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**Gender Performances and the Dynamics of Identity  
Construction in Edna O’Brien’s *House of Splendid  
Isolation* and Bernardine Evaristo’s *Girl, Woman, Other***

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to examine how the performance of gender roles in Edna O’Brien’s *House of Splendid Isolation* and Bernardine Evaristo’s *Girl, Woman, Other* shape women’s identities and determine their position of power within the private sphere. The analyses in this study are based on Judith Butler’s theory on gender performativity developed in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Butler argues that identity, particularly gender identity, are constituted in time through gender performances. This study assumes that O’Brien and Evaristo’s selected novels portray characters who are assertive in their social performances, despite social expectations and norms that seek to constrain them within socially defined positions and roles. From the analysis of the selected novels, we realized that postmodern characters live in societies with diverse family models. These include the traditional family model, the dual-earner family model, the single-parent family model and the same-sex family model. We also found that gender performances shifted with the changes in the family structure. Characters in traditional family models tend to be more concerned about performing traditional gender roles and are, therefore, more ready to conform to social expectations. This means that their identities are, to a greater extent, socially defined. Most of the female characters who choose to conform to traditional gender expectations live in societies where failing to comply results in serious social sanctions. On the other hand, most postmodern female characters are deeply dissatisfied with traditional gender roles and are often involved in activities outside the home.

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We realised that changes in the structure of the family are hardly ever followed by men's change of attitude towards house-care activities. Therefore, many female characters adopt the role of the breadwinner only as an additional workload, since they still carry the full responsibility of the housekeeper. However, the analysis revealed that younger characters, especially those in advanced societies, are getting more conscious of the dynamics of gender roles and are insisting on a balanced division of labour, both in and out of the home. This study also brought us to the surprising realisation that female oppression is also possible in all-female relationships especially when one partner seeks to occupy the position of power while imposing her will on the economically or physically less privileged partner. Thus, lesbianism is not a solution to female oppression.

**Keywords:** Bernardine Evaristo; Edna O'Brien; Gender Performances; Girl; Woman; Other; House of Splendid Isolation; Identity Construction.

## 1. Introduction

The concept of identity formation has gradually departed from the traditional and essentialist view to the social and discursive approach which view identity, not as a fixed and stable entity but as continuously constituted in social action. In this light, the process of identity construction involves both "the role of local or wider social and cultural contexts in constraining which forms of identity are available to the people within those contexts—that is, social construction" and "the active role of the individual in constructing his/her own identity—that is, personal construction" (Vignoles et al., 1:12). Jonathan Culler [2] notes that the "subject is an actor or agent, a free subjectivity that does things...but a subject is also subjected, determined" (2:109). People are made into men and women by particular positions which are allocated in the social order. They become who they are by performing acts and taking up roles that define them. This paper examines O'Brien and Evaristo's representation of women's gender roles within the context of postmodernism and how these socially attributed roles determine their social status and define their identities. In her doctorate thesis titled "Representations of Femininity in the Novels of Edna O'Brien, 1960-1996", Amanda Greenwood [3] argues that O'Brien specifically examines the condition of women excluded from patriarchal discourse and addresses throughout her fictions her protagonists' attempts to construct their identities. Mary Ryan [4] in her article "Ending the Silence: Representing Women's Reproductive Lives in Irish Chick Lit" lays emphasis on the question of socially constructed images while highlighting the damage it can cause to women. In her thesis titled "A Grand Tragedy: The Progression and Regression of Gender Roles in Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls Trilogy* and *House of Splendid Isolation*", Laura Gail Miller [5] highlights O'Brien's "continued frustration with gender roles evident in *House of Splendid Isolation*" (5:57). This study posits that O'Brien and Evaristo's selected novels portray characters who are assertive in their social performances, despite social expectations and norms that seek to constrain them within socially defined positions and roles. While some of the characters in O'Brien's *House of Splendid Isolation* [6] and Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* [7] build their identities around socially prescribed gender roles, many others, particularly younger characters, resist traditional gender roles and actively seek to construct their identities in their own terms rather than in relation to their roles as wives and mothers. The analyses in this study are based particularly on Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity developed in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*[8]. According to Butler, "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, ... through a stylized repetition of acts" (8: 179). These acts are the socially

approved and politically regulated bodily movements and gestures that congeal over time to produce the effect of the natural. These acts are constitutive in the sense that “they constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal” (8: 180). In Butler’s view, this “repetition is at once a re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (8: 178). Gender roles are often regulated by gender expectations and norms. In traditional societies, differences in gender roles are more distinct and rigid. However, in postmodern society, the differences in gender activities and attitudes are less rigid as attributes are becoming less and less gender-specific. The postmodern deconstruction of binary opposition has disrupted the binary system of sexual difference that served as the basis for gender-related norms. Gender roles and behaviours are often context-related. People are often expected to play specific roles in the family, the workplace, the religious and the political settings. This article is specifically concerned with the performance of gender roles in the private sphere of the home and how this shape the identity of the characters involved. For the sake of a better comprehension of the context, this article begins with a background on the different family models that are portrayed in the selected texts.

## **2. Family Models**

In Frederick Engels’[9] account of the origin of the family, it is maintained that the family, as it is known today, has gone through several stages of evolution (9:46). Engels argues that the early primitive societies were not based on the nuclear family. People lived in communities of gatherers and hunters. Production and reproduction were a collective responsibility. He asserts that the nuclear family came as a result of capitalism, where men, in an attempt to ensure the patrilineal transfer of inheritance, had to monopolise women’s reproduction. By monopolising women, men were sure that their properties will be inherited by their offspring. Marxist feminism believes that the birth of the traditional nuclear family was the origin of female subordination. To Nancy Chodorow[10], the “sexual division of labour and women’s responsibility for child-care are linked to and generate male dominance” (10: 6). She considers that patriarchy is the result of the division of labour. The attribution of gender roles within the family setting is greatly influenced by the family model. The nature of the family setting might be more or less restrictive on the actions of its members, as it affects the extent to which characters conform to gender expectations.

### ***2.1. The traditional family model***

The traditional family model has been the norm for centuries. It has long been projected as the ideal family model and any other forms of family setting were considered as a deviation from the norm. The traditional family model is generally made of a husband, wife and children as suggested by Michelle Blessing[11] in an online article titled “Types of Family Structures”<sup>1</sup>. The husband is often the breadwinner of the family, while the wife is in charge of taking care of the home and raising the children. The children are dependent on their parents for all their necessities up to maturity where they are expected to replicate the family model. The traditional family model is generally nuclear in western societies but can be larger in other societies. Dominant social discourses have maintained this family model as the standard model for centuries. Gender roles within this family model are performed following a “culturally intelligible grid of idealised and compulsory

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<sup>1</sup> <https://family.lovetoknow.com/about-family-values/types-family-structures>

heterosexuality” (8:172). The analysis of the selected novels suggests that the traditional model is losing some of its popularity. It exists either in remote settings or among older characters, which indicates that the traditional family model is not given priority in the selected novels. This family model is also represented in many cases in a broken and fragmented state even among older characters, most of whom are either separated, divorced, or widowed. For instance, in the *House of Splendid Isolation*, Josie is widowed and lives alone in a big house. Her “splendid” companion, McGreevy, has lost both his wife and his daughter. Her closest neighbour, Mister Doyle, is equally unmarried and has no child. This also suggests that the purely traditional family model with strict gender roles is no longer the dominant model of the postmodern period. However, many variations of the traditional family model, as well as deviant family models, are gradually getting recognised and accepted as a legitimate family setting. Changes within the postmodern society have allowed for the emergence of different family models as a result of the postmodern acceptance of difference, but the traditional family remains the dominant family model because it is maintained by the regulatory regimes of heterosexuality. Contemporary variations of the traditional family model include the dual-earner family model. In this family setting, we have the husband, wife and children just as in the traditional family setting. However, both parents work out of the private sphere and traditional gender norms and roles are either reversed or renegotiated. In some dual-earner family models, partners share the responsibility of breadwinner and both take up domestic roles while at home. This type of family setting is common where both parents work in equally lucrative jobs. In general, most of this type of family setting is influenced by the economic situation of the family. Gender roles are often negotiated and renegotiated for the sake of adjustment and adaptation to changing family conditions. Evaristo’s most solid families are those of dual earners. In *Girl, Woman, Other*, this includes the family of Shirley and that of Carole. There is a considerable amount of gender equality between these two couples. Roles in these families are not attributed according to gender. Lennox, the husband of Shirley, takes care of the home and participates in raising the children, while Shirley also provides for the family by working as a teacher. One of the basic pillars of this family model seems to be gender equality. Though many men might be willing to assume the traditional feminine gender roles, very few tolerate dominating attitudes from women. By presenting these families in a positive tone, Evaristo suggests that the best family model for contemporary society is the model with equal rights and equal responsibilities. Shirley’s family setting is contrasted with that of Penelope. Penelope gets into a purely traditional family model when she marries Giles; her high school sweetheart. Though Penelope is a trained teacher, she adopts the role of the traditional housewife and any attempt to get a job is resisted by Giles. When Penelope reads Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*[12], it sparks her dissatisfaction with the role of the traditional housewife and she decides to fight her way to the workplace. However, her husband is determined to keep her in the domestic sphere. When she insists, he leaves her. This suggests that Giles and Penelope did not define the basis of their relationship before marriage. Penelope wrongfully assumes that since Giles is a civilised man, he will not be patriarchal. Unlike Penelope, Carole and Shirley negotiated their gender relations with their partners before marriage. Evaristo suggests that women should always make sure they understand the basis of their relationship before getting into marriage. The case of Penelope indicates that some men in postmodern society still believe the place of the woman is at home. Many dual-earner families do not have a balanced share of roles. In some cases, women still perform traditionally gendered roles at home while working full-time out of the home. Amma says her “Mum worked eight hours a day in a paid employment, raised four children, maintained the home, made sure the patriarch’s dinner was on the table every night and his

shirts were ironed every morning/meanwhile he was off saving the world” (7:11). Amma’s mother combines the traditional gender role of a mother, housekeeper and still assumes the traditionally masculine role of the breadwinner. Her father does very little to assist her in her traditional gender role. Amma says that “his one domestic duty was to bring home the meat for Sunday lunch from the butcher” (7:11). Amma’s mother represents thousands of postmodern women around the world who have got access to employment, but still carry all the domestic workload while their husbands watch TV, read newspapers, or hang out with friends after work. These women often end up physically exhausted from the combination of paid jobs and domestic activities. They represent the limitations of liberal feminism that advocates equal employment rights, but fails to push men to pick up domestic duties to balance up the division of labour. Thus, many women end up working like slaves both at home and in the workplace, while the men enjoy the new peace of mind brought by having women assist them in their traditional role of breadwinners. Feminism, in this case, becomes beneficial to men and detrimental to women who often get worn out from exhaustion. Amma considers her mother’s illness and death as “symptomatic and symbolic of her ... oppression” (7: 34). She tells her friends that her mother “never found herself”. She “accepted her subservient position in the marriage and rotted from inside” (7: 34). This emphasizes the devastating consequences of being a full-time housewife and having a full-time job. Women, like Helen<sup>2</sup>, no longer outlive their husbands. Hopefully, men can now start to have better and longer lives as a considerable part of the burden of a breadwinner are getting off their shoulders. Most of these women do not even know they are being oppressed. Amma says that her mother “never complained about her lot, or argued with him, a sure sign she’s oppressed” (7: 11). Evaristo, through the voice of one of her characters, draws attention to the subtle form of oppression hidden behind the equal right to employment movement. In *Girl, Woman, Other*, Shirley observes during her first visit to her job site that her school has a “Domestic Science classroom with steel preparation counters and gas cookers, ready to nurture the next generation of housewives, full-time housewife and full-time job” (7: 219). The next generation of women are expected to be good housewives and be financially independent at the same time. This means that they have to fully perform their traditional roles as housekeepers and still take up a full-time job. This comes as “a downside of the Women’s Liberation Movement” (7:219). Yet, it does not have to be so. It is again preferable for women to take on solely traditional roles than to combine both feminine and masculine traditional roles while their men relax as they are being aided in their roles. In the same passage, Shirley says that “it won’t be the case for her” because “once she gets married to Lennox, they’ve agreed he’ll do the cooking, she’ll do the cleaning, he’ll do the shopping, she’ll do the ironing” (7: 219). Since they both work out of home, they chose to equally share domestic work. This suggests that for the dual-earner family model to be effective, men have to be willing to give up their need to be superior and take up some domestic roles as is the case with Lennox. Men’s contribution in this sense is vital for gender equality to be effective. Current programmes like the HeForShe campaign by the AWLO<sup>3</sup> Foundation are working in this line. The women on their part need to be able to support the family with the revenue from their workplaces. The childless couple family model is equally related to the traditional family model. In developed countries, it is not uncommon to meet couples who have decided not to procreate. Children do not constitute part of their family structure. In some cases, the decision can be from both partners and in others, it is a means of resistance to traditional gender roles and expectations by the female partner. This is the case with

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<sup>2</sup> Amma’s mother

<sup>3</sup> African Women in Leadership Organization

Josie in O'Brien's *House of Splendid Isolation*. Josie gets married to James, but refuses to procreate. Josie's childlessness can be interpreted in several ways. Her refusal to procreate is indicative of her rejection of the role of mother highly expected of her.

## **2.2. Deviations from the traditional family model**

Deviations from the traditional family model include the single-parent family model and the same-sex couple family model. The single-parent family model is acceptable in some developed communities, but it is still marginalised in many contemporary societies. It consists of either a single father or mother raising his/her child/children. It is generally common among women. This is because more men than women abandon their offspring. A typical case of women becoming single mothers as a result of men's irresponsibility is portrayed in the case of LaTisha<sup>4</sup>. LaTisha is raised by a single mother when her father leaves her mother for another woman. Her father's attitude causes serious damage to her self-image. So she grows up as a troublesome kid. Her attitude pushes her to replicate her situation by becoming a single mother to three kids from three irresponsible men. She is obliged to take full responsibility for her offspring with the help of her mother. The fact that LaTisha regrets being a single mother suggests that this family model is still a problem even in contemporary societies. It exists by sheer tolerance. However, it is more tolerated within postmodern societies than in some traditional societies. The social sanctions for women who become single mothers are relatively low now compared to the previous eras. Evaristo makes this clear enough when she presents the case of Hattie. Hattie grows up in her parents' farmland around the 1930s<sup>5</sup>. She gets pregnant out of wedlock at the tender age of 14; before she could even know her own body. The moment her pregnancy is discovered by her parents; she is kept out of social contact until she is delivered. To save her image and that of her family, the child is given away. Penelope, who tends out to be this child, learns from her adopted parents that she was abandoned on the staircase of a church. Though single motherhood is still seen as an unfortunate deviation, the situation was completely unacceptable in Hattie's time. Before taking the child away, her father tells her, "you don't speak a word about this, to anyone, ever, you must forget this ever happened, Hattie/your life will be forever ruined with a bastard child/men will have two reasons not to marry you" (7:370). Joseph understands the double sexual standards of his society and wants to save the future of his daughter by doing away with the proofs of his daughter's sexual transgression. He also understands that women in this social context get their identity from their husbands, without whom they are considered a nobody in their society. In *Girl, Woman, Other*, single mothers also include Bummi who is widowed and Omofe who is abandoned by her Nigerian Husband. Single parents usually cannot follow strict traditional gender roles at home because they are obliged to play the roles of both men and women. Single mothers are often the head and the sole provider of their families. Most of them often work harder than other women in a dual-parent family setting because they carry all the responsibilities of the family. The same-sex or transgendered family model is a fairly recent phenomenon in western societies due to the recent development in gay rights that has resulted in the legalisation of gay marriages in most European countries and in America. Gay marriages are still illegal in most parts of Asia and Africa. Gay family models also have different variations ranging from childless couples to couples with children. However, same-sex couples who seek to have children often adopt or make use of technologically assisted reproduction methods

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<sup>4</sup> In Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*

<sup>5</sup> She is "ninety-three and counting" when the chapter dedicated to her opens (340).

like in vitro fertilisation or intracytoplasmic sperm injection. Though same-sex relations are represented in both, *Girl, Woman, Other*, and in other works by the selected authors, the characters involved are hardly ever in a family, in the traditional sense of the word, except in cases where they are members of an extended family like it is the case with Morgan. None of the gay couples in the selected novels is officially married. The case of Yazz<sup>6</sup> is a situation that resists classification. Her parents, Amma and Roland are both gay. Amma seems more like a single parent though she shares parental responsibility with Roland, her sperm donor and the legitimate father of Yazz. The gay characters in the selected novels have the most unstable, the most disruptive and the most polyamorous sexual relationships. The analysis of the selected novels reveals that family models change following changes in social norms and conditions. The social changes from the traditional, through modern, to the postmodern period also influence changes in the family structure. Gender roles within the family also change depending on the family model. These changes are not only temporally, but also geographically contingent. In the selected works, older characters are more likely to be part of a traditional family model than younger characters. Also, characters in less developed societies are equally more likely to be in a traditional family model than characters in developed societies. The analysis of gender roles within the selected novels will, therefore, be done in relation to the different models of the family, in order to highlight how evolution in the family structure affects the performance of gender roles, which in turn influences how women in these different eras are defined.

### 3. Gender Performances and Identity Construction

This section examines the performance of gender roles within the private sphere of the home while highlighting the impact of gender performances on the construction of characters, especially female characters' identities. Characters' roles and social attitudes do not only help to define their identities but also reflect or determine their social statuses and their position in power relations. Men and women adopt systematically different roles and attitudes in traditional family settings. They also occupy different positions of power at home. Men typically play the role of providers, protectors and decision-makers of their families. Women mostly play the role of housekeepers. For women, their first role is seeing to the needs of the family members, taking care of the home and raising children. Since the home is considered as a place that provides shelter from the huddles of the external world, women are expected to make the home a comfortable shelter for the family members. They are expected to be, not only emotionally welcoming but also to make sure that the home is clean and neat. Their responsibility in the home also includes providing food to the family. If the husband is responsible for bringing in the necessary resources for the family's feeding, she must make sure the family is well-fed. In *Girl, Woman, Other*, when the chapter about Winsome, the mother of Shirley, opens; she is in the kitchen "preparing a family meal of roast breadfruit, fried flying fish seasoned with onion and thyme, with a side dish of grilled yellow squash, eggplant, zucchini and pan-roasted mushrooms with a herb lemon sauce" (7:249). This announces her role as a housewife. She has taken on traditional gender roles since her husband decided they leave London soon after their marriage. Winsome does not seem discontented with her traditional gender roles. However, she is not satisfied with the inferior position she held as a daughter and wife. She was expected to obey her father and then her husband. Before marrying Clovis, Winsome used to work as a bus cashier. After their marriage, her

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<sup>6</sup> The youngest female protagonist in Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*.

husband demanded that they leave London and “head off for the south-west of England” where he hoped to find work as a fisherman (7: 259). The last thing Winsome “wanted was to be a fisherman’s wife, being a fisherman’s daughter had been hard enough” (7: 259). Yet, she was obliged to follow him because “a woman had to obey her husband in those days, .../divorce was shameful and only granted on the grounds of adultery, if a marriage didn’t work out, it was a life sentence” (7: 259). Clovis did not have to force his wife, it was the norm in their time for women to follow their husbands’ decisions whether they liked them or not. When Winsome suggests to Clovis that they should return home instead of moving further south to the Scilly Isles, he tells her, “Winnie, I mek up mi mind, I got to try this place, I have a hunch” (7: 260). She then realises that she “didn’t really know this man who wanted [her] to follow him around like a mindless idiot” (7: 260). Though Winsome is not satisfied with the expectation to obey her husband completely, there is nothing else she can do because she is constrained by social norms, which established men as decision-makers. When Clovis speaks, he uses the first person singular, “I” even though they have to move together. This suggests that Winsome does not exist here as a person in her own right. She exists only in relation to her husband. Winsome affirms that she has never existed as a person in her own right: “first [she] was a daughter, then a wife and mother, and now also a grandmother and great-grandmother” (4: 257). Her identity is closely tied to her role as a wife and mother. Her perception of the self depends then on how well she performs these roles. Winsome is unable to construct her identity on her own terms because she feels her fate is at the whim of her husband. Traditional social norms were still prevalent around the sixties when Winsome got married. Cohabitation was unacceptable and divorce was prohibited except in the case of adultery. Most women like Winsome had no choice but to adapt to the inferior position in the family and take orders from their husbands even if they were not favourable. Manuku Mukoni[13] suggests that the “lack of power for women is attributed to socialisation that begins in the family and is reinforced in the community” (13: 309). Winsome realises with dissatisfaction that she occupies a subordinate position at home. She says, “if it was twenty years later, Rachel, I’d have left him there and then/if it had been thirty years later, I’d have lived with him before marrying him” (7: 260). This suggests that the gender norms regulating social roles, behaviours and status have changed thirty years later. Since Winsome married in the sixties, thirty years later takes us to the middle of the postmodern period. Winsome suggests here that women in the postmodern period have more freedom than those of the modern period. Winsome feels that her daughter, Shirley, is very lucky to have all the opportunities she did not have. Shirley later complains that her mother used to impose traditional gender roles on her when she was a teenager. While her brothers “didn’t have to do housework or even wash their own clothes, ... she had to spend her Saturday mornings doing both” (7: 218). Though at home, Shirley is treated according to gender expectations, she excels at school and becomes more successful than her brothers. Once professionally successful, she will reject traditional gender roles at home. While Winsome is busy preparing the family meal, “Shirley is winding down with a glass of wine while gazing dreamily at the sea like it’s the most beautiful thing she’s ever seen” (7: 250). Unlike her mum, Shirley is not concerned with cooking. She does not even cook in her own house. Her husband does. Winsome considers the fact that she dresses in white when she is on holiday as “symbolic of [her] not helping out around” the kitchen. Unlike her mother, Shirley does not derive her personal identity from socially defined gender roles. She is also a wife and mother, but her sense of self is not tied to these gendered performances. She actively constructs her own identity and, therefore, exists as a person of her own right. Penelope’s mother, Margaret, is another older character who assumes an entirely traditional feminine role at home. After her marriage, she



forgoes all the activities she enjoyed before, for the role of a housewife. Margaret was “once so rebellious and gregarious”. Margeret;

*enjoyed dances, made friends, cycled into the countryside on Sundays with a group of them. Including few bounders who were nevertheless such fun, had picnics, got merry on gin from their hip flasks.*

*She'd sneak out at midnight to bathe naked in the River Foss with them*

*Hitched her skirts above the knee when she was far away enough from home*

*Flagrantly smoked in public when women who did so were considered vulgar. (7: 278)*

As soon as she gets married she changes. All she does now is “knitting, sewing, cooking cleaning, ironing, or any other activities that filled her days” (7: 279). She has left the person she used to be in the past. She tells Penelope how she misses dancing and often thinks of the past, of the person she used to be. She says, “I don’t know where she went” (7: 279). Margaret does not seem to be happy with who she has become. She wanted to be a teacher, but the law at the time did not allow married women to own jobs. This means that after training for the profession, she will have to give it up as soon as she gets married, which defeated the purpose of training. Penelope feels “sorry for her having to choose between a career and a family, which seemed terribly unfair and just as her mother couldn’t wait to escape the sages of South Africa, she couldn’t wait to go to college, have a career and leave her parent’s straightjacketed lives behind” (7: 279). She marries Giles as soon as they finish their studies. The irony here is that while feeling sorry for her mother, Penelope does not foresee herself in a similar situation later. When Penelope marries her high school sweetheart, Giles, she does not expect him to try to confine her to the home. Everything seems pretty perfect, “as she’d dreamed, Giles was so caring of her, enquiring about her welfare, affectionate touches, a stroke on her cheek, a kiss at the nape of her neck, making her feel important and desired” (7: 285). She gets pregnant before having a chance to start the career she trained for and with a husband who assisted her in hard jobs at home and tolerated her cooking experiments, she does not “mind staying at home with the babies” especially when they are still new-borns. However, Penelope soon feels overwhelmed by the task of childbearing and “after three years of having two suckling children gorging on her engorged breasts, she began to feel sucked dry by them” (7: 286). So, she demands a break to “counterbalance her now rather unwilling role as an earth mother” (7: 286). She equally begins to feel sidelined from current important discussions including those “about the various cultural revolutions erupting globally, including the women’s liberation one” which are taking place while she [is] knee-deep in kiddie poo and vomit” (7: 286). Saying she “[is] knee-deep in kiddie poo and vomit” is a gross exaggeration. Yet, Evaristo uses it to emphasise how much she gets carried away by her role as a mother. Penelope is deeply dissatisfied with traditional gender roles. Her work as a mother makes her so “ga-ga”<sup>7</sup> her husband gives up trying to “discuss the affairs of the world, inflated with intellectual self-importance” (7: 287). Her intellect drops to the point that he prefers to eat his meals in silence and retire to his study rather than engage in a conversation with her. Penelope’s intellect diminishes because all her time is taken up by her housewife duties. She feels “that her brain cells were popping like stars dying off into irretrievable oblivion” (7: 287). To revive her brain, she tries to

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<sup>7</sup> No longer in position of one’s mental faculties, especially on account of old age.

get some sensible conversation with the local librarian who offers her a copy of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. The book then serves both as an eye-opener and a source of courage for her to "embark on a campaign to lobby Giles for her return to work" (7: 288). She is surprised to find out;

... that what she'd hitherto thought personal to her was in fact, applicable to many women, masses of them, women whose husbands forced them to stay at home when they were more than willing to put their intellect to good use in the skilled workforce, women like herself who were going bonkers with boredom and banality. (7: 288)

*The Feminine Mystique* is a book susceptible to provoke a feeling of banality in women who spend their entire life on home duties. It presumes that women who do that end up feeling a void after those they live for no longer need their attention. This feeling of lack of fulfilment makes women's lives to be quite banal, contrary to those of men who have the luxury to achieve noble things in society. Friedan's arguments here imply that most women feel an irritating emptiness after the children they lived for grow up and no longer need their care. For instance, Amma says, "I can tell Mum's is unfulfilled now we've all left home because she spends her time either cleaning it or redecorating it" (7:11). Evaristo seems to agree with some of Friedan's positions in her portrayal of this character. Penelope does not want to end up unhappy with her life like her mother, so she embarks "on a campaign to lobby Giles for her return to work" (7: 289). Instead of allowing her to go to work, Giles prefers to leave the marriage because what he wants is a housewife. To him, Penelope cannot be both housewife and a career woman at the same time because it will compromise his privileged position as the breadwinner, or worse still, he might be obliged to take on some home duties when his wife will be busy at work. Giles believes a woman's place is at home as "it was the natural order of things going back to time immemorial: me hunter-your homemaker/ me breadwinner-you bread-maker/ me child maker-you child raiser" (7: 289). This statement qualifies Giles as typically patriarchal. Even though Giles is a caring husband who provides for his family, his purely traditional view of the family clashes with Penelope's modernist idea of what a family should be. Therefore, their conflict can be located at different levels. The conflict that seems to be generated by misunderstandings around gender roles is also related to a power struggle. Giles is a man who believes in the superiority of the male species. He considers himself the master of the house. He tells Penelope that she cannot get a job because it is "impractical to have two masters: a boss at work and a husband" (7: 278). This means he believes he has the power and occupies the dominant position in their marriage. Penelope, on the other hand, is a modern educated woman who believes in gender equality. She is shocked to learn that her husband considers himself superior to her. When he tells her she cannot have two masters, she wonders whether he is joking, but realises he is not, "by the look on his face" (7: 287). The power struggle ends in separation. Penelope resists the attempt by her husband to defined her on his own terms and solely in relation to her role as wife and mother. She later marries Philip who unlike Giles is "a man in touch with modernity/ a New Man" (7: 291). Giles also remarries and this time around he goes for an Indian woman, which suggests that she fits into traditional gender norms. In *House of Splendid Isolation*, the main families represented are those of James and Rory. Rory is the policeman in charge of the operation against McGreevy<sup>8</sup>. He is married to Sheila and they have two children; Caimin and Aoife. O'Brien presents Rory's family as a traditional family where Rory plays

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<sup>8</sup> A notorious terrorist

the role of the provider of the family and Sheila is in charge of taking care of the house and the children. This is illustrated at the beginning of the second section of the novel when Rory comes back home from work. Sheila directly questions his duty as the provider of the family. She asks him if he has brought the fuel for the barbecue as she demanded (6:8). When he says no, she gets angry and suggests he should not be asking for dinner when he cannot provide according to her demands. By complaining that Rory does not play his role as a provider enough, she pushes him in an effort to prove himself. He draws her attention to all that he has provided for her, including

*a new carpet, the cuckoo clock, the sideboard crammed with ornaments, antiques he has paid for with his blasted sweat and his blasted arse. Women. Goods. Wardrobes. Finery. Jewellery. Lolly. There was a time this avarice of hers was a charm in itself and never did he go for a trip or do a job without bringing back some little thing to hang on her. (6:8)*

Rory reminds Sheila he plays his role so well he has been literally spoiling her. He tells her that she lives “in a clover” (6: 8). The fact that Sheila regularly questions her husband’s duty suggests that she wants to make sure Rory is really playing his role to the full. This suggests that men also need to live up to the expectations of their wives and their failure to do so should be questioned. Apart from providing for the family, Rory also helps in house chores. He does not only hunt deer but gets involved “in skinning it, then cutting it, then making parcels for the deep freeze” (6: 9). As far as roles are concerned, Rory and his wife are both settled on their respective defined gender roles. Though Sheila has taken on the role of a mother and housekeeper, she does not tolerate any attempt from her husband to dominate her. When he speaks rudely to her, she becomes stern and he apologises. This suggests that he does not see himself as superior to his wife. This is not the case with James and Josie. Josie is portrayed at the beginning of her marriage as an unhappy bride getting into a blighted future, though she marries into a house where “[a]ny girl would have given her eyeteeth to marry into” (6: 27). She is reserved, disgusted and doubtful on her wedding day. She is not in love with her husband and regrets “each step leading her to the blind and stony darkness that was her future” (6: 29). Circumstances surrounding her wedding make her feel discouraged about married life, even though she is supposed to be excited because she now has her own home. Josie is not willing to conform to social expectations and James is also not conscious of his role as a husband. He abandons her in bed on the morning following their wedding. When she gets up, she begins to question her status as a bride: “To be a bride and yet a bride. To be a wife and so cursorily left, no, that was not what she had wanted, that was not what she had consulted teacups for” (6: 40). She learns from Mister Doyle that the big house is blighted and realises what a false picture she had painted of it. He hopes she will make “a couple of children that’ll lift the curse” (6: 39). This indicates the importance of her community’s expectation for her role as a mother. It is needed to save the family. Quite a few things make it difficult for Josie to apply herself to the socially expected role of a wife and mother. First, she has taken no personal commitments to her marriage, though she hopes she will soon come to accept her condition and try to adapt accordingly. However, she soon realises that she does not even know her husband and has had wrong impressions about the house she got married into. Second, her husband does nothing to help disperse her doubts. Instead, his attitude plunges her deeper into despair. She, therefore, from the beginning renounces the role of mother and wife. Her refusal to assume these roles is the primary cause of conflict with James. Her servant, Brid, informs the reader about her mistress’ rejection of motherhood. She says, “[t]he missus didn’t want a baby either. Wore corsets that were too

tight. Had to have assistance at pulling the lacings, they had to be pulled until she had an hourglass waist and could barely breathe” (6: 46). When James realises that she is unwilling to bear him children, he decides to get her pregnant through forceful and unconsented intercourse. He comes home drunk and then “[i]n the morning he mounts her without saying a word because she has got into the goddam habit of saying no and stop and no. He has now taken to holding her lips shut with one hand, clamping the way he might clamp an animal” (6: 44). The fact that “he calls her muddy, short for mother and mud while he rises and rears within her” (6: 44) suggests that he is disgusted with her barrenness. His effort to impose the status of motherhood on his wife fails.

Josie’s attitude towards motherhood is a negative one. When she finally gets pregnant, she is desperate to lose the child:

*In the morning she searched the lavatory bowl for a sign and once roared with delight but it was a trick of the eye. What she thought was blood was a brown stain on the worn porcelain. It cried inside the walls of her womb. It was more like a banshee than a child. She prayed that she would lose it, that its crying meant it did not want to live. (6: 46)*

Josie is determined to avoid motherhood. She tries to convince the local doctor to help her flush it out, but instead, he gets angry. We learn by the end of the text that she finally gets an abortion. James, on his part, resents assisting or providing for her. She has failed in her duties. He ends up being the one provided for when he puts the house in her name and loses his money on horses. The role of childbearing and rearing is a principal woman’s role in all categories of family across the selected novels. This includes seeing to their needs and giving them family education. Most Female characters even in disruptive nuclear family models and relationships still take upon themselves the task of raising children while the men only give some support. In the most gendered family model, men stick to their role of provider and leave the child-rearing completely to the women. In the traditional family model, the role of men as breadwinners gives them a position of power over their families. Their source of power does not only involve the position of the head of the family bestowed upon them by social norms, but also from the fact that they manage most of the family resources. At home, men turn to act in more authoritative, independent and objective ways. The women adopt a more dependent and emotional behavioural pattern. To assert their power, men will adopt more vocal communication patterns, speaking in authoritative tones while the women express themselves in subordinate tones and sometimes are often silent. Women’s submissive attitudes at home often reflect their lack of power in the private sphere. By occupying inferior positions in the power relation of the home, women are unable to be subject of their own narrative. This also implies that they do not have the agency required to shape their own identities. Agency is closely linked to the process of subjectification (13: 313). Men’s power from unearned privileges can look like strength and their dominant attitudes are directly linked to their position in the power relation at home. Fiercely dominant men would assume the position of power in their families forcing the women into subordination. Men exerting power at home is very common among the older generation characters across the selected texts. Clovis, for instance, was a loving husband to Winsome in his youthful years, but he also made all the decisions and her opinion did not count. Men generally take advantage of their superior position to get things their own way at home. In *House of Splendid Isolation*, James resorts to using force when he wants sex and Josie is unwilling to give in. Men’s superior physical strength is sometimes the basis of domestic and sexual violence both of which

are practised by James on Josie. Believing that Josie has been sleeping with Father John, James gives her fierce beatings. He seizes the opportunity to avenge for all the moments she made him feel like he was not in charge. He beats;

*her for every drink she had ever grudged him, for his poor brother whom she dispatched to an exile's death, for the offspring which she did not give him, the mares and fillies she had reviled, but most of all for the dried up menagerie of her womanhood, for the farce that was their bed-chamber life. (6:135)*

After the beatings, James invites his friends and forces Josie to serve dinner just because he wishes to humiliate his wife. He mocks her in front of his invitees and even tries to sexually molest her comparing her to a horse. Josie's attempted adultery brings out the chauvinistic character in him. He tells the friends: "feed. Shovel. Ride. Woman and horse. ... remarking that a horse had more honour" (6:137). He receives a form of approval for his ego as his friends repeat after him suggestively telling him, he has a good mare in the front field. James does not see Josie as his equal. He constantly compares her to a mare. James, in comparing women to horses hopes to establish himself as the master of the house in an effort to heal his wounded ego. He realises that Josie has, in fact, got away with almost everything. She has got the house, succeeded in sending his brother away, opposed his orders and refused to give him offspring. Just like one would tame a horse, he feels he has to make her submit by force. Yet, Josie is determined to resist social expectations and live life on her own terms. As we move forward in time and further into more developed societies, the attitude of men gradually changes from that of "Tyrannosaurus Brutes"<sup>9</sup> who believe in the superiority of the male species (7:291) to men who treat women respectfully and then to those who consider them as equals at all levels. Some of the male characters still maintain a good number of their masculine attitudes, but are more considerate towards women. At least, they do not impose their will on them. In *House of Splendid Isolation*, Rory has considerable masculine features, but treats his family with consideration. Rory's masculinity is portrayed in his identification with McGreevy. When he hears that McGreevy has escaped from both the army, RUC and a search dog by jumping out of a moving van, the thrill of that action brings back memories of his youthful years, the hero he had once been, the adrenaline when he went out on the pitch, the puck of the Hurley, the slithering, the crowds roaring, the goal, the goals, his wizardry and the adulation of the crowds booming in his ears" (6: 12). Rory's youth was similar to that of Giles. However, once married he takes care of his family without expecting to be the master. The fact that he apologises to his wife when he is accused of snapping suggests that he is considerate of his wife. Shirley's husband Lennox is probably the most considerate of all the male characters men. He is the only male character in all the selected novels who seems to consider marriage a partnership between two equal parties. Winsome sees him as a younger version of the type of man she had wanted for a husband. She believes that her daughter is very lucky to have him. Another male character who seems not to portray a dominant attitude in the private sphere is Philip, Penelope's second husband. She describes him as "a man in touch with modernity, a New Man" (7: 291). However, it turns out that he is a psychological pervert. By allowing women to be equal, men do not lose their sense of self. However, their female partners do gain the ability to exist in their own right. That is, they are able to define themselves in their own term and not solely in relation to the men. In all the single-family models represented in the selected novels, women, play the role of breadwinner, mother, and

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<sup>9</sup> See *Girl, Woman, Other* page 291

housekeeper at the same time. Even though most women in the selected novels struggle to combine these roles as single mothers, they are also able to be the subject of their own narrative. An analysis of these characters reveals the difficulties women face in trying to combine these roles and do them single-handed. Most of the characters in this category rely on the help of family members and friends to assist in the home duties while they go out to work. A typical example here is LaTisha and her mother, Pauline. Pauline had been abandoned by the father of her two kids, LaTisha and her sister, Jayla whom she raises while working as a social worker. To be able to cope, Pauline has solicited the help of her friends who babysit her children from time to time when her work does not permit her. LaTisha only succeeds in raising her three children with the assistance of her mother and sister. She is a single mother who has made up her mind to work hard and succeed at her workplace. However, with three children, it will be impossible for her to achieve her dreams without help. Her mother is quite aware of the difficulties because she was also obliged to raise her two children alone when Jones left them. LaTisha's sister particularly loves children and so it becomes easier for her to babysit the children. With her mother and Jayla to help raise her children, "she felt the burden roll off her head and on to them" (7: 207). She also appreciates it when her father finally comes home. She feels that he will participate in raising the children. Her determination at work makes her think she will never marry because she might not be able to take on the duties of a wife. She hopes to "make general store manager one day if she works hard enough, sucks up to her superiors, doesn't piss off her colleagues (too much) and stays focused on her goal, which means remaining single" (7: 191). She probably knows that the very minute she gets married, her attention will become divided and if her husband is a patriarch, most men are, she will never meet up with her goal of climbing the corporate ladder. She has worked quite hard to progress in the corporate world and is unwilling to give up her newly constructed identity for a socially defined one (as a wife). In John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*[14], the protagonist, Sarah Woodruff who seeks freedom from the constraints of Victorian gender expectations, rejects marriage on similar grounds. She tells Charles Smithson who is seeking her hand in marriage, "I do not want to share my life. I wish to be what I am, not what a husband, however kind, however indulgent, must expect me to become in marriage" (14: 430). Sarah knows that upon marriage, she will lose her own identity in an attempt to live up to her husband's expectations. So she prefers to be the subject of her own narrative by remaining single. Like LaTisha, Amma leverages on godmothers to raise Yazz as a single mother. Amma is a nonmonogamous lesbian feminist who decides to become a mother, though she rejects the role of the housekeeper and does not like house chores. Her situation as a single mother is slightly different because her daughter's father, Roland, and his gay partner, participate in taking care of the child. He takes "Yazz every other weekend, as agreed ... from Friday afternoons to Sunday evenings" (7: 36). Since Amma has taken up the role of a mother, she gets to take care of the child for the rest of the week, which means that during this period she is more like a single mother. So she creates "the position of seven godmothers and two godfathers/ to ensure there'd be a supply of babysitters for when her child was no longer quite so compliant and portable" (7: 37). Amma reduces her load by sharing her role as a mother with her friends. Though she seems to be a radical feminist who never thought she will want a child, she never complains of her role as a mother. Instead, "having a child really did complete her, something she rarely confided because it somehow seemed anti-feminists" (7: 36). Evaristo seems to deconstruct radical feminism by letting Amma, her seemingly radical feminist character to enjoy motherhood. This suggests that motherhood is an acceptable role for women who have been endowed with the natural capacity for reproduction regardless of their feminist beliefs. Feminism should not discourage

women to take up this role, but should rather lobby for them to do so in ways that are fulfilling to them. In a same-sex relationship like that of Amma, Dominique, Roland, and Nzinga, gender role is a complex phenomenon. This is because most of the characters do not really live together. However, an analysis of those who do, reveals a surprisingly similar phenomenon with heterosexual relations. When Dominique decides she wants to get committed to her partner, Nzinga, she moves in with her in America. Nzinga is “a teetotal, vegan, non-smoking, radical feminists separatist lesbian housebuilder, living and working on wimmin’s land all over America”, whereas Dominique is a “drinking, drug dabbling, chain-smoking lesbian feminist carnivorous clubber who produced theatre by women and lived in a London flat” (7: 84). This suggests that Dominique is the exact opposite of Nzinga. Evaristo combines juxtaposition and contrast here to emphasise their differences. The problem is that Nzinga is a radical, man-hating feminist, who thinks feminism equals replacing male hegemony with female hegemony. She adopts a dominant position early in her relationship with Dominique by giving her ultimatums. This suggests that she is authoritative and absolutely dominating. Amma understands this and warns her friend not to go with her, “but having found real love, Dominique followed it to America” (7: 84). They live in a gay community that does not allow any visit from “adult males and boys over ten” (7: 85). Dominique “soon became a teetotal, vegan, non-smoking, radical feminists separatist lesbian housebuilder, living and working on wimmin’s land called Spirit Moon, which only allowed lesbians to reside there” (7: 85). This suggests that Nzinga imposes her own ideas on Dominique who loses the right to any decision. She exists on Nzinga’s terms and soon loses her own identity. Her “life was becoming empty of purpose other than to love Nzinga unconditionally and increasingly obey her” (7: 97). Ironically, Dominique tells Amma who is trying to persuade her to leave Nzinga how it is so “liberating to be removed from having to deal with male oppression every day” when she is, in fact, dealing with female oppression (7: 103). It is only when the oppression progresses to its advanced form of physical abuse that Dominique’s eyes get open and she feels the need to move away from her oppressor. The story of Nzinga and Dominique suggests that an abusive same-sex relationship is possible and that lesbianism is not a solution to female oppression.

#### 4. Conclusion

This article set out to examine how the performance of gender roles in Edna O’Brien’s *House of Splendid Isolation* and Bernardine Evaristo’s *Girl, Woman, Other* shape female characters’ identities and determine their position of power within the private sphere. The analyses in this study were based on Judith Butler’s theory on gender performativity developed in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Butler argues that identity, particularly gender identity, are constituted in time through gender performances. Characters’ gender performances were examined in the private sphere of the home and within the public sphere. From the analysis of the selected novels, we realized that postmodern characters live in societies with diverse family models. These include the traditional family model, the dual-earner family model, the single-parent family model and the same-sex family model. We also found that gender performances shifted with the changes in the family structure. Characters in traditional family models tend to be more concerned about performing traditional gender roles and are, therefore, more ready to conform to social expectations. This means that their identities are, to a greater extent, socially defined. Most of the female characters who choose to conform to traditional gender expectations live in societies where failing to comply results in serious social sanctions. On the other hand, most postmodern female characters are deeply dissatisfied with traditional gender roles and are often

involved in activities outside the home. The development of new family models like dual earners, single-family models and same-sex family models open space for women to work out of home and earn their own money. We realised that changes in the structure of the family are hardly ever followed by men's change of attitude towards house-care activities or relevant changes at the workplace. Therefore, many female characters adopt the role of the breadwinner only as an additional workload, since they still carry the full responsibility of the housekeeper. More women are taking up roles traditionally attributed to men, while fewer men accept to take on roles traditionally attributed to women. Therefore, most female characters, especially older ones and those in less advanced societies, get caught between fulfilling the increasing demands at their workplaces and taking care of the home and the children. However, the analysis revealed that younger characters, especially those in advanced societies, are getting more conscious of the dynamics of gender roles and are insisting on a balanced division of labour, both in and out of the home. This study also brought us to the surprising realisation that female oppression is also possible in all-female relationships especially when one partner seeks to occupy the position of power while imposing her will on the economically or physically less privileged partner. Thus, lesbianism is not a solution to female oppression.

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