

# **Representations of Women in Jordon Peterson's 12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos. A Critical Discourse Analysis**

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**تمثلات المرأة في كتاب ١٢ قاعدة للحياة: ترياق للفوضى  
لجوردن بيترسون. تحليل خطاب نقدي**

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**ملخص:**

The current study aims to examine the representations of women in Jordon Peterson's bestseller self-help book "12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos". Through a qualitative analysis of 12 extracts, the current study provides a critical discourse analysis via employing sociosemantic categories through which women are referred to in the data. To that end, the study utilizes Van Leween's (2008) model of Social Actor Representation (henceforth SAR). The study found that the representations of women are driven by certain gender ideologies which in turn reflect the author's perspective and beliefs concerning women and women related issues.

تهدف الدراسة الحالية الى كشف تمثلات المرأة في الكتاب الأكثر مبيعا لجوردن بيترسون كتاب (١٢ قاعدة للحياة: ترياق للفوضى). وظفت الدراسة الحالية تحليل خطاب نقدي من خلال تحليل نوعي لاثني عشر نصا تمت الإشارة فيها الى المرأة. من اجل ذلك، تم توظيف نمط فان لوين (٢٠٠٨) تمثل الممثل الاجتماعي. استنتجت الدراسة ان تمثلات المرأة في النصوص المختارة تحمل أيولوجيات جنسانية تعكس معتقدات ووجهات نظر الكاتب فيما ما يتعلق بالمرأة والقضايا المتعلقة بها.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** جوردن بيترسون , تحليل الخطاب النقدي , تمثل الممثل الاجتماعي , تمثلات المرأة , ١٢ قاعدة للحياة: ترياق للفوضى

**Key words:** Jordon Peterson, CDA, SAR, Representation of women, 12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos.

## 1- Introduction

The rise of right-wing politics in Europe and America in recent years has been accompanied by an increase in anti-feminist backlash discourse which focuses on feminism as a threat to the culture and its power dynamics. Concurrently, the Canadian psychologist and professor Jordon Peterson stands out recently as a cultural warrior and one of the most influential and controversial figures in the debates of cultural issues particularly in the topics of Feminism, gender equality and social justice.

Despite the influence that Jordon Peterson has had in the last years, few studies (Mannella, 2020; van de Ven & van Gemert, 2020, p.12; Finlayson, 2021, p.6) have tackled his phenomenon, however none of the studies concentrate on the representation of women in his works and the ideological standpoints under such representations. Hence, this study attempts to highlight the women related ideological standpoints of Jordon Peterson in his notable self help book “12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos”.

Koay (2019) defined self-help books in the sense of “providing information to readers with the aim of helping them learn something or improve themselves without the help of other”. The typical type within self-help books is ‘Psychological self-help books’ whose concern is to guide readers towards more effective and satisfying lives (Dolby, 2005, p.39).

As a non-fiction genre, self-help book is considered as one of the most pervasive types of modern writing in the west, consequently it has an enormous impact on the meditation of gendered subjectivities. The general perception of popular culture towards gender is best documented in the self-help books as the latter is considered to be the most voluminous body of contemporary textual material (Taylor, 2012, p. 144). In light of what the current study attempts to achieve, discourse of culturally valued genres such as that of self-help book is of highly concern in the literature of Critical Discourse Analysis (Henceforth CDA) (Lazar, 2007, P.149).

Given that Jordon Peterson who has been described as “the world’s most influential intellectual” (Brooks, 2018), the study rationale draws on

Van Dijk's view that the public opinion is greatly influenced and shaped by the discourse of the elites "...elites are the ones who initiate, monitor, and control the majority and most influential forms of institutional and public text and talk...They may set or change the agenda of public discourse and opinion making" (Dijk, 1995, p.4).

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2-1. Critical Discourse Analysis

Historically speaking, CDA has its origin in the Frankfurt School established before World War II, however as a linguistic approach, it had been preceded by a school named as critical linguistics emerged in the 1970s mostly in the United Kingdom and Australia with the focus on the role of language in structuring power relations in society culminated in their classic work *Language and Control* (Fowler et al., 1979). The early 1990s marks the inception to the paradigm of CDA following a small symposium in Amsterdam. Since then, CDA has been associated with the ideas of a network of scholars such as Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk, Theo van Leeuwen and Ruth Wodak and Gunther Kress (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p.3).

As one of the critical approaches, CDA takes language as a social practice which means that it has an interest in the relationship between language and power relations in its social context (van Dijk, 2015, p. 466). CDA analysts consider the discursivity of discourse is the basic unit of communication, thus they are concerned with the analysis of how the overt and covert structural relationship of power, dominance, and marginalization are discursively reproduced in the language and discourse (Wodak and Meyer, 2009, p.2).

Van Dijk (2001) defined CDA as "discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context". Moreover, the focus of CDA is not only limited to power in discourse, rather the power behind discourse (Fairclough, 2018, p.14). To that end, CDA analysts are concerned in demystifying the

underlying ideology and power-related characteristics of a discourse (Elyas et al., 2020, p.7).

Fairclough (2018) highlighted how CDA can open a venue via the critique of discourse as a way into wider critique of social reality (p.13). A critique of this kind can produce critical knowledge which enables human beings to emancipate themselves via self-reflection (Wodak & Meyer, 2001, p. 7). Thus, a basic tenet within CDA is to expose the strategies of discourse that seem to be ostensibly consensual and natural although, in essence they are ideological and serve as representations to the interests of a particular social group (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 5). To that end , CDA is recognized as an influential tool to examine the representation of women in the text (Elyas et al., 2020, p.7).

## 2.2. Social Actor Representation (SAR)

Halliday and Hassan (1989,p.75) proposed that social practices are realized in language via three categories of lexicogrammatical system:

**A-** processes (verbs) which refer to activities. **B-** the participants: designating who participates in an action as well as the form of participation i.e. (the performer of an action or the one who is affected by it). **C-** The circumstances: which limits the activity in a context.

In Van Leeuwen's Social Actor Representation (henceforth SAR), the focus is on the participants. Following Halliday and Hassan (1989), Van Leeuwen (2008) introduced a taxonomy in which social actors (participants in Halliday's term) are represented and recontextualized in a particular social practice (written, spoken and so on).

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Van Leeuwen's Socio-Semantic Categories for Analyzing Social Actors

The current study utilizes van Leeuwen's analytic model in an attempt to investigate how women as social actors are represented. In the analysis of social actor representations, Van Leeuwen (2008, p.23) proposed two broad categories in the framework namely exclusion and

inclusion under which many subcategories are subcategorized . The former is accomplished in two ways namely suppression and backgrounding whereas the latter can be accomplished through pairs of categories: Suppression/Backgrounding, Activation/ Passivation, Generalization/Specification, Association/Disassociation, Indetermination /Differentiation, Nomination/ Categorization. It is worth mentioning that the eleven categories are selected based on their recurrence in the data. The definitions and elaborations of the sociosemantic categories are introduced as below:

## Exclusion

1) **Suppression:** It is achieved in the case where' there is no reference to the social actor(s) in question anywhere in the text'

2) **Backgrounding:** It excludes any direct reference to the social actor in relation to a given action, however, mention of them may be made elsewhere in the text. Social actors may not be related to the actions just in the same clause

## Inclusion

1) **Activation:** A representation in which social actors are depicted as “the active, dynamic forces in an activity

2) **Passivation:** A representation in which social actors are envisaged as undergoing the activity, or receiving an action

3) **Aggregation:** In Aggregation, social actors are referred to statistically i.e. they are quantified, treated as quantity

4) **Association:** It refers to “groups formed by social actors which are never labeled in the text “although the actors or groups who make up the association may of course themselves be named and/or categorized”

5) **Dissociation:** The representation whereby social actors are viewed as “lonely in the pursuit of activities that could be carried out cooperatively” (Bortoluzzi, 2010, p.520).

6) **Indetermination:** is the representation of social actors (individuals or groups) as unspecified, “anonymous”.

**7) Differentiation:** It is achieved when the representation explicitly differentiates an individual social actor or group of social actors from a similar actor or group

**8) Nomination:** It represents social actors in terms of their individual, unique identity

**9) Categorization:** represents social actors in terms of the identities and functions they share with others.

#### 4. Data collection

The data under examination consists of 12 extracts taken from Jordon Peterson's self-help book, "12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos" which was published in 2018. The fifteen extracts are to be analyzed qualitatively in detail as the most representative extracts in which women are represented based selected sociosemantic categories from van Leeuwen's model (2008).

#### 4.1. Data analysis

##### Exclusion

##### Suppression

**Extract 1** "Who decided, anyway, that career is more important than love and family? Is working eighty hours a week at a high-end law firm truly worth the sacrifices required for that kind of success? And if it is worth it, why is it worth it? A minority of people (mostly men, who score low in the trait of agreeableness, again) are hyper-competitive, and want to win at any cost. A minority will find the work intrinsically fascinating. **But most aren't,**"

In the above extract, women are being suppressed because they are not incorporated in the text i.e., the author makes no reference to women. The suppression of women in the extract is linguistically realized by passive agent deletion which is replaced by 'most' in "But most aren't". Exclusions of women in the text is based on Van Leeuwen's notion that the reader is assumed to already know what is suppressed in the text and

deems irrelevant in the context. Thus, the context of the text above determines that it is female-oriented.

The author ostensibly proposes sexist-based division of labor, responsibilities and priorities allocated to each gender according to which women (although he makes no reference to them) prioritize love and family. On the other hand, men prioritize career and work because they are more “hyper-competitive, and want to win at any cost”.

## Backgrounding

**Extract 2** “Men enforce a code of behavior on each other, when working together. Do your work. Pull your weight. Stay awake and pay attention. Don’t whine or be touchy. Stand up for your friends. Don’t suck up and don’t snitch. Don’t be a slave to stupid rules. **Don’t, .. be a girlie man. Don’t be dependent**”

When it comes to backgrounding, the representation of social actor is excluded in the action at issue but she/he is mentioned later at the end of the text. Concerning the given extract, the text is ostensibly male oriented, however mention related to women “girlie” is delayed to the end of the extract. In a number of imperative sentences, the author gives a male centered view point which propagates what men do's and don'ts in the workplace. concerning the latter, the men are prohibited neither to be “girly”, nor “dependent”. It is evident that “the girlie”, which is in the above extract attributed to the men, is used to stigmatize the men whose works are not up to par.

## Activation

**Extract 3** “If you’re **female**, you have access to many high-quality **suitors: tall, strong** and symmetrical; creative, reliable, honest and generous. And, like your **dominant male counterpart**, **you will compete ferociously, even pitilessly, to maintain or improve your position in the equally competitive female mating hierarchy**”

The point of activation here lies in the difference in the way male and female social actors are activated as well as the type of action they are



involved in in relation to their activation and passivation. In the female-oriented texts of the above extract, the activation of women, is accomplished by maintaining stereotypical assumptions in which females act a dynamic role in relation to issues that are traditionally held for women such as “interest, love, attention, mating, having access to, marrying”, however, due to their lack of independence in Peterson’s perspective, women are constructed in a fierce competition to chase after dominant and dependable males.

“like your **dominant male counterpart, you will compete ferociously, even pitilessly, to maintain or improve your position in the equally competitive female mating hierarchy**”

This part of the extract is also ideologically loaded as it conforms to androgenic thesis which highlights the differences within each gender and proposes that male traits are not attainable to women and vice versa. Woman, in an androgenic lens , can exercise power only in contexts where only women compete with each other not in those contexts that are applicable to men (Krishnaraj, 1996, p.10).

## Passivation

**Extract 4** “Chris started by hating men, but he ended by **hating women**. He wanted **them**, but he had rejected **education, and career, and desire**. He smoked heavily, and was **unemployed**. Unsurprisingly, therefore, he was not **of much interest to women**”

women are passivated being a phenomenon in a mental process . They are also subjected i.e. represented as “object” in extract (4) in a way that they have been construed as a reward, or a privilege awarded to men in return for their hard work, employment, persistence, affluence and success. Thus “chris was not of much interest to women” since he “ had rejected education, and career, and desire, and was unemployed”

## Aggregation

**Extract 5** “Almost 80 percent of students majoring in the fields of healthcare, public administration, psychology and education, which comprise one-quarter of all degrees, are female. The disparity is still

rapidly increasing. At this rate, there will be very few men in most university disciplines in fifteen years.”

Aggregation in this extract is performed in two cases ,the first is utilized in relation to “females students” and the second to “ men in most universities” .The aggregation in relation “female students” is realized by the definite quantifier “80 percent of” functioning as a numerative of a nominal group. The second case in which aggregation is performed is realized by the indefinite quantifier “few men” which functions as the head of the nominal group. The use of indefinite quantifier “few” is used mainly to anonymize the social actors i.e. to avoid specifying the percentages and providing a detailed and a clearcut statistical argument (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p.83).

## Association

**Extract 6 “Chaos—the unknown—is symbolically associated with the feminine.** This is partly because all the things we have come to know were born, originally, of the unknown, just as all beings we encounter were born of mothers. Chaos is mater, origin, source, **mother; materia**, the substance from which all things are made.”

In this extract, association is formed between chaos and femininity symbolically There are a variety of ways by which association is made by means of language, chief of them are parataxis and circumstances of accompaniment, however as in the major cases in which association is formed in the data, the example above shows that the association is realized, by means of parataxis. In the examined data , the femininity/chaos association is set in contrast with another association sc. order/masculinity as its counterpart association as in the example below:

**“Order, the known, appears symbolically associated with masculinity** ..... This is perhaps because the primary **hierarchical** structure of human society is **masculine** .... It is because men are and throughout history have been the builders of towns and cities, the engineers, stonemasons, bricklayers, and lumberjacks, the operators of heavy machinery. Order is

God the Father, the eternal Judge, ledger-keeper and dispenser of rewards and punishments”

Here, the association is formed between order and masculinity, moreover the reason given to this association enacted by the conjunct “because” indicates the difference in the representation of the chaos and order dichotomy and more importantly their gender manifestations. Thus, order is masculine because masculinity is “the primary hierarchical structure of human society”, here, order is wedded to the notion of hierarchy as an implicit reference in which chaos (henceforth femineity) is in the bottom whereas order is in the top position of this hierarchy. The gendered hierarchal notion becomes relevant as the text moves on to convene another association in an attempt to explicate the reasons why masculinity is the primary hierarchical structure in which men are associated with “the builders of towns and cities, the engineers, stonemasons, bricklayers, and lumberjacks, the operators of heavy machinery. God the Father, the eternal Judge, ledger-keeper and dispenser of rewards and punishments”. As usual, the association is realized by parataxis.

## Dissociation

**Extract 7** “It has become a tenet of a certain kind of social constructionist theory that the world would be much improved if boys were socialized like **girls**”

The ‘girls’ in the (7) extract are activated, while the ‘boys’ are passivated, they undergo the activity of feminization placed by the social constructionist theory. According to van de Ven and van Gemert ( 2020) Peterson uses a “post truth sentiment” in which he purposefully misinterprets the tenets of the theories he discusses (p.2), hence in contrast to what, he assumes , the social constructionist theory perceives to carry out , the text seeks to make a disassociation in the way each gender is socialized i.e. creating a gender based socialization to the way each gender is perceived to act.

## Indetermination

**Extract** ^ “Why do **women** want an employed partner and, preferably, one of higher status? In no small part, it’s because **women** become more vulnerable when they have children. They need **someone** competent to support mother and child. It’s a perfectly rational compensatory act, although it may also have a **biological** basis”

Indetermination is the representation of social actors (individuals or groups) as unspecified, “anonymous”. This strategy is used either to obfuscate the identity of the social actor or if the writer/speaker treats her or his identity as irrelevant to the reader. It is typically realized by indefinite pronouns (“someone,” “somebody,” etc.). In the extract above, women are represented as a sensor in a mental process towards an anonymous social actor who is realized linguistically by the indefinite pronoun “someone”. However, although not nominated i.e., not referred to by his unique identity, the anonymous social actor is categorized as an “employed partner” as well as identified by the adjective “competent” and “of higher status”. The identity of “someone” is anonymized since the focus is not on his unique identity, rather it is his categorization as “competent employed partner”. In Jordon Peterson’s logic , women are always in a need of a competent partner to support them because they bear the burden of reproduction as he put it

“Why do women want an employed partner and, preferably, one of higher status? In no small part, it’s because women become **more vulnerable when they have children**. They need someone competent to support mother and child when that becomes necessary. It’s a perfectly rational compensatory act, although it may also have a biological basis”

## Differentiation

**Extract 9** “I recently watched a McGill University professor, female, lecture a room full of female law partners or near-partners about how lack of childcare facilities and “male definitions of success” impeded their

career progress and caused women to leave. I knew most of the women in the room. **I knew they knew that none of this was at all the problem.** They had nannies, and they could afford them. They had already outsourced all their domestic obligations and necessities. They understood, as well—and perfectly well—that **it was the market that defined success, not the men they worked with**”

The representation in differentiation plainly differentiates an individual social actor or group of social actors from a similar actor or group. Hence, it creates the difference between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ or between ‘us’ and ‘them’. In the extract above, women are referred to in terms of their gender as “women” as well as by the adjective “female”. Moreover, women are also referred to by means of the pronoun “they” which are differentiated from men i.e., ‘us’.

To unveil the ideology underpinning the above extract, it is important to note that the author juxtaposes both the postfeminist denial of inequality with the values of neoliberalism. Regarding the former, the author denies any systematicity of gender inequalities by render them upon the responsibilities of individuals turning a blind eye to the social and political workings of gender.

In the latter, the author draws on the market values as a mode of governmentality to repudiate and deny any politics of gender in the definition of success in the public spheres particularly in the workplaces. Hence, through leaning on neoliberalism, the author casts individuals, particularly women, as human capital stripping them of any identity value except market ones (Rottenberg, 2018, p.17).

## Nomination

**Extract ١٠** “Western images of the **Virgin Mary** with the Christ Child and the Pietà both express the **female**/male dual unity”

**Extract ١١** “**Eve** immediately shares the fruit with Adam. That makes him self-conscious. Little has changed. Women have been making men self-conscious since the beginning of time. They do this primarily by rejecting them—but they also do it by shaming them, if men do not take responsibility. Perhaps it is for this reason that **Eve’s daughters** are more protective, self-conscious, fearful and nervous, to this day”

The nomination refers to a representation in which social actor is referred to by her or his unique identity. The nominated social actors are linguistically realized by the proper noun. The nominated social actors in the two texts above are “Virgin Mary, Eve and Eve’s daughters” As the given two extracts indicate that the female nominated religious figures such as Eve and Virgin Mary are the most frequent social actors used throughout the data. It is an indication of how religious anecdotes are widely utilized in the examined data as Nellie Bowles (2018) put it “Peterson ... tells his audiences there's no shame in looking backward to a model of how the world should be arranged. Look back to the 1950s, he says, and back even further. He is bringing them knowledge, ... He casts this as ancient wisdom, delivered through religious allegories and fairy tales containing truth, he says, that modern society has forgotten” (p.1).

## Categorization

**Extract ١٢** “The division of life into its **twin sexes** occurred before the evolution of multi-cellular animals It’s plenty long enough **for male and female and parent and child** to serve as vital and fundamental parts of the environment to which we have adapted. **This means that male and female and parent and child are categories**, for us—**natural categories**, deeply embedded in our perceptual, emotional and motivational structures”

Categorization conveys a representation in which social actors are referred to in terms of the roles or identities they share with others. Categories can

be 'functionalized'; social actors are referred to in terms of the role(s) they share with others (role or occupation). On the other hand, categories can also be 'identified' whereby social actors are referred to 'in terms of what they, more or less permanently, or unavoidably, are'. In the text under consideration, a heavy emphasis is laid on functionalization. In particular, the author concentrates on the categories of roles such as male and female. Instead of using it in a compound noun such as 'female worker, black female and so on', the category female is used alone in the above extract as well as in most of the cases the word female or woman are referred to in the examined data.

More importantly, the analysis of text above clearly shows that the categories of female and male are not referred to as functional categories, a role an individual shares with others, instead they are considered as identification categories i.e., female and males are being considered as inevitable and permanent categories that shape one's life permanently. Thus, these categories are deemed as "natural", "occurred before the evolution of multi-cellular animals" and "parts of the environment" which means that they are out of individual's control.

## 5. Discussion and Results

When it comes to the contexts in which women are excluded, women are radically suppressed in the context where the field or the processes inside the clause concern a variety of stereotypically masculine domains such as hyper-competition, necessity for work, professional success. Women are also suppressed whenever the context or the issue(s) discussed determines that the text is women-oriented, hence the reference to women seems irrelevant.

Concerning the ways in which women are included in the data, the allocation of roles in the data shows that women and men are allocated to two sexist distinct roles endowed to them by nature with women prioritizing the role of children and husband caretaker whereas men perform the breadwinner role. In Jordon Peterson's discourse, these gender-based roles function in tandem in two spheres namely the public sphere and the private

sphere. Accordingly, the public sphere which is associated with the workplace is allocated to men whereas the private sphere which is associated with home is in turn allocated to the women. Thus, throughout the examined data, women are construed in terms of familial roles. This point is highlighted in the female oriented rhetorical question posed in the extract (1) in which the author disapprovingly asks “why career is more important than love and family”.

With regard to the categories of activation, the author draws on the gender role transcendence in the androgyny. In the light of the ideology of androgyny, Woman can be strong and competitive towards other women only in the traditionally feminine traits such as politeness, compassion, emotion etc. According to this ideology, these traits are exclusively female domains in which only women compete. To that end, women in the data act a dynamic role in relation to issues that are traditionally held for women such as “interest, love, attention, mating, marrying”.

Concerning passivation, women are subjected i.e. represented as “object” in the data to the extent that they have been construed as a reward, or a privilege awarded to the men in return for their hard work, employment, persistence, affluence and success.

Aggregation is highly emphasized , Women are treated as statics in the data mostly to portray them as monopolists whose numbers in most of the university disciplines outnumber that of men. It is noteworthy that aggregation is utilized to give an impression of objectivity and credibility with regard to the numbers of women in the universities

The analysis conducted reveals how pivotal the religious anecdote are in Peterson’s overall discourse with “Eve” as the most female nominated social actors with

Concerning categorization, the categories of female and male are constructed in terms of sex as biological functional categories, roles an individual shares with others and not as identification categories. Hence, female and males are being considered as inevitable and permanent categories that shapes one’s life permanently.

## 6. Conclusions



The study found that the representations of women carry a number of gender ideologies such as sexism, post feminism, neoliberal post feminisms to mention but a few. The analysis of nominated female social actors shows how the anti-feminist language draws on a “religious revival” and mythological discourse. When it comes to roles allocation, the representation of women in terms of their familial roles is also emphasized to validate and restrict the roles of women in the private sphere. The stress of the familial roles is also part of the conservative discourse which aims to reinforce the family values. In addition, the present study also proves the suitability of CDA and particularly Van Leeuwen’s SAR model (2008) in the analysis of representation of women in a valued and widely read genre and hybrid modes of discourse namely self-help book.

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