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Gender Performativity in Buchi Emecheta's Kehinde

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***ABSTRACT**: Gender is no longer considered as the product of genetics or biological truth. It is, on the other hand, perceived as a performative- a doing rather than a being- constituted and maintained as a recognizable subject in a heterosexual matrix. Nigerian women writers focus on the performative dimension of gender identity in their literary texts. They offer a comprehensive resistance to essentialization of gender identity and argue for a resignified identity of Nigerian women. This study reads Buchi Emecheta's Kehinde through the lens of gender performativity to expose gender as a fluid concept that can be taken out of prior contexts and be reiterated in ways contrary to original patriarchal intentions. In doing so, Emecheta destabilizes heteronormative gender performatives and opens the possibility of Nigerian women to evolve into strong, independent and empowered individuals. In essence, the female protagonist of Kehinde establishes a resignified identity of a Nigerian woman that questions essential gender identities, critiques heteronormative hegemony and people that propagate it, and is proud of being a black woman.*

***Keywords:** Buchi Emecheta, gender performativity, Judith Butler, Nigerian women, performative*

"Claiming my right does not make me less of a mother, not less of a woman. If anything it makes me more human" (Kehinde 141).

Buchi Emecheta's Kehinde (1994) traces the life of a middle-aged Nigerian woman Kehinde that contends against the ritualization of the 'female' gender which normalizes feminine gender identity and norms; and strives to resignify her identity as a Nigerian woman both within and outside heterosexual contexts. The novel is considered an important contribution to the canon of Nigerian literature as it not only offers a comprehensive resistance of the essentialist representation of Nigerian women, but also studies the ideological apparatuses responsible for the essentialist construction of the traditional feminine norms, behaviours and practices constantly reiterated in their daily lives. Exposing the 'female' gender as a construct enforced upon the bodies of women, Emecheta cautions her readers against accepting gender identity as an essence. She propagates the message that pre-determined feminine roles as wives and mothers are the effect of "institutions, practices, [and] discourses" in the patriarchal culture (Gender Trouble xxxi). In doing so, she implores women to redefine their identity as strong, independent and successful individuals. From this context the study argues that Buchi Emecheta's Kehinde is a performative critique. It analyses the novel in the framework of Judith Butler's gender performativity that purports the idea that an identity is a performative- not a being but a doing. In the words of Butler: "gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, … [it] proves to be performative- that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing" (34). The reading of Kehinde through the lens of gender performativity is useful because the concept exposes gender as an unstable and fluid category produced and maintained within power structures that it can be taken out of prior contexts and cited and reiterated in ways contrary to original patriarchal intentions, thereby destabilizing heteronormative gender performatives and opening the possibility of women to evolve into strong, independent and empowered individuals. In essence, the female protagonist Kehinde establishes a resignified identity of a Nigerian woman that questions essential gender identities, critiques heteronormative hegemony and people that propagate it, and is proud of being a black woman.

In her formulation of the theory of gender performativity in the seminal book Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990), Judith Butler argues that one's gender is performatively constituted. In other words, gender identities are 'regulatory fictions,' 'corporeal acts,' 'stylized repetition of acts,' and 'strategies' that have been constructed and constituted through discursive and non-discursive practices. In essence, the body of a 'woman' possesses and exhibits such feminine characteristics as irrationality, emotionality and passiveness. She is considered the weaker sex meant to be helped and protected. As Adrienne Rich points out in her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980), a

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woman is trapped in the institution of compulsory heterosexuality which disempowers her. She is compelled to get married and remain in her married life "in order to survive economically, in order to have children …, [and] in order to remain respectable" (138-9). This political institution compels "the daughter to 'accept' incest/rape by her father, the mother to deny that it is happening, [and] the battered wife to stay on with an abusive husband" (134). Butler notes that if she "fail[s] to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility," then she becomes a victim of social criticism and punishment (23). However, it is imperative to note that these traditional feminine gender roles are not applicable to black women that work as hard as a bull. She is employed in hard labour work along with her men. She is forced to work as a slave, plough fields, and produce more slaves, among others. Questioning the accepted concept of womanhood, Sojourner Truth in her famous speech 'Ain't I a Woman?' delivered at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in Ohio raises a crucial question 'Ain't I a woman?':

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? … Look at my arm! … I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much … as a man … ain't I a woman? (qtd. in Busby 38).

According to Pramod K. Nayar, Truth's speech questions the different perspective of gender accorded to white women and black women. Her speech, in his words, "proposed that ideas of womanhood in America seemed to see the white woman as standard, and the black woman's experience had escaped the attention of the feminists because they were all white" (109). In doing so, Truth anticipates Butler's theory of gender as a performative- a *doing* rather than a *being* that is not limited to any particular context. It also echoes Derrida's argument in the essay 'Signature Event Context' that it is possible to take a 'sign,' here gender, from its prior context and reiterate it in different contexts and in different time periods; thereby effecting different interpretations for the same word. Drawing upon these arguments, it can be argued that the subordinating feminine attributes performed by the female protagonist Kehinde in the novel selected for study are not natural and stable traits. Her gendered identity has been constituted as a result of the continuous reiteration of the norms and customs attached to the 'female' body in the Nigerian context. Comprehending gender as a construct, Emecheta resignifies Kehinde's identity from a submissive and dependent Nigerian woman to a liberated and independent 'black woman.'

Buchi Emecheta is one of the most prolific second generation Nigerian women writers. Her literary works offer an authentic presentation of Nigerian women struggling to assert herself against sexual and racial oppressions. In the words of Marie Umeh, "[i]t is through Buchi Emecheta that the souls of voiceless Nigerian women … are revealed" (qtd. in Ward 83). Emecheta's novel *Kehinde* traces the development of the female protagonist Kehinde Okolo from a traditional Igbo woman towards individuality within a heterosexual hegemony. Kehinde is a middle-aged educated Nigerian woman settled with her family in London for 18 years. The London home represents a space where she enjoys freedom, her voice is heard, and is treated as a friend and a companion by her husband. However, she is quite conscious of her role as a traditional Nigerian wife. Hence, she relinquishes her professional career in London to reunite with her husband and children in Nigeria only to experience nothing but humiliation. She immediately returns to London where she rejects the patriarchal conventional expectations of a woman, thereby redefining her identity as an empowered black woman.

Kehinde is an independent and responsible Nigerian woman working in a bank in England. Though in London- the land where women rule and enjoy freedom to take decisions- Kehinde remains the good Nigerian woman. She performs the feminine roles of an obedient wife and nurturing mother in acquiescence with the compulsory and naturalized heterosexual hegemony. She obeys her husband Albert, allows him to take decisions for her and is nothing but a sex object for him. In doing so, she internalizes the superiority of her husband and reduces herself to a subservient position. For instance, she performs the role of a good wife by not taking credit in buying the house. Though she "earned more than he did [and] ... because of her position in the bank that they had been able to get a mortgage. But a good wife was not supposed to remind her husband of such things... she … play[ed] the role of the 'good' Nigerian woman" (4). Kehinde is even told when to make love, when to have children and when to abort. Thus, when Albert takes her to the hospital to get the abortion done because he does not want her to lose her promotion as a branch manager, she obliges. He is confident that "she will do what I [he] say[s]" (15). Kehinde, therefore, has no control over her reproductive rights. She is nothing but a sex object for her husband that "grip[s] [her] … from behind … force[s] [himself on her], and before [she] know[s] what [he's] about, [he's] done" (5). In succumbing to her husband, Kehinde foregoes the status of equality and respect experienced by her ancestors in the pre-colonial period, viz. Queen Amina of Zazzau, Yaa Asantewaa, and Queen Anna Nzinga, among others.

Kehinde's commitment and loyalty to her husband illustrates the presence of "a panoptical male connoisseur … within the consciousness" of Nigerian women (Bartky 34). In her essay "Foucault, Femininity and the Modernisation of Patriarch Power," Sandra Lee Bartky argues that women voluntarily continue to be

victims of male gaze and judgement. Their concept of a traditional woman has been so deep-seated that they treat women who think and act differently as enemies. Kehinde's disrespect for Mary Elikwu, a single mother, reveals how her thoughts have been disciplined in a patriarchal society. Kehinde has contempt for the woman as she does not prefer to be addressed as Mrs. Okolo, an act that is quite contrary to Nigerian tradition where a woman without a husband is considered incomplete irrespective of how successful she may be. She wonders why Mary Elikwu persists in being addressed as Mary when Nigerian women struggle to have an identity as a married woman:

'What is the matter with this woman?' Kehinde wondered. 'Not wanting to be called "Mrs", when every Nigerian woman is dying for the title. Even professors or doctors or heads of companies still call themselves "Professor (Mrs)" or "Dr (Mrs)". This woman must be crazy …' (39)

Thus, the lessons taught to girls are so ingrained in them that they continue to reiterate gender acts, behaviours and practices ascribed to their bodies. They even expect other women to reiterate the feminine norms attached to the female body. In doing so, women normalize and materialize the feminine gender identity.

A girl is taught to essentialize her gendered identity from childhood. She is instructed to look beautiful, dress properly, sacrifice for her brothers, perform the duties of a wife without fail and take care of her children. As a result, she maintains her physical appearance and dresses attractively for male gaze. Albert, for instance, is attracted to his wife Kehinde because she takes great care of her physical appearance- "a plump African woman with a heavy backside" (6). In addition to looking beautiful and attractive, a Nigerian woman is also disciplined to be polite, patient, loyal, obedient, nurturing, sacrificing, protecting and submissive. While daughters are expected to always give and give and give- for instance, Bimpe (Kehinde's daughter), is expected to become a day scholar while her brother Joshua remains in the boarding school; a married woman, on the other hand, is expected to be obedient, loyal, and respectful to her husband. They are reprimanded if they violate any norm attached to the body of a 'woman.' For instance, when Kehinde calls her husband Albert by his name she is scolded and corrected to address Albert as the father of her son:

'Little Mother, Ifi, call Albert for me. Where is he?' Kehinde besought her sister. Ifeyinwa opened her eyes in horror. 'Sh … sh … sh, not so loud! Don't call your husband by his name here-o. We hear you do it over there in the land of white people. … We don't do it here-o. Please Kehinde, don't-o.' (70)

A woman is also disciplined how to dress. She is expected to welcome her guests "to the whole array of Nigerian traditional styles and fabrics, from guinea *boubou* to *aso-oke iro* and *buba*, to the Igbo lace blouse and George *lappa*, ending with the Igbo ceremonial costume of white *out-ogwu*" (38). She is also told whom to meet. For instance, Moriamma avoids her best-friend Kehinde on the instructions of her husband, Tunde. He tells her to keep away from Kehinde as he considers her to be a fallen woman. In doing so, Moriamma "was becoming the good Muslim wife Tunde had always wanted her to be" (60).

A married woman is also expected to save her marriage no matter what because it is considered a necessity as it propagates the flow of life. A girl is taught from childhood that motherhood is a prerequisite for social acceptance which bestows a joyful and privileged status on them; and mothering and nurturing are important biological acts that she is expected to perform. As a result, when her brother is send to school, she stays back home to learn how to cook, wash and clean the house. Traits such as caring, nurturing, forgiving, and protecting are fed to her. It is this training Kehinde received in her childhood that compels her to perform the role of a caring and nurturing mother. She sacrifices her self-esteem and takes up the job as a hotel room cleaner in order to raise money so that she can bring her children to London. Women are, thus, socially and culturally pushed towards an existence that require them to identify and find meaning to their lives only through their husbands and children.

However, having a child is not enough in the Nigerian context. A Nigerian mother must bear a boy child because a son enhances her position in the family. The birth of a baby son is celebrated as illustrated thus:

He [Tunde] was wild. He telephoned all their friends, both in England and Nigeria, and started calling himself 'Tunde and Sons Ltd'. Presents came from everywhere. The day the child was named, they invited as many people as if it were a wedding, and rented a suite at the London Park Hotel for the reception. The baby's picture was in all the Nigerian papers in London: Olumide- 'my savior, my standard bearer, my warrior is here'" (55).

A son is given a lot of privilege and importance in the family and the society. He is trained and taught to conform to the traits, behaviours and interests ascribed to the masculine body. He is taught that man is the master and women his slaves and all that a woman possesses- children, land, house and even her body- belongs to men. This has been illustrated in the novel where Albert instructs his son Joshua to control and conquer women. He says: "'We men must stick together, and look after our women. The house in London is yours. Make sure it goes under your name. Your mother loves you very much and would be happy to see you make your claim […]'" (140). Consequently, Joshua reminds his mother that she is the possession of a man: "'[…] Ma, they said I should take the house and look after you […]'" (139). Further, a boy is send to school, while a girl is expected to look after the family. Hence, Joshua is allowed to stay in the boarding house and concentrate on his

studies, while Bimpe goes to school and returns home to do the housework. She tells her mother: "when I return from school, the amount of house work I am expected to do, Ma, it's incredible" (120). In addition to this gender discrimination, girls are punished for trivial mistakes while all the faults committed by a son are merely laughed off. Thus, when Joshua speaks rudely to his parents, he is not reprimanded. They ignore his rudeness rationalizing the behaviour as "the normal behaviour of a fourteen-year-old boy establishing his identity. However, when the daughter Bimpe interrupts her father she is quickly silenced: "'Will you keep quiet please, young lady! I happen to be talking to your mother'" (2). Thus, the continuous reiteration of masculine and feminine traits, behaviours and practices essentializes gender identity.

Butler in *Gender Trouble* contends against the constant reiteration of feminine traits that restrict the female body in submissive feminine roles. She argues that wifehood and motherhood are not natural traits but are the effects of heterosexuality which compels the female body to assume them "as the essence of itself and the law of its desire" (125). She critiques the institution of marriage where a woman is considered an object to be exchanged from one patriarchal clan to another or from one master to another. She has no identity of her own but reflects masculine identity. She is merely "a relational term that both distinguishes and binds the various clans to a common but internally differentiated patrilineal identity" (53). Butler also critiques the institution of motherhood that is ingrained in the Nigerian context as an essence. A married woman is evaluated in terms of her ability to reproduce. If she turns out to be barren, she is considered a curse. Hence, she undergoes various treatments and rituals in order to give birth. Butler suggests in liberating the female body from such essentialistic constructions because there is no necessary relationship between one's body and one's gender. She refers to Herculine Barbin's situation and drag artists to expose gender a 'fictive production.' It is possible to have a feminine body and not exhibit feminine attributes viz. mothering, nurturing, and dependence.

Kehinde realizes the meaninglessness of constantly reiterating the traditional feminine attributes she is expected to perform when she makes a visit to Nigeria after 18 years. Her stay in her native land creates an awareness of the freedom she enjoys in the West and the sexual oppression she undergoes in Nigeria. Like all modern Nigerian women, she is caught in a conundrum between African traditions and westernization. She sways like a pendulum fluctuating between two poles of culture. Having lived in a land where women believe in their individuality, Kehinde's world shatters into pieces when she finds out that Albert has "got another wife" (71). Her life changes and she is compelled to assume the role of "the senior wife of a successful Nigerian man" (73). She is made to understand that it is normal for a Nigerian man to have many wives. Ifeyinwa tells her "It happens all the time. My husband has two other wives and we all live in two rooms" (71). So did Albert who argues: "'I know you're angry. But look back, Kehinde. My father had two wives, yours had three, so what sin did I commit that is so abominable?'" (86). She also understands the demerits of being financially dependent. In a letter to her friend Moriammo, Kehinde writes "Honestly, Moriammo, Albert has humilated me, and the worst is, that I have to depend on him financially. He gave me the first housekeeping money in over eighteen years of marriage, and I had to take it" (94). She is forced to kneel down and accept the housekeeping money Albert offers. When she refuses to do so his sisters "levied a fine of one cock" as punishment (94). Disappointed with the submissive gender roles which seem natural to the natives, Kehinde realizes that in Nigeria one is expected to behave like a traditional Igbo woman so that their men would feel important: "a wife [had] to give her husband room enough to be a man" (89). It is for the same reason that Albert prefers Rike to Kehinde because she "bow[s] down to tradition" (89). Unlike Kehinde that "was full of herself, playing the role of a white, middle-class woman, forgetting she was not only black, but an Igbo woman," Rike does not allow her education to cloud her duty towards her husband or his relatives (35). She plays the role of a good wife and a dutiful mother, and she takes great care of the needs of the family members. While edifying readers about Nigerian culture and traditions, Emecheta insists that the institutions of marriage and motherhood should not be celebrated at the altar of sacrificing their capabilities. Unwilling to let her dreams dry up like a raisin in the sun, Kehinde leaves Nigeria as she refuses to be a victim of polygamous marriage which she believes is "degrading to women" (84). Her decision to return to London and start life afresh explains her realization that she deserved to be valued and treated with respect. In doing so, she steps down from the pedestal of expected feminine roles of a wife and a mother and reiterates a new set of gender acts, behaviours and practices. She transforms herself into an empowered 'woman,' beginning by claiming her authority over her house:

She got out of the taxi in front of the house in Leyton … dipped her hand into her coat pocket and brought out the front door key. … house welcomed her like a lost child. … a voice insider her sang out, 'Home, sweet home!' … The For Sale sign flapped forlornly in the wind … with unexpected strength she wrenched it from the ground. 'This house is not for sale,' she declared. 'This house is mine.'(107-8)

Kehinde's situation reflects Ato Quayson's argument that a woman is caught between traditions and modernism. He writes: "women's existence is strung between traditionalism and modernity in ways that make it extremely difficult for them to attain personal freedom without severe sacrifices or compromise" (585). Consequently, Kehinde sacrifices the most important thing for a Nigerian woman which is marriage.

Kehinde is able to attain emancipation and empowerment with education. In her letter, Bimpe congratulates her acquiring a degree in sociology. She writes: "I can't believe that in such a short time, a little over three years, you could get a degree! I know you said you were determined to be a university graduate … Many congratulations, Mum" (122). No one better than Emecheta can understand the difficulties a black woman has to undergo in order to be educated. Like any other black woman, Emecheta also struggled to be educated. Nevertheless, she overcame all odds and obstacles and attained graduation from the London University. Realizing that education is a stepping stone to a woman's self-achievement and success, she resignifies her female protagonist as an educated black woman that believes the saving grace for all women to be "the big 'E' of education" (95). It helped her to identify the power structures that muzzle her individuality.

In the pursuit of constructing a new identity, Kehinde rescues herself from the oppressive power structures in the society that subjugates her. She takes control of her body and emotions. No longer is she going to be her husband's sex object or her children's dutiful mother. She awakens into an empowering subject taking decisions for herself. She tells Ifeyinwa that she has tied her tubes because she does not want to conceive anymore: "'I don't want any more children. I have tied my tubes'" (103). She also chooses to have a relationship with Mr. Michael Gibson, her tenant. Though her son Joshua questions this relationship and reminds her "to be the ideal Ibusa village mother" that lives for her children, she dismisses his expectations and remains firm in her decision (138). She argues that "'I did, when you were young. My whole life was wound around your needs, but now you're a grown man! Mothers are people too, you know'" (139). Kehinde thus relishes the new life she chooses: "… she seemed to be glorying in it. Enjoying shedding her duties. Most Igbo women like taking on the whole family's burden, so that they would be needed. [But Kehinde] … no longer cared" (141).

Kehinde's quest for empowerment should not be misunderstood as rivalry against her male counterparts. She is not self-centered. She does not realize her dreams of an independent and successful life at the cost of her family. She swallows her pride and self-pity and earns money doing such menial jobs as adjusting the television for the sheikh, making beds, and cleaning bathrooms. She even does over time. All this hard work, in order to reunite with her children. Being family-centered is an important trait that Nigerian women cherish. They believe in helping one another. They not only help their family members but also work towards the betterment of the entire community- men, women and children. The delineation of Emecheta's female characters in empowering roles reflects Clenora Hudson-Weems's argument in *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* that "Africana women have always been, by necessity, independent and responsible co-workers and decision-makers" that strive for "human harmony and survival" (28, 31).

Reconstituting Nigerian women as independent and determined, Emecheta gives voice to the marginalized group of Nigerian women that were hitherto oppressed in the heterosexual matrix. Her female characters have begun to speak, decide and act for themselves. Her novel *Kehinde* is an attempt to create awareness among readers of oppressive power structures that muzzle the growth of women. It also offers the possibility of redefining the identity of women in powerful roles. Nevertheless, as observed in Velma Mohan's article 'The Journey of the Nigerian Women en route to Empowerment in the Select Works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,' the emancipation of women is still in its nascent stage. In spite of flourishing in various fields of society, "[t]he struggle by women to assert themselves and attain complete empowerment in a world dominated by men is far from over" (114). However, the resignification of the identity of a 'woman' in empowering roles is not far from impossible. Through Kehinde's resolute and independent character, Emecheta argues that the future prospects for Nigerian women are promising. They can rearticulate an identity of their own.

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