Performativity in the Nigerian Scenario

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Abstract— The article entitled "*Performativity in the Nigerian Scenario*" employs Judith Butler's theory of performativity to examine the deconstruction of the socially constructed categories of identity: gender and race in the African situation. Using the theory it is argued that the naturalized conception of gender and race are interpellative performatives which can be challenged, subverted and constituted differently. The article investigates how the women characters in the select works of three Nigerian female writers: Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie dismantle the myth of gendered and racial identity thus enabling them to be empowered.

Keywords— deconstruction, empowerment, interpellation, performativity

I. INTRODUCTION

AFRICAN women were viewed from a bio-essential lens in the narratives of both the racial colonialists and the early male authored African literature. This essentialist construction that subordinate and marginalize black women has been comprehensively confronted by the women writers of Africa. The writers delineate empowered black women who reject and confront the chauvinist gender stereotypes and social roles set by the patriarchal society modelled on the colonizing culture. The rejection of gender and social norms and the possibility of doing them differently is what Judith Butler propounds in the theory of performativity. This paper examines Butler's theory in the select works of the Nigerian women writers Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as an instrument to describe the constructed, assumed and performative dimension of gender and race in Nigeria.

II. EXPERIMENTAL SECTION

In a 'racenconscious' society, the black women writers concur that it is their cardinal onus to undo the scenarios that subject women to gender and racial discrimination in order to entail a new life that will enhance an egalitarian society. They strive to demythologize the distorted constructions of the African women as slaves, matriarchs, mammies, lewd women, castrating bitches and second-class citizens. A unique twist is rendered to the social constrictions that confine black women to rigid structures that blur their identity. The female protagonists delineated emerge as liberated and empowered women by 'undoing' their feminine and racial roles.

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The act of doing feminine and racial roles differently underscores the fact that norms attached to an individual are not permanent and fixed; but are constructs. As a result, it can be implied that gender and race are not biologically determined but are the effects produced by the performance of various 'gender acts' and 'racial acts.' The performative dimension explicated by Judith Butler in her seminal work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (1990) can be applied to the Nigerian scenario to redefine a new female identity.

Judith Butler, an American philosopher, has been instrumental in the formulation of the theory of gender performativity to describe the constructed, assumed and performative dimension of gender. She explains that gender is not a pre-discursive fixed identity but is a construct which can be 'done' or 'performed' within the heterosexual matrix. Consequently, categories such as 'feminine' and 'masculine' come into being when a body performs or 'does gender' in a stylized reiteration of conventions that eventually become naturalized and consolidated.

The concept of performativity can be transposed on to race as well for theorists like Stuart Hall, MacPhee and Cooppan assert the idea that race including 'black' identity is a historical, political, social and cultural construct. Cooppan agrees with Kwame Anthony Appiah who in 'In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture' underscores that "there are no races." (15) Accordingly, individuals engage themselves in the repetition of the gender and racial norms out of fear of being insulted or attacked by society.

This paper examines the select narratives of the Nigerian women writers Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie which strive to rescue black women from the 'interlocking factors' viz. gender and race by 'undoing' the norms attached to them and performing different roles that would liberate them from their dual oppression The writers, thus carve a new world for women in which they experience freedom from the marginalization imposed on them by patriarchy and colonialism.

III. PREDICTIVE CAPABILITIES OF PERFORMATIVITY

Among the other Nigerian women writers, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie raise the status of a woman in the African society. Their oeuvre is a protest against the victimization of Igbo women in Nigeria and by extension all societies. The writers satirize the demeaning images of women and the societal forces that shape their lives. Their bold and subversive texts celebrate a woman's independence and economic success. They redefine a new female identity that does not perform the 'gender' and 'racial'

norms constructed by the patriarchal society. The writers coalesce to underscore that if women need liberation from outdated conventions, men also have to change and adapt to the concept of New Woman.

A. Undoing gender norms

The New African Woman valorized in the works of the black women writers possesses traits usually ascribed to men. The African women portrayed are bold, courageous and determined who define their own space and contribute to the progress of the society; thereby deconstructing the false perception that such traits are gender specific. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler explains that "…what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body." (Preface 1999 xv) A person learns how to do certain norms and in turn 'display' being that gender. For instance, slave masters forced women to be as "masculine" in the performance of the work like their men. They had to work in coal mines and in iron foundries. Thus, black women displayed 'masculine traits' by performing masculine jobs thereby liberating themselves from the constructed female roles. By putting up a feminine behaviour and at the same time behaving masculine explores the level of performance of gender roles which can be reversed. Butler sees gender as a behaviour which can not only be reversed but also rehearsed.

B. Undoing racial norms

Similarly, the racial categorization of an individual is not natural but is a product of colonization. Race is a social construct that divides population on the basis of physical characteristics and naturalizes the groupings to which it refers. Thus, race is a 'doing' and not an ontological state of being. Women writers attempt to confront and reject the racial norms that label women as 'slaves' and 'second-class citizens.' The writers held the view that black women could be liberated from the racial discrimination by 'undoing' the norms attached to their body. They have begun to realize that the categorization of individuals as 'black men' and 'black women' come into existence through the process of repetition and reiteration of various 'black acts' and without these acts there would be no race at all.

IV.   Results And Discussion

In order to analyze and reconceptualize the constructed and assumed dimension of gender and racial norms set by patriarchal society, the paper examines Butler's theory of performativity in the select works of the Nigerian women writers.

A. Reconceptualization of gender norms

The female characters delineated by Nwapa, Emecheta and Adichie are in sharp contrast with the stereotypical and mythical images of women portrayed by racial colonialists and the early male-authored African literature. They are women with revolutionary spirits who 'undo' their feminine roles.

The submissive roles a woman is expected to perform with regard to the traditional concepts of wifehood, motherhood, and daughterhood are vehemently rejected and subverted in the narratives of the women writers and a realistic picture of the role of women is celebrated. The glorious ideal of motherhood has been demystified and strategies to be employed by a childless woman have been suggested by women writers.

Women have been socialized to believe that "children made a woman." (*The Joys of Motherhood* 219) and that marriage and family are the ultimate things a woman should vie for. A childless woman is scorned and ridiculed by society. Her inability to reproduce will label her as a man. Nwapa's protagonist Efuru, for instance, is scorned by her family and society for her incapacity of giving birth. Similarly, Emecheta's female character Nnu Ego is also scorned for being childless. Amatoku, Nnu Ego's first husband marries another woman saying, "I have no time to spend my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile. I have to raise children for my line." (*The Joys of Motherhood* 32) When Nnu Ego bore twin girls, her second husband Nwaife asked, "Nnu Ego, what are these? Could you not have done anything better?" (127) For them, being a mother was not enough, one had to breed sons.

The notion that marriage is considered to be an index of social status which measures a woman's success has been underscored in the article 'Acadas and Fertilizer Girls: Young Nigerian Women and the Romance of Middle-Class Modernity' by Misty L. Bastian. Bastian noticed a pictorial obituary in a local Anambra State newspaper. The photo of the deceased was that of a young "woman wearing a formal wedding dress." On enquiry Bastian found that the dead woman had "informed her husband and relatives that she wished to be shown in her white wedding gown." The reason being she had married late in life long after her family had labeled her a hopeless "spinster." She considered the achievement of her marriage and the birth of her child to be the greatest accomplishments for she "worked harder for marriage than she ever worked as a postgraduate." (Bastian 56) This idealization of the African woman as a married and nurturing mother which conceals her social reality has been explored and exploded by women writers. Women like Nwapa's Efuru move ahead in life in spite of being a barren woman. They puncture the concept of the 'canonized' mother and give a realistic representation of African women and their experiences in the society.

The African New Women sketched in the works of women writers are bold enough to voice themselves and counter the fetters of conformity and obedience. They voraciously reject the patriarchal views which prescribe women as nothing but producers of children especially sons.

In *A Dying Colonialism,* Fanon underscores that, "The birth of a boy in a family is greeted with greater enthusiasm than that of a girl. The father sees in him a future working partner, a successor to the family plot and after his death a guardian for the mother and the sisters." (105) "The girl," on the other hand, "has no opportunity… to develop her personality or to take any initiative." (Fanon 106) All the important decisions of her life are taken by either her father or her husband; for she has been taught to abide the customs and traditions without any objections. She is merely an "unwanted and propertlyless

objects of exchange." (Amadiume 364) Through repeated performance of the gender acts, "[t]he girl adopts automatically the behavior and the values of … feminine society." (Fanon 106) This repetition of submissive gender norms set by the patriarchal society is what women writers strive to obliterate.

Female protagonists like Kehinde, Olanna and Debbie revolutionize the previously perceived notion of a woman exhibiting submissive feminine roles. They prove that women can also make the impossible possible by exploring the domain of work claimed by men to be solely theirs. For instance, the notion that war is an exclusively male enterprise has been deconstructed with the participation of women in war time activities on the front lines as drivers, doctors, and nurses. They laid aside their female roles for the safety of their country.

The involvement of the African women as leaders can be dated to pre-colonial times. The Queen of Zaria (Zauzau) in Hausaland, Nigeria, for instance, is an important African woman leader in the 15th or 16th century who "encouraged trade… Under her remarkable leadership Zaria became the most powerful state in Haussaland." (Jackson 30) The narratives of the third world women writers, thus defy the gendered constructions of war and nationalism. Their works underscore that women too have the potential to become "credible and serious leaders" (Chand 231) and can be just as useful to her country as a man in times of national crisis and reconstruction.

B. Reconceptualization of racial norms

The narratives of Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie not only portray female characters who see themselves beyond the roles of 'daughters,' 'wives,' and 'mothers' but also delineate characters and situations which question and reverse racial discrimination experienced by both men and women. They search for security and freedom from slavery, not only for themselves but also for their families. Odenigbo in *Half of a Yellow Sun* impresses Olanna as he protests against the discrimination meted out to the black people in the society. When a white man at the end of the queue was signalled to come forward, Odenigbo condemns the attitude of the ticket seller towards the people of colour. He demands that the ticket seller "apologize to everybody in this queue" for his insulting act. (29) Odenigbo, later in the novel, affirms that the identity of the people living in Nigeria has been constructed by the colonizers to oppress and marginalize them. "I am Nigerian because a white man created Nigeria and gave me that identity. I am black because the white man constructed *black* to be as different as possible from his *white*." (20)

The spread of education has brought about a tremendous change in the predicament of women. It has enabled them to refuse to be "locked into their exclusively female roles." (Davis 6) They avidly resist against people who consider them as producers of children and "second-class human …. (who) washed his clothes and got his meals ready at the right time." (*Kehinde* 81 This powerful tool has enabled women to realize their full potential and gain the confidence to 'undo' their gender and racial roles.

V. CONCLUSION

Women in the Third World societies, views Kumar, have gradually been able to "subvert and demythologize indigenous traditions, nationalist representations which seek to label women into subordination" and marginalization. (43) A 'female subject' describes Butler is a fiction, a fabrication, and a construct. Butler extends Simone de Beauvoir's statement, 'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman,' to suggest that a woman (the doer) is a term-in-process, a becoming, and a discursive construct. In *The Politics of the Performative* (1997), Butler underscores the need to have a society deprived of rigid gender norms, so as to make life more meaningful and significant for an individual. Race, like gender, has no ontological status. It is a concept that has been created by the colonialists and can be dismantled.

Consequently, gender and race are notions that are assumed and performatively constituted. The repetition and reiteration of 'woman acts' and 'black acts' produce the subject 'black woman.' The narratives of the Nigerian women writers Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie attempt to redefine the identity of the African woman by subverting and reconstructing gender and racial identity that marginalize them. Butler's theory of performativity shows that it is possible to undo the gender and racial norms constructed by the patriarchal society through the reiteration of a new set of acts thereby empowering women.

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