

Performing Survival Intersectional Gender Roles in Brit Bennett's The Mothers and Huzama Habayeb's Before the Queen Falls

Asleep

**Dr. Muhamad Hussein Ramadan Kiaei / University of Tehran /
Faculty of Foreign Languages / Department of English**

mkiaei@ut.ac.ir

**Firas Harith Abdulqader Al-Sudani / University of Tehran/ Aborz
Campus-Department of English**

firas.alsudani@ut.ac.ir

Abstract

This paper is a comparative reading of *The Mothers* by Brit Bennett and *Before the Queen Falls Asleep* by Huzama Habayeb by Judith Butler as a theory of gender performativity. It claims that femininity in both novels is not a given or essential identity, but as a social production and a process under negotiation that is formed through repetition, discipline and institutional power. Based on a qualitative comparative methodology based on close textualism, the paper discusses how emotional discipline, bodily regulation, institutional power, sexual control, and motherhood influence the subjectivity of women in the two texts. The results indicate that women in both novels are obliged to practice socially acceptable femininity by restraint, body conformity and adherence to familial, religious and communal expectations. Meanwhile, the instability of these rules is shown through moments of resistance, emotional disruption, as well as narrative discontinuity. Although the mechanisms of gender regulation in both novels are similar, the differences between the two novels are in the context of the cultural conditions, in which gendered mechanisms are enforced. In her novel, Habayeb introduces femininity in connection with the survival in displacement, war, and the pressure of the community, but Bennett, in her novel, focuses on sexuality, the assessment of the community, and reproductive responsibility in a modern African American environment. It finds that gender performativity plays both roles in the two works as a mechanism of containment and a survival strategy, and that femininity is a culturally particular but structurally general process of negotiation and not a necessary identity.

Keywords: (gender performativity, femininity, motherhood, institutional).

أداء البقاء الأدوار الجندرية التقاطعية في رواية الأمهات لبريت بينيت ورواية قبل أن تنام
الملكة لحزامة حبايب

الدكتور. محمد حسين رمضان كيائي / جامعة طهران / كلية اللغات الأجنبية / قسم اللغة
الانكليزية

mkiaei@ut.ac.ir

فراس حارث عبد القادر السوداني / جامعة طهران - فرع ألبرز / قسم اللغة الانكليزية

firas.alsudani@ut.ac.ir

الملخص

يقدم هذا البحث قراءة مقارنة لرواية "الأمهات" للكاتبة بريت بينيت، ورواية "قبل أن تنام الملكة" للكاتبة حزامة حبايب، من خلال منظور نظرية جوديث باتلر حول "الأدائية الجندرية" (Gender Performativity). ويجادل البحث بأن الأنوثة في كلتا الروايتين ليست هوية فطرية أو جوهرية، بل هي إنتاج اجتماعي وعملية تفاوض مستمرة تتشكل من خلال التكرار، والانضباط، والسلطة المؤسسية. وباستخدام منهجية مقارنة نوعية تستند إلى التحليل النصي الدقيق، يستكشف البحث كيف يسهم الانضباط العاطفي، والتحكم الجسدي، والسلطة المؤسسية، والسيطرة الجنسية، والأمومة في تشكيل الذاتية الأنثوية في النصين. وتشير النتائج إلى أن النساء في كلتا الروايتين مجبرات على ممارسة أنوثة مقبولة اجتماعياً من خلال كبح النفس، والامتثال الجسدي، والالتزام بالتوقعات الأسرية والدينية والمجتمعية. وفي الوقت ذاته، تتكشف حالة عدم الاستقرار لهذه المعايير التنظيمية من خلال لحظات المقاومة، والاضطراب العاطفي، والانقطاع السردية. ورغم أن آليات التنظيم الجندري تعمل بشكل مشابه في كلا العملين، إلا أنها تختلف في سياقاتها الثقافية؛ إذ تؤثر حبايب الأنوثة في سياق البقاء وسط النزوح، والحرب، والضغط المجتمعية، بينما تركز بينيت على الحياة الجنسية، والرقابة المجتمعية، والمسؤولية الإنجابية داخل بيئة أمريكية-أفريقية معاصرة. وفي النهاية، يخلص البحث إلى أن الأدائية الجندرية تلعب دوراً مزدوجاً كألية للاحتواء واستراتيجية للبقاء في كلا العملين، مما يبرهن على أن الأنوثة هي عملية تفاوض ذات خصوصية ثقافية ولكنها شمولية من الناحية البنيوية، وليست هوية ثابتة. الكلمات المفتاحية: (الأدائية الجندرية، الأنوثة، الأمومة، السلطة المؤسسية).

Introduction

Modern feminist criticism of literature has been trending towards nonessentialist conceptualizations of gender, with more critical focus on the performativity and construction of gender. In this change, the theory of gender performativity by Judith Butler has taken center stage in rethinking identity as a process through repetition, normativity, and power. Instead of femininity being perceived as a stable or natural condition, Butler redefines femininity as a performative effect created by the repetition of embodied practices that are governed by discursive and institutional practices (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 33). She builds on this argument in *Bodies That Matter* whereby she asserts on the materialization of the body by the standards of regulation (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 12). Continuing on this, McKinlay claims that the framework of Butler allows realizing the identity as something always shaky and negotiated in the relations of power instead of being stable and coherent (McKinlay 14). In the same vein, Singisala points out that gender is not an innate concept, but a socially constructed and culturally imposed phenomenon that is perpetuated by normative structures that construct subjectivity (Singisala 130). These views combined place gender as a contingent and dynamic process and make the framework created by Butler particularly fruitful to comparative literary analysis.

This paper provides a comparative study of two contemporary novels, *The Mothers* by Brit Bennett and *Before the Queen Falls Asleep* by Huzama Habayeb, that portray female subjectivity in two different socio-cultural realms. The novel by Bennett is set in a modern African American society in the United States whereby femininity is influenced by communal judgment, sexuality, religion and expectation of reproduction. By comparison, the novel Habayeb is a product of an

Arab world of displacement, family limitation, and instability in government where femininity is intimately connected to survival and perseverance. Although these divergences exist, both novels predict how femininity is created, controlled, and bargained in the context of social pressures. This paper explores the workings of gender performativity in various cultural and historical sites, by placing these texts in dialogue, and demonstrates that there are both similarities and differences in the construction of feminine identity .

Although the current literature has addressed the concept of gender performativity in the modern literature using the concept of gender performativity as developed by Butler, a lot of this scholarship has been limited to the analysis of individual texts or the reading within a particular culture. There is still a relative paucity of comparative studies which investigate the ways in which gender performativity works in Western and Arab literature, both in terms of the similarity of the structures of gender regulation and the cultural particularity with which it does so. This article fills that gap when it brings Bennett *The Mothers* and Habayeb *Before the Queen Falls Asleep* to the discussion and shows that various historical, social, and institutional circumstances influence similar mechanisms of gender construction.

This paper suggests that the two novels develop femininity as a performative practice defined by emotional control, bodily control, and institutional control; nevertheless, the same mechanisms work in different ways in the two cultural settings. In this regard, gender performativity coincides both as an overarching system of normativity and as a culturally contingent survival tactic. Femininity in both texts is created via repetition which is in line with norms dictated in society, which reinforces the notion that gender is culturally constructed as opposed to being natural (Singisala 130). Women must manage their

emotional displays in a manner that makes them socially readable, which is often achieved by being silent, reserved and controlling of their emotions (Hochschild 7; Goffman 35). Simultaneously, the body is turned into a disciplinary space in which appearance and behavior conventions become gendered identity (Bordo 167), and institutions, including family, religion, education and the state, enforce these conventions and make gender appear natural and fixed (Connell 54).

Meanwhile, since the gender is produced by repetition, it can be disrupted, failed, and rearticulated (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 179). This instability is the key to the interpretation of identity as a place of ambiguity and negotiation instead of coherence as discussed by McKinlay (McKinlay 10). Both novels portray scenes where emotional overabundance, physical opposition or plot contradictions reveal the vulnerability of normative femininity. Even as Salih points out, repetition never fully exhausts itself and hence identity is structurally unstable (Salih 64), and similarly, Lloyd points out that gender norms are citational and therefore never rigid to change or be challenged (Lloyd 70). These acts of interruption are not necessarily liberating, but they indicate the conflicts inherent in gendered subjectivity and the constraints of normative coherence.

This study is methodologically a qualitative comparative study that is informed by close textual analysis of *Before the Queen Falls Asleep* and *The Mothers*. A purposive sample of twenty-three quotes of each novel was taken based on their relevance to the main issues of the study: emotional discipline, bodily regulation, institutional power, sexuality and motherhood. The discussion revolves around narrative voice, language, characterization, and emotional tone to determine the repetitive trends in the construction of femininity. These texts were categorized and read according to the thematic aspects and analyzed

within the concept of gender performativity as developed by Butler, with specific focus on repetition, normativity and instability. The mix of comparative close reading and thematic analysis allow this study to make a contribution to the feminist literary literature by demonstrating that gender performativity is not only a process of constraint, but also a process of negotiation and survival that is culturally specific.

1. Gender Performativity in Before the Queen Falls Asleep

In this section, the concept of gender performativity proposed by Judith Butler is used to determine how gender identities are constructed, regulated and reproduced through recurring social practices in *Before the Queen Falls Asleep* by Huzama Habayeb. The novel represents the female characters whose actions, feelings, and physical manifestations are defined by the normative expectations that are in place in the family, society, and institutional environments. When read through the prism of a Butlerian lens, the scenes display femininity not as a natural and fixed identity, but rather as a socially constructed identity that is constructed through discipline, visibility and emotional control.

This dynamic becomes particularly visible in the airport scene: “you spoke with a smile that held some disapproval of my weeping... ‘I’m going to study, I’m not going to war!’” (Habayeb 4). Femininity in this case is put on shows where femininity is controlled and subject to publicity. The smile is a form of disciplinary gesture bearing emotion within acceptable boundaries of social acceptability whereas the embarrassment is not in the mourning itself, but in its outward expression. It is in this sense that social legibility presupposes regulated expression of emotions. In terms of Butlerianism, this level of composure is decodable as a performative effect brought about due to repeated social practices but not necessarily the manifestation of

character (Butler, Gender Trouble 47). The scene redefines vulnerability, then, as waste, but feminine intelligibles as the rational posing. It seems that emotional containment is then not a truth within, but a reference to normative behavior. In the present instance, Gender comes out as a disciplined visibility that is maintained by repetitively correcting oneself in the public.

Butlerian concept is another addition as to how this scene creates femininity via repetition instead of nature. These emergent stylized acts of composure, restraint, and controlled visibility bring a femininity that is recognizable in a social zone of observation. According to Salih, repetition never happens to the end and this implies that identity is structurally unstable as Salih (Salih 64) states, and so gender is not essential as Lloyd (Lloyd 52) states is also citational. This tension is evident in the airport scene: whereas the emotional control makes societal intelligible, this control is never absolute. The tears which are not brought to normativity reveal the instability which lies inside the normative femininity. Thereby, the scene exposes that the gender performativity is reliant on the repetition, yet repetition constantly has the potential to be disrupted.

The same emotional control is evident in other parts of the story. The confession, You were afraid, really afraid... but the child-ish pride... made you say, I am afraid, makes affect a field of disciplined self-silencing (Habayeb 15). Fear is admitted in form, but not stated outwardly and it implies that gender coherence is not based on what it feels but also what can be offered publicly. It is possible to identify a sense of recognizable identity based on the reiteration of approved types of emotion, Butlerianly speaking. Being publicly scared would thus interfere in the developed calmness required by normative femininity. The conflict between childish pride and emotional restraint

is also a transitional movement of childish spontaneity to a socially controlled womanhood. Thus, emotional truth is made subservient to social intelligibility and mature femininity created in such a manner is generated through constant practices of regulated exposure.

This tension regulation/excess is even more evident in the conversation, such as, —“Don’t cry!’... ‘I won’t,’... but the tears did not listen... ‘I love you’... ‘I love you more’” (Habayeb 9). In this case, the norm of affective restraint is reiterated by the imperative against crying, the body is in opposition to this norm by involuntary tears. The situation shows not only that gendered discipline is enacted by direct command, but also by virtue of the fact that the body must comply with the modes of emotional expression that are acceptable in the society. The tears reveal the constraints of performative control, in spite of the fact that verbal response indicates the obedience. Meanwhile, the hugging and the interchange of love statements contextualize intimacy within culturally comprehensible framework of restrained love. However, the inability of the body to respond in a completely submissive manner reflects the lack of stability with this order of discipline. The scene, in Butlerian terms, demonstrates that performativity is never smooth; instead it represents a negotiation that is continuous among regulatory command, embodiment response and effectual overflow.

Finally, the retreat scene: “When I got home I shut the door and turned the key twice in the lock... and poured my soul into fall to-pieces (Habayeb 49) and the emotional price of performative composure maintained on a day-to-day basis. The two rotations of the key multiply the feeling of confidentiality, changing domestic space into a sort of temporary this world of being out of sight. It is only after symbolic shutting out of surveillance that vulnerability becomes a

possibility. On a Butlerian level, the scene implies that restrained femininity only relies on the social act of stability, and inward regulation of emotional disintegration. It is but a surfaced composure kept together by an internalized weight that is unsayable. Emotional surrender is limited to the inside world, where breakdown is not seen by the social gaze. By means of that, the gendered coherence will be hinged on careful control over when, where, and conditions of exposure to vulnerability.

2. Bodily Appearance and the Materialization of Femininity

The creation of femininity is largely dependent on bodily appearance where analysis by culture discourses and social expectations defines how the bodies of women are shown, disciplined and interpreted in the society. Standards affecting beauty, the body shape, clothing, care, and bodily posture prompt women to keep a check and eye on their physical bodies to match the prevailing notions of femininity. Femininity is thus enacted and visible in these recurrent practices and the gender thus seems to be natural and stable despite being socially produced in a manner of continual regulatory practices. In terms of Butlerian approach to gender, it is said that the gender norms act upon the body by making femininity materialized in a manner that defines the bodies that are treated as being gendered well (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 2). On the same note, Bordo points out that the female body is exposed to constant discipline which is dictated by the ideals of beauty and behavior created by society (Bordo 167).

Regulation of the body becomes evident in the following scene: “you still resist adding any adjustments or embellishments to your clean look” (Habayeb 7). In this case, the adornment refusal pre-empts body as a surface of writing in an aesthetic regime of normative femininity. Earrings and other types of accessories are used as semiotic

signs that aid in the acquisition of acknowledgment within the socially acceptable expressions of feminine appearance. Simultaneously, resistance remaining also indicates that people do not conform naturally, but should do it over and over. Butlerian approach envisages that these embellishments are repetitive practices by which the gendered identity gets stabilized over time. But this chain of citation is broken by the “clean look which reveals the ornamentation as an additive principle, not indispensable. Femininity is not thus a truth of the body, but a stratification generated by acts of aesthetic control that are in turn incremental. Performativity is made apparent in this manner; where embodied inclination is tensioned with normative expectation.

Moreover, the statement, “If we hurriedly chewed one mouthful after another... we were singled out” (Habayeb 20), unveils consumption as a discipline site where femininity is particularly neo-liberated. In this scene, food goes beyond the sphere of nourishment and is a performance that can be observed socially. Rushing, hurry, and overt lust are all the signs of leaving acceptable feminine behavior, making singled out a sort of punishment in front of an audience. Even such practices of the body as eating are involved, as seen through the Butlerian lens, in the materialization of gendered identity (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 47). Listening to, and domesticating that food-love is therefore necessary, that the femininity may be socially comprehensible. The setting implies that the coherence of gender relies on the urgency being suppressed in the tune of a visible restraint and how even the prosaic consumption can be controlled by the gendered norms.

In addition, the ironic declaration, “We, O most splendid of queens... a penny... imprinted... to shrink” (Habayeb 21), generalizes the discipline of the body in a transference into economic subjectivity.

This artificial grandeur of the queens is sharply contrasted with the internalization of scarcity where femininity is produced by the modes of diminishing it and shrinking oneself. The seeming raised diction is shaved down to the ground by the picture of the diminishing penny, a condition, which femininity turns out to be, a mastered diminution instead of a mastered plenitude. Butlerian viewpoints tend to hold repeating discourses of limitation sedimented in self-understanding, which, ultimately, seems quite natural, as opposed to something imposed by society. Economic restriction gets even further placed within a framework of being divinely ordained and this erases its structural sources and turns deprivation to inevitability. This way, performativity transcends bodily looks into the control of material expectation where femininity is constructed by disciplining to accept less.

Similarly, the description of the teacher who “conformed to wearing a full hijab in company” yet did not wield faith as moral authority (Habayeb 62) makes it more difficult to determine relationships between obvious compliance and inner character. The hijab in this case, serves as a semiotic signifier, in a religious aesthetic regime, achieving instant social legibility. However, the anger of the teacher at failing to pray out loud over the narrator being corrected or viewing divorce as moral pollution upsets the belief that apparent piety has to be punitive. The assumption of performativity (based on Butlerian ideology) is not a promise of ideological conformity, as it is possible to invoke gendered and religious norms without identifying completely. In such a way, the teacher carries out an institutionally acceptable style of femininity in a dress, but rejects the disciplinary brutalities that the much-identified style of femininity can carry. Her perceived conformity has been accompanied with moral suppression to point out

that femininity is a negotiated construct in regulatory systems as opposed to a mechanical reproduction of the same.

Finally, the portrayal of the “clever” English teacher who “looked like a foreigner with her mannish trousers and tight shirts” (Habayeb 70) anticipates gendered appearance politics. Dressing to this extent is a visible referencing to normative femininity and anything outside anticipatory dress is instantly subject to suspicion. The definition of the trousers as being mannish exposes the binary thinking in which proper embodiment takes the form of not resembling the opposite sex in appearance, i.e. one must not be seen as masculine in order to be perceived as a proper embodiment. Meanwhile, the foreignness of the appearance of the teacher places her as culturally and genderedly transgressive, aesthetic deviation is connected with overall fears of the difference. In a Butlerian analysis of the dress, dress is a practice of repetition whose stabilization of gender is over time. But this scene reveals the frailty of such stabilization, too, as a slight shift in appearance becomes enough to put the limits of acceptable femininity in a state of disruption. Performativity is thereby made apparent in the disruption of sedimented expectations in visibility, and the anxiety caused by less than fully compliant bodies.

3. Institutional Power and the Repetition of Gender Norms

The institutional power has a significant role in causing and reproducing the gender norms with the help of the structures and practices of social institutions. The family, education, religion and the media set up the expectations of the correct gender roles and behaviors, thus defining the performance of femininity and masculinity in the ordinary life. Butlerianism will view this as the way in which such norms are maintained over time through repeated social practices that come to have the power of authority (Butler, Gender Trouble 41).

Likewise, Connell claims that it is institutions that arrange social practices in a manner that confirms dominant gender relations and naturalizes existing hierarchies (Connell 54). Therefore, institutional power helps in the perpetuation of the gender norms by entrenching them in habitual systems of regulation, discipline, and social authority.

This dynamic becomes particularly evident in the novel's depiction of family relations. The portrayal of Aunt Rahma, who "would let loose on him and not stop" (Habayeb 24), creates an element of vocal extravagance disrupting the principle of feminine moderation. Her rejection of the modest size or the containedness upsets the anticipation that, as a woman of femininity, she is required to be patient, gentle, and quiet. According to Butlerian understanding of excess, the instability of the regulatory regimes which base their stability on disciplined repetition becomes self-evident. In this regard, the dislocation of forced compliance which manifests in the act of letting loose is a temporary one and sets forth speech as a place of resistance. Nevertheless, this outburst is restricted to the domestic level, and this restriction constrains the sweeping power of it. Consequently, both the potential of subversion and the limitations needed to avoid such upsetting of the gendered authority become visible in the scene.

The moment of rupture is quickly followed by the restoration of gendered order in the scene where "She would stand up, bracing herself after her defeat... and ask... to help her get dinner" (Habayeb 25). In this case, the sign of bracing oneself represents perseverance, not freedom, and proposes that the strength of resistance is recaptured amid the feeds of house hold life. Household labor is back to focus as a stabilizing ritual in which institutionalized femininity is re-asserted. Butlerianly, repetition provides consistency in the wake of the instances of discontinuities to enable the reclamation of normative

gender roles. The kettle and making dinner as tools of normalization diverts looking at confrontation to de facto. Meanwhile, the daughters are interpellated into this domestic act making sure that the generations of gendered labor are transmitted and that the continuation of the institutional power in the family is maintained.

Performativity thus persists because it is continually resumed through everyday acts that restore normative order after moments of disruption. This logic becomes even clearer in the reflection that “My mother had always convinced herself... that she was right, or at the very least that she was forced to do what she did” (Habayeb 40). Its text also shows that gender is not merely an outside control, but rather, a type of internalized control. The self-accusing and self-excusing consciousness of the mother is indicative of identifying the sedimentation of acquired submissiveness within the self. This assertion that she was forced, structural constraint is redesigned to seem as a necessity, and that the enforcing arm of the patriarchy is made in to a duty of moral imperative. Butlerian viewpoint dictates that political regimes stand best when applied as forms of self-conviction, as opposed to dictatorship. Compulsion is therefore recounted as the ethical duty, which makes it appear as independence and strengthening institutionalized femininity. Through this gender coherence would be subject to compliance with the expectation set by patriarchy and the alignment of individual conscience.

A similar logic of institutional regulation appears in the statement that “The matter wasn’t limited to the expenses of the two women... the other seeking a quick end to her compulsory spinsterhood” (Habayeb 50), that makes marriage more of an economic and political exchange than a marriage union. The terms of expense make subjectivity of female be lowered in the economic state of expenses to

a system of patriarchy, in which unmarried femininity is expressed as deviability, which needs to be remedied. Making heterosexual marriage destiny just confines a Butlerian view to sedimenting social expectations which make heterosexual marriage the natural and inevitable thing to do. Urgency in turn is made the rule and marriage is a control device by which women are assimilated into socially approved systems of belonging. In this regard, the female body is the exchanged value of a system which equates femininity and being incorporated in marriage. It is then through contractual belonging via institutionalized femininity that institutionalized femininity is ensured and not through choice.

Likewise, the assertion that “We, his children, were still his beautiful people... who did not grow up no matter how big we got” (Habayeb 55) unveils a paternal discourse that is apparatus of frozen subjectivity. The denial of growth maintains dependence and is a continuation of hierarchical asymmetry in the family. A Butlerian view of such repetitions of forms of address would be to fix identity in the narrow categories and thus, that being is constantly constantly hailed as a child, it is a mode of interpellation into indefinitely infantile conditional. In this regard, beauty is not a quality that promotes individuality, but a symbol of property, the affection enslaving to reign. Temporal development is thus rhetorically put in limbo with a language of loving possession, which refutes autonomy and but comes off as safeguarding. In this scene, gender performativity acts as the flow of naturalization of dependency as a natural, common and even desirable state.

Institutional regulation also manifests itself within the educational system. The claim that teachers should not “waste time in talk that had no relation to the curriculum, and that could cause harm” (Habayeb 68)

presents pedagogy refers to institutions to a disciplinary apparatus. Here the role of the curriculum is not so much a structure of education, but a control (a boundary) to speech, a taming of thought. Butlerian viewpoint implies that these boundaries define what can be said in the authorized places and what sorts of expressions are valid in the world of expression. As a result, speech is evaluated not by how true it is and how effectively it may be judged but rather how it aligns with institutional norms. An additional caution against harm implies that not using the curriculum is conceptualized as a risk to social order, and not a diverse chance to reflect and protest. Classroom thus becomes an aspect of disciplinary space whereby subjectivity is created in a controlled way in terms of speechlessness, silence, and obedience. By so doing, gender performativity is replicated onto the intellectual as well as bodily and emotional actions where conformity is once again re-created by shaping the discourse itself.

Correspondingly, the threat, “I could write a report... explaining that you intentionally miss the morning line-up in order to avoid saluting the flag” (Habayeb 75), shows the dialogue of gendered discipline and national ritual. Morning line-up turns into a ritual performance of affiliation whereby nonattendance will not be represented as an omission, but through conscious defiance. According to Butlerian sense, these kinds of rituals create compliant subjects by rehearsing the rituals every day. The risk of documentation is that it turns deviation into an offense that will be subject to bureaucratic punishment, going beyond surveillance of the physical gesture, into administrative writing. The institutional authority thus helps in getting compliance not by making them be involved, but by being recorded, being classified or even being disciplined.

At this point, the logic of performativity can be well observed with regards to the daily salute: it does not make itself felt in any one act but in repeated enactments that become so natural and self-evident. The framework by Butler assists in understanding the process of naturalizing identity in a body by means of ritual (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 95). This is what seems to be voluntary, but it is in reality institutionalized by an expectation to ensure that compliance is provided in the form of consent. The femininity here should thus not only be compatible with a moral and aesthetic ideal but also the patriotic spectacle. The female body is enslaved by the rise of belonging to the nation and gender coherence by a repetitive obedience choreography.

Beyond the classroom, the description that “we watched the daily programme Hello!... prepared in haste by the Military Media Division” (Habayeb 161) de-protonizes gendered subjectivity into a wider biopolitical machine. The programme, which investigated the extremely high morale of Iraqi forces and sold cheers of euphoria, casts itself as administratively controlled and released into society. In the Butlerian sense, reiteration spectacle serves to stabilise the national identity by means of repetition. Concurrently, the (chant Ha khouty ha,) my brothers! is an interpellation into a feminized discourse of militarized masculinity as subjects of normality. Women are thus left to be marginal to a national imaginary of fraternal solidarity and of martial endurance. The home spectatorship is the next location to the positioning of femininity into patience, stamina and silent obedience, and the performativity is projected into consuming state-scripted stories.

Under conditions of conflict, the scene in which “I woke terrified to the breathless ringing of the doorbell” (Habayeb 170) initiates fear as a

productive reaction to precarity in wartime. Vigilance is a habitual bodily posture that is reflected in Sheila, standing with her eyes open wide, and scanning the surrounding. Her nakedness and uneven hem also break ornamental coherence, revealing an aesthetic regulation of femininity in its nakedness, at risk of direct assault. Butlerian sense of power becomes a reality in this case as somatic anxiety, which transforms the bodily behavior in the state of instability. The mention of the second month of the invasion, makes the long hours of alertness normal, and it would be proposed that the crisis reorganizes mundane embodiment. Gender in this sense is enacted in the form of protective response and sheltering of one another, because bodily practice is put into new calibrations concerning survival and not display of sociality.

Likewise, the reflection that “we never went to bed hungry” (Habayeb 206) places femininity in a value system of scarcity-based gratitude. The exclamation of O my queen symbolically uplifts the feminine character and at the same time conceals the lack of material things. Such address re-inscriptions, given the conditions of lack, will reiterate the symbolic sovereignty, as Butler does, with endurance refigured into a moral virtue. The house, with its profound patience and persistence, is turned into an ethical training-school, and the discipline of repetition in prayer, the name of God, my mother, and we repeat, again and again imprints faith as the habit of the family. The naturalization of scarcity is achieved by repaying this debt time and again, and it is femininity whose part in this process is patience, sacrifice, and disciplined composure.

In addition, the statement that “It was a surgical operation that seemed necessary in order to accommodate ourselves to our new life” (Habayeb 208) figuratively imagines adaptation as bodily change. The photo depicting surgical operation implies invasiveness of the

precision, as social adaptation is depicted not by the process of gradual adjustment but by a cut. Within a Butlerian standpoint, social change genders both upon the body the subjectivity is overhauled through organized adaptation. Since the operation seems to be necessary, obedience becomes naturalized as lack of alternatives and accommodation as a form of restoring the injured as opposed to defeat. Recalibration of posture, desire, and expectation here to match the new historical conditions is gender performativity, where survival is based on the reconfiguration of the self.

Furthermore, the confession that “My father loved me... for the man in me” (Habayeb 224) derail the integrity of the gender identity. It is not so much that the love is aimed at the daughter as the daughter, but rather at an imaginary masculinity existing in her. In a situation where he started referring to me with male terms, the linguistic citation will be a process by which education redefines and disciplines the identity. In a Butlerian understanding recurrence in addresses inter-subject the subject to gendered intelligibility and gradual sedimentation of masculine naming instantiates another kind of legibility. The mentioning of jihad in my name further connects gender performance to nationalist discourse whereby the patriarchal authority and the national ideology intersect themselves in the creation of gendered subjectivity. In this scene, femininity is revealed as a thing to be chastised, re-granted and controlled by words, garment and surveillance.

Also, the moment when “his eye would not collide with flesh not his to see” (Habayeb 231) visual control of patriarchy is dramatized. Feminine body is posed as property that is controlled by modesty, ownership and controlled visibility. But the posture of the narrator, in which he quotes the power of masculinity as an ability of the body and

occupying space: “my back bent, my legs spread, in the posture of two vital men, makes the quotation of the power of masculinity. Butlerian viewpoint of posture and body disposition would be a performative activity that will decentralize the expectation of gendering. Arguing to be given a cigarette further takes possession of a signifier coded masculine, where gender becomes a performance of repetitions of signs, instead of an ontology. Such an unprecise reaction on the part of the father implies a lack of stability on the regulatory enforcement as such where femininity can be reorganized strategically in the space of discipline although it can be monitored.

Finally, the dance in which “we moved our shoulders... he said, ‘Forgive me!’” (Habayeb 273) makes the relations between the genders emotionally weak and emotionally tense. Hierarchy is momentarily halted by physical closeness providing a moment of relational vulnerability. However, the father soon returned to masculine containment by quickly re-defending himself as silent, redefining masculine containment as a coping mechanism in response to being found emotional. Butlerian point of view says that masculinity is maintained by excluding the vulnerability and the loneliness of the father demonstrates the psychic price of that discipline. Meanwhile, the fact that the narrator notes that she was a more defeated woman, highlights the division of labor in gendered power dynamics. Silence is therefore, something which serves as defense as well as an extension of regulatory authority and leaves father and daughter both equally molded by norms in which they cannot escape completely.

These scenes taken collectively illustrate that the narration of femininity as a process of production and negotiation, as opposed to identities, in Habayeb. The functions of emotional regulation, body control, surveillance by institutions and family control are working in a

combination to form familiar versions of feminine subjectivity. Meanwhile, there are swings of excess, ambivalence, and embodied resisting where the instability of these norms is encouraged. Gender in *Before the Queen Falls Asleep* is not a thing, but is rather a continuing performative intercourse that follows socially imposed expectations, cultural influences and survival needs.

4. Gender Performativity and Femininity in The Mothers

The performativity of gender in *The Mothers* by Brit Bennett is expressed through the repetition which constitutes feminine identity, in a certain socio-cultural setting. According to Butlerian point of view, femininity is not an essential being, but rather a series of repeated performances which brings about the semblance of unity and stability (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 12). In the novel, there are social norms that determine the right way to act and what constitutes intelligible femininity in the society. Mr. McNay posits that gendered subjectivity is achieved through body practices negotiated within power structures (McNay 47) and this is also similar to Bordo who points out that femininity is written on the body through disciplining, regulating and normalizing practices (Bordo 166). Combined with these views, one can present an effective framework of analyzing how Bennett, in her novel, influences the issue of femininity as a social construct, as a form of maintaining and as a form of disciplining, all based on everyday interactions, group norms, and the embodied forms of conformity.

The performative structure of Nadia's girlhood becomes visible when she recalls that "she always pretended to be unafraid," while her life felt like "being handed from person to person like a baton" until "her mother's hand was gone and she'd fallen" (Bennett 4). This statement foregrounds a fearless act and not an aspect that is intrinsic. It is the courage that is repeatedly staged in front of others and

maintained by means of the social circulation that femininity is not produced internally, but in a relationship. The metaphor of the baton also emphasizes the fact that the construction of gendered identity occurs as a result of such transfer of power as familial, social and institutional. Concurrently, the disenfranchisement of the hand of her mother disrupts this chain of support and the fragility of an identity that is perpetuated by repetition. The collapse of Nadia is, therefore, a symbol of personal sadness, as well as, the instability of coherence itself in its gendered existence. To be more Butlerian, the scene shows that femininity relies on repetitions of the acts of composure and continuity, but they are easily broken once the structures that uphold it fail.

This vulnerability intensifies in the encounter where he declares, “Naw. This a grown man drink. Not for a little thing like you. I’ll get you somethin’ sweet. You like that, honey? You look like you got a sweet tooth,” before smiling and sliding “a hand onto her thigh” (Bennett 6). In this case, the little thing is a miniature that linguistically (metrically) shows Nadia as childlike, dependent and available instead of autonomous. His pledge to somethin sweet also coincides femininity with pleasure, consumption and diminishing. Meanwhile, the physical invasion of his hand changes flirtatious speech into incarnated domination and the way that gendered power is deployed both in words and deed. Nadia is therefore written as petite, cute and reachable through dialogue that Rhetorically seems pretty innocent but in actual sense covers-ups inequality. As a Butlerian point of view, this way of address, does not just talk about femininity; it contributes to its production by repetitive positioning and unequal recognition. The scene thus demonstrates the way in which feminine identity is dictated

by everyday contact, infantilization as a form of gendered control is a subtle yet potent means of control.

Similarly, this dynamic of diminishment continues when “He always made her feel impossibly young... ‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Aren’t you, like, twelve?’... Even eighteen... would seem young to him” (Bennett 9). Though the exaggeration is seemingly boastful, the impact is in an oblique manner disciplinary. Nadia, even being the adult, is constantly placed as a child into the interaction although she has entered the stage of adulthood. In this meaning, impossibly young merely implies that youth is not merely a biological reality but a normalized condition that is generated by unequal addresses. He can put her in the lower position where he has to dominate by portraying her as inexperienced and immature. In terms of Butlerian, these acts of infantilization are recurrent not just describing Nadia; they assist in the formation of a gendered identity based on vulnerability and less power. Femininity therefore comes to be associated with helplessness in an interaction structure which masks power as flirtation.

The pressure of normative femininity becomes even more visible when the narrative insists that “She was supposed to be the smart one. She was supposed to understand that it only took one mistake and her future could be ripped away from her... Of all people, she should have known better. She was her mother’s mistake” (Bennett 12). The repetition of the phrase – She was supposed to- gives emphasis to the power of expectation that takes a toll on the subjectivity of a woman. Intelligence comes up as a defence against sexual mistake but also at the same time, the text makes clear how unsafe that defence is. The act of it only took one mistake builds female sexuality as a cliff of a dangerous edge on which a single deed can define a whole future. Nadia is thus placed in a logic of anticipatory blame, femininity is

founded on what is anticipated of oneself in terms of self-surveillance and social stigma of social disrepute. This burden is heightened in the last line, which is, Her mother was a mistake, by establishing her identity in a familial history of allusive barrenness. In this sense, the novel creates femininity, not necessarily based on desire and social perception, but through the process of the internalization of blame, caution and moral responsibility.

In addition, the communal voice deepens this critique when it declares, “Oh girl, we have known littlebit love... that littlebit of honey left in an empty jar that traps the sweetness in your mouth long enough to mask your hunger... and in all our living, nothing has starved us more” (Bennett 22). Every element of romantic attachment can be found in the metaphor of littlebit love, which provides a sweetness that, at least momentarily, masks more profound deprivation. Similarly, the photograph of a jar of honey implies the deception of food that is not really food. Femininity in this respect is fashioned by a set of longing which is never ultimately accomplished, even though it may come in short glimpsing delights. This we is also particularly crucial, since it positions the female desire in an intergenerational, collective experience as opposed to an individual, emotional incompetence. This collective articulation is seen through a Butlerian approach to the production of femininity through repetition to forms of desire that are both supposed to be fulfilling like causing a state of scarcity of emotion. The desire in this way is socialized and stringent.

This logic of disciplined femininity extends into maternal narrative when Nadia recalls that “She’d heard, time and time again, her mother’s own story about how God had led her to Upper Room” (Bennett 45). The fact that this testimony is repeated demonstrates the ritualization of narrative as a way of identity formation. The biography

of her mother- lonely, educated lowly (cleaning rooms) builds respectability based on endurance, faith and giving in to hardship. Simultaneously, characterizing such work as something she was lucky enough to be allowed to do rebrand economic precarity as religion, thus concealing structural inequality by appropriating it with the help of religious interpretation. Nadia will therefore be inheriting a paradigm of femininity that is based on sacrifice, humility and perseverance. In a Butlerian view repetitive testimony is an act of performativity where the narration of womanhood is established, maintained and passed down through generations.

However, resistance to passive femininity emerges in the portrayal of Latrice Sheppard, who “was tall and demanding, not some meek wife who sat in the front pew, silent and smiling” (Bennett 58). The importance of the contrast of demanding and meek is that it underlines the expectations on a wife, which are normative in a religious space. Sitting silently and smiling can be seen as a way of being idealised to form submissive femininity, but Latrice does not fit this bill. Her interpreting that she was not called to sit, but to serve, turns service out to be not elements of conformity, but a demonstration of authority and being present. By doing so, the novel makes femininity truly difficult to pin down and make it singular. In a Butlerian way, the performance by Latrice highlights a challenge of gender norms that are seen as not absolute, but can be reshaped within the same institution that aims to enforce femininity.

Finally, this instability of moral order reappears in the surreal image of “a flock of angels... all saints but no sinners... an off-kilter world where girls mothered old women and betrayed their best friends” (Bennett 236). This hypocrite hyper purity of all saints and no sinners indicates a skewed and ultimately untenable ethical system. As

boundaries of roles start collapsing and shifting around the stability of the hierarchies is not being considered any more. The mothering of old women by girls confounds the norms of generation, and betrayal confounds the ideals of feminine loyalty, care and coherence. Collectively, these contradictions construct femininity as quite paradoxical, as one, which cannot be resolved entirely, due to conflicting requirements. The scene thus shows the unsteadiness of the symbolic order itself in which purity and transgression co-exist, and normative requirements cannot explain the complexity of life. The text as it appears in Butlerian terms reveals the instability of a moral system relying on rigidly gendered roles, but constantly undermined by experience.

5. Gendered Power, Sexual Regulation, and the Disciplining of the Female Body

This dynamic becomes even more pronounced in the encounter where he declares, “Naw. This a grown man drink. Not for a little thing like you. I’ll get you somethin’ sweet. You like that, honey? You look like you got a sweet tooth,” before smiling and sliding “a hand onto her thigh” (Bennett 6). The sexualized discourse and corporal penetration in this scene interact to control the femininity in Nadia, via a culture of undermining and entry. The little thing is used to place her in a childlike position and as a subordinate and the constant use of sweetness associates femininity with pleasure and passivity as well as consumption. Meanwhile the act of laying a hand on her thigh changes flirtation into enacted domination uncovers the discipline of the female form with intimate practices of power that innocently or lovingly seem superficially sexual. Butlerian interpretation sees gender not as a simple expression, but an active construction in terms of emphasis upon addressing people by the same names and touching them and not

having equal recognition with those being touched. The regulation is framed as intimacy with a structure of male power that constitutive of Nadia as small, desirable, and available. In such a manner, the scene displays the functioning of sexual regulation that occurs not only via an express forbiddenware, but via those everyday gestures that train the female body and conceal manipulation under the language of attraction.

Likewise, this dynamic of diminishment continues when “He always made her feel impossibly young... ‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Aren’t you, like, twelve?’... Even eighteen... would seem young to him” (Bennett 9). Though the exaggeration is intended to be playful, it has a disciplinary impact. Nadia is recurrently placed in a younger, less experienced and, thus, lesser position in the interaction. It may be cast in this sense in which the notion of being impossibly young posits that it is not a biological fact which youth is, but rather a relational condition created through unequal modes of address. The way he uses this actress as immature puts her in an inferior role and strengthens a paradigm of femininity based on experience and agency loss. The scene thus exposes the working of the gendered power in the relatively uncomplicated speech that makes asymmetry in intimate relationships a matter of course.

This pressure becomes even more apparent when the narrative insists that “She was supposed to be the smart one. She was supposed to understand that it only took one mistake and her future could be ripped away from her... Of all people, she should have known better. She was her mother’s mistake” (Bennett 12). The repetition of “She was supposed to” underscores the disciplinary burden placed upon Nadia, as femininity is organized around anticipation, self-surveillance, and moral accountability. Intelligence is imagined as protection against sexual error, yet the passage simultaneously reveals how fragile that

protection is. The claim that “it only took one mistake” frames female sexuality as a threshold of irreversible consequence, where desire is governed by fear of judgment and loss. The final statement, “She was her mother’s mistake,” intensifies this logic by locating Nadia within an inherited narrative of reproductive failure. Femininity thus emerges as a condition shaped by anticipatory blame, where the female subject is required to monitor herself in advance of communal condemnation.

Furthermore, the communal voice deepens this critique when it declares, “Oh girl, we have known little bit love... that little bit of honey left in an empty jar that traps the sweetness in your mouth long enough to mask your hunger... and in all our living, nothing has starved us more” (Bennett 22). In this case, romantic attachment is representative as brief sweetness, which temporarily masks more profound emotional desperation. The honey in the vacant jar creates the sense of nutrition, yet not nourishment, indicating that feminine desire is constantly thrown in the direction of intimacy that is likely to bring fulfilment and at the same time replicate lack. We is particularly important, as it places this condition in a female collective, or more precisely communal experience as opposed to an individual one. By so doing, the novel contextualizes femininity in terms of structurally circumscribed desire, in which not only is desire socially constructed, but also is emotionally malnourished.

This logic of disciplined femininity also extends into maternal narrative when Nadia recalls that “She’d heard, time and time again, her mother’s own story about how God had led her to Upper Room” (Bennett 45). The fact that this story is recounted several times indicates that the testimony is a ritualizing way of identity construction. The biography of her mother, which is characterized by loneliness, lack of education, and work (cleaning rooms) builds the respectability via

perseverance, religious beliefs, and acceptance of pain. Simultaneously, the encoding of such labor as something that she was fortunate to possess reconstructs the economic precarity as having been gifted by God, covering the structural inequality with the religious discourse. Nadia therefore, inherits an exemplar of womanhood that is based on sacrifice, humility and perseverance. In this sense, femininity is passed on through narratives between generations as a disciplined sense of survival.

Yet resistance to passive femininity emerges in the portrayal of Latrice Sheppard, who “was tall and demanding, not some meek wife who sat in the front pew, silent and smiling” (Bennett 58). The juxtaposition of the terms: demanding and meek, brings out the ideals of norm that are expected in wives in the religious space. The act of sitting silent and smiling signifies a perfect sample of submissive femininity and Latrice does not take that role. When she insists that she was not called to sit, but to serve, she clarifies that servitude is not to obey, but to be actively involved. By doing so, the novel shows the femininity to be not a kind of fixed identity but a place of negotiation in the institutional setups. The appearance of Laetitia shows that even the gender norms can be challenged even inside the spheres that are aiming at controlling them.

The tension becomes even more visible in the surreal image of “a flock of angels... all saints but no sinners... an off-kilter world where girls mothered old women and betrayed their best friends” (Bennett 236). The absoluteness of the deadliness of all saints and no sinners is exaggerated to imply the idealized moral order which is imbalanced. With the collapse and translocation of roles, the unity of traditional hierarchies is disrupted. The old women who are the mothers of girls, fidelity yields to disloyalty and femininity emerges as paradoxical too

whereby care and disobedience form a niche. The scene therefore reveals how perilous symbolic expectations based on predetermined moral and gender roles but excluding lived contradiction are. Butlerian terminology exposes that normative femininity cannot ever be completely safe, since the truth of experience constantly upsurges the system that aims at capturing it.

6. Motherhood, Agency, and the Instability of Gender Identity

The burden of reproductive responsibility becomes especially visible in Nadia's haunting question: "Sometimes I wonder—... If my mom had gotten rid of me, would she still be alive? Maybe she would've been happier. She could've had a life" (Bennett 97). The break after Sometimes I wonder- indicates indecisiveness in stating an idea which is emotionally and socially taboo. Nadia envisions herself as the hindrance to her mother and domesticizes a story where motherhood comes in as a constraint on female life and not its achievement. The implied meaning of the statement, here, is that bringing up a child, in this context, is pictured as requiring the sacrifice of independence, potentiality, and identity. Motherhood then is not merely a construction of nurture, but rather a structure of sacrifice at the cost of femininity to reproductive overload and loss.

The sense of instability extends beyond motherhood and emerges more broadly in the confrontation where he asks, "What's with this black versus gay bullshit?" insisting, "There are black gay people, you know," while "for a second, her heart sank" (Bennett 114). The swap is upsetting simplified identity categories and reveals the shortcomings of thinking within strict binaries. The scene preempts its overlapping and intersectional dimensions by not considering identity as unique and oppositional. The response of Nadia is an indicator of unease preceding a certain subjectivity that cannot be categorized and at that, how

femininity is bartered in a broader arena influenced by race, sexuality, and social power. The moment thereby makes identity difficult to describe in a fixed manner as it demonstrates that gender cannot be conceived outside the interaction with other axes of difference and marginalization.

Likewise, masculinity itself becomes unstable in the scene where “Luke was used to trainers rubbing down sore muscles... but that was in the locker room,” and now “He felt awkward... another man rubbing lotion onto his skin. Maybe Carlos was gay” (Bennett 132). The difference between the locker room and the rest of the spaces demonstrates the acceptability of bodily contact are contextually determined and as imperative to maintain the heterosexual masculine legibility. On the one hand, touch is normalized in the context of sporting care; and on the other, it is problematic when removed from that same context. The unease of Luke makes masculinity a performance maintained with delicate control over bodily distance and the disimplication of any act that can be perceived in a different way. By so doing, the scene demonstrates that masculinity, by no less than femininity, is based on repeated performances that alienate the deviation of the self.

The emotional labor of concealment becomes especially visible in the reflection that “The how of any betrayal was the hardest part to justify, how the lies could be assembled and stacked and maintained until the truth was completely hidden behind them” (Bennett 247). Betrayal is here not an action, it is a framework that has to be placed constantly and sustained. The layering metaphor reveals the sense of architecture of concealment where even language becomes strained with emotions. The numbness on Nadia is some threshold, where speech starts to fail in the press, whereas Aubrey withdrawing is a

concrete way of expressing a breakage inexplicable through explanation. In this regard, the pastoralizing of the femininity would be tangled by the work of injury administration, telling of harm, and trying to repair emotionally in a relationship broken through the secrecy.

This rupture continues in the persistence of memory within domestic ritual, when “She hung two stockings, not three,” bought “a fake tree from Walmart,” and clutched “the felt tree skirt... hoping to catch a wisp of her mother” (Bennett 250). The third stocking is lost causing a loss by subtraction, and domestic performance is an act of reconstruction driven by grief. This sense of not being complete is further heightened in the fake tree when the present is compared to the past that was complete and safe. Even now, care, ritual and domestic repetition continue to be the key to the performance of femininity, but are plagued by what is absent. The scene tells us that feminine identity is not just created when the care is performed in the everyday, but as the mourning persists in the actions of care.

This tension becomes even more apparent in the contrast between chosen and imposed motherhood, when “Aubrey didn’t look scared,” appearing “comfortable... a hand resting on her stomach,” because “magic you wanted was a miracle, magic you didn’t want was a haunting” (Bennett 267). Here, pregnancy is not a predetermined fate of biology, but an experience, which is deciphered in terms of a desire, agreement, and attitude to the future. The physical comfort of the body and the reassuring movement of Aubrey indicates that embodiment is in tune with the will, whereas an unwanted pregnancy is imposed as constraining and unfathomable. Femininity thus turns to be ordered not merely on the basis of reproductive power, but on the connection that exists between bodily experience and individual agency. The opposition highlights the instability of the very concept of a maternal

meaning, as motherhood can either seem fulfillment or a form of constraint based on the circumstances in which it is experience.

Questions of power become especially sharp in the politics of narrative control, when a man claims, “I figured wise women such as yourselves would want to know what your pastor’s been up to,” while the collective voice protests, “Who was he to tell our stories?” (Bennett 273). It is a point of authority and opposition that storytelling becomes in this moment. The rhetorical question questions male prerogative to narrate the female experience but regardless, the story is told, showing narrative as a way of power in itself. His call to maternal wisdom hopes to justify such an encroachment by taking a language of feminine authority even as it silences the voice of women herself. Therefore, it is not only social roles and bodily expectations that mediate femininity, but it is also a struggle over who is entitled to speak, make sense of and define female experience.

7. Comparative Analysis of Gender Performativity in Habayeb and Bennett

Combined, *Before the Queen Falls Asleep* and *The Mothers* indicate that femininity is not the static or natural state of being, but a social process, generated and involved in a process of endless negotiation through repetition, discipline, institutional control. In both novels, gender is created through a reiteration of disciplinary practices of emotional self-control, bodily self-control and normative obedience that constitute what is intelligible femininity in each of the social worlds. The process of reproducing these practices occurs in patterns of the everyday, family demands, community surveillance as well as institutional organizations and they all show that femininity is not reproduced as essence, but rather as a form of social legibility which is regulated .

Simultaneously, the specifics of mechanisms in terms of historical and cultural conditions in which they operate are quite different in the two novels. Before the Queen Falls Asleep by Habayeb, femininity is well related to surviving in an environment that is characterized by displacement, political imbalance, the control of family and social precarity. Gendered performance is a phenomenon where endurance, restraint and adaptation is a response to structural pressure. In comparison, femininity in Bennett The Mothers is directed more specifically based on interpersonal and communal relations which are informed by sexuality, religious morality, reproductive responsibility as well as social politics of reputation. The same way that the survival of Habayeb is prefigured in larger forms of instability in her novel is how the female subjectivity of Bennett is prefigured in her novel in the way of its intimate and communal disciplining via judgment and desire and moral responsibility .

As this comparison thus indicates, the gender performativity mode of operation applies differently in both texts using similar structural practices which however bring about dissimilar feminine subjectivity depending on the context. Femininity is enacted in Habayeb as the stamina with control, emotional regulation and disciplines are inalienable to political and domestic precarity. Femininity has been represented in Bennett by engagement with self-monitoring, sexual control and communal responsibility, with the establishment of female selfhood via the threat of disapproval, the weight of the moral judgment. In neither of the two novels the women are not allowed to be legible without negotiating socially construed roles on the various occasions that they have to do so. These negotiations however, never can bring total stability. Instead, in both lines of writing, gender identity continues to be under contradiction, disruption and redefining .

Finally, this comparative reading shows that the processes of gendering can be similar in the structures of various cultures, yet they have historically and culturally diverse interpretations and implications. In both pieces performativity is not an articulation of a predefined identity, but a continuous process of negotiation of normativity, power and experience. The study demonstrates that by putting Habayeb and Bennett into conversation it becomes apparent that femininity acts as both a location of constraint and a survival strategy being subject to a social, historical and institutional pressures which are specific to both social, historical and institutional contexts and not medifiable on the basis of an inherent or fundamental feminine core.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that the performativity of gender in *Before the Queen Falls Asleep* by Huzama Habayeb and *The Mothers* by Brit Bennett is organized around repetitive disciplining emotional, controlling bodies, institutional regulation, control of sexuality, and maternity. Emotional discipline controls female visibility in both novels since women are supposed to be composed and restrained so that they can be socially intelligible. Meanwhile, the body is a key control venue that determines how the material manifestation of femininity is normed through norms of appearance, modesty, and behavior. These norms are further reinforced by the institutional (family, religion, education) and community structures that entrench norms in the everyday practices and authority systems .

This analysis has further revealed that these common processes are not applicable identically in the two texts. Femininity in *Before the Queen Falls Asleep* is inherently associated with survival and survival under situational displacement, political upheaval and communal limitation. Femininity in *The Mothers*, on the contrary, is constructed

more clearly by the influence of sexuality, the judgment of a community, responsibility in child bearing and responsible moral sense. It is true that both novels disclose the disciplining power of gender norms but show that this power has a cultural mediation and historical particularities in its outcomes .

In conclusion, this comparative reading affirms that femininity in the two works is a process of constant negotiation that is influenced by repetition, power and social pressures. Gender performativity turns up in these novels as a mode of constraint and as a mode of survival, whereby women adapt to the demands placed on them by their respective communities. By juxtaposing Habayeb and Bennett, this paper downplay into the feministcomparative literature field by indicating that gender regulation structures can be shared, although the meanings and effects are immensely influenced by the issue of cultural, historical, and institutional difference.

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