Performative Gender: Feminine Dualism in Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* and Assia Djebar’s *Children of the New World*

In 1990, Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble*, a feminist text that explored the categories of gender, sex, homosexuality, heterosexuality, and most well noted, gender and identity performance. Initially, she questions what it means to be woman, discussing critics Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud, Monique Wittig, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray and their views of womanhood and the Other. Butler also discusses the issue of attempting to broadly represent women coming from different cultural backgrounds; “By conforming to a requirement of representational politics that feminism articulate a stable subject, feminism thus opens itself to charges of gross misrepresentation” (6-7). It is impossible for such a broad idea as feminism to adequately define each woman in the world, and it should not try to do so, Buchi Emecheta discusses the same feeling of disconnect between African women and the typically Eurocentric ideas behind Feminism in a 1992 interview: “The reason why we Africans have difficulty identifying with feminism is because we have always worked. So it’s no use telling us that feminism is something new” (“Buchi Emecheta” 94). In a colonialist state there are expectations for how people are expected to behave, this is especially true for women. Women experience a duality of gender identity performance, not only are they expected to act within the realms of the colonized ( unintelligent, docile, etc.), but they also must perform within a changing environment, balancing changing gender expectations, such as Nnu Ego, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, who must
balance the expectations of her upbringing yet also navigate the fast-paced and cut-throat city of Lagos, fully providing for her family when her husband cannot. Judith Butler defines gender identity formation as “an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (191). Judith Butler’s framework of feminism and identity performance in relation to gender creates a lens through which to study Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* and Assia Djebar’s *Children of the New World*; in each text the women are forced to navigate colonial and post colonial expectations for blacks yet must also face the duality of existing and prospering in their own community; a duality that leads, more often than not, to doubt for the women of the texts, doubt in themselves, their husbands, and their cultures. However, as the novels progress these women, through their “stylized repetition of acts” within their homes and communities, carve out niches for themselves in which they are able to be find their own identity beyond what is prescribed for them.

Albert Memmi in his text *The Colonizer and the Colonized* describes the psychological mindsets behind those involved in colonialism. He begins his discussion by defining three types of colonizer: the colonial, the colonizer that refuses, and the colonizer that accepts. The idea of the colonial is someone who stumbles onto colonialism by chance, because there are jobs available and he is able to make a profit, however, his goal is not to stay in the colony but to eventually be able to return to his country and buy a home (Memmi 6). Memmi proposes that even with no malice driving the colonial’s intent, he will still reap the benefits of the colony, and that “certain privileges are reserved strictly for him” (9). However, “The colonial does not exist, because it is not up to the European in the colonies to remain a colonial, even if he had so intended. Whether he expressly wishes it or not, he is received as a privileged person by the institutions, customs and people” (Memmi 17). These privileges include the respect of the
colonized, being given favorable jobs, the celebration of his traditional and religious holidays, and the use of his mother tongue in social, political, and financial transactions (Memmi 13). The colonizer who refuses is a colonial who consistently speaks out against the injustices and the privilege that he sees in colonial life. “To refuse means either withdrawing physically from these conditions or remaining to fight and change them,” he has the option of going home, or attempting to enact a political movement to change the way that things are (Memmi 19). To stay and fight creates an issue for the colonizer who refuses, he is put into a liminal state; by speaking out he is ostracized by his countrymen for seeking their financial destruction and yet “The fact remains, however, that he admits a fundamental difference between the colonized and himself” (Memmi 25). Memmi maintains that the colonizer who refuses will not refuse for long and that even during his refusal, he is still reaping the same benefits of privilege that the colonial reaped, the same privilege that drives the colonizer who accepts (46). The colonizer who accepts is one who fully assents to the privileges and benefits he reaps by colonizing and maintaining the status quo, and his assent typically originates through profit that he expects to make daily (Memmi 58). In order to profit, the colonizer must participate in the hierarchy of colonial life, and in turn, must take full advantage of those beneath him, the colonized.

The second half of *The Colonizer and the Colonized* focuses on the life of the colonized. Firstly addressing how the colonized are oppressed by the colonizers through the creation of myths. In order to perpetuate the status quo of a colony, colonizers revert to racism to oppress and degrade the colonized, through “The substantive expression to the [colonizer’s] benefit, of a real or imaginary trait of the accused” (Memmi 81). The myths of the colonized include ignorance, laziness, that they are inherently servile, degenerate, or childlike—the colonized are also typically marked by the plural in order to dehumanize them and rob them of their liberty
Eventually, the colonized develop what is known as The Dependency Complex, colonizing powers has so long oppressed them, and the racial myths have been so long institutionalized that the colonized begin to believe that they are true, which leads them to become wholly dependent on the colonizers and the hierarchy they have established (Memmi 89). Memmi claims that disfigurement occurs for both the colonizer and the colonized, “One is disfigured into an oppressor . . . the other, into an oppressed culture whose development is broken” (89). Memmi concludes his text with two ways in which the colonized may respond to colonization, assimilation or revolt. In attempting assimilation, the colonized are attempting to become those who had oppressed them, however, they will never be able to reach full assimilation, they begin to “Tire of the exorbitant price which [they] must pay and which [they] never [finish] owing (Memmi 123). The final option, revolt consists of regaining indigenous language usage, reversing the mythology of colonialism, and breaking down the hierarchical structures of the colony. The mindset of colonization is influenced by each of these human characterizations: the colonial, the colonizer who refuses, the colonizer who accepts, and the colonized. This thought process/hierarchy is the first layer that must be overcome in the search for gender identity, women cannot begin to branch out from their own cultures until they are able to navigate and dominate the culture of colonialism.

In Assia Djebar’s Children of the New World the audience is privy to an ongoing battle in the city of Blida in Algeria, the novel follows a twenty-four hour period from the morning of May 25, 1956 to May 26, 1956. There is a range of characters wrapped up in the ongoing war on the mountain, also the largest symbol in the text, as it seems to loom over each scene in the text. Touma, a young woman in her twenties, is a resounding example of a young woman attempting to regain agency through independence. Specifically, her seemingly traitorous alliance with the
police acts as her way to assert her own expectations for her life. By acting as an informant, Touma is not simply feeding her people into the machine of colonialism. In her own way she is asserting her own power over the police. She is breaking out of the expectations set for the colonized; rather than giving them information for nothing, which would have been the expectation for the colonized, she gives information for her own reasons, and receives gifts and attention from the men she works with, “She was chatting, laughing; her mouth open to the man . . .” and “a silver lighter” (Djebar 68, 91). Touma represents Albert Memmi’s response of the colonized, assimilation. Touma consistently tries to fit into the French, rather than the Arab, community in Blida. In truth, her actions detach her from both communities. The French see her as an informant, possibly a source of entertainment, but nothing more; she is only a means to an end. The Arab community has almost completely shunned her. She does not conform to what she is supposed to wear or how she is supposed to behave. Moral outrage combined with her spying, which the Arab community would see as betrayal, completely ostracizes Touma from their community. She actively seeks however, to create a niche for herself as a woman, not just as a colonized, which will be discussed later.

Another example of subverted colonialism in *Children of the New World* is the ongoing battle throughout the novel. Rebels fighting against the French colonialists overtake the looming mountain. This war creates a backdrop for all of the action in the novel; Salima’s torture, Cherifa’s abdication from her sequestering, Touma’s informing, etc. The rebels represent the final reaction of the colonized, revolt. “That accusing and annihilating image must be shaken off; oppression must be attacked boldly since it is impossible to go around it (Memmi 128). Each character in the text is somehow involved in this revolt, whether it be literally involved in guerilla warfare, or if it is the women who have been left behind when their husbands go to join
the resistance – either way, Touma’s spying and the rebels on the mountain both symbolize the struggle of these people to break out of the colonialist mold and forge a path of their own.

Buchi Emecheta in her *The Joys of Motherhood* tells the story of a woman, Nnu Ego and her struggle to become a mother. Contrasting with Djebbar’s *Children of the New World, The Joys of Motherhood* is set more concretely in a colonial society with a dual setting between traditional Ibuza and modern Lagos. There are two prominent examples demonstrating Nnu Ego’s dealings with the colonial hierarchy, when her husband is drafted for the war, and her husband’s court session ending in his conviction of assault. Nnaife, Nnu Ego’s second husband, struggles throughout the novel to provide for his family, allowing most of the weight to fall onto Nnu Ego’s shoulders. However, Nnaife sees an opportunity present itself after he is drafted, he is told, “That their wives and relatives would be well cared for . . . . He was told that the large sum of twenty pounds would be paid to her, and that she would be sent similar amounts from time to time” (Emecheta 146). So he goes along with the military knowing that his people will be cared for. However, they receive the first payment, but that is all. Nnu Ego thinks that the payments will be sent to her, but it is only later that she realizes that there is red tape to sift through in order to get the money she had been promised. With Nnaife deployed the responsibility for caring for her growing family falls squarely on her shoulders. The miscommunication that occurs when it comes to the money is evidence of a corrupt political structure; not only are the men kidnapped and forced into the military, but the political pathways that Nnu Ego is forced to navigate are never explained to her. This demonstrates the colonial privilege discussed in Memmi; the colonized are condemned by the society they live in because they receive the exact opposite, their mother tongue is not used, they are given the worst jobs, they are given no respect from the colonizers, their traditional and religious holidays are ignored or banned as heathen.
Secondly, Nnaife’s court case epitomizes the judgment, degradation, and condemnation perpetuated by the colonizers on the colonized. Nnaife assaulted a neighbor under the insult of corrupting and tainting his daughter. In Igbo culture, his insult and his reaction are justified. However, the court that is put together the put his on trial is anything but fair. The jury was made up of mostly Europeans and the audience was three-quarters full of Yoruba’s who did not understand their customs. During the trial, the prosecuting lawyer but their race, heritage, and customs on trial, but without providing the proper context for any of them—resulting in a condemnation of their family and a conviction of Nnaife with five year’s imprisonment. Nnu Ego and Nnaife were both made to look like fools in their testimony and the prosecutor makes a point about the irreconcilable differences between Igbo culture and Lagos culture:

_**Nnu Ego:** “My husband is like any other man. I would not have married and man who did not behave like a man.”

_Prosecutor:_ “Even to the extent of carrying a cutlass?”

_**Nnu Ego:** “He was drunk and his daughter’s honor was at stake.”

_Prosecutor:_ “And the bride price?”

_**Nnu Ego:** “Yes, and her bride price. It’s her father’s money.”

_Prosecutor:_ “You’re right, Mrs. Owulum. But the trouble is that we are now in the twentieth century and is Lagos. No one has the right to carry a cutlass, not even your husband.”

(Emecheta 218)

The conviction of Nnaife and the embarrassment of Nnu Ego on the stand epitomizes the injustices done to the colonized during colonization. There was no way for Nnaife to get a fair trial in these circumstances, and therefore he was condemned. Nnu Ego and Nnaife are still
trapped within the colonized mindset in that they have no begun to defy authority for their rights, as Touma and the rebels do in *Children of the New World*. However, Nnu Ego is able to defy her own circumstances in order to provide the best she can for her children. She keeps them in school no matter what she has to do, consistently doing backbreaking work to keep the money coming in. Her passion for her children and their betterment is her form of revolt against the colonial hierarchy. She does not condemn her children to the same life she is living, she empowers them to reach beyond what she has.

*The Joys of Motherhood* and *Children of the New World* both show characters struggling to overcome the oppressions of colonialism; there is, however, a dualism of identity seeking in both texts. Not only are the women in these texts breaking out of colonialism, but they are also finding ways to navigate within their own communities, and the expectations for their gender.

The most common depiction of women in African literature, especially with male authors, is the Mother Africa trope. This idea epitomizes one dimension of the oppressive, specifically patriarchal structure, which they have to navigate. Florence Stratton in *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* addresses the problems behind the literary symbol of Mother Africa and what it means for women and women authors. In her explanation of the Mother Africa trope, Stratton hopes to show “That the trope operates against the interests of women, excluding them, implicitly if not explicitly, from authorship and citizenship” (40). She examines texts in which the Mother Africa representation is either portrayed as a virgin, a loving mother, or a prostitute, usually “pregnant” with her author’s meaning (Stratton 52). She also points out the Mother Africa was used by Senghorian Negritude advocates as “the heritage of African values, a pre-colonial African essence as yet uncontaminated by western culture” and that she is “The Black Woman, the Earth Mother, and anthropomorphic symbol of primal
sensuality” meaning, this portrayal of Mother Africa as a light in the darkness (Stratton 40). However, Stratton counters that argument by expounding on the gender binaries it produces. It plays into the male-female power dynamic, that it “legitimizes the critical practice of excluding women from the creation of culture, of writing them out of the literary tradition,” and how it perpetuates the exploitation of female sexuality, since Mother Africa was portrayed in the texts she examined as a virgin, a nurturing mother, or a whore/prostitute (Stratton 51-53). Stratton’s final conclusion is “That through the Mother Africa trope, [male authors] mask the subordination of women in the patriarchal socio-political systems of African state from which [women] do, indeed, need to be liberated” (55). Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi in her book Gender in African Women’s Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference acknowledged the false image portrayed of women and its perpetuation, “Men—male-writers, male-critics—promoted their work and the ideas of other men such that even those images of women that were fostered systematically excluded images of women by women,” meaning, when authentic visions of women appeared in literature they were seen as actually inauthentic, because male writers and critics had so thoroughly perpetuated their ideas of the African woman (3). The idea of motherhood and fertility appeared again and again alongside of the Mother Africa trope, which served to lay importance on women based off of their ability to procreate; “This idealization of the African woman that posits her status as a transcendental symbol found itself duplicated in African literature with a parallel stress on the supremacy of motherhood, of the fertile mother, of fecundity” (Nfah-Abbenyi 3).

In The Joys of Motherhood, Nnu Ego’s biggest struggle in the first half of the narrative is her ability to have children. Initially, she is married to Amatokwo as his first wife. As time progresses she does not become pregnant. Under pressure from his family, Amatokwo takes a
second wife. Nnu Ego spirals into depression when the new wife becomes pregnant quickly; she cares for the new child, she even breastfeeds the child. When this is discovered Amatokwo beats her. Eventually, Nnu Ego goes back to her father’s house, he father finds her a new husband who will not put as much pressure on her to have children immediately, he hopes that this will allow her to relax and get pregnant soon. The novel opens on a scene where Nnu Ego is about to kill herself—she finally bore a son, but he died expectantly—she blames herself and decides to end her life, though she is saved before she can achieve her goal. The sheer psychological turmoil Nnu Ego goes through about bearing children symbolizes the pressure women are under to bear children. Butler discusses Foucault’s ideas of maternity—that “The maternal libidinal economy” can be understood as “A product of an historically specific organization of sexuality” (125) If one accepts this model, Foucault’s ideas can be understood instead as:

A reification that both extends and conceals the institution of motherhood as compulsory for women . . . . The clearly paternal law that sanctions and requires the female body to be characterized primarily in terms of it reproductive function is inscribed on the body as the law of its natural necessity. (Butler 125-126)

Based off of the Mother Africa trope a woman who cannot bear children is a betrayal to her country and no woman at all; her husband condemns her and treats her as a farmhand rather than the senior wife. “‘What do you want me to do?’ Amatokwo asked. “I am a busy man. I have no time to waste my precious male see on a woman who is infertile. I have to raise children for my line. If you really want to know, you don’t appeal to me any more. You are so dry and jumpy. When a man comes to a woman he wants to be cooled, not scratched by a nervy female who is all bones”’ (Emecheta 32). The necessity to bear children in order to be considered a woman in Nnu Ego’s cultural environment in the text is an example of the patriarchal hierarchy present
within the culture of the colonized. There is another facet to women in patriarchal societies too, the requirement for submission to their husband.

In *The Joys of Motherhood* Nnaife’s second wife Adaku symbolizes the female not submitting to the male. Nnaife inherited Adaku after his brother died expectantly, this is what is expected in Igbo culture, and Nnaife would be expected to take care of and satisfy his new wife. When Adaku arrived Nnu Ego was extremely jealous of her, however, Adaku suffered alongside of Nnu Ego throughout their hardest times when Nnaife could not provide for his wives. Adaku was a highly sexualized woman, the first night Nnaife laid with her, and she “Turned out to be one of those shameless modern women whom Nnu Ego did not like. What did she think she was doing? Did she think Nnaife her lover and not her husband, to show her enjoyment so” (Emecheta 124)? Adaku, at first was a happy second wife; she tried to help as best she could. However, Adaku suffered from the jealousy of Nnu Ego, and she eventually became fed up with the ill treatment she was receiving—she was getting abuse for only having two female children—and being told she had no say in the family, and she decides to leave. “I don’t care for the life [my personal gods] gave me I’m leaving here tomorrow with my girls. I am not going to Ibuza. I am going to live with the [prostitutes] . . . . As for my daughters, they will have to take their own chances in this world. I am not prepared to stay here and be turned into a mad woman, just because I have no sons” (Emecheta 168-169). Adaku goes on to support herself well and is able to keep her girls in school, in the end she shows no malice toward Nnu Ego, because she understands the stress she was under throughout the novel. Adaku becomes an independent, liberated woman who provides for herself and her children without the help of a man.

In *Children of the New World* the first story the audience is privy too is that of Cherifa and her first husband. Cherifa found “Nothing worse than being forced to live with a man whom
everything inside her had instinctively rejected” (Djebbar 18). However, Cherifa submits, because that is what is expected of her in her cultural environment; but then it goes too far and she cannot live that way anymore. Similarly, from *The Joys of Motherhood* their argument pertains to Cherifa’s inability to bear children. Different from Nnu Ego, however, Cherifa refuses to have children by this man even when he commands her to go to treatment; it is at that moment that she revolts, "’No!’ Cherifa hesitated. ‘No, I will not go for treatment . . . . No! God has not given me any children. I don’t want any’” (Djebbar 11)! At this point, she effectively leaves him; she first must drive him to repudiate her to which she responds with a “Mercilessly gentle smile, a smile of triumph” (Djebbar 16). Although Cherifa cannot outright leave her husband she is able to manipulate him and the cultural system in which they live well enough to enact what she wants for her future, in turning her husband down, both about having children and sex/companionship, Cherifa decreed her own revolt. She refuses to accept her husband, a man she does not love; in breaking out of that marriage she grants herself Youssef, her second husband whom she loves dearly.

The women in these texts are required to navigate a dual oppressive structure, first, they must participate and overcome colonialism, and second, they are required to navigate their standing in their cultural environment based on their gender. These two tasks converge when the women participate in Judith Butler’s idea of performative identity; there are two categories through which some of the women’s identities develop: (1) familial identity (Nnu Ego and Cherifa) and (2) through sexuality and independence (Touma and Adaku). Judith Butler in her address of performative identity discusses a quote from Simone de Beauvoir, “One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one,” arguing that, “*woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or end,” (45). It is significant to remember
here that the women in these novels have to construct their identity through a dual structure of oppression, through the patriarchy of their own culture and through the patriarchy of a foreign oppressive force. If “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being,” then it follows that what these women build their lives around, the actions and motivations they have most often, are what creates their gender identity (Butler 45).

For Nnu Ego and Cherifa, their driving force is their family. Nnu Ego’s motivation centers on her family, specifically her maternity. In discussing Julia Kristeva’s ideas of maternity Butler explains that “Kristeva describes the maternal body as bearing a set of meanings that are prior to culture itself. She thereby safeguards the notion of culture as a paternal structure and delimits maternity as an essentially precultural [sic] reality” (109). This stems from the idea Butler discusses earlier in her text about how gender and sex are cultural constructs, and they have gained a cultural connotation in connection, such as the idea of gender roles—that one gender is better than the other gender at something simply because one is male and the other is female. However, by removing maternity from culture, making it prior to culture, maternity loses its connotation of being woman’s work. Therefore, “The pleasures of maternity constitute local displacements of the paternal law, temporary subversions which finally submit to that against which they initially rebel” (Butler 119). This reasoning depicts Nnu Ego’s devotion to her children and her family as a subversion of the patriarchy rather than a perpetuation of it. Gender performance is enacted through a series of repetitive acts that create an external gender identity. Nnu Ego is, more often than not, the sole provider for her family, placing her in the culturally masculine role, however actions in caring for her children and her household perpetuate her
identity as a woman who can independently care for her loved ones; this is her niche as a woman.

Cherifa’s focus is also on her family but in a different way, her niche lies in the protection of her household and her husband. After escaping a loveless first marriage Cherifa frequently discusses how much love she has for Youssef, when he is in danger, she acts against all tradition:

A strange desire overtakes and worries her, to do something, something daring whose luminosity will astound Youssef. . . . For a happy wife, living inside a house she never leaves as tradition has prescribed, how for the first time to decide to act? . . . . Cherifa no longer needs to dwell on words. She has made her decision. (Djebar 84-85)

Her decision is to warn him, in order to do this she has to walk through town, unaccompanied, to his shop; this is astounding because she is not supposed to cross town without her husband walking a few paces ahead of her as an accompaniment. But her determination is strong to warn her husband. She leaves her home and walks across town—she is ogled by men and becomes extremely uncomfortable—until she reaches her husband and is able to warn him that he may be in danger. Cherifa acts as the protector of her family and her household, also a typically masculine role, however she acts out of love, this is her niche, fiercely protecting the man she loves even if it may prove dangerous to life.

Touma is an Arab informant for the French in Children of the New World; she is considered a emancipated woman in that she does not wear the traditional Arab garb that most of her fellow women wear in Blida, she wears high heels, a short skirt, and a permanent wave in her hair (Djebar 90). She is a highly sexualized character and enjoys the leering attention she gets
from men, “Touma likes being [looked at] this way by these men; she sees it as a form of respect,” (Djebar 90). Her liberation causes unrest in the community however, her brother wishes her dead (and kills her) to protect the honor of the family and the Arabs in the community condemn her for her dress and her actions. Judith Butler addresses the idea of judging a woman on what they are wearing based off of cultural scruples, “A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into the compulsory frames set by various forces that police the social appearance of gender” (45). The idea here is that if one were to trace the cultural reasoning behind certain judgments about clothing and how distinct genders should dress, one would not actually be able to come up with a descent reason to police clothing. Touma is an independent character, she lives on her own and is not under the domain of a spouse or family member, she behaves the way she wants to behave. Touma’s feminine niche is categorized through her sexual and behavioral independence, she achieves what she wants to achieve and lives the life she wants to live.

Adaku, as outlined above, is judged by Nnu Ego for being sexual and enjoying her sexual interactions with her husband. She also carves out and independent living for herself and her children enabling them to get an education. Adaku only realizes her true potential when she removes herself from beneath the domain of her husband. “The pleasures, the desire, the acts—do they not in some sense emanate from the biological body, and is there not some way of understanding that emanation as . . . causally necessitated by that body” (Butler 134)? Adaku’s experience with sexual pleasure allows her to step outside of the social construct of women not enjoying sex too much—using it as only a means to an end—to get pregnant. It is this willingness to step outside of the expectations society has for her that allows Adaku to become an independent woman and sole provider for her children.
These four women are required to navigate unending streams of cultural oppressive constructs. First, the patriarchal hierarchy that is inherent in colonialism including the racism and lack of privilege that being part of the colonized group entails. Second, they must navigate their own culture’s patriarchal hierarchy, where they are under the dominion of fathers, brothers, or husbands for the majority of their life. Nnu Ego and Cherifa navigate this dualism through their dedication to their family, while Adaku and Touma break out of their societal place to forge their own path to fulfillment. Through their repeated actions of dedication to their families, sexual satisfaction, provision for others, and provision for themselves, these women utilize the concepts of Judith Butler’s performative gender to carve out feminine niche’s in their communities where they can prosper.
Works Cited


