methodological approach allows for a deeper understanding of the connection between fiction and social realities (Zakaei, 2002).

5. **Ethical considerations:** In conducting this research, compliance with ethical principles and considerations has always been considered. To this end, accurate and clear references to the original texts form the basis of the analytical work, and at all stages of citations, the page numbers of the quotations have been carefully recorded. An effort has also been made to avoid any subjective and undocumented interpretations and to present the analyses based on textual evidence and the selected theoretical framework. Finally, preserving the authenticity of the texts and respecting the author's material and moral rights are among the inalienable principles that have been considered throughout this research.
6. **Research Limitations:** In examining any scientific research, identifying its limitations is of particular importance. This study is no exception to this rule and faces several fundamental limitations. First, the scope of the present analysis is limited to only two works by a specific author, which naturally limits the possibility of examining a wider range of perspectives and literary styles. Furthermore, given the interpretive nature of discourse analysis, a degree of subjectivity in the interpretations and analyses is inevitable, although an attempt has been made to control this subjectivity as much as possible by relying on a solid theoretical framework. Also, given the limitations of the study area (focusing on the urban middle class and cultural gender issues), the findings of this study cannot be generalized to the entire range of Persian fiction and are only a reflection of the characteristics of the works under study. Nevertheless, this research method, despite its limitations, allows for a deeper understanding of the connection between literature and sociology and provides researchers with a suitable analytical tool for examining women's activism in the family field (Ghaffari, 2014: p. 35).

Data Analysis and Discussion

In this section, we analyze the content of selected novels using Bourdieu's theoretical framework (Bourdieu, 1993; Bourdieu, 2019). The following analysis is organized around three main axes, and to compare the capitals and strategies in the two novels, the following table is presented to create more balance and clarity:

Table (1): summary of research novels

Novel	Cultural capital (example)	Resistance strategy (example)	Achievement (symbolic capital)
I turn off the lights.	Mastery of French, Literary Study (Pirzad, 2001)	Silent Resistance Through Intellectual Independence (Pirzad, 2001)	Gaining independent identity and self-respect
We get used to it.	Literary Taste and Cultural Knowledge (Pirzad, 2005)	Redefining Emotion and Conscious Silence (Pirzad, 2005)	Maintaining psychological integrity and gradual transformation

A) Delineating the family field and the rules governing it

The family field in Pirzad's novels is an arena with specific rules and hierarchies within which the characters' actions are formed (Bourdieu, 2003).

- Power hierarchy: Textual evidence suggests that men (such as Arthur in "The Lights..." and the main character's wife in "We Get Used to") have superior economic capital and social status, and this superiority is the basis of their structural power in the family arena. For example, Arthur largely determines the rules of the arena by controlling financial affairs (Pirzad, 2002; Turkman and Mehrabi, 2016).
- Unwritten rules: Rules such as "the need to maintain social honor and appearance," "fidelity as an obligation for women," and "the priority of traditional female roles (wife and mother)" are clearly reflected in dialogues and descriptions. Female characters consider these rules to be part of their internalized character, even if they are in conflict with them in practice (Pirzad, 2005).

- Competitive atmosphere: Although this arena appears peaceful, it is an arena of hidden competition to redefine the rules and acquire symbolic capital. A competition that is not manifested in the form of open conflicts, but in the form of mentalities, small choices and meaningful silences (Akbari Bayraq and Haj Mohammadi, 2025).

B) Women's strategies of activism to increase agency

The central female characters, in order to play the role of an activist rather than a passive one, benefit from a set of strategies and types of capital (Bourdieu, 2020):

1. Action through cultural capital: Clarice in "I Turn Off the Lights" is a clear example of this strategy. Her cultural capital (proficiency in French, habit of reading, specific literary taste), although at first glance it seems isolated, is precisely the factor that takes her beyond the role of being simply "Arthur's wife" and creates for her a breathing space of intellectual independence. For example, in the scene where Clarice is reading a French book, she says: "These words take me where Arthur cannot" (Pirzad, 2001). This capital is a symbolic support for her that she uses when confronting other characters (such as Dr. Mortazavi) (Torkeman and Mehrabi, 2016: p. 55).
2. Silent and everyday resistance: The main character of the novel "We Get Used to It" is a clear example of this type of resistance. She does not openly rebel against the marriage that has been arranged for her, but through "silence", "procrastination" and "internalizing suffering", she carries out a type of negative action that is itself a powerful form of non-cooperation with the rules of the field. For example, in an internal description, she says: "My silence is a cry that no one hears" (Pirzad, 2005). This indirect resistance reduces the costs of overt defiance, but at the same time, it proves her existence as a subject with will (Akbari Bayraq and Haj Mohammadi, 2025).
3. Redefining Affection and Relationships: Both novels show that women transform "love" and "affective attachment" from a traditional duty into a personal and agency-giving choice. Clarice's emotional attraction to Dr. Mortazavi, although it does not lead to a practical relationship, is a meaning-making act; a choice made outside the predetermined framework of the family and gives her life new meaning and direction (Pirzad, 2001).

C) Costs and achievements of activism

No action in the field is without cost and reward (Bourdieu, 2024). Textual analysis shows:

- Achievements: Gaining symbolic capital in the form of "self-respect" and "independent identity" (in the case of Clarice), and maintaining psychological integrity against environmental pressures (in the case of the character "we get used to") are among the most important achievements of these actions (Ghafari, 2022).
- Costs: This activism also entails emotional costs (feelings of loneliness, remorse, anxiety) and social costs (possible marginalization). This tension between the restrictive "structure" and the liberating "agency" is the source of the main drama in both novels (Fakouhi, 2013).

Discussion and synthesis of findings

The above analysis shows that Pirzad's novels are the stage for the micropolitics of women's everyday lives. These works clearly demonstrate that activism does not necessarily mean overt rebellion, but can take the form of reinterpreting the rules of the field and redistributing available capital (Bourdieu, 2020). The discourse that dominates these novels is not a revolutionary discourse, but a gradual one that makes possible change from within and through seemingly mundane actions. This is precisely the point where Bourdieu's sociology and fiction connect: explaining how individuals create space for maneuver and agency within restrictive structures (Torkeman and Mehrabi, 2016; Akbari Bayraq and Haj Mohammadi, 2015).

Conclusion

By analyzing two of Zoya Pirzad's landmark novels, "I Turn Off the Lights" (Pirzad, 2002) and "We Get Accustomed" (Pirzad, 2005), from the perspective of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of field and capitals (Bourdieu, 2003; Bourdieu, 2012), this research has achieved a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of women's activism in the private sphere of the family. The research findings clearly show that the

central female characters in these works are not passive beings who submit to power structures, but rather intelligent actors who redefine their own position with a precise understanding of the rules governing the family field.

The key achievements of the research can be summarized as follows:

1. **Multidimensionality of Activism:** The present study showed that women's activism in these novels is not defined solely in the form of overt resistance and rebellion against structures, but rather manifests itself in more subtle forms such as the use of cultural capital (study, mastery of a foreign language), silent resistance (conscious silence, procrastination), and the redefinition of emotional relationships.
2. **The family field as an arena of conflict:** The analyses showed that the family, despite its peaceful appearance, is an arena of competition for the acquisition of symbolic capital and the redistribution of power. Using available resources (especially cultural capital), female characters seek to increase individual agency and gradually change the rules of this field.
3. **Discourse of transition:** The discourse formed in these works expresses a gradual transition from the traditional identity of women to an autonomous subject. This transition does not occur through a complete break, but through the path of redefining roles within the same family field.
4. **The Connection of Sociology and Literature:** This research succeeded in demonstrating the potential of Bourdieu's approach to the analysis of literary texts and showed how the sociology of literature can reveal the hidden layers of social relations in fictional texts.

Final Conclusion

By narrating the daily lives of middle-class women, Pirzad's novels are in fact narratives of micropolitics and everyday resistance to dominant structures. These works show that social change does not necessarily occur in large and obvious arenas, but also takes place in the heart of ordinary relationships, in meaningful silences, and in seemingly small choices. Pirzad's female characters, with calculated actions that stem from internalized character and understanding of social situation, gradually change the rules of the family field to their advantage.

Suggestions for future research

1. Comparative analysis of women's activism in Pirzad's works and female writers of later generations.
2. To examine the evolution of female characterization in contemporary Iranian fiction, relying on sociological theoretical frameworks.
3. To analyze the representation of other social fields (such as the workplace or public space) in the works of Iranian female writers.

This research is a step towards understanding the complexities of women's position in contemporary Iranian society and the capacities of fiction to reflect these complexities.

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