

## The Discursive Construction of Identity in the Autobiographies of Yazidi women

Vol. 13, No. 1, Tome 67  
pp. 65-97  
March & April 2022

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### Abstract

The role of language in the construction of identity is one of the most important modern theoretical debates about identity. Structuralism and poststructuralism emphasize with particular certainty the constructive role of language in the formation of identity. Assuming that language is a powerful tool in constructing identity discourse, the present study examines the two novels of the last girl and girl who escaped from the clutches of ISIS and shows by what linguistic mechanisms the Yazidi women use the genre of "autobiography" as a Strategies are used in the struggle against the discourse of domination, and by offering different counter-discourses, they construct the dominant discourses and global stereotypes in order to eliminate some of the consequences or negative feedback of the aggression and oppression of the Yazidi colonized society. . In this regard, we used Laclau and Moff discourse theory and its methodological tools to analyze research data. The results show that four discourses in conflict and conflict with each other have sought to represent the identity of the Yazidi woman: a) the discourse of the "Kurdish Nationalist Party"; B) the discourse of the "central government of Iraq and the Arabs"; C) the discourse of "ISIS" and d) the discourse of "Yazidi women writers". Yazidi women are struggling with all the identities that the dominant discourses have defined for them, such as slavery, rape, and refugee, and creating new identities for themselves as Yazidi leaders and advocates for the rights of women and Yazidis.

**Keywords:** Autobiography, Identity, Yazidi women, Discourse theory, Laclau & Mouffe

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Received: 24 November 2020  
Received in revised form: 1 April 2021  
Accepted: 25 April 2021

## 1. Introduction

The role of language in the construction of identity is one of the most important modern theoretical debates about identity. Poststructuralism emphasizes with particular certainty the constructive role of language in the construction of identity. By accepting this basic idea, Laclau and Moff's theory of discourse also emphasizes that "who" or "identity" is relative and inherent, and that identities should be understood as "subject situations" in a discourse construction that can never be established forever. Among the literary genres, "autobiography" is one of the most important types that has become very popular among "identity-based" movements and discourses in recent decades. Women, people of color, people with physical disabilities, people of different sexual orientations, and survivors of violence have all played a role in developing the process of self-representation by revealing their repressed histories and creating new perspectives in the genre. In the view of theorists of autobiographical literature, every autobiography is an exploration of an identity and the design of the subject of identity is one of the characteristics of female writing. The crisis-stricken community of Iraqi Yazidis is one of the communities whose women, after finding themselves defenseless against the crimes and genocides of ISIS forces and themselves raped and desecrated, turned to writing biographies and telling their personal stories of the crisis. ISIL created a movement that resulted in the emergence of numerous literary works that have been translated into various languages around the world and have reached numerous editions. Although in general the identity-building components of the Yazidi community do not have the necessary uniformity and this has led to the fragmentation of the identity of the members of this community, ISIS's crimes against Yazidis have further weakened the Yazidi identity, especially the women of this community. Nevertheless, the publication of autobiographies of Yazidi women was very effective in restoring the identity and discourse of Yazidi women. Therefore, the main issue of the present study is that Yazidi women have used this genre and linguistic facilities to construct or deconstruct the social identity of

Yazidi women.

### Research Question(s)

In this regard, this study intends to answer the following questions by applying Laclau Mouffe's theory of discourse:

1) In the autobiographies of Yazidi women, what are the main discourses in conflict with each other that seek to construct the discourse of Yazidi women?

2) The identity of the Yazidi woman is elaborated around in which of the above-mentioned discourses?

3) How did Yazidi women writers in their autobiographies represent Yazidi identity and by what discourse mechanisms did they construct the dominant discourses?

The main hypothesis of the research in answer to these questions is that Yazidi women, by taking an active and proactive stance against ISIS crimes, try to construct all the identities that the dominant discourses have defined for them and achieve a new identity by using the linguistic possibilities of autobiographies.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory: hegemony and the ontology of identity

According to Laclau's discourse theory, "identity" is relative and intrinsic, and identities should be understood as "subject situations" in a discourse construct (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 115); That is, discourses always set situations for individuals to occupy them as subjects, thereby giving them meaning and identity. To understand precisely the "non-intrinsicity" of identity in discourse theory, it is best to begin by defining Saussure's concept of "sign" as the foundation of poststructuralist theory of language and how

meaning is created. He knows the component of signifier (sound imagination) and signified (mental imagination) (Saussure, 2003, p. 96).

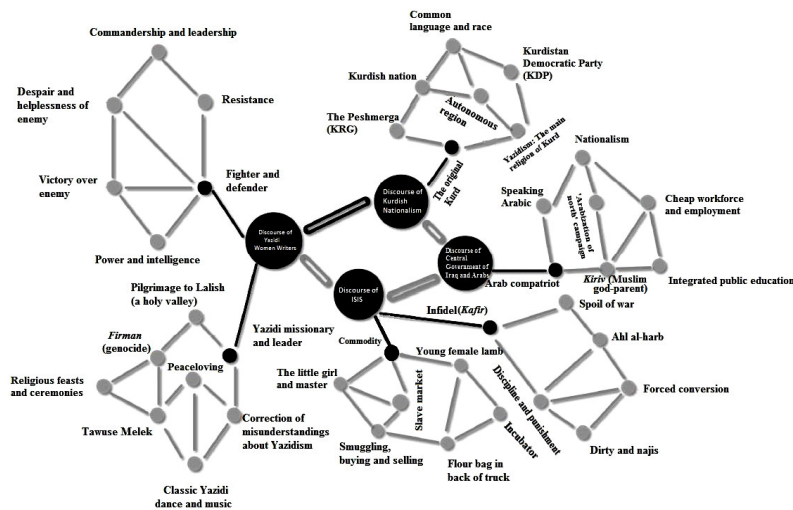
## 2.2. *Autobiography and discursive construction of identity*

Literary works resulting from life realities of the writer, called autobiography, refer to the works in which the writer depicts his/her own personal experiences; the narrative line and narrated events are directly taken from the writer's personal life. In his book *L'Autobiographie en France*, Philippe Lejeune, the first theorist of first-person literature or autobiography, has been provided the most well-known definition of autobiography: A prose narrative of the past (retrospective) which a person presents of her/his own life and in which the major emphasis is on her/his personal life especially on her/his life story (or story of the character) (Lejeune, 1971: 14 as cited in Nassehi, 1391: 93). Yet "the study of autobiography explodes disciplinary boundaries and requires and understanding of other approaches, methods and practices" (Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield, 2000: 1). The popularity has led some to put emphasis on the autobiographical (sometimes referred to as the autobiographical turn) and consider it as an ever-present feature in writing (regardless of its type or genre) (Lang, 1982: 6). Let alone this broad understanding, it was in the late 18th-century that autobiography was first recognized as an independent literary genre. From the 1970s onwards, the genre owes its growth and increasing prosperity to various social and political movements across the globe which have led more and more people to write about and publish their expectations of life. Women, colored people, the physically disabled, LGBT and survivors of violence all have played a role in representing themselves through revealing their suppressed histories, hence bringing about new perspectives in the genre of autobiography. So in the recent decades, identity movements have played a significant role in the emergence and progress of this kind of writing with its different written products. Also they have conducted theoretical and critical analyses in the

fields of gender, feminism, race and postcolonial studies (Ghaemi and Sojouidi, 1397: 97). The autobiography provides writers with an opportunity to elevate themselves to the position of representing subject; that is to change into subjects who are also representatives of others. It is necessary to pay attention to the construction of self in and by autobiography, which becomes possible by asking questions about the ways through which writers produce and reproduce the cultural identity of their self through language.

### 3. Results

Four main discourses can be found in the two works, each of which strives to represent the Yazidi woman identity differently: a) the discourse of Kurdish Nationalist Party, b) the discourse of central government of Iraq and Arabs, c) the discourse of ISIS, and d) the discourse of Yazidi women writers.



#### 4. Conclusion

In the two novels "The Last Girl" and "The Girl Who Fled from ISIS" there are four main discourses, each of which tries to represent the identity of the "Yazidi woman" in different ways: a) the discourse of the "Kurdish nationalist party"; b) the discourse of the "government" Central Iraq and the Arabs "; c) " ISIL "discourse; And d) the discourse of "Yazidi women writers". In these two works, Yazidi women, while reflecting the fragmentation of Yazidi identity as a sociological crisis, take constructive steps to build a new identity of society and their identity. Common narratives in rival discourses by stereotyping Yazidi women represent them merely as passive victims of gang rape at the hands of rapists. Yazidi women try to fight all the identities that the dominant discourses have defined for them, such as orphans, rape victims, captives and refugees, and instead create new identities such as the Yazidi leader, women's rights defender, peace ambassador and writer.