

Cross-cultural Performativity of Gender Communication in Heather Raffo's *Nine Parts of Desire* (2006) (*)

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Abstract

Since the mid-twentieth century, the study of gender has constituted a fundamental part of many interdisciplinary research works due to its multi-perspective nature which made it a fertile ground for analysis in diversified fields of science. Discussions over sex/gender distinction and the representation as well as perception of gender ceaselessly exist within controversially enriching, discursive frameworks. In 1990, Judith Butler (1956), one of the prominent feminist theorists in the field of gender studies, first coined the concept of “gender performativity,” where she challenged the conventional notions of ethnomethodologists and phenomenologists who restricted the perception and communication of gender to pre-existing social constructs. Hence, this study aims to investigate the play *Nine Parts of Desire* (2006), written by the contemporary Iraqi-American playwright and actress Heather Raffo, in the light of Butler’s theory of gender performativity to prove that the communication of female gender, represented by Raffo’s nine Iraqi female characters from culturally diverse background, is linguistically and cross-culturally performative. Furthermore, given the theatricality of Butler’s concept, the study also tends to establish a connection between Butler’s cross-cultural performativity and Raffo’s dramaturgical performativity while acting the play on stage in order to underscore the fact that the performativity of female gender in the play is both cross-culturally and dramaturgically communicated.

(*) Cross-cultural Performativity of Gender Communication in Heather Raffo's *Nine Parts of Desire* (2006), Vol.11, Issue No.3, July 2022, pp.325-348.

Keywords: Gender performativity, Linguistic performativity, Theatrical performativity, Performativity and performance, Post-Gulf War drama, Arab-American playwrights, Dramaturgy, *Nine Parts of Desire*, Heather Raffo.

المخلص

منذ منتصف القرن العشرين، أصبحت دراسة الجندر جزءاً لا يتجزأ من العديد من البحوث البيئية لما تشتمل عليه من أوجه فكرية متعددة جعلت منها موضعاً خصباً للدراسة والتحليل في مجالات علمية وأدبية شتى؛ فلطالما أثّرت العديد من النقاشات الجندرية حول التقريب ما بين مفهومي الجنس والجندر (النوع الاجتماعي)، وكذا حول التمثيل الجندري وكيفية استقبال المتلقي له. وفي عام ١٩٩٠، كانت أول من صاغ مفهوم "أدائية الجندر" هي المُنظرة جوديث بتلر (١٩٥٦-)، واحدة من أهم واضعي النظريات النسوية في مجال دراسات الجندر، حيث تحددت الأراء النمطية لمُنظري الإثنوميثودولوجيا والـفنومولوجيا التي حددت تصوير الجندر والتعبير عنه في إطار قيم وقواعد مجتمعية ثابتة بطرحها لمنظور أكثر تحرراً في التعامل مع الجندر. ومن ثم، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تناول بالبحث والتحليل العمل المسرحي تسعة أجزاء من الرغبة للكاتبة المسرحية والممثلة المعاصرة العراقية الأمريكية هيدز رافو (١٩٧٠-) في ضوء نظرية "أدائية الجندر" لبتلر بغرض إثبات أن التعبير عن الجندر النسائي المتمثل في الشخصيات المسرحية التسعة التي تقدمها رافو يتسم بالطابع الأدائي على الصعيدين اللغوي والثقافي. فضلاً عن ذلك، تربط الدراسة بين أدائية الجندر عبر مختلف الثقافات والأدائية المسرحية لرافو أثناء تجسيدها لشخصيات السيدات التسعة ذوات الخلفيات الثقافية المتعددة بغية التأكيد أن مفهوم أدائية الجندر النسائي في العمل المسرحي يتم التعبير عنه ونقله في إطار ثقافي متنوع وكذا درامي مسرحي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أدائية الجندر، الأدائية اللغوية، الأدائية المسرحية، الأدائية والتمثيل، الأعمال المسرحية ما بعد حرب الخليج، كتاب المسرح الأمريكيون العرب، صناعة المسرح، تسعة أجزاء من الرغبة، هيدز رافو.

This study examines the play *Nine Parts of Desire* (2006) of the Iraqi American playwright Heather Raffo (1970-) using Judith Butler's (1956-) feminist notion of performativity as a tool of analysis. Such performativity notion is employed to stress that the communication of Arab female gender in Raffo's play is cross-culturally performative in a Butlerian sense. In order to reach such final outcome, the study coins the term "cross-cultural performativity" when referring to Butler's performativity theory in relation to the cultural pluralism depicted by Raffo's characters and the term "dramaturgical performativity" when

pointing out to Raffo's dramaturgical communication of Arab female gender on stage through her artistically multi-cultural portrayal of characters. Therefore, the study attempts to illustrate the cross-cultural as well as dramaturgical nature of gender performativity in Raffo's play.

Accordingly, the study limits its theoretical scope of analysis to the part of Butler's theory which introduces the construction of gender/racial identities through repeated performative acts, defying the heteronormative gender binary culture that is instilled by Arab societies. It does not delve into Butler's notions about queer folks but scrutinizes rebellious female identities that do not conform to the heteronormative context. Additionally, it provides answers to queries about how the identity of Arab female gender and in turn Arab female race in *Nine Parts of Desire* is communicated to the audience by Heather Raffo, how Butler's theory of gender performativity can be utilized to investigate the construction of non-stereotypical Arab female gender and racial identities across cultures through speech and corporal acts in Raffo's play, and whether the female gender, in Raffo's play, unmasks instances of culture non-conformities as a consequence of such repeated acts or not.

In gender studies, the two terms "performance" and "performativity" bemuse the literary theory reader due to their diverse interpretations and intertwined usages. Moya Lloyd casts light on the existing "overlap" between both terms where the adjective performative is utilized, in performance studies, to describe the noun performance and at the same time the theory of gender performativity points out to "gender performances" (573). On the one hand, Janelle Reinelt introduces the various usages of the term "performance," believing in the uniqueness of the term in contrast with the ordinary theatrical performances. She claims that the purpose of using such term is to admit that performance art involves "stag[ing] the subject in process, the making and fashioning of certain materials, especially the body, and the exploration of the limits of representation-ability" (201). She also adds that the term "is related to a general history of the avant-garde or of anti-theat[re] . . . [rejecting] aspects of traditional theat[re] practice that emphasized plot, character, and referentiality: in short, Aristotelian principles of construction and Platonic notions of mimesis" (Reinelt

202). Moreover, she illustrates that “the field of performance has expanded since the 1950s . . . to include cultural performances, giving equal status to rituals, sports, dance, political events, and certain performative aspects of everyday life” (Reinelt 202). On the other hand, Reinelt clarifies that what differentiates between “performance” from “performativity” is the philosophical significance attached to the latter “as part of an ongoing poststructural critique of agency, subjectivity, language and law” (203). This means that the term “performativity” embeds certain sophistications in its relevantly associated meanings due to the ceaseless connections established by poststructuralists between such term and other areas of investigation such as agency, subjectivity, language as well as law.

In fact, both terms are associated with the propositions describing the ontological instruments of gender communication, that is to say, how gender is communicated by subjects; such propositions are provided by myriad categories of theorists, from among them are ethnomethodologists, like Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel; phenomenologists, like Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty; and feminists, like Judith Butler. For ethnomethodologists, gender is comprehended as “a performance or accomplishment achieved in everyday life” (Brickell 159). In other words, ethnomethodologists view the “performance of gender as a doing or achievement by actors through which their gendered selves come into being” (166). This means that gender, for them, is an obligatory role that they perform whether they feel what they perform or not. They further have faith in the fact that the social existence of the self will not be fulfilled unless such gender role performance is implemented within imposed, compulsory, and conditional cultural norms of acceptance and rejection (172). This view is also shared by phenomenologists who stress that “the body” is regarded as “an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities” (Butler, “Performative Acts” 521). Thus, the identity of subjects, in the opinion of ethnomethodologists and phenomenologists, is determined in accordance with how much such subjects conform to the norms and not with how much their deeds reflect their true self. This explains why ethnomethodologists assert that the subject “does sometimes pre-exist the deed, and is reinforced through the enactment of

the deed” (172). Hence, gender, from the vantage point of ethnomethodologists and phenomenologists, is communicated through a process of enactment of pre-dictated cultural norms; that is why they consider the communication of gender identities a theatrical performance that does not reveal, from a feminist viewpoint, the true essence of an individual.

However, the feminist theory adopts a more liberal attitude towards the communication of gender within the performativity context. Butler explains such liberal attitude, which opposes that of ethnomethodologists and phenomenologists, in a first person tone saying that within a feminist theory, “[m]y situation does not cease to be mine just because it is the situation of someone else, and my acts, individual as they are, nevertheless reproduce the situation of my gender, and do that in various ways” (Butler, “Performative Acts” 523). Thus, feminism opts for a more autonomous expression and communication of gender where the individual’s actions account for his/her gender being and identity, where the “rigidity of the discursive structures that keep each gender within certain behavioural and attitudinal limits” (Maia 548) is dispensed with and where “the process of adaptation of the subjects in ‘new’ gender forms” occurs (Maia 548).

Nine Parts of Desire (2006) is an American play written and performed by the contemporary Iraqi-American female playwright Heather Raffo who was raised in Okeno, Michigan, by an Iraqi civil engineer and an American mother. Visiting Iraq in 1993, in the aftermath of the Gulf War, Raffo interacted nostalgically and passionately with the Iraqi people, in general, and females, in particular, conducting with them many interviews that constituted an important part of her Masters of Fine Arts thesis project in 1998 and were then transformed into a play premiering in 2003 at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, UK (Romanska 213-14). Raffo asserts that *Nine Parts of Desire* is meant to be about “the Iraqi Psyche,” “the American Psyche,” and “the need for feminine strength.” Her solo performance displays a quest for female gender identity and voices inwardly-sensed female oppression through the impersonation of nine Iraqi female characters of different cultural backgrounds: Mullaya, a hired weeper; Layal, an artist; Amal, a middle-

aged Bedouin; Huda, a London-based immigrant in her seventies; a young British-educated female physician; a nine-year-old Iraqi girl; Umm Ghada, the mother of nine bereaved children; the Iraqi-American New Yorker; and Nanna, an old pedlar selling any rubble items found. Upon relating the play to the aforementioned discussion on “performance” and performativity,” one can say that *Nine Parts of Desire* seems to be a fertile ground for the intersection of the two terms “performance” and “performativity” due to the multiple philosophically dramaturgical and cultural significations that the play tends to generate while communicating the Arab female gender to the audience. This proposition is manifested in the analysis that follows.

Gender performativity is a concept that Butler coined in her book *Gender Troubles* in an attempt to present an intriguing interpretation and thought provoking analysis of gender identities. Believing that gender is performative, Butler casts light on the “misapprehension” that “there is a ‘one’ who is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today” (*Bodies That Matter* 94). Accordingly, she does not promote for the idea that individuals are free to intentionally select the gender that they would prefer to be from a predetermined selection of gender roles or identities with which “the wardrobe of gender” (*Bodies That Matter* 94) provides them; however, she implicitly and at the same time objectionably alludes to the type of cultural norms and constraints that prescribe the type of gender a person is supposed to be even before this person comes into existence.

In fact, Butler’s gender performativity views or, in other words, her gender insights introduced in *Gender Troubles* emerge from a firm inclination towards countering “the violence of gender norms” (xix) or what she calls “normative violence,” in other words, violence that is “pertaining to the norms that govern gender,” which shackled an individual’s gender so that either he/she becomes “a natural manifestation of sex or a cultural constant that no human agency could hope to revise” (xx). To explicate this notion further, she expresses her resentment of the prejudiced treatment her relatives received by being stigmatized in their community and ousted from their families and jobs as

a result of acting against the common sexual norms saying, “I grew up understanding something of the violence of gender norms: an uncle incarcerated for his anatomically anomalous body, deprived of family and friends . . . gay cousins forced to leave their homes (xix).”

In *Nine Parts of Desire*, the non-stereotypical and nonconventional Arab female gender patterns portrayed by Raffo verify the performativity of gender in a Butlerian sense where the characters do not act in compliance with the cultural norms that restrict the birth of their true gender identities, in other words, they reject “going to” an already existing “wardrobe of gender” (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 94) that would delimit their position within a certain gender role, and they prefer to communicate their female gender through a more liberating attitude that combines the normative with the non-normative, the normal with the non-normal, or the common with the uncommon together in an attempt to counter “the violence of gender norms” (Butler, *Gender Troubles* xix) though the degree of behavioural nonnormality that they adopt does not reach a queer position.

Raffo’s nine characters share normality in maintaining their spontaneous femininity and experiencing real-life hardships as well as patriarchal oppression; however, each exhibits varied states and degrees of non-normativity, non-normality, or uncommonness during their quest for gender identities and for values like peace, freedom, love, sincerity, and justice. For example, it is uncommon, in the Arab world, to find a cultivated hired weeper, like Mullaya, who is well versed in history and mythology, mentioning “Genghis Khan,” the Emperor of the Mongol Empire (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 4); “Nammu” (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 5), the “first deity recorded in Sumerian mythology” (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 79); and “Apsu and Tiamat” (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 6), the “water god and goddess” in the “epic of creation *Enuma Elish*” (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 74). It is also non-normative in an Arab community to easily accept a female artist like Layal whose sole speciality is painting female nudes as well as portraits for Saddam and who is in constant search for love to the extent of sexually yielding to Saddam regime’s men despite being married.

Additionally, it is intensely non-normal in an Arab society to interact with a woman who justifies her lustful nature by saying that

“either [she] shall die or [she] live[s] a ransom for all the virgin daughters of Muslims” (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 10) and by providing the daring pretexts that she feels a daily crave for love as if she has metaphorically never “eaten before” (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 32) and that she cannot deviate her “mind from flesh” (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 33). It is worth mentioning that such non-normatively audacious self-revelation on the part of Layal gains a broader sense as it transfers from being a mere depiction of Layal’s character to being a clear indicator of Raffo’s outspoken personality as a human being, author, and actress.

Moreover, contrary to the Arab Bedouin norms, Amal leaves her family in London upon witnessing her Saudi Bedouin husband’s marital infidelity and goes to Israel to be the second wife of an Israeli tribesman of her same tribe. Unfortunately, Amal’s second marriage fails, and she leaves heading for Iraq with her children to have a new affair with her first ex-husband’s friend who kept in touch with her for a whole year over the phone till she fell in love with him. It seems that non-normality constitutes a major part of her course of living as her third marriage plans fail as well once her new would-be spouse saw her face to face in Dubai, and she returns to London to re-marry her first husband. Similarly, Huda, the Iraqi female in exile, manifests non-normativity in the dauntlessly undisguised and outspoken manner with which she narrates the torture of female activists in Saddam’s prisons, recollecting the naked hanging of females in menstruation so that “blood runs on [them], for [their] whole cycle,” their naked lying on the floors, and their “rap[ing] with electronic instruments” (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 52).

Furthermore, even the doctor, who represents mercy and humanness, unlike normal Arab wives, cannot endure, in despair, the loss of her husband’s legs upon being affected by the Uranium released from bombings during the Gulf War, considering him her “death sentence.” Commenting on her husband’s status, the doctor says, “[h]e can’t make money sitting at home, what’s left of the man, I can’t even look at him now” (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 22). Although the doctor views her confession as disgraceful, she maintains in an unashamed tone: “I don’t care, honestly; I don’t care what I say ... it sickens me” (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 22). Finally, the young girl, unlike most girls, expresses her hatred to her

mother who bitterly criticizes her for being stupid and who has prevented her from going to school because she “wave[d]” (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 23) to the American soldiers who visited them at school. The young girl also wishes to be kidnapped by American soldiers in order to leave her country. From the aforementioned examples, it is conspicuous that the female gender of Raffo’s characters is performative on account of the fact that such gender is constructed through their non-normative behaviour, asserting that “this [one woman] show rejects stereotypes on many levels” (*Nine Parts* 71) as directly confirmed in the production notes of Raffo’s play.

Paving the way to her gender performativity notions, Butler, in *Gender Troubles*, differentiates between sex and gender, stressing the fact that sex has a biological connotation while gender has a cultural one. She claims that “whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed; hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex,” but it could be considered “a multiple interpretation of sex” (9-10) and “the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established... a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts” (11). She also adds that it is unfeasible to extract “‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (6) since it indicates “a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations” (15).

Detaching gender from sex, Butler, accordingly, aims at proposing that the stable binary nature of sex, that is to say, male or female, is needless to be imposed on gender because when gender and sex are dealt with as two isolated entities, “gender itself becomes a freefloating artifice, with the consequence that *man and masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman and feminine* a male body as easily as a female one” (*Gender Troubles* 10). This means that replicating a single “prototype of gender performance” is not feasible, in a Butlerian sense, since such replication will not provide an actual representation of any sex. This actual representation will only be fulfilled through an inconstant “self-design” that individuals create for themselves and then perform regularly in any gender performance (Hi 684).

Hence, in Butler's opinion, gender is determined through an array of recurrent bodily acts performed by an agent. In this respect, she considers performativity "a repetition and a ritual" which "achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body" and not through an unrepeated single performance (*Gender Troubles* xv). Accordingly, Butler underscores that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (*Gender Troubles* 43-44). She clarifies that such repeated acts are said to be performative only when "corporeal signs" of them are noticed on the acting body or through any other "discursive means" (*Gender Troubles* 173), such as speech acts. Although, she argues, like ethnomethodologists, that "gender is always a doing," she pinpoints that there is no possibility that the subject "pre-exist[s] the deed" (*Gender Troubles* 33), or in other words, there is no "doer behind the deed;" on the contrary, the "doer" is variably constructed in and through the deed" (*Gender Troubles* 181). This means that the identity of the subjects will not be formed without the deeds they choose to perform on regular basis because it is the deed that prescribes the subject and shapes his identity. Hence, it could be inferred that gender identities are only formulated upon analysing the physical or speech acts of the gendered bodies on account of the fact that the performative body loses its being if judged independent of the acts it performs.

In this regard, Butler uses drag as an illustrative example of the unpredictability of "gender reality" based on one's culturally oriented "naturalized knowledge." She asserts that one can never claim knowing the "gender reality" of a person on seeing a body before him in an opposite sex's attire: "We think we know what the reality is, and take the secondary appearance of gender to be more artifice, play, falsehood, and illusion;" however, as she further elucidates, "if we shift the example from drag to transsexuality, then it is no longer possible to derive judgment about stable anatomy from the clothes that cover and articulate the body" (*Gender Troubles* xxii). Palpably, Butler's drag example is intended to stress that in gender "what we take to be 'real,' what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is . . . a changeable and revisable reality" (*Gender Troubles* xxiii). Moreover, it aims at resistibly

confronting “the violence performed by gender norms” (*Gender Troubles* xxiv) as pointed out earlier.

In the light of Butler’s sex/gender distinction as well as of her belief in the absence of a fixed gender performance and in the determination of gender through repeated acts, Raffo’s female characters in *Nine Parts of Desire* are examined. Noticeably, such female characters cannot be analysed in separation of the influences of the cross-cultural contexts or cultural pluralism, to which they have been exposed, on how their gender identities are defined and communicated. In fact, culture operates on the characters’ gender and assigns meaning to their “sexed nature.” Since gender, according to Butler and as explained earlier, is the discursive/cultural method by which a “sexed nature” (*Gender Troubles* 11) is shaped, it is noteworthy that the cross-cultural contexts or cultural pluralism, which Raffo’s characters encounter, add significance to their female sex, enriching it and impacting its actions. Such actions are then ritualized in constant repetitions, formulating and expressing the female characters’ crossculturally performative gender identities regardless of their biologically natural sex, which the audience is totally ignorant about. This lays emphasis on Butler’s aforementioned propositions which prove that gender is a “free-floating artifice” where the normative binary nature of sex must not be enforced upon gender (*Gender Troubles* 10) and that gender is a “doing” (*Gender Troubles* 33).

For instance, multi-cultural contexts intersect in Amal leading her to appear to the audience as a thirty-eight-year-old tenacious, perseverant, and determined fighter in life, longing for freedom and peace through polygamy. Her performatively open-to-possibilities gender identity is the product of a Bedouin, western (studying and living in London with a Saudi husband), Arab (Iraqi tribal family and Saudi husband), Israeli (second husband) cultures. Another example is Huda, whose politically-oriented and revolutionary-leftist Arab background, numerous freedom-supporting travels to Beirut, Vietnam, and Chile, and long years of exile in the western culture city of London, result in a westernized, rebellious, defiant, fearless, and humorous female figure in her seventies whose old age did not free her from the habit of drinking whiskey. Moreover, the doctor, where the east (Iraqi origin) and the west

(medical training) converge and where cancer resides, is a professionally efficient physician dealing with cancer and deformity gynaecology cases, setting a good example for the entire female race with her persistently combantant nature.

In addition, as a representative of a new generation eyewitnessing the calamities of war and watching satellite channels, the Iraqi girl is said to absorb multi-cultures, two major of which are: the Iraqi and the American, and she starts to reveal such binary inward conflict at an early stage of her life by being attached to her longdisappearing father, being attracted to American males and culture, like being a fan of the American boy band "N-SYNC, mostly Justin Timberlake" (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 23), and being enticed into departing for a new land other than her own homeland. Equally important, Umm Ghada meets "emissaries from the world" (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 29) and leads them to the Amiriyya bomb shelter, where she lost her nine children on the February 13th, 1991 bombing, undertaking the responsibility of unveiling to the world the brutally gruesome consequences of such crime to commemorate and immortalize the memory of her dead family: "All my family is here . . . Come. Now you sign the witness book" (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 31). Another example is the female American, who stands for Raffo herself, who holds a dual nationality and lives in America torn between her compassion for her Iraqi relatives whom she worries about and yearns to visit and her life in America. The Gulf war turns her into a more responsible figure for her Iraqi heritage and people, believing that one "just can't watch it on TV" (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 36). With all this in mind, it is deduced that cross-cultural performativity of gender communication, in each of Raffo's characters, is achieved through a "doing" or "deed" that precedes the subject as Butler poses in her afore-discussed theory.

In continuation of the performativity theory, Butler underscores two aspects of performativity between which her theory shifts: the linguistic and the theatrical, and correlates both aspects to impart further clarity to her theoretical hypotheses. Explaining such aspects, she argues:

My theory sometimes waffles between understanding performativity as linguistic and casting it as theatrical. I have come to think that the two are invariably related . . . and that a

reconsideration of the speech act as an instance of power invariably draws attention to both its theatrical and linguistic dimensions. In *Excitable Speech*, I sought to show that the speech act is at once performed (and thus theatrical, presented to an audience, subject to interpretation), and linguistic, inducing a set of effects through its implied relation to linguistic conventions. If one wonders how a linguistic theory of the speech act relates to bodily gestures, one need only consider that speech itself is a bodily act with specific linguistic consequences. (*Gender Troubles* xxv)

This demonstrates how performativity, in Butler's opinion, relies basically on speech acts which is not only denotatively linguistic during the process of meaning generation, but also connotatively theatrical due to the actions that such speech acts reinforce and impose on the body that implements them through gestures and movements. Therefore, it is inaccurate to deal with performativity in separation from both its linguistic or theatrical significance and subsequently its cultural and dramaturgical significations, respectively.

Nine Parts of Desire, as a dramatic piece, acquires its force from its discursive and dramaturgical nature, where linguistic and theatrical aspects meet, respectively. Through the discursive power of the play's series of cross-cultural monologues/speech acts, cross-cultural performativity of female gender communication is plainly evident in the multiple and rich significations of such speech acts and is ultimately fulfilled. Additionally, by way of the vigour with which Raffo performatively switches between diverse and non-normative female gender identities on stage, dramaturgical performativity of female gender communication is established. This is discussed in detail in the following research parts.

Discussing the linguistic aspect of Butler's gender performativity theory, Reinelt demonstrates that Butler's "work on the performative category of sex seeks to provide an account of the possibility of intervention and re-description of sexual norms possible in the structure of the speech act itself and its relationship to the body" (204), the matter which opens new vistas for "theorizing gender" and in turn for

“representing the relationship between language and gender” (Meyerhoff2). In this respect, Butler invokes J.L. Austin’s speech act theory with which she is influenced and explicates Austin’s two major types of speech acts that grant an utterance its performative feature, saying:

J. L. Austin proposed that to know what makes the force of an utterance effective, what establishes its performative character . . . Austin distinguishes "illocutionary" from "perlocutionary" speech acts: the former are speech acts that, in saying do what they say, and do it in the moment of that saying; the latter are speech acts that produce certain effects as their consequence; by saying something, a certain effect follows. The illocutionary speech act is itself the deed that it effects; the perlocutionary merely leads to certain effects that are not the same as the speech act itself. (*Excitable Speech* 3)

In the aforementioned quote, Butler establishes a relationship between gender performativity and language, attempting to emphasize that gender performativity is achieved through language, and that language sets the primary steps of the social role that gender plays. She contends, “[l]anguage sustains the body not by bringing it into being or feeding it in a literal way; rather, it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible” (*Excitable Speech* 5). This demonstrates that the performative language that a person uses, according to Butler, describes his/her identity on account that “[l]anguage is thought of 'mostly as agency-an act with consequences;' an extended doing, a performance with effects” (*Excitable Speech* 7).

Illustrating Butler’s linguistic performativity, Sarah Salih puts it clear: “To claim, as Butler does, that sex is . . . performative is to claim that bodies are never merely described, they are always constituted in the act of description” (61). She clarifies, for example, “[w]hen the doctor or nurse declares ‘It’s a girl/boy!,’ they are not simply reporting what they see . . . they are actually assigning a sex and a gender to a body that can have no existence outside discourse . . . the statement . . . is performative” (61). Consequently, by conveying such linguistic aspect of

performativity, “Butler has also framed sex as a discursive construct” along with her faith in the performative construction of gender (King 10).

In *Nine Parts of Desire*, Raffo’s female characters reveal personal, psychological, and cross-cultural depth through illocutionary speech acts that pinpoint Butler’s linguistic performativity where such discursive speech acts grant the body its social existence and construct its gender identity. In fact, Raffo skilfully fathoms out her characters’ overt and covert feelings and values by virtue of such illocutionary speech acts so that the female gender is transparently conveyed.

Illocutionary speech acts, in the play, are numerous, mostly questions that prompt action. Such type is evident in the speech acts of most of the play’s female characters. For instance, being “mythic,” Mullaya, at the outset of the play, voices few illocutionary commands, “take off your slippers, take off your sandals, take off your boots, appease the hungry” (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 3) with the aim to metaphorically feed the river, which symbolises “life-giving” and “the underworld” (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 70) so that it does not either flood or be damned. Moreover, lamenting Iraq’s miserable conditions during the Gulf War, she wonders, “where is anything [Americans] said there would be? We were promised so much the Garden of _____” (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 4). The illocutionary question here implies a requested action to be taken to overcome the miserable conditions and fulfil promises of prosperity. In addition, wanting everyone to witness the distressing outcomes of war, Mullaya asks people to “read the [whole] story . . . on [her] sole” (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 5), a desire to share the painstaking truth with everyone in an attempt to find a saviour. For further quest for help, she elaborates, “I have holes in my shoes . . . even in my feet . . . there are holes everywhere” and asks the saviour to “bring [her] back the water [she] was created in” (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 5). Mullaya’s illocutionary speech acts embed a sense of nostalgia to precious cravings that are unattainable.

By the same token, Layal and Amal are eloquent spokeswomen for illocutionary speech acts through which a quest for a stable identity is cherished. On the one hand, explaining why she refuses to leave Iraq, Layal wonders, “who will be left to inspire the people if all the artists and intellectuals run?” (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 6-7), which portrays a call for

artists and intellectuals to stay in Iraq and preserve its cultural identity. Moreover, commenting on her potentials, Layal states, "I'm a good artist, I'm an OK mother, I'm a miserable wife" (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 11), a reference to her evaluation of the doing or, as it were, performance level of such missions that formulate her female Arab identity. On the other hand, aspiring and requesting peace, Amal poses the question, "[d]o you know peace?" (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 11). In addition, trying to find a reason for her would-be spouse breaking up upon meeting her in Dubai, she asks herself, in a Bedouin broken English, expecting a self-reply, "what he seed in me that change him?" (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 17). In fact, Amal's quest for identity is juxtaposed with the search for political peace, in general, and a personal peace of mind, in particular.

Most importantly, the illocutionary speech acts of some of the female characters send alarming signals. For example, seeking an urgent solution to the spread of uranium that would destroy offspring and plants for generations, the doctor asks, "We will have this depleted uranium for what – four thousand years? How many generations is that growing up handicapped?" (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 21). Similarly, recalling her mother's statement "Saddam stole my sons" (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 25), the Iraqi girl is not trying to inform the audience of the plight of losing her three brothers, but the statement intends to avenge the loss incurred by the Americans and to express a hopeless wish to have them back, a signal to the fact that dear ones were once lost and more losses are looming ahead if no action is taken. Moreover, asking people to buy war items found, Nanna encourages them to buy saying, "you like to buy? These things very nice, very old, from good family" (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 41), as if she is implicitly trying to alarm people that the calamity of war will be forgotten if one does not remind himself/herself regularly of it through its remnants. Hence, the illocutionary speech acts in the play are not meant to perform an informative role but a performative one that calls for immediate action, expresses future aspirations, or sends alerting messages.

It is noteworthy that Butler's linguistic performativity, in the play, is not only limited to Raffo's characters' illocutionary speech acts, but it could also be traced in the play's title, epitaph, and character names,

which allude all together to and stimulate as well as induce an agency. To clarify, the title of the play includes the word “desire” that refers to the fact that each female character in the play has a burning desire for a value that she is seeking and that some of the females act as objects of desire. In fact, Raffo was inspired, while choosing a title for her play, by Al-Imam Ali’s words which she uses as an epitaph for the play: “*God created sexual desire in ten parts; then he gave nine parts to women and one to men;*” the performative nature in the wording is obvious in terms of whose performative sexual desire would rather be more forceful, a man or a woman, from Al-Imam Ali’s view point. Another important key point is that some character names prompt a “doing” carried out by the character herself. For instance, Mullaya incites mourning, Layal points out to nights spent in making love, Amal refers to a hope for peace and in turn a journey of seeking peace, and Umm Ghada confers long lasting joy and future hope on her daughter’s tomorrow and hence on herself after losing her daughter Ghada.

Explaining the theatrical aspect of her theory, Butler associates her discussion of gender performativity with the nouns “performance” and “act” as well as the adjectives “dramatic” and “theatrical in ample contexts. For example, she stresses that “[g]ender is a performance” (*Gender Troubles* 178), and she further elaborates that “[gender] is real only to the extent that it is performed” (“Performative Acts” 527). She also claims clearly that “[t]he acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts” (“Performative Acts” 521). Referring to the significance established from regarding gender as a “corporeal style” and an “intentional and performative” act, Butler illustrates that performativity, in this case, “suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (*Gender Troubles* 177). Hence, by juxtaposing gender with performances/theatrical contexts, admitting the validity of its reality only when performed, and describing the meaning signified by performative acts as dramatic, theatricality primarily becomes an integral part of the performative character conferred upon gender.

To trace Butler’s theatricality in the play, it is essential to analyse the dramaturgical performativity as depicted by Raffo on stage.

Commenting on and describing such performativity, the play's production notes portray a theatrical image of how the play is performed:

As the play begins, individual characters are introduced slowly, and the movement from role to role is careful and distinct. But the pace quickens, time frames blur, and characters cut each other off midsentence, driving the play toward a psychic civil war with the solo performer embodying the larger argument of what liberation means for each woman and for Iraq. (*Nine Parts* 69)

By speaking of an accelerating "pace," a dazzling "time frame," interrupted utterances, and "psychic civil war," theatricality is primarily attained in a full sense since this is how the visual image is perceived by the audience and evoked in their minds. Moving from the general visualized image of the play to the dramaturgy of the performer, Raffo illustrates that she depicts her women as if they were "dramatized characters in a poetic story" (Raffo, *Nine Parts* x). She adds that her strategy in composing the play was to "liken it to song writing. [She] listened deeply to what each woman said, what she wanted to say but couldn't, and what she never knew how to say. Then [she] wrote her song" (Raffo, *Nine Parts* x). Obviously, writing the song of each woman denotatively points out to the process of script writing and connotatively alludes to staging such "songs" dramaturgically.

It is worth mentioning that Butler does not restrict her explanation of the theatrical aspect of her theory to the theatrical nature of gender performativity, in general, but she highlights the theatricality associated with the human body, in particular, expressing that the body is considered "a materiality that bears meaning ... and the manner of this bearing is fundamentally dramatic. By dramatic [she] mean[s] only that the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities" ("Performative Acts" 521). To clarify the various "possibilities" that the body physically manifests, she expresses her aversion to viewing the body as a submissive and compliant entity, arguing that "[t]he body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, as if it were a lifeless recipient of wholly pre-given cultural relations" and compares its condition to that of a dramatic script, believing that "[j]ust as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires

both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives” (“Performative Acts” 526). This, in itself, asserts the fact that the term performativity, with its theatrical sense in the background, implies a tendency towards “rejecting the mimetic aspects of representation, whether in ‘theatre’ or in ‘life’” (Reinelt 206).

In *Nine Parts of Desire*, Raffo and her characters succeed in performing their female gender in a “corporeal style” (*Gender Troubles* 177), as propounded by Butler, embodying varied and unremitting “possibilities” (“Performative Acts” 521). The performer’s body, as it were, holds non-normative dramatic significations that confirm as well as sharpen its Butlerian dramaturgical performativity. Pamela Renner describes Raffo’s harmonious acting by referring to her exquisite solo ability to “summon a chorus” (21) of Iraqi women on stage, “to change not only voice but tempo” while performing her soliloquies, to appear before the audience as “gaunt or fat, young or aged, exuberant or sorrowful” (23) while recollecting excruciating memories to the extent that she was named “a chameleon” (23) by critics. In other words, the agency associated with the body, whether literally of the performer or figuratively of the characters, accounts for dramaturgical performativity in Raffo’s play.

It is also worth mentioning that Raffo, in her play, develops a body motif that is constantly accompanied with agency from the start till the end. Such motif is primarily and tacitly perceived in the title and the epitaph elucidated earlier in this paper, and it also occupies a noticeable position in the stage directions where Raffo manages to sketch her characters’ traits and movements meticulously and expressively. For instance, each stage direction mentions the symbolic prop “*abaya*” on which the whole dramaturgy of the play relies since Raffo performatively shifts between one woman and another using such prop in a swirling movement. In fact, the “*abaya*” is a body prop that refers to the Arab culture and the manner with which it is worn reveals part of the women’s character traits since some of them put it on conventionally, like Mullaya and Amal, while some use it only as a prop, like Layal who “*wears [it]*

loosely hanging off her shoulders like a dressing gown or painting smock" (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 6), the Doctor who dries up her hand with, the Iraqi girl who plays with it, and Umm Ghada who "*lets the abaya fall*" (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 28).

To reinforce the body motif, Raffo either mentions the word body directly or refers to it indirectly many times along the play in contexts of identity description, sexual abuse, death, and torture, asserting its performative nature. This is exemplified in Layal's announcement that our "bodies" are "deserted in a void," that no one dares to paint female nudes, and that she paints her own body and does not care if people accused her of being "obsessed with her body" (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 7-8). Moreover, Amal recalls how her mother describes her body in praise and expresses her concerns over the hugeness and obesity of her body. When her would-be spouse decides a breakup on seeing her, she is convinced that it is because of her fat body. The body motif is also obvious in Umm Ghada's stories about the death of her children in the Amiriyya bomb shelter whose "walls are stuck with hairs and skin" of the dead (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 30). Picturing the torment of females in Saddam prisons as mentioned before, Huda speaks of the tortured female bodies. Finally, the American bewails the "mass graves" (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 35) created for the bodies of the dead Iraqi people feeling compassion for the heart-wrecking stories that she listens to and watches on television.

For further underpinning the theatricality of her theory, Butler draws a comparison between how gender roles are perceived in nontheatrical contexts versus the theatrical ones to spotlight the prejudice that an agent might be exposed to in reality versus on stage. She points out to the fact that "gender performances in non-theatrical contexts" are monitored by more fiercely "punitive and regulatory social conventions" than "the theatrical performances" which at times can confront bitter criticism and strict censorship. In other words, she attempts to heighten the plight of non-conforming gender performances which could be accepted on stage where a place for imagination is still controlling the mindset, but are absolutely rejected in real-life contexts, for example "on the street or in a bus" ("Performative Acts" 527). This is unquestionably true especially in Arab communities; the audience of *Nine Parts of*

Desire, for instance, may sympathize with characters like Layal, Huda, or Amal, but such character patterns in real life are susceptible to rejection, persecution, and disqualification since it is inappropriate to feel compassion for an adulteress nude artist, rebellious liberal, or a female polygamist, respectively.

Most interestingly, Butler does not restrict her theoretical assumptions of gender performativity to separate gender identities; nevertheless, she universalizes her theory by correlating race with performativity, believing that race is performative like gender; hence, it engulfs whatever she hypothesizes while explaining gender performativity. In this regard, Charlotte Chadderton maintains that Butler views racial identities as “something we *do*,” (52) and that “scholars,” like Butler, describe race as performative to “theorise racial expression such as dress, accent, manner of walking or political stance” (54). Explicating a key point related to Butler’s notion of racial performativity, Chadderton further adds that “[r]acial microaggressions, performed mostly by the racially privileged, which accumulate in the experience of those who are racially oppressed and reproduce their marginalisation, can be considered to be performatives” (54). Accordingly, through assuming the performativity of race, Butler emphasizes the production of racial identities through repeated actions, whether such actions are those of a central or a marginal, in other words a privileged or an unprivileged.

Upon relating the aforementioned precepts to *Nine Parts of Desire*, it is worth mentioning that Raffo’s special focus on Iraqi females aims at reaching a broader target which is the female Arab race and in turn the universal race of females all over the world regardless of their colour, religion, nationality, or sex. Therefore, not only is the female gender of Raffo’s characters performative, but the whole female Arab race and thus the whole women race around the globe. This is epitomized in Layal’s confession that she is not painting only her body, but painting the bodies of “all of us” (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 8) because she “cannot separate [herself]” from “each woman [she] meets her or [she] hears about her” (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 9), referring to the entire race of women. In this respect, Layal voices Raffo’s intentions while composing and performing her play, the matter which is stated straightforwardly in the production

notes of her play: "When we see an actress transforms from one Iraqi woman to another, we are better reminded of the complexities of nationality and the universality of all women" (Raffo, *Nine Parts* 70).

In conclusion, upon exploring Butler's theory of gender performativity and examining Raffo's *Nine Parts of Desire*, it could be deduced that Raffo's play constitutes a rich discursive platform for Butler's theoretical propositions where the Arab female gender identities, represented by the nine culturally plural characters, are crossculturally, linguistically, and dramaturgically performative in the sense that they are communicated to the audience through recurrent deeds that precede the subject and defines its existence. In the play, linguistic performativity is manifested in the performative speech acts of the nine female characters while dramaturgical performativity is represented in the performer, stage directions, props, and body motif. Notably, the Arab female gender identities, in the play, record moments of culture non-conformities through their independently rebellious non-normative and non-stereotypical behavioural responses to prejudices and abuse; they manage to voice bravely their fears, frailties, and desires. Finally, *Nine Parts of Desire* is a play that apparently confines attention to Iraqi women; however, it is meant to closely address the entire female race worldwide with the aim of attending to a universal human side, exactly like Butler's theory that is applicable to an entire human race rather than to single individuals.

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