

Gender Performativity: A Feminist Reading of *Life after Life* by Kate Atkinson

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ABSTRACT

This study tried to read the novel of *Life After Life* by Kate Atkinson from a feminist Standpoint. The study found that *Life after Life* depicts various attempts by female "subjects" to grow up and learn to live up to the expectations of a suppressed gender that aims to be given a status equal to that of the dominant male. For this purpose, the concept of "gender performativity" as introduced by the American critic, Judith Butler, was applied to several experiences of female characters during the World War II. It became clear that these women were attempting to exert their own free will toward getting over the obstacles imposed on them by the imperatives of a male-dominated society and perform jobs and activities in wartime British society that would earn them prestige and respect equal to their male colleagues.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Performativity" as a notion is originally derived from the works of linguist John Austin. In Austin's view, "performativity" is "linguistic declarations that perform actions, including calling into being the objects they name" (as cited in Brickell, 2005, p. 3). The idea of "performativity" then developed by the poststructuralist Derrida into the notion known as citationality which is beyond the scope of this study. Judith Butler took the lead from both these scholars to argue that there is no pre-discursive identity since even our understanding of biological sex is discursively established (i.e. proved by means of argument rather than intuition). Just like her predecessors, Butler discounts the importance of gendered acts and agency of the subjects and puts more emphasis primarily on the repetitive nature of gender (2015, p. 186).

Butler has overthrown the distinction between sex and gender so that she could argue that there is no sex that is not always gender. All bodies are gendered from the time that they obtain social existence (become part of society) (Salih, 2002, p. 2).

The idea of "performativity" is introduced in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble* when Butler puts in: gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this

sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a "subject" who might be said to pre-exist the deed" (2015, p. 25).

The main point of reference in this study is Judith Butler's critical masterpiece of late 20th century *Gender Trouble*. There are many works and ideas on which *Gender Trouble* originally draws. *The Second Sex* and *Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault* (1987) are some of the most important books on which Butler sets the foundation of her work. *The second sex* and its writer Simone de Beauvoir stand on top of all influences on Butler (Salih, 2002, p. 8).

De Beauvoir starts her book by this declaration that "I am a woman" and then attempts to extend this affirmation to all women. Such self-identification, when happened at the onset of a storm of thoughts has grave implications. To make his meaning clear she adds that: "...this is the background from which all further claims will stand out. A man never begins by affirming that he is an individual of certain sex: that he is a man goes without saying" (as cited in Moi, 1990, p. 1). This response is done in answer to the question "what is a woman." De Beauvoir tries to find in the first place who asks this question and under what situation it is asked so she could provide an answer to it. This interest in the nature and situation of the speaker is a feminine one according to the author, namely, she is forced by the imperatives of the society to define herself as a sexed being. From this earlier declaration she comes up with a philosophical dictum after the fashion of

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Descartes: "I am a woman, I must define myself" (as cited in Moi, 1990, 2). In contrast to this fact, a man never needs to assert that he is a man. De Beauvoir claims that since she herself is a woman, everything she says in *The Second Sex* becomes inevitably related to the fact that she has a female body (2010, p. 5).

Both Butler and de Beauvoir believe that there is no beginning or end to the process of being a woman. So, gender is more what we do than what we are. Butler stands apart from the common belief that sex, gender, and sexuality exist in relation to each other. So, if a person is biologically female, she is expected to exhibit feminine traits to appear normal- that is to seduce men (Salih, 2002, p. 46).

In fact, Butler relates gender to act and performance. To do so, she resorts to the studies on ritual social drama by anthropologist Victor Turner. Social actions such as rituals and rites, in view of Turner, requires for their acceptability to be repeated. Such repetition is in fact the re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already established (as cited in Butler, 1988, p. 526). As rituals and religious ceremonies need to be fixed in the public mindset through repetition and emphasis, female 'identity,' as it is, has enrooted in the psyche of humankind in the course of history. Butler comments that: "the body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, as if it were a lifeless recipient of wholly pre-given cultural relation" (p. 526). What governs gender performances (actions that initially suggest sexuality of the performer) in Butler's assumption is "punitive and regulatory social conventions" (p. 527). To be a woman "is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to a historical idea of woman" (p. 522).

"Subject" is a term that is used by Butler in reference to the Hegelian notion of Geist which is loosely translated as spirit. Hegel's Geist is much like a hero of nineteenth century novel (as we see in Bunyans' *Pilgrim's Progress* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* and in the next chapter we will see in the protagonist of *Life after Life*) who undergoes a travel from ignorance to maturity and self-knowledge. Butler's "subjects" come close to this Hegelian term in many respects as they attain greater wisdom and enlightenment through their efforts (Salih, 2002, p. 22).

Butler describes Hegel's "subject" as a 'journeying spirit,' a cartoon character who is never disappointed by the obstacles it faces. She asserts: "What seems like tragic blindness turns out to be more like the comic myopia of Mr. Magoo whose automobile

careening through the neighbor's chicken coop always seems to land on all four wheels" (as cited in Salih, 2002, p. 24). What paves the way for our understanding of the notion of "performativity" is the idea by Butler that "subject" can only know itself through 'another.' Though in the process of recognizing itself and formation of its own consciousness it must overcome and destroy the 'other,' otherwise it put its own existence at risk (p. 25).

In *Invisible Bullets*, the great new-historicist critic Stephen Greenblatt and Payne offer the term "subversion" as a way to challenge the authority. According to him "Shakespeare's plays are centrally, repeatedly concerned with the production and containment of subversion and disorder...all mediate on the consolidation of state power" (2005, p. 134). He means to say that although Shakespearean plays offer chances of "subversion" against established norm and ideology, they are all the same finally subdued and repelled. This negative view on the impossible mission of opposition against the power and state is much in line with Foucault's understanding and definition of power. Allan Sinfield, the famous cultural materialist thinker, has introduced the term entrapment model to guard against the impossibility of "subversion." He quotes from *Invisible Bullets*: "Greenblatt treats "subversion", not as something that power has to contain but as a 'strategic maneuver by which power is perpetuated'"(2005, p. 81).

The possibility of "subversion" for Judith Butler arises from a combination of Hegelian dialectic (that "subject" comes into being through opposition) and Foucauldian model of power (Salih, 2002, p. 71). She stresses that feminism has found in the possibility of a utopian future a potential for "subversion" that promises the destruction of current order and replacement of a new one (Butler, 2015, p. 36).

Butler utilizes the Althusser's notion of interpellation for the sake of promotion of her own understanding of "subversion." The French Marxist philosopher Althusser believed that ideology constantly 'hails and interpellates' (addresses) us as subjects. In so doing, it may hail or address us in some different social roles that we play, or, as Althusser used to say, different 'subject positions' that we usually occupy. One and the same woman could be 'interpellated' at one occasion as a mother and at another location as a member of a particular church, or even as a doctor, as a voter, and so on (Bertens, 2014, p. 87).

Butler prefers some forms of "subversion" (such as performative ones that will be mentioned in the next

chapter) over some others (tax evasion, for example), because she believes some norms of decency and dignity entail that this is a bad manner (2015, p. 148). She explains the idea of "subversion" through the notion of "parody" and "drag." In the third chapter of *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes: "If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity" (2015, p. 136). So it can be said all gender is a form of "parody," yet some gender performances are more parodic than some others. By highlighting the difference between body and performer, and the gender that is being performed, parodic performances such as "drag" serve to disclose the imitative nature of all gender identities. Butler claims that, by imitating gender, "drag" discloses the imitative nature of gender itself (Salih, 2002, p. 64). So, gender is an act (performance) or a combination of acts, that is done for the sake of survival, because those who do not perform their gender are regarded by society as queer and are consequently punished (p. 65).

After a full analysis of drag performance, Butler concludes: "in imitating gender, "drag" implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself-as well as its contingency" (2015, p. 137). As to the subversive and destabilizing effects of "drag" on accepted social norms, Butler stresses that the task is... to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to 'displace' the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself" (p. 148). So, the "drag" must be read as a cultural and political practice that tries to subvert gender. Samuel Chambers believes that "drag" alone is unable to subvert gender in its entirety. For it to be effective, it needs to target the coherence of sex/gender and undermine the distinction between sex and gender (p. 153).

This study looks for instances of "gender performance" and "subversion" put into practice by female characters through the novel *Life after Life*. The emphasis of this research on performance of gender by women which at times tends toward the "subversion" of predefined roles for women in a society gives researchers and historians material to delve into that side of war which supplies women with opportunity to make their voices heard and their presence felt. This aspect gathers momentum when we discover that the stance of women in this novel turns from passive bystanders and witnesses of the war into active participants who venture to steer the direction of the war and even pre-empt it in the first place. All such attempts start from a premise by the

author that what would happen if one could have lived her life just as she had liked. This hypothesis entails the occurrence of re-incarnation whose possibility by a happy chance is afforded to the author. The protagonist, now furnished with the opportunity of successive lives, takes up a trial and error maneuver to get matured and start each life from the scratch equipped with earlier experiences. So in the end, she turns from a meek and docile pigtail girl into a matured woman who even endeavors to tamper with history and interfere in the course of World War II. Such development of character and aspirations via successive journeys through life can be taken figuratively by the feminist activists as indicative of a feminine desire to live a life built up on earlier experiences of subjugation at the hands of men and freedom of subsequent generations. Decision-makers and responsible organizations believe that woman's acceptance in society is not solely dependent on up-to-now credited assumptions concerning bodily beauty and elegance but their true potentials and capabilities that is beautifully practiced in *Life after Life*.

2. DISCUSSION

As a known postmodernist author, Kate Atkinson was born in 1951 in York, England. She began writing for women's magazines after winning a competition in 1986 known as *Woman's Own Short Story*. She was the second winner for the Bridport Short Story Prize in 1990 and won another Award in 1993 for her short-story *Karmic Mothers*, which she later adapted for BBC. Her first novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1995), won the 1995 Whitbread Book of the Year award. Atkinson's recent books include *Life after Life* (2013), winner of the Costa Novel Award and the South Bank Sky Arts Literature Prize; and *A God in Ruins* (2015), a sequel to the earlier novel *Life After Life*, which include several of the same characters (Myles, 2019).

Life After Life's plot spans much of early twentieth-century history in Britain. The novel starts at a bar in Germany in 1930, where Ursula Todd attempts assassination of Germany's would-be Reich, Adolf Hitler before his promotion to the leader of the country. She shoots Hitler, and is immediately killed by all his friends. Ursula is born and reborn over and over again. Sometimes she becomes obsessed with her fate and changing the outcome of her life and her family member's lives. But when her brother Teddy dies in a plane crash over Germany in one life, she can't do anything about it, while in another life, Teddy lives, through no intervention of Ursula's. She realizes that to have a happy life, she has to live and let live (NPR, 2013).

Ursula is born in 1911 and experiences both World War I (in which Hugh and many of her neighbors fight) and World War II. World War II becomes particularly central in the latter half of the book. The rise of the Nazi Party and fascism in Germany, coupled with Adolf Hitler's charisma and nationalist ideology, led to his seizing power in Germany and the overthrow of democracy in 1933. In the novel, Ursula experiences this conflict in-depth, as both of her younger brothers fight in the war, and Ursula herself becomes involved as a part of the rescue team that helps extricate people from the wreckage of nightly bombing in London. Additionally, one of the novel's timelines sees Ursula experience the war from the German side, as she watches firsthand the rise of the Nazi party and even interacts with Hitler and his mistress Eva Braun. In another of Ursula's lives, Ursula assassinates Hitler in 1930, just as the Nazi Party is starting to gain popularity. This prompts a thought experiment (as Atkinson does not show the fallout of this action) about how the fate of Europe might have been different if Hitler had not been alive to lead the Nazi Party (LitCharts, 2018).

This coercive and choking atmosphere (as if determined by a patriarchal society) persists in the first half of *Life after Life*, though with the onset of World War II, and active contribution of women to it, it largely fades away. There are references in the work from which it can be inferred that woman duties and responsibilities are imposed on them: "Sylvie added. (Or did she?) Motherhood was her responsibility, her destiny. It was, lacking anything else (and what else could there be?), her life" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 33). This relation between motherhood and being a woman intensifies the notion by Judith Butler that through responsibility and job, gender and identity is created: "gender is itself a kind of becoming or activity, and that gender ought not to be conceived as a noun or a substantial thing or a static cultural marker, but rather as an incessant and repeated action of some sort" (2015, p. 143).

What is realized from the first half of *Life after Life* before the onset of the war is that the strength and firmness of character is a fit quality and much-sought-for in men rather than women according to the norms of the male-dominated society. Such belief in strength of character for men is shared among the women as well. Just like Hugh, Sylvie considered that "children should be toughened up early, the better to take the blows in later life" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 34). Still men appear as redeemer for women as Hugh is described in several parts of the novel as rescuer as Izzie remembering the unhopeful state of Sylvie right before her marriage reminds her that: "heaven only knows what would have happened to

you if Hugh hadn't charged in and rescued you" (p. 191). Such early on differentiation between sexes, between gender and sex in lay terms, is formulated aptly in the words by Catharine MacKinnon: "stopped as an attribute of a person, sex inequality takes the form of gender; moving as a relation between people, it takes the form of sexuality. Gender emerges as the congealed form of the sexualization of inequality between men and women" (as cited in Butler, 2015, p. xii).

By a careful study of *Life after Life* it becomes clear that enforcing of gender roles is quite evident and severe. The main characters are aware of their own condition, their own potential, and what they aim; so they actively manipulate their power toward forging new identities for themselves. Crucial to this knowledge shared among the protagonists in this novel is Butler's understanding of "gender performance as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems" (Kirkvik, 2015, p. 9).

Life after Life depicts crucial moments in the life of typical women, when they could perform their gender with the aim of defining their standing and position in society as opposed to men. If previously such definition of roles and status was, on the basis of insights by Freud and Lacan in accordance with a 'lack' that originates in a child girl who used to define herself based on the bodily differences with her father or brother. Such deeply-rooted understanding of oneself for women seems to have undergone a great change since the introduction of the notion of "gender performativity." It clearly designates a state where women can play and perform their gender rather than being confined within limits of sexuality and biological lack. In the framework of this understanding, this section uncovers moments during which female characters in the novel attempt to perform their gender. At moments such performances find way into the dialogues exchanged among females as well. Such practice of gender is very conspicuous in the episode related to World War II.

We find Ursula as a member of rescue squad in 1940, a year after the start of World War II, and along with the rest she is "clearing the rubble by hand, like careful archaeologists" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 236). Ursula's earlier occupation had been at Air Raid Precautions department back in 1939. Such active role during the war by Ursula and other women is a must because in Judith Butler and other non-humanist feminists' assumption "gender is a relation among socially constituted subjects in specifiable contexts." This view of gender has as its premise that "what the person 'is,' and, indeed, what gender 'is,' is always

relative to the constructed relations in which it is determined" (2015, p. 14).

Ironically, the first protection, in the whole novel, offered by Ursula is yielded to a scared dog under the shower of bombardment: "She was half-sitting, half lying on the ground and tried to hang on to something but she couldn't let go of the dog and she found herself being blown slowly along the ground" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 200). What follows is Ursula's death under rubble from recent bombardment.

To describe Ursula's character, we must think of three phases. In the first phase, she is an inexperienced girl hushed by the necessities of her gender and imperatives of society as well. Her first experience of dealing with men, which ultimately leads to her loss of virginity, is as suffocating as her multiple births: "She would choke, for sure... Then he let go of her and set off, crashing through the bushes, leaving Ursula gasping for air" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 116).

The second phase develops during the war. In the course of rescue mission, Ursula develops a character that is more masculine than feminine. When she appears from inside a hole after trying to recover bodies under debris she washes her face under water from a bottle and spits without the slightest observation of feminine etiquettes. At the spectacle of this, Mr. Palmer puts in: "I bet you used to be a real lady." Ursula finds this insulting and replies as rejoinder: "I'm affronted. I think I spit in a very ladylike way" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 241). This bears relation to the view expressed by Luce Irigaray and re-iterated in *Gender Trouble* by Butler that "women constitute a paradox, if not a contradiction, within the discourse of identity itself. Women are the 'sex' which is not 'one.' Within a language pervasively masculinist, a phallogocentric language, women constitute the unrepresentable" (2015, p. 14). Besides, this quite manly behavior evokes the notion of "parody" and "drag" which is introduced by Butler to emphasize the parodist nature of human behavior and consequently the formation gender.

The character that Ursula develops during the Blitz forbids her to speak of calamities and morbid scenes she all the time have been witness to. This puts her on equal footing with men. Ursula "didn't mention wading in effluent from ruptured pipes, certainly didn't mention drowning in that same effluent. Nor did she mention the gruesome sensation of putting your hand on a man's chest and finding that your hand had somehow slipped inside that chest." She has learned that an individual of strong character refrains from sharing feelings and experiences which only serves to demoralize others. "She thought of all those soldiers from the last war who had come home

and never spoken of what they had witnessed in the trenches. Mr. Simms, Mr. Palmer, her own father too, of course" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 244).

Then happens the third phase; the full maturity of her in the midst of rubbles and under bombardment by German airplanes; the extraordinary moment when Ursula exhibits a greater firmness when she tries to soothe Miss Woolf:

'Your mother will be awfully glad to see you come home tonight,' Miss Woolf said, joining the charade. She stifled a sob with her hand. Tony made no sign of having heard them and they watched as he slowly turned a deathly pale, the colour of thin milk. He had gone. 'Oh, God,' Miss Woolf cried. 'I can't bear it.' 'But bear it we must,' Ursula said, wiping away the snot and the tears and filth from her cheeks with the back of her hand and thinking how once this exchange would have been the other way round. (Atkinson, 2015, p. 268)

Now she is a new person who sees beyond the boundaries of gender: "She had become almost indifferent to death. Her soft soul had crystallized. She was a sword tempered in the fire. And again she was somewhere else, a little flicker in time. She was descending a staircase, wisteria was blooming, she was flying out of a window" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 265). Before the war Ursula's "wooing by Ralph (or his by her, perhaps) might have taken the form of dances, the cinema, cosy dinners *à deux* but now, more often than not, they had found themselves at bombsites, like sightseers viewing ancient ruins" (p. 246).

In *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir states "no biological, psychical or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society" (2010, p. 330). The first expression of respect for Miss Woolf comes from Ursula and she equates her with her father Hugh because she felt that "the woman had iron in her soul" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 242). This is the first indication in the whole novel that through hardship and strength of soul and character, even women can earn prestige and admiration.

About the authority of Miss Woolf it suffices to inquire Ursula's idea of her as she was not sure that "Miss Woolf was a woman of some influence or whether she simply refused to take no for an answer. Both, perhaps" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 237).

The best indication of firmness of character is demonstrated in handling casualties of war: "Ursula had vomited up her supper long before then. She vomited after nearly every incident. Mr. Armitage

and Mr. Palmer too, Mr. Simms before. Only Miss Woolf and Mr. Bullock seemed to have strong stomachs for death" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 239). Such firmness and practicality, beside her talents in music and running the rescue squad single-handedly is an affirmation of a non-humanist feminist belief that "feminine could not be theorized in terms of a determinate *relation* between the masculine and the feminine within any given discourse, for discourse is not a relevant notion." In other words, "gender must not be determined in relation to differences between men and women" (Butler, 2015, p. 15). Gender is much a matter of practice than that of difference. This is unlike structuralist assumption that relation between signifier and signified is a matter of difference.

There are men involved in saving civilian lives as well. Mr. Bullock is one of them who is apparently the one to be much a patron of dancers club than serving the injured. The shelter he shares with the rest of the rescue team is at times visited by some of the dancers from his usual haunt. Miss Woolf who is much dedicated to the job "shoed them away like chickens" telling "dancers my eye" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 237). Besides demonstrating a dedicated-to-job and stern character, Miss Woolf represents those types of females who are manly in conduct and human in aim. She refuses to include in her horde any woman who earn their living through their body; much the less men who regard women as such.

Another dominant character in *Life after Life* is Ursula's father, Hugh, who despite having taken his traditionally designated responsibilities such as supporting his family financially, undertakes tasks few men may feel like doing. He is the one who accompanies his sister on the trip to getting rid of her illegitimate baby and back home paying no attention to Sylvie's comments about her. He, also, stands by Ursula's side when she is raped and has to go through the devastating experience of abortion at the age of sixteen.

As a confirmation of the view by both De Beauvoir and Butler that "gender is a process which has neither origin nor end" (Salih, 2002, 46) even men in *Life after Life* are puzzled at the change women have undergone. In response to Sylvie's claim that there are more important duties for women at the time of war, Hugh objects: "I remember that you once said there was no higher calling for a woman than marriage" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 245). This invokes a remark by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*: "women must become, must "be" (in the sense of "posture as if they were") precisely what men are not and, in

their very lack, establish the essential function of men"(2015, p. 58).

The outbreak of war brings women to actual involvement in society. They seem not merely satisfied by their contribution behind the front. They want their share of everything. One manly hobby women try their hands in and prove much of an expert is gambling just before the Blitz breaks out. It is a game in which they actively participate as Miss Woolf wins two pounds to the surprise of Mr. Bullock. This must be considered an act of "subversion" because as Judith Butler argues "there are ways of 'doing' one's identity which will cause even further trouble for those who have a vested interest in preserving existing oppositions such as male/female, masculine/feminine" (Salih, 2002, p. 45). Therefore, such attempts of involvement in manly hobbies by women can be considered as an obvious act of "subversion".

A close look at the structure of *Life after Life* reveals a trial and error system that is manipulated toward acquiring a fixed identity for women. Butler believes that as in other ritual social dramas, "the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established" (2015, p. 178). So, the frequent repetition of actions (several births of Ursula, reiteration of assassination scene through the entire novel, similar experiences of dealing with male advances, and ...) are aimed by the author toward establishing the role gender beyond stereotypes of male/female categorizations.

In "*Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*" Butler uses De Beauvoir understanding of gender to come to a conclusion about the formation of identity. She states that:

gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (1988, p. 519)

This definition of identity and making it dependent on what she calls repetition of acts, bodily gestures, and movement points out the belief that gender is socially constructed. Such repetitions of action that are here called essential in the formation of identity

are not an unimportant point to be neglected by Kate Atkinson. Several deaths and re-births of Ursula can be regarded in the light of this belief. The repetitions of experiences by Ursula through her multiple re-births, a reality to which she become aware of through the consultation by Dr. Kellet, are in fact all done by the unconscious of Ursula to aid her in the formation of a new identity. This new identity, as is formed through several trials and errors after each death and re-birth, is what Judith Butler calls "gender identity" (1988, p. 520), an identity which is fully aware of gender performances in the first place and what it entails in consequence. Atkinson brings several quotations from Plato to Nietzsche in the beginning of *Life after Life* to make the readership prepared for the outcomes of a possible re-incarnation.

In one of her visits to Dr. Kellet's practice in London Ursula was introduced to new insights regarding identity as such: "'*Werde, der du bist*, as he would have it,' Dr Kellet continued... 'Do you know what that means?'... 'It means become who you are,' ... (the being before the non-being, Ursula supposed.) 'Nietzsche got that from Pindar... 'It means – become such as you are, having learned what that is'" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 104).

Gradually Dr. Kellet fixes in Ursula's mind the idea of sacrifices that some persons with exceptional abilities must do in order to save their nation: "One must hold on to the idea of sacrifice, Ursula. [Dr. Kellet said]. It can be a higher calling" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 101). "Ursula felt she had no use for the life she had been saved for. 'I'd like to see Dr Kellet again,' she said to Sylvie" (p. 126). So, awareness of her supernatural ability of re-incarnation along with the identity she develops during involvement in rescue missions brings Ursula to understanding of subversive possibilities coming about through her capability of living multiple lives and in different locations. As a result, she consciously chooses to live another life in Germany in 1930, at a time when Nazis were coming to power and earning public support due to dissatisfaction of the nation with the aftermath of World War I. Her life in Germany and having a German husband a children are all a conscious chose of destiny toward the kind of sacrifice Dr. Kellet had talked her into it.

The relationship between one's actions and the formation of identity is a matter of political expediency; in Butler's wording: "feminist theory has sought to understand the way in which systemic or pervasive political and cultural structures are enacted and reproduced through individual acts and practices (1988, p. 522). Sylvie's obsession with her children's behavior and spending a lot of time "quizzing Ursula

about her manners" can be seen in the light of this understanding. Whereas Izzie, Hugh's untamed sister, has proved a failure to the family as Hugh speaks of her in this way: "Izzie, apparently, has become herself a long time ago" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 104). When Hugh brings his sister back home from the grasp of debauchery, he scrutinizes her thoroughly for any bodily change as if any subversive act (elopement with her lover) by a woman entails the loss of womanhood. In other words, "subversion" is beyond the possibility of a woman. The novel intensifies the suspicion that in a current exemplary society it is up to men to determine the fate of women: "'If only the bounder [i.e. the married man with whom Izzie had an affair] hadn't been married,' Hugh said. 'He could have made an honest woman of my sister'" (p. 22).

Butler's scholarship in the field of "gender identity" has been influential in a number of society-related fields and continues to invite the researchers to engage in a critical re-thinking of the "subject" (Salih, Prologue to *Judith Butler*). Sarah Salih asserts that: "all Butler's books ask questions about the formation of identity and 'subjectivity,' tracing the processes by which we become subjects when we assume the sexed/gendered/ 'raced' identities which are constructed for us (and to a certain extent by us) within existing power structures" (2002, p. 2).

Against any act of self-discovery all elements of society depicted by Kate Atkinson are arranged. The way a society wants a would-be woman to be and how a future man should be is best reflected in their being treated and disciplined by the adults: "Nanny Mills was rather frightening...spending a lot of time quizzing Ursula about her manners and inspecting Teddy's ears for dirt" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 104). This, in general, implies that manners is what a woman should observe to be viewed as gentle, whereas men are only required to be clean in body. In the word envisaged and described by Atkinson, even the men are characteristically pre-defined: "small boys were a mystery to Sylvie. The satisfaction they gained from throwing sticks or stones for hours on end, the obsessive collection of inanimate objects, the brutal destruction of the fragile world around them, all seemed at odds with the men they were supposed to become" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 31). Men are expected by society to the future savior of the world. This is the role that *Life after Life* adopts for women.

There are not a few indications in *Life after Life* which recommends for women to be themselves: "'I'm always so glad,' Sylvie murmured, 'that I don't have to take a turn at being other people.' 'You're very good at being yourself,' Ursula said" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 166). In another scene when Ursula is

trapped during the Blitz inside a cellar, she feels quite panicked at the possibility of death, and wonders: "If Hugh were here, or Teddy or Jimmy, or even Pamela, they would be fighting to get her out of here, to save her. They would care. But there was no one here to care. She heard herself mewling like an injured cat. How sorry she felt for herself, as if she were someone else" (p. 179).

Carolyn Hailbrun states that successful woman has successful husbands, she at the same time regard this triumph as worthless as such a woman takes her identity from her man (as cited in Gardinger, 2005, p. 347). Sylvie the mother of Ursula finds family and social prestige through her marriage with Hugh, "a rising star in the prosperous world of banking. The epitome of bourgeois respectability" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 20)

Maurice is in every respect the opposite of Ursula, both in manners and mind: "Ursula didn't think too much, the way Pamela sometimes did, nor did she think too little, as was Maurice's wont" (Atkinson, 2015, p. 24). Adelaide, Hugh's mother, is also a very conventional woman, typical of women who want their status to be the same and accept no change and revolution. She expresses racist remarks which reflect her preference of slavery for women over their choice of destination against society's will: "Adelaide... said she would have preferred it if Izzie had been kidnapped by white slave traders rather than throwing herself into the arms of debauchery with such enthusiasm" (p. 22).

In her earliest critical work, *Subjects of Desire*, which was originally produced as a university dissertation, Judith Butler utilized the Hegelian notion of "subjectivity" and concludes that through "performativity" a "subject" (female) can pass the passages of her identity formation and reach the "subjectivity" of her own. In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the German philosopher Hegel describes the progress of a "subject" from ignorance to absolute knowledge. This Hegelian "subject" much resembles the protagonist of a novel (usually a male hero) which gradually moves through several life experiences from ignorance to knowledge and self-discovery. This symbolic journey of the Hegelian "subject" is closely comparable to the experiences of heroes in such literary masterpieces as Homer's *Odyssey*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. In these texts, the hero goes on a life journey from which he returns equipped with wisdom and enlightenment. The hero in these stories is a metaphorical 'everyman' who starts life in ignorance and achieves maturity only when he returns from his journey (Salih, 2002, p. 21-2).

In consideration of multiple life experiences of Ursula in *Life after Life* a similar progress from ignorance to wisdom becomes apparent. Kate Atkinson depicts a typical woman without any particular talent and sends her on multiple life journeys to equip her with experiences enough to enable her to perform her gender. If we regard the travels by Ursula back and forth during her life as a production of her mind and fantasy, as Dr. Kellert initially believes, we are to miss an important point by Butler mentioned in *Gender Trouble* that "the cultural associations of mind with masculinity and body with femininity are well documented within the field of philosophy and feminism. As a result, any uncritical reproduction of the mind/body distinction ought to be rethought for the implicit gender hierarchy that the distinction has conventionally produced, maintained, and rationalized" (2015, p. 17).

Ursula overcomes all symbolic obstacles against her coming of age and becoming matured by the aid her gift of re-incarnation. The first death she experiences is at her birth. In the second life she gets over the death at birth yet dies by drowning in the ocean. In the third life she falls off a window to her death at childhood. The next death that she experiences is due to Spanish flu still a child. From here on, her life goes on multiple parallel paths. In one she is raped at the age of sixteen and later marries an abusive husband who kills her. Her experience with men comes to her aid when she is cornered by the same rapist who wants to start a relationship with her. But she succeeds to fend her off. Ursula's knowledge of her particular gift of re-birth gives her a chance to choose the time and place she wants to be born and live and this time she opts for pre-war Germany and friendship of Eva Braun and a German husband. So, with a foreknowledge of the opportunity for preventing a devastating war she finds way into Nazi circles and assassinates Hitler to save the world of the outcomes of upcoming war.

In many respects, the experiences of Ursula resemble the coming to maturity of protagonists in Dickensian literature. *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens is an exemplary one of such literature which falls by critics into the category of 'novel of education.' Pip, the young male hero of the novel, suffers from severe naivety which is only cured when he embarks on a journey to London and learns many realities about life and people. At the end of the novel he returns home a matured man. Journeys of Ursula, both metaphorical one in life and time, and the real ones to Germany, can be viewed as the maneuver of the author to equip her heroine with maturity to be enabled to perform her gender. So, *Life after Life*

communicates a message that the same maturity can be achieved by every other woman through practice of their gender and active involvement in society.

Whereas the category of 'novel of education' belongs generally to the male authors and about men, *Life after Life* is a work by a female author about a woman which contains many of the characteristics of this genre and can be placed within it. The Judith Butler's "subject" that is modeled on Hegelian spirit "progresses by acknowledging the mistakes it has made, so that its life journey resembles a game of snakes and ladders in which it repeatedly moves upwards or forwards, only to slither back down again when it commits an error before moving on to the next stage (Salih, 2002, p. 23). Ursula travels back and forth in time, makes mistakes and suffers death, becomes experienced and starts life anew to face another obstacle in her path to obtain maturity. The association between gender of the "subject" and identity is best described in Judith Butler's wording: "There is no 'gender identity' behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (2015, p. 33).

3. CONCLUSION

The aim of the present study is to apply the Judith Butler's notion of "gender performativity" to Kate Atkinson's novel *Life after Life* in order to demonstrate the performance of gender in practice by female characters during the World War II behind the front under air attack in London.

In this study the notion of "gender performativity" is explored by bringing actual instances from the time of World War II and women involvement in it. This issue is especially handled by focusing on the rescue squad members and their activities during Blitz and all their attempts to supply relief to the injured and those trapped under rubbles remaining from German air raids in 1940.

Then, the notion of gender performance is viewed from another perspective. By referring to the concept of "subject" and desire and dialectic as originated by the German philosopher Hegel and developed by Judith Butler in her first work *Subjects of Desire*, the case of Ursula is taken up right from the beginning in an effort to relate all of Ursula's strivings toward survival and progress to a feminine hushed desire toward their true status. Ursula in her multiple deaths and re-births is viewed as a "subject" who undergoes a journey in life with the aim of achieving maturity and progress. The fruit of this voluntary journey is self-discovery and maturity. In the outfit of a life-time traveler, much like the inexperienced Pip in

Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Gulliver in Jonathan Swift *Gulliver's' Travels*, and..., Ursula undergoes a journey in life which appears more like the progress of the mouse in 'snake and ladder' game. As the mouse ascends the ladder, it is bitten and descends. Similarly, in her early life, Ursula dies, becomes experienced, open eyes to life once more, knowing how to get over the difficulties already having tried and failed. This progress and journey through life which brings *Life after Life* in the category of 'novel of experience' provides Ursula with the understanding and ability to think of ways to pre-empt the devastating World War II. So, she decides to attempt at the life of the Fuhrer in order to relieve the world of the outcome of extremism already germinating in Germany. This progress of the protagonist from an inexperienced girl to a mature woman who appears as the rescuer of the world is viewed by the study as emblematic of potentials that women could possess if from the beginning they were not viewed as unimportant and second in grade by male-dominated society. Liberating of women of categorizations and their relegation as second to men is proved by the study to be one of the aims of the author of the authorship of this novel.

Another concept which is explored fully in Butler's *Gender trouble* and is that of "parody and drag". This notion, that can only be understood and imagined under the concept of "gender performativity," exposes to the performative nature of gender in general. "Parody" as an earlier form of gender performance which is in effect the repetition of masculine roles by women appears quite subversive against the established order.

In the application of the notion of "gender performativity" to the case of Ursula it became clear that she was from early on in struggle to survive and flourish in a society that wanted her death and hushed. The very emblematic of such domineering society was multiple deaths and re-births of Ursula at the start of the novel. Suffocation of Ursula by umbilical cord at her birth was taken as symbol of years of hushed suffering that would await her in case she survived. Yet, she decided to try her lot despite all the difficulties that lay in wait for her. She struggled her way up through youth and overcame the threat of death by learning how to dodge it up until the age of sixteen when she was raped and deflowered by a friend of his brother Maurice. What she learned from her first experience with men made her immune against any other male advances that followed in her later re-births. She survived thus to become voluntary involved in World War II. Her engagement with rescue activities and the character that she developed during her friendship with Miss

Woolf heralded a new existence for her. She gradually became aware of her especial talent of invincibility in the face of death. So, she experienced a parallel existence in Germany in 1930 and befriended Eva Braun in order to find admittance into Nazi circles. She accomplished her objective by the assassination of Hitler in one of these nightly gatherings and accepts on herself a death with a fore-knowledge that she would be back from the dead in less than no time.

In short, the current study finds *Life after Life* as a conscious attempt by the author to give women chance of survival and achieving maturity in a society that want them hushed and underprivileged. All endeavors and struggles in *Life after Life* by Ursula to survive and learn from earlier mistakes are taken as emblematic of a feminine crusade all through human history to achieve an equal existence with men and supply a new definition of femininity based on capabilities rather than physique and appearance. Beside all such attempts by Ursula, the efforts of other female characters in *Life after Life*, especially Miss Woolf, is highlighted in the work by the author to make the readership familiar with the true identity of women and all the sufferings that they have experienced in the modern society which regards women retard and their potentials still lagging. "Gender performativity" as a progressive notion in the feminist studies enabled the study to focus on many allusions and suggestions in *Life after Life* and read them in keeping with the aim of a feminist research.

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