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THE METAMORPHOSIS OF 'LOLITA' IDENTITY WITHIN THE TRANSFORMED GENDER DISCOURSE

Abstract: Over the years, the perception of 'gender' has been transforming from essentialism, which equates gender with biological sex, to social constructionism, which suggests that gender is constructed within a social and cultural discourse. Discursive psychologists insist that gender is constructed in and through discourse, and accordingly, discourse analysis has been used as a method for research on gender identity. Different theories produce different understandings of gender, which underlines the necessity of analyzing literary products and phenomena from a diachronic perspective. The present work analyzes 'lolita' identity and its metamorphosis from Nabokov's *Lolita* to Albahari's *Daughter*. Feminine identity of Nabokov's Dolores Haze, formed within the discourse of late modernism, has been transformed, due to the changed gender discourse of postmodern and post globalized society, into performative and fluid identity of Albahari's Daughter.

Key words: 'lolita' phenomenon, gender transformation, gender studies, identity, performativity, feminism, Nabokov, Albahari

"Lolita" phenomenon, as well as its literary representation, is connected with cultural and social modernization and expansion of popular / consumer culture of the second half of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st. Due to this connection it is required that this model should be studied from diachronic perspective that includes the change of these systems. "Lolita" identity, as a specific way of constituting female subjectivity within the context of popular / consumer culture, should be studied as marginal gender and liminal identity based on the mechanism of constituting female subjectivity as continuous transformation: 'neutral' gender position of a child / girl is being transformed into sexualized subject which then gains the characteristics of commodity for glamorous consumption. As is generally known, Lolita, or the nymphette, as Nabokov introduced her, is a maiden between the ages of 9 and 14 possessing the complex of elusive qualities, magic ingredients that are perceptible only to a small number of men like Humbert Humbert, who are separated in age from the nymphettes by a span of at least ten years [Aldridge 1961: 23]. It is not, however, Lolita's age that is of crucial importance in defining her identity but the lack of maturity both intellectual and emotional. Judged by the special criteria of Humbert Humbert, Albahari's Daughter is not a nymphette – but when observed according to more objective standards she and Lolita are very much alike.



The defining characteristics which determine 'Lolita' identity are the following: the relation to a father / the absence of a father that is embodied in the relationship with an older man who takes the role of a father; the identification with models of popular culture and figurative identification with commodity in the consumer society; the use of the body as a means of manipulation; the presence of exile / apostasy of society. These basic characteristics are common both to *Lolita* and *Daughter*, making thus both of them the bearers of 'Lolita' identity.

The idea of observing the transformation of 'Lolita' identity from a diachronic perspective emerged while reading the K. Visweswaran's paper: "Histories of feminist Ethnography", whose segment from the introduction I intend to use as a starting point of this research:

If "feminism" has changed substantially in the past one hundred years, so too has our understanding of what constitutes gender; thus, different forms of feminism have produced different understandings of gender, where gender itself cannot be separated from the categories of race, class, or sexual identity that determine it (Visweswaran 1997: 592).

Visweswaran explored how women are figured as subjects, as well as how a subject of identification is produced by particular understandings of gender at distinct historical moments - from the first emergence of gender as a descriptive category for women, which made a woman a universal category, to displacing gender from the center by engaging strategies of disidentification rather than identification.

The observation of 'Lolita' identity from the perspective of changing gender discourse requires studying the overview of feminist and gender theories through the periods earlier mentioned. Prior to the mid of the 20th century, that is, before the time of the first publication of *Lolita* (1955), the category of gender was equated with the biological sex. This notion that men's and women's mode of operation in society is governed by their biology is known as 'biological essentialism' and has been fiercely contested by many feminist theorists. Since the 1950s, an increasing use of the term 'gender' has been seen in the academic literature and the public discourse, for distinguishing gender identity from biological sex.

When studying the development of feminine and gender identity through feminist theories, it is impossible not to start with the famous quote of Simone de Beauvoir - "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman". This quote being the part of 1949th book *The Second Sex*, marks the turning point in gender theory development and the beginning of social constructionism which suggests that gender is constructed within a social and cultural discourse. Realizing that the social and cultural discourse of Western Civilization is male dominant, de Beauvoir argues that women have been defined by men and that if they attempt to break with this, they risk alienating themselves. Women are defined and differentiated with reference to a man and not a man with reference to a woman; she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject and the Absolute, while she is the Other. Simone de Beauvoir links woman's identity as Other and her fundamental alienation to her body (especially her reproductive capacity).

Taking into account previously presented theory, at this point, ‘Lolita’ identity is defined with reference to a man - Humbert Humbert in Nabokov’s and the Professor in Albahari’s novel. She, ‘Lolita’, does not even exist beyond his own discourse, since in both cases the narrator is a man and her feminine identity is introduced through the male signifier, which points out the necessity of observing this identity as a double or triple modeled system. Not only is the girl’s identity the Other, but in cases of these two novels she represents the total opposition to a male character, him being the Subject, the Bearer of High Culture, the Consumer; her being the Other, the Consumer and the Bearer of Popular culture and the Commodity consumed by him. In Nabokov’s novel Lolita’s charm is presented as entirely physical while spiritually she is presented common and vulgar, as opposed to his high culture standards. Contrary to Humbert’s cultural background – he was born in Paris, in bourgeois family which provided him with high education and enabled him to become a literary scientist specialized in English literature, Lolita’s background is rather common and popular – both her and her mother are typical representatives of consumer society, infatuated with popular advertisements and magazines, with no real ambitions in their lives: “All she (Lolita) wanted from life was to be one day a strutting and prancing baton twirler or a jitterbug” (Nabokov 1991: 46) Humbert in all his lyrical descriptions deliberately brings into juxtaposition her carnal richness and her mental baseness:

“Lolita of the strident voice and the rich brown hair - of the bangs and the swirls at the sides and the curls at the back, and the sticky hot neck, and the vulgar vocabulary – “revolting,” “super,” “luscious,” “goon,” “drip” (*ibid.* 65). She is “a combination of naivete and deception, of charm and vulgarity [...]” (*ibid.* 147-148).

But mentally she was unvaried and uncomplicated, “a disgustingly conventional little girl” (*ibid.* 148). Her unimaginative standardized and conventional mind led her to believe every advertisement she read and to desire to sample every product she saw advertised. She was an avid reader of comic strips and lover of low-grade movies. “She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster” (*ibid.* 148). The same opposition is to be found in Albahari’s *Daughter*, where, under a series of odd consequences, a “gray-haired” university professor spends a night in a hotel with his colleague’s daughter and performs a sexual intercourse with her. The resemblance to Nabokov’s characters is apparent – the professor is also a literary scientist dealing with English literature, having no interest in popular culture, whereas the girl, regardless of her family education, identifies with consumers of popular culture and molds her own conduct according to popular taste. This confrontation of high and popular culture is best described in their conversation about a philosopher George Santayana:

She didn’t know, she said, that Santana had written a book. Who is Santana, I asked, and what book? Well, the one you mentioned, replied the girl. That’s Santayana, I corrected her, and who’s that Santana of yours? Oh, said the girl, his name’s Carlos. I asked what Carlos had written. Nothing, replied the girl, he doesn’t write, but plays the guitar. Then it’s not the same man, I replied [...].¹ (Albahari 2010: 23)

¹ My translation. The quotation marks are omitted from the original text as well as from the translation.



(Nije znala, rekla je, da je Santana napisao knjigu. Ko je Santana, upitao sam, i kakvu knjigu? Pa, taj koga ste pomenuli, uzvratila je devojka. To je Santajana, ispravio sam je, Džordž Santajana, a ko je taj vaš Santana? O, rekla je devojka, on se zove Karlos. Pitao sam šta je Karlos napisao. Ništa, odgovorila je devojka, on ne piše, već svira gitaru. Onda to nije isti čovek, rekao sam [...].)

In both novels the technique of role reversal is applied, wherefore the constant transformation from daughter to mistress and mistress to daughter makes the basis for the plot.

Previous analysis arising from de Beauvoir's theory has developed in accordance with the theory of Materialist feminists who question the very existence of gender categories, arguing that 'women' and 'men' are social categories defined in relation to each other rather than on the basis of a pre-social biological essence. Thus materialist feminists postulate a Marxist class-like relationship, with patriarchal domination causing a social division rather than following from pre-existing sex differences. Patriarchal society is said to take certain features of male and female biology and turn them into a set of gendered characteristics that serve to empower men and disempower women, and which are then presented as natural attributes of males and females. Therefore a hierarchy is said to precede division.

Contrary to Materialist feminists, Post-modern feminists emphasize cultural factors, seeing 'men' and 'women' as discursively constructed categories. Discourse analysis follows from the 1970/80's 'turn to language' in sociological thought. The focus shifted away from the individual and his or her intentions, to language and its productive potential. So in post-structuralist or post-modern models, language constitutes rather than reflects or expresses the meaning of society, experience and the individual's sense of self. Human beings are said to have no fixed essence and no rigid identities. The most influential version of this concept of discourse is the one derived from the work of Michel Foucault. For Foucault, discourses are anything which can carry meaning - languages, images, stories, figures, scientific narratives and cultural products, but are also the things we do - social and everyday practices. Discourse in terms of gender refers to "a whole range of different symbolic activities, including style of dress, patterns of consumption, ways of moving, as well as talking" (Edley, 2001, p.191). Gender identity is constructed and reproduced through these symbolic activities. The emergence of certain discourses of sexuality are inter-dependent with social power exercised by medical, judicial and religious communities, as well as consumer society.

As an addition to this concept of discourse, it is necessary to perform narratological analysis where the focalization of the narrative process is to be reviewed. Both novels represent fictional confessions of narrators who, by telling their stories, try to justify their twisted behavior. Humbert Humbert, as well as Professor, acquire the characteristics of an unreliable narrator which are evident in contradictory comments they make. This contradiction is present both between their words and acts, as well as between the values they imply themselves and the values comprehended in the novels as objective truth. The detection of narrator's

unreliability, during the reading process, enables the readers to conceive the messages hidden behind the words spoken. The review of narrator's focalization now reconsiders his interpretation of the female character (Lolita and Daughter), as well as the processes responsible for molding Lolita identity.

In accordance with both Foucault's theory and the narratological analysis of the novels, the position for analyzing 'Lolita' identity has been changed. It is now possible to analyze her subjectivity regardless of man's (Humbert's or Professor's) positioning her within his discourse. Her practices carry the meaning for themselves, and at this point 'Lolita' identity is formed by the means of powers dominant in consumer society and shaped by those of popular culture. Comparing consumerism with aestheticism, it is consumerism that involves a dependence upon the actual rather than imaginative possession of objects. From the moment of their becoming lovers Lolita seems to become a commodity herself with a sole purpose of giving pleasure to Humbert, placing herself willingly into hierarchically lower and disempowered position, only to take the reverse position. This is when she starts using her body as the means of manipulation, she demands material compensation for the continuation of her sexual favors, becoming thus a tyrant of avarice and cruelty.

Only very listlessly did she earn her three pennies per day; and she proved to be a cruel negotiator whenever it was in her power to deny me certain life-wrecking, strange, slow paradisaic philtres without which I could not live more than a few days in a row [...]. Knowing the magic and might of her own soft mouth, she managed to raise the bonus price of a fancy embrace to three, and even four bucks. (Nabokov 1991: 184)

It is, however, her own sexuality that is sacrificed here. Having been used as a specific way of survival and struggle, Lolita's feminine sexuality is no longer an integral part of her identity. The act of making love is comprehended by Lolita as pure motions with no intellectual stimulation. She is impervious not only to moral consequences but to any other consequences of her sexual behavior - to her, making love is an act less significant than going for a walk, eating an ice-cream or visiting a new candy store. Except when it comes to material satisfaction, sexual activity is of no interest to her. Lolita's headmistress reported to Humbert the impression that she "remains morbidly uninterested in sexual matters, or to be exact, represses her curiosity in order to save her ignorance and self-dignity" (Nabokov, 195).

A number of post-structuralist feminist theorists, influenced by Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Luce Irigaray, have sought to theorize the body and its relation to difference and gendered subjectivity (sexually specific personality), resulting in concepts of subjectivity as embodied performance. Influential feminist scholar Judith Butler, for example, no more accepts sex as a natural category than gender itself. Butler posits that if gender does not follow automatically from sex, then there is no reason to assume only two genders (Butler 1990). Bringing into question the linkage or connection between sex and gender leads to a speculation that sex may be a product of scientific discourses, and may thus be as culturally constructed as gender. Butler says that the body does not have a pre-given, essential sex and that bodies become gendered by means of a continual 'performance' of gender. Gendered

subjectivity is thus acquired through the repeated performance by the individual of discourses of gender. According to Butler and her theory of performativity, gender is not inscribed onto a biological body, but is discursively constructed, shaped and sustained. Gender is performed by individuals on a daily basis and the everyday performance and practice construct gender within social and cultural discourse. In other words, she insists that gender identity is constructed and sustained within regulative discourses.

This shift to performative identity, resulting from the transformed gender discourse, leads to the metamorphosis of 'Lolita' identity embodied in the character of Abahari's Daughter. Being a bearer of all characteristics of 'Lolita' identity, Daughter takes the role of the outcast (having been thrown out of a train for not possessing a train ticket) but also embraces the male protector in a particular situation. Contrary to Lolita, Daughter performs her own sexuality for its own sake and regardless to a male partner.

In a word, the girl was masturbating. [...] So I leaned over to her young ear and asked whether she wanted me to take over. The girl didn't even move. Just sit there, she said, I'll tell you when it's your turn. My turn!² (Albahari, 2010, p. 34)

(Rečju, devojka je masturbirala. [...] Stoga sam se nagnuo prema njenom mladom uhu i upitao je da li želi da je malo odmenim. Devojka se nije ni okrenula. Samo tu sedi, rekla je, kazaću ti kada dođe tvoj red. Moj red!)

At this specific point it is obvious that Daughter's sexual identity is not restricted to feminine only nor to passive one. Her habit of continual watching pornographic movies accompanied by self satisfying modifies previous representations of masculine and feminine identities. Feminist film theorists have long been concerned with the processes by which power and visibility have been entwined and allocated to the masculine along with the right to look. However, many anthropologists have implicitly reproduced and extrapolated a phallogocentric logic by defining visibility and power as synonymous terms. This concept derives from an article called 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' by Laura Mulvey, a feminist film theorist, comprehending the film as an instrument of the male gaze, producing representations of women and sexual fantasy from a male point of view. She declares that in patriarchal society 'pleasure in looking has been split between active / male and passive / female'. Traditional films present men as active, controlling subjects and treat women as passive objects of desire for men in both the story and in the audience, and do not allow women to be desiring sexual subjects in their own right. Such films objectify women in relation to 'the controlling male gaze' (Mulvey 1992: 33), presenting 'woman as image' (or 'spectacle') and man as 'bearer of the look' (*ibid.* 27). Men do the looking; women are there to be looked at. Revising Mulvey's theory some film theorists (E Ann Kaplan, Kaja Silverman, Jackie Stacey) began to doubt the validity of her argument, questioning whether the gaze is always male, or whether it is merely dominant. They argued that the gaze could be adopted by both male and female subjects - the male is not always the controlling subject nor

² My translation.

is the female always the passive object. The main question occurring from these revisions is whether women necessarily take up a feminine and men a masculine spectator position and indeed, if there are only unitary 'masculine' or 'feminine' reading positions? These questions lead us right to fluidity of performative identity, such as the one illustrated in *Daughter*, who alternately changes positions from the active one – the owner of the gaze, to the passive one – the image being looked at.

She was looking at me, while I repeated to myself: the girl is watching pornographic movie, the girl is masturbating [...]. Then the girl asked me if I wanted to watch it together. When I turned to her, I saw that she lifted the blanket, lying with her legs spread, naked, of course [...]. And while I was staring into that triangular area, she moved her left thigh a bit, raised her hips allowing me thus to see [...].(Albahari 2010: 26-27)³

(Gledala me je, a ja sam u sebi ponavljao: devojka gleda pornografski film, devojka masturbira [...]. Tada me je devojka upitala da li hoću da zajedno gledamo film. Kada sam se osvrnuo prema njoj, video sam da je zadigla pokrivač, da leži raširenih nogu, gola, naravno [...]. I dok sam tako piljio u taj trouglasti prostor, ona je malo pomerila levu butinu, odigla kukove I tako mi omogućila da vidim [...].)

Going back to *Lolita* who was the bearer of commodity aesthetics, being the object of the gaze, and Humbert, the owner of the gaze, representing as such clear masculine/feminine positions, the transformation has taken place within the 'Lolita' identity itself, and has been embodied in performative identity of the *Daughter*, who rejects clear gender positions by performing fluent gender roles. Thus, the metamorphosis of 'Lolita' identity has taken place due to, as Butler suggests, performativity and has become remodeled in *Daughter*, demonstrating that gender can be seen as something people do rather than as a quality they possess. As a closure, we are rewriting de Beauvoir's quote from the beginning of this paper, by saying "One is not born a woman, one performs (or is performed as) a woman."

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METAMORFOZA "LOLITA" IDENTITETA U OKVIRU IZMENJENOG RODNOG DISKURSA

Rezime

Fenomen "lolite" i njenog književnog predstavljanja povezan je sa različitim oblicima kulturno-društvene modernizacije i ekspanzijom popularno-potrošačke kulture druge polovine dvadesetog veka i prve decenije dvadeset prvog veka, pa je stoga neophodno sagledati ga u dijahronijskoj perspektivi smene tih sistema. "Lolita" identitet preispituje se kao rodno granična i liminalno identitetska pozicija u čijoj je osnovi mehanizam konstituisanja ženskog subjektiviteta kao neprekidne transformacije. U radu je prikazana metamorfoza "Lolita" identiteta na primerima romana *Lolita*, Vladimira Nabokova, i *Čerka*, Davida Albaharija, odnosno transformacija femininog identiteta Nabokovljeve Dolores Hejz u performativni, a potom i fluidni identitet Albaharijeve Čerke. Pomenuta metamorfoza se dešava pod uticajem izmenjenog rodno diskursa od modernog društva sredine 20. veka do postmodernog i post-globalizovanog društva početka 21. veka. Prvobitno posmatran kao feminini identitet isključivo modelovan

preko muškog označitelja, “Lolita” identitet biva predstavljen isključivo kao opozicija muškom naratoru. Bez sopstvenog prava na reč ona igra ulogu koja joj je dodeljena. Preispitivanjem pozicije i pouzdanosti naratora, kao i promenom teorijskog okvira posmatranja, “Lolita” identitet postaje moguće posmatrati izvan pomenutih nametnutih okvira. Upravo njene svakodnevne prakse upućuju na popularno-potrošačku kulturu kao presudnog činioca u modelovanju njegov, sada performativnog, identiteta. Daljom promenom teorijske pozicije i uključivanjem post-strukturalističkih i feminističkih sagledavanja izgradnje i modelovanja identiteta, “Lolita” identitet biva sagledan kao fluidni, odnosno rodno granični.

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