

## Gendering and Constructing Violence in Ellen McLaughlin's Ajax in Iraq

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### Abstract

**Objective:** This study examines the reality of women soldiers' violence in Ellen McLaughlin's *Ajax in Iraq* and argues that women soldiers—like men—can be perpetrators of violence.

**Methods:** The study is conducted in light of Judith Butler's concept of performativity as theorized in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). In relation to Butler's theorization, which assumes that gender is a social construct, the characters' violent acts and behaviors are analyzed in order to explore men and women soldiers' violence.

**Results:** The study shows that the behaviors of the female soldier in the play go beyond the binary narrative of gender performance as well as the social construction of violence. This portrayal of violent acts suggests that acts of violence are de-gendered and that both men and women can be both victims and perpetrators of violence.

**Conclusions:** The study concludes that acts of violence of military women are re-gendered and de-constructed through women's performance in the play. It also shows that women soldiers' behaviors are affected by women's cultural and social environments, a situation which indicates that the binary system of understanding violence fuels inequality between the genders.

**Keywords:** *Ajax in Iraq*, Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Ellen McLaughlin, women soldiers, violence.

### النوع الاجتماعي وبناء العنف في مسرحية أليان ماكوللين "أياكس في العراق"

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### ملخص

**الاهداف:** تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى دراسة واقع عنف المجندات في مسرحية أليان ماكوللين "أياكس في العراق"، وذلك تبعا للفرضية القائلة أنّ المجندات يمكن أن يرتكبن أعمال العنف مثل الرجال تماما.

**المنهجية:** أجريت الدراسة في ضوء نظرية بتلر "مشكلة النوع الاجتماعي: النسوية وتخريب الهوية" ومفهومها عن "الأداء" (1990). حيث تذكر بتلر أن الجنس هو مسألة ممارسة، والأداء هو الذي يقرر هوية الفرد وليس جنسه. حُلّت الأفعال والسلوكيات العنيفة للشخصيات في ضوء فرضية النظرية القائلة أن الجنس هو بناء اجتماعي وذلك من أجل استكشاف عنف الجنود من الرجال والنساء. **النتائج:** كشفت الدراسة أنّ سلوكيات المجندة في المسرحية خارجة عن الفكر الثنائي للنوع الاجتماعي، ومن ثمّ خارج البناء الاجتماعي للعنف، مما يثبت أن أعمال العنف لا تميز بين الجنسين، وأن الرجل والمرأة يمكن أن يكونا ضحايا ومرتكبي العنف في نفس الوقت. **الخلاصة:** تخلص هذه الدراسة إلى أن أعمال العنف التي تتعرض لها النساء العسكريات يُعاد تصنيفها بين الجنسين وتُفكّك من خلال أداء النساء في المسرحية المختارة، وأن سلوكيات المجندات تتأثر في بيئتين الثقافية والاجتماعية، مما يدل على أن النظام الثنائي لفهم العنف يغذي عدم المساواة بين الذكر والأنثى.

**الكلمات الدالة:** أياكس في العراق، بتلر، "مشكلة النوع الاجتماعي"، أليان ماكوللين، المجندات، العنف.



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## Introduction

This research is devoted mainly to the study and analysis of women soldiers in Ellen McLaughlin's play *Ajax in Iraq* (2011) as well as the violence practiced by male soldiers against women in the play. Moreover, it discusses the language as a form of violence used by women as a form of their empowerment. It is mainly concerned with the depiction of these women in McLaughlin's text. Furthermore, it raises and answers many controversial questions and issues related to the placement and treatment of women in the military. Among these debated questions: How are these women soldiers depicted in the text? How are they treated by their male mates and higher rank male soldiers? Do these women succeed in deconstructing the binary narrative of gender? How? Does language play any role in signifying these women soldiers trying to demolish this narrative? Can these women soldier re-gender their gender? If they can empower themselves among the masculine milieu, can they keep it or the stereotyped gender and violence impose their narrative on them? All these debated questions will find their way to be answered by the text analysis of the play. As it is the general framework of the research, the analysis in this study will be based primarily on Judith Butler's theory *Gender Trouble* and the concept of *Performativity*. Moving away from bias, this research emphasizes the violence committed by male soldiers against women. And the reason for this is all to show that the perpetrator of violence can be a man or a woman regardless of his/ her gender, and the behaviors of the individual and his/ her actions are what determine the violent nature of a person. Then, the frequency of these behaviors determines his/ her gender identity through the person's continuous performance. Therefore, according to Butler's *Gender Trouble*, specifically, *Performativity* concept, language is a signifier. Thus, it determines the nature of its speaker since it is repeated and continuous which makes it falls under the categorization of performance. Butler (1999) states that "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" (45). In this regard, Butler declares as well the following, "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration." (xv)

Thus, the language spoken by the women soldiers in McLaughlin's play *Ajax in Iraq* is considered, methodologically speaking, a tool by which the capability of women to act violence is identified. Actually, the violent actions perpetrated by the women soldiers in the play happened before the play begins, in other words, they are off stage. With the evidence that, the main woman soldier character, A.J, is brutalized and violated by her general and then suffered traumatization as a type of a reward for her bravery in fighting. Thus, instead of rewarding her for her heroic actions at war as mentioned in the play and will be analyzed by giving her the shield of honor, she is sexually violated. Noticeably it means that, this female character succeeded in sharing the masculine role ascribed to men at wartime. She can do what men can do at the battlefields. It is a proof that she tries to skip her gendered role determined to her by the society as being the feminine, the weaker, by perpetrating violent acts at war. Thus, the first objective of the current study is already fulfilled and demonstrated. Not forgetting to mention that the playwright draws a connection between the ancient male Ajax in Sophocles play (444 BCE) and the female Ajax in her play. Thus, she presents a modern version of the classical heroic soldier character in Sophocles play but presenting the hero a woman not man.

It is worth mentioning that making the hero of her play a woman is symbolic and challenging to the binary and gendered narrative. Therefore, the present chapter is dedicated to examine the gendered violence committed by men soldiers against women soldiers in spite of their constant tries to demolish the stereotyped violence fueled by society. Therefore, there are two objects to be realized by the text analysis of McLaughlin's *Ajax in Iraq*. The first objective is to examine the reality of women soldier's violence to demystify the binary narrative of gender whereas the second objective is to explore the inevitable stereotyping of violence in the light of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, *Performativity* Concept. Accordingly, the current study aims to demonstrate that gender is a matter of performance not sex. In the sense that, actions and behaviors decide the gendered identity of the individual. It does not matter, whether the person is man or woman, what matters is his performance.

### **Ellen McLaughlin's *Ajax in Iraq***

*Ajax in Iraq* (2011) is a play written by Ellen McLaughlin, who was born in 1957. She is an American playwright and actress, she wrote many plays and books, and she is well-known for her masterpiece *Ajax in Iraq*. Her play *Ajax in Iraq* combines a mythical male character called Ajax with the character of a female US Army conscript named A.J. McLaughlin's play reveals the extent of violence and harm the two main characters are subjected to during the events of the play, namely, A.J., an American soldier, and Ajax, a Greek hero. Both characters are exposed to betrayal and begin to suffer because of all kinds of acts of violence, including physical and verbal, in addition to sexual abuse. The play ends with both characters killing themselves to get rid of the pain of violence they are exposed to. In her play, McLaughlin mixes between the era of the Greek wars and the American war against Iraq. Therefore; the name of the hero for her play is inspired by the Greek era. In her introduction to her play, McLaughlin says that she:

quickly recognized the connections between material the actors presented and Sophocles' tragedy *Ajax*—a play about the Greek hero of the Trojan War driven to madness and suicide after what he saw as his betrayal at the hands of his commanders. *Ajax in Iraq* fuses the ancient and the contemporary, combining her adaptation of Sophocles' tragedy with a modern play inspired by the material generated by the students during the workshops. (*Ajax in Iraq*. Scene I, 8).

Therefore, it will be noted that there is a collision between the past and the present in this play represented in the nature of the warrior in the army and the Greek military on one hand, and on another hand the American woman soldier in the American army. And then how both warriors are betrayed at the hands of their leaders, but both warriors surrender to this betrayal. The Greek warrior commits suicide after he fails to win the Hero's Shield. As for the American soldier, she also commits suicide due to her inability to resist sexual assault, so both soldiers, man and woman, suffer from post-war trauma. It is significant that they are similar in many concerns. Both are soldiers who can perpetrate violence at war. Her gender as a woman doesn't mean that she is exempted from acting violence. In other words, away from their gendered identities, they are equal from the performativity perspective as well as both face the same tragic fate and end. Athena reasons that the exploitation of high military ranks to control soldiers of lower ranks and levels is a threat whose severity can reach physical and verbal abuse. According to her, McLaughlin's play contributes in:

universalizing the trauma and tragedy of war by treating *Ajax*'s breakdown as an example of PTSD (posttraumatic stress disorder). .... *AJ*'s breakdown is a response to sexual battery by her superior officer. The use of sexual assault in the play reflects increasing concerns about the incidence of sexual harassment and assault in the US military, while PTSD illustrates the condition of soldiers. (2016. p. 74).

In an explanation about the play, Pankow states that the dramatist herself, McLaughlin, plays a significant role in guiding the actress of the main character, A. J., in the rehearsal of the play. It is not an easy task to conduct her role in the play, she has faced by many difficulties and obstacles in acting, but she overcomes them. As Pankow expresses in her introduction about the play saying that:

As an actor, I tend to think a lot about my roles—dissecting the script for clues about my character. This thinking has been both a blessing and a curse in my time—providing me with depth to my characterizations, but also hindering me in my task to work moment-to-moment as an actor. Sometimes my thinking about a character does not stop when I go onstage, as it should—and this occasionally prevents me from honestly interacting with my fellow actors. I was surprised at just how different my process for *Ajax in Iraq* turned out to be (2013, p. 6).

The play concentrates on veterans' issues as well as focuses on "gender discrimination, sexual trauma, PTSD, and suicide" (De Loose, 2014, p. 21). The merging of the two characters (*Ajax* and *A.J.*) in McLaughlin's play represents an extension of the continuum of calling between veterans of the ancient eras of Sophocles and veterans returning from the

Iraq War. McLaughlin's play tackles the suffering of the veterans in two sides: "disconnects that take place between the service members and their families/friends, and disconnects that take place within the service member before, during, and after the experience occurs" (De Loose, 2014, p.75). So, it is clear that De Loose's study focuses mainly on representing the troubles of the veterans and presenting these issues to theatre.

The current research focuses on analyzing and showing the violent acts perpetrated by men soldiers against women or by women against men, the violence that will be studied here can be sexual harassment, sexual assault, physical abuse or any other kind of violence. The language of the women will be explored and analyzed as well for its distinctive importance in reflecting violence. The analysis in this study is based on Judith Butler's theory *Gender Trouble* and its concept of *Performativity* in order to achieve the two objectives of the study. The first objective examines the reality of women soldiers' violence to demystify the binary narrative of gender and the second objective explores the inevitable stereotyping of violence that will be achieved through clarifying that men and women are alike in committing violent acts regardless of their gender. So, both male and female are perpetrators who can do brutal acts in the military institutions. Furthermore, the second objective which is exploring the inevitable stereotyping of violence is to clarify that woman cannot change or trans her gender though she tries her best to do so. This is because man still governs and behaves according to the binary narrative that is constructed and expected by his society. Examining the violent actions conducted by both women in the first objective and man in the second objective as well as language will demonstrate the reality of violence committed by both man and woman in concern to gender and performativity.

#### **Brutality in McLaughlin's Play**

Before analyzing and shedding light on the practices and forms of violence brutality in McLaughlin's *Ajax in Iraq*, we should come across the meaning of brutality or violence and the relationship between it and literature. As much as related to this study, violence means all the heinous acts and behavior including sexual abuse, sexual harassment, torturing people, rape, and hurtful speech. Violence according to Hamby (2017) is "nonessential, unwanted, intentional, and harmful behavior. Violence is a subset of aggressive behavior that is most usefully distinguished from aggression by its nonessential nature" (p. 177). Precisely, concerning the relation between violence and literature, Carroll (2014) justifies that the spread of violence in literature is due to:

literary authors and their readers want to get at the inner core of human nature. All human interests are set in conflict with the interests of others. Even among the closest kin, fitness interests partially overlap and partially conflict. Between parents and children, siblings, spouses, coalitional partners, and members of one's own tribe, shared fitness interests prompting love or friendship clash with individual interests prompting suspicion, envy, resentment, anger, and sometimes hatred. Violence is the flash point at which the tensions aroused by conflicting interests reach critical mass. In literature as in life, violence reveals the underlying structure of human motives and passions (p. 1).

The concern of the current study is to shed light on and address the cultural norms of the society in relation to women and brutality in McLaughlin's play. The violence in the play is not limited to one kind of violence. In fact, the play contains different kinds of violence like physical, sexual, psychological, social, cultural and even verbal violence. But the most distinctive one is mixing sex with violence. Therefore, the current study attempts to tackle these kinds of violence in order to present a comprehensive understanding of the women and men characters of the play. Analyzing the violent actions and behaviors of these characters in the play in the light of Judith Butler's concept of *Performativity*, helps in giving clear image about the depiction of women soldiers in contemporary English plays. The woman character in the play named A.j, even though being heroic soldier who proved her valor and her ability to be powerful like men soldiers, she suffers from brutality and intimidation in order to let her surrender to the binary narratives of her society. Though her constant tries to re-gender and re-construct her gendered identity by practicing violence, she failed to do so and therefore committed suicide. She is depicted as powerful which shows that violence is a matter of practice and performativity not a matter of sex or gender,

however, she couldn't change the social stereotyped frame which prohibits her empowerment whether physical or verbal. This section examines the brutality of women and men soldiers in McLaughlin's text *Ajax in Iraq*, how women soldiers can be perpetrators of violence but at the same time how men brutalize them. The text analysis will be accomplished with the help of Judith Butler's theory *Gender Trouble* and concept of *Performativity*. As Butler declares that behaviors and dispositions of a person determine his/her gender (1990).

The play starts with the entrance of Athena, the goddess of war. McLaughlin borrows classical techniques, mythical figures and characters like goddess and heroes. She is bridging the past with the present. Athena tells the audience about something scary happens inside the tent, that is why she says: "You don't want to go in there. Terrible stuff happening in there" (*Ajax in Iraq*.S.I, 9). And this usual intimidation is due to the applicable traditions in the societies, so it is part of Butler's work to drop these traditions and assumptions. Therefore, Butler declares that "Gender Trouble sought to uncover the ways in which the very thinking of what is possible in gendered life is foreclosed by certain habitual and violent presumptions" (1990, p. viii). So, from the beginning there is an indication to the violence in McLaughlin's play *Ajax in Iraq*.

Indeed, the play *Ajax in Iraq* is full of violent actions and speeches which are delivered and told by different characters who are referred to by the dramatist as letters like; A,B, and C. It is a choral technique used by the dramatist to exposes the main concerns of the play. Actually naming her characters in this way, McLaughlin gives them universality as well as objectivity. One of the choral section who is called **A** declares what is the role of soldiers in wars when he states that "We are soldiers. We were sent here to kill people. We've done that too. We take lives, that's what soldiers do. And once you've done it, you're never the same" (*Ajax in Iraq*.S.I, 10). Also, Character **B** expresses one of the violent states when he states that "It's just, the noise, it never stops: gunfire, explosions, rockets—they kinda hiss when they—and RPGS, it's a, like, a rushing / sound..." (*Ajax in Iraq*.S.I, 10). What gives a clear image about violence in McLaughlin's play is the speech of **C** when he/ she says:

But I know people who died, people who lost arms and legs, I know people who will always be haunted by what they did, what happened to them over here. It has to have been for something, OK? Don't tell me I did this for nothing. Don't tell me that. That makes me crazy (*Ajax in Iraq*. S.I,12).

Butler refers to such scenes of violence and cruelty as mentioned earlier in this section as "the violence of the foreclosed life, the one that does not get named as "living," the one whose incarceration implies a suspension of life, or a sustained death sentence" (1990, p. xxi). Actually, the violent scenes in the play are too many, so the examples mentioned above are enough to indicate the amount of violence in this play. All the violent acts in the play will be analyzed as mentioned before depending on *Gender Trouble* and *Performativity* in order to provide a clear image about the main topic of this study which is the depiction of women soldiers in contemporary plays.

#### **Gendered Violence in Ellen McLaughlin's *Ajax in Iraq***

In this section, the focus will be on exploring the violent acts committed by men soldiers against women in McLaughlin's play *Ajax in Iraq*. The increase in the amount of violence perpetrated by men against women raises great societal concerns, especially the women's group. According to World Health Organization (2009) "Often inequalities in gender increase the risk of acts of violence by men against women" (p. 3). It may seem normal that men soldiers perpetrate brutal acts, but the study focuses on both male and female behaviour to prove that the behaviours of a person determine his gender identity regardless of being man or woman as Butler confirms in her theory, when she declares that the character of "gender is socially constructed" (1990, p. xi) and she states also that "gender is culturally constructed" (1990, p. 8). Thus, culture and social norms shape and decide the meaning of gender and distribute the gender roles between man and woman. Accordingly, nature or sex has nothing to do with gender. In the sense that it is not biology that decides the masculine and feminine but culture (Salih et al., 2018). The first speech of the character CONNIE MANGUS, who is A.J's best friend, her words indicate the inevitability of women soldiers being subjected to violence by men soldiers in the army, MANGUS declares that:

And if you're a soldier with tits, the pressure is just unbelievably immense to, not to... If you, even for a second, can be seen to be, like, indulging yourself, having a little pity party... I don't know, I just have no patience for people who need a lot of attention for just doing the job they signed up for. But there were things I didn't see, people who I just didn't...I didn't take in how badly it was going for them and that, well, I'm just going to have to live with that. (Ajax in Iraq. S.I, 16)

The first sexual harassment by male soldier against woman soldier in the play is by PISONI (a specialist man soldier in A.J.'s unit), when he has informed that A.J. is showering, he states the following "You think she might need some help / with that?" (Ajax in Iraq. S.I, 20), he indirectly hints at going to the bathroom and sexually harassing her. Then, PISONI accuses A.J.'s friends that they give her drugs to use her sexually, PISONI talking to A.J.'s friends saying "Yeah, what are you guys doing to her? We figure you must be drugging her up so she can be your zombie sex slave" (Ajax in Iraq. S.I, 20). Males' brutality may be familiar, because they are always accused of being the only ones, not the female who commit all kinds of violence, especially sexual violence, that's why Butler states that "male serves as the cause and irreducible meaning of that sexuality" (1990, p. 42).

CHARLES, who is PISONI's friend also threatens the female friends of A.J. that he will send a report accusing them of giving drugs to A.J. unless they allow him to take videos. CHARLES directly tells them "We won't report you, as long as you let us take videos" (Ajax in Iraq. S.I, 21). CHARLES is not satisfied with the threat, but exceeds to accuse A.J. of being a bitch, when he asks "what's wrong with that bitch?" (Ajax in Iraq. S.I, 21). This threat and intimidation by males towards women seem that it has become a familiar situation in society. In the regard of threat Kaufman-Osborn (2005) states that "men seek to secure the wholesale subordination of women by isolating and terrifying them either through violence or threats of violence" (p. 608). That's why even the first appearance and the first words of Ajax when Athena calls him to get out of his tent is the following "I see you, Daughter of Zeus! I shall glorify you with the bloody trophies I'm making for you" (Ajax in Iraq. S.I, 25). Ajax's reaction to Athena's call is considered bloody violence against the female character of Athena, although Athena symbolizes the goddess of war.

When women do not submit to the sexual desires of men soldiers, men may resort to the most violent methods to subdue women to their animalistic lusts. For example, when Charles says to Sergeant "The only way any of them would beg you is if you put a gun to her head" (Ajax in Iraq. S.II, 27). This reveals that Charlie and his other colleagues are ready to take any brutal action against the women soldiers in order to satisfy their instincts. But Sergeant reveals a more insidious way of sexually exploiting women soldiers, as he intends to exploit his military rank, which exceeds the ranks of women soldiers. He states this himself when he tells Charles and Pisoni "I have to admit, it doesn't hurt that I outrank 'em all" (Ajax in Iraq. S.II, 27). It is the dominance of military law that allows the higher rank to take advantage of the power granted to them at the expense of the lower ranks. In this regard Butler expresses the following "the prevailing law threatened one with trouble, even put one in trouble" (1990, p. xxix). Then, Charles understands how the women soldiers submit themselves to the Sergeant, it is as Charles expresses "So the only action you can get is command rape?" (Ajax in Iraq. S.II, 27). And as soon as the women soldiers have no proof of the sergeant's horrible actions, the evil spirit within him does not care about anything so he brazenly declares "My word against hers and where's her evidence?" (Ajax in Iraq. S.II, 27). One of his other methods of exploiting women soldiers is "Stealth and cunning, my friends. I know how to put all that training into use, that's all" (Ajax in Iraq. S.II, 27), as he tells his friends. A.J.'s weakness unfolds when she starts pleading the Sergeant to stop the sexual assault, her speech with Sergeant indicates how much she is hurt and suffered because of violent acts of the Sergeant. A.J. begs the Sergeant saying:

I can't do it anymore. .... I don't want anything. Except for this to stop. .... Please. .... Sergeant. Please, Sergeant. .... Sergeant. Please, Sergeant. Let. This. Stop (Ajax in Iraq. S.II, 28).

A.J.'s weakness appears clearly when she is in front of Sergeant, her weakness reveals the dominance of masculine over feminine. In this regard Butler states that "the oppression of women has some singular form discernible in the universal or

hegemonic structure of patriarchy or masculine domination" (1990, p. 5). In the ancient play of Sophocles, Ajax's wife Tecmessa is also in danger because of her husband's madness, she is worried of her husband's behaviors, therefore she states "He became a madman, sick with blood. Killing and torturing innocent creatures. Thinking he was slaughtering Greeks" (Ajax in Iraq. S.II, 30). Tecmessa seems that she accepts the brutal behaviors of her husband due to the social norms. Based on what is mentioned previously, Bawah's work (1990) *Women's fears and men's anxieties: the impact of family planning on gender relations in northern Ghana*, tackles the fears of wives and the anxieties of husbands. He states that "More women than men responded that wife beating was justified in each of these scenarios, reflecting women's perceptions of social norms concerning violence and their acceptance of male decision-making authority" (p. 57)

After A.J.'s unit is ambushed and all but A.J. are killed, A.J.'s close friend, Mangus, recounts the events of A.J.'s survival from death and her adventure in trying to save the members of her unit. Even though they are killed, she does not abandon them as she evacuates all the bodies of her unit members. In detail, Mangus says:

And then A.J. goes out on a routine mission... She's driver for a team that's going out again, house to house, watching from the humvee while two guys go into a house, kick the door down. Suddenly two things happen: something goes off inside the house, some sort of explosion, and at the same time a sniper starts firing on the humvee. The other soldier, the gunner in the humvee, is hit right away, they take the head off him, so she's alone with the vehicle. Now she's under fire, calling some help to the area and trying to get her sights on where the sniper fire is coming from, but also driving the humvee to some kind of protection so she can be there if anyone comes out of the house. She gets the humvee to this wall near the house and that's when the house just explodes, completely goes up, there's just no way anyone in there could survive the blast. What's incredible is that she survived it, but that's just because she got herself behind the wall. Nobody is, but she keeps going back in to find them and bring them out and she's still under fire while she's doing it. It isn't until she's bringing the last body out that she finally gets relief from another unit that comes in and takes out the sniper and takes over recovering the bodies. (Ajax in Iraq. S.III, 36-37)

It denotes that she shows valor and ability to survive in the same way the men soldiers can do. She has proved that she is powerful like men which implies and goes with accordance to Butler's claim that gender is not a matter of sex rather it is related to performance. Hence Butler says "the performance of gender can indicate nothing about sexuality or sexual practice (1990: xiv). In other words, gender is not determined biologically but by the individual's behaviors and actions. Furthermore, A.J., as a woman soldier, could skip the social confinements that reserve her the less powerful position in the social ladder. She becomes the most powerful and the tiger woman which shakes and upsides down the binary narrative in her society; by her joining the army and be a soldier and by surviving. Ironically, her Sergeant who is supposed to be happy with A.J.'s survival, instead he summons her straight to his office and tells her the following "I thought you'd come in here looking like a little blood and guts girl-Rambo. Rambette" (Ajax in Iraq. S.III, 37), then he asks her "Come here. Let me smell you" (Ajax in Iraq, 37).

Even after she undergoes all the horrors during the attack on her unit and miraculously survives, the sergeant still wants to sexually harass her. It is true that the sergeant is higher in rank than A. J., but he still remains an army colleague, and the logic assumes that the sergeant should be supportive to her. However, many studies indicate that the partner is often the one who perpetrates violence against women, as indicated by a study by the World Health Organization (2009) "Violence against women is most often perpetrated by an intimate partner" (p. 3-4). The Sergeant starts issuing more orders "Get your ass over here, Soldier" (Ajax in Iraq. S.III, 37). The assault by the Sergeant against A.J. is not limited to sexual practice, but exceeds it to sexual humiliation, so A.J. is humiliated and insulted by the sergeant who is in charge of her. In this regard, Kaufman-Osborn (2005) states that the woman may be subjected to "sexual humiliation that gender is usually victim to" (p. 616). It is rape which is considered a form of violence that usually most women are subjected to even in the military and even when she is a soldier. A.J. is driven weak and powerless though she proves powerful and strong by surviving from

death at war. However, her attempts to deconstruct the norms and the binary narrative which renders her weak and feminine whereas man strong and masculine, have failed. Thus, McLaughlin by her play supports and proves the correctness of Butler's arguments that performance decides the gender identity of the person not his/her sex, as Butler declares that "gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed (1990: 34). In the case of A.J, when assaulted by her general and the other men soldiers, their violent sexual actions express the binary narrative. Thus, it reserves them the masculine identity whereas it deprives her this identity and renders her the feminine, in other words, the weaker.

The continuous sexual pressures on A.J. lead her to kill herself in a horrible scene, she put her M. 16 in her mouth and shot herself. Pounds-Williams (2017) states that the reason behind A.J.'s suicide is "because of the community's potential violent reaction to her afterward" (p. 194-195). It is noticed that nobody feels sorry for her death, they put her helmet on her butt, covering her butt with the helmet indicates the end of the cause of her torment that led to her death. The Sergeant makes no reaction or comment of the A.J.'s death, Sergeant only said "Specialist A.J. Swopes. ....Specialist A.J. Swopes. .... Specialist A.J. Swopes" (*Ajax in Iraq*. S.VII, 51). Indeed, her death is caused by the Sergeant. She kills herself because of the Sergeant's continuous sexual assaults. About the sexual assault Pounds-Williams (2017) comments that "A.J. who is repeatedly raped and ultimately commits suicide because of it" (p. 196). It is only PISONI who admits that A.J.'s death is because of the ignorance of her fellows. He expresses that saying: "There must have been a thousand times she tried to signal that pain. We didn't see it because we didn't want to" (*Ajax in Iraq*. S.VII, 53). He further says that "her killing herself is about our betrayal of her. We should have paid better attention. She was one of us and we didn't take care of her" (*Ajax in Iraq*. S.VII, 53). In Pisoni's speech, there is a very clear signal to the shortcomings of A.J.'s male soldiers' friends' that reflect the societal construction of gender. It is a construction built on a difference between the two sexes; male and female that it is called the binary. It is the narrative that governs and operates the relationship between man and woman. Thus, it fuels the inequality between the two genders accordingly generates violence. In fact, it can be claimed that the gendered inequality and violence is the product of culture not nature. However, A.J is betrayed by her society which constructs her gendered identity. Concerning her betrayal, Williams states that, "A.J. She is a soldier and a rape victim who ultimately kills herself due to that betrayal" (Williams, 2017: 199).

A.J. cannot protect herself from the violence of the sergeant, and she is not protected by the rest of her colleagues, so she resorted to killing herself. According to a study by the World Health Organization (2009), the recurrence and continuation of violence lead to "hinder the ability of those affected to remove themselves from abusive situations or seek support" (p. 3). Hence, it is very important to know that the feminine is not a woman's choice, but rather the influence of the environment imposes on her, including the domination of the masculine society. Butler expresses this issue as follows "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1990, 45). So feminine behavior is not an inevitable consequence of female biology. Gender behavior is imposed on women by the norms of a male-dominated society.

### **Vulgar Language: A Tool of De-Constructing Gender**

Unlike Peter Morris's play *Guardians*, McLaughlin's play *Ajax in Iraq* does not contain the same amount of obscene words, the reason is that McLaughlin's play focuses more on the violence of male soldiers against women rather than the violence of women soldiers against men. Therefore, even the language of women soldiers is not inclined to linguistic violence, except for some women soldiers who mention violent words that carry obscenities which will be mentioned in this section successively. Since language has its distinctive significance in constructing gender identity as indicated by Salih (2007) "Gender identities are constructed and constituted by language, which means that there is no gender identity that precedes language" (p. 56). In the choral (who are both men and women soldiers) section of the play, character C mentions bad words about men in her speech, she says "Shit man" and also she says "that thing could kill your sorry ass" (*Ajax in Iraq*. S.I, 10). This is at the beginning of the play, both men and women soldiers are talking among themselves to the audience. Character E in the choral also has a role in calling the Iraqis with obscene words when she says "I hate the mother-fuckers" (*Ajax in Iraq*. S. I, 10). The words said by the female soldiers represent the truth of women soldiers as it is declared by Butler "representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed



to be true about the category of women" (1990, p. 2). That is why the female choral words show the obscenity in the tongue of the women soldiers and the amount of hatred they harbor towards Iraqis. Language in this play is a signifier of gender inequality and violence as well as the related feminist issues. According to the current study, the Iraqi prisoners are hated and violated by the women soldiers not for political or national causes but for being men, as when character C verbally abuse and humiliate the Iraqi men prisoners saying "I hate the mother-fuckers" (Ajax in Iraq. S.I, 10). These Iraqi men symbolize the masculine identity and signify the binary gendered narrative. They express their hatred and revolt against any male character whether, American or Iraqi, they are all men. Nationality and politics have nothing to do with their hatred for these men but their gender's identity.

Even the translator who is working with American soldiers is not spared of the vulgarity of the tongue of the character D of the choral, where she says that she "can't even trust that motherfucker" (Ajax in Iraq.S.I, 11), referring to the translator. Mangus, A.J.'s closest friend calls one of the soldiers in her unit "Oh, you bitch" (Ajax in Iraq. S.I, 18). At a time, she can use polite words to speak with her. Mangus, again in her speech with one of the soldiers in the same unit, uses bad words, she says: "secret-ass-magic" (Ajax in Iraq. S.I, 18). The question is, why this linguistic violence? The relationship among the soldiers of same unit is supposed to be consolidated and improved. The strange thing is that although Mangus is A.J.'s best friend, yet Mangus continues to mention A.J. badly, in addition to what is previously mentioned about the obscenity in Mangus words. She also says about A.J. " she scared the shit out of me" (Ajax in Iraq. S.I, 19). While Sickles who is a specialist in A.J.'s unit says that A.J. is " unbelievable shit" (Ajax in Iraq. S.I, 19). The afore mentioned sordid words spoken by women soldiers refer to the influence of the prevailing culture on the language used among women soldiers. Butler links the limits of the rhetorical analysis of gender with the culture of gender, where she says "The limits of the discursive analysis of gender presuppose and preempt the possibilities of imaginable and realizable gender configurations within culture" (1990, p. 12). Butler sees that the limits of language analysis can be in line with "the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality" (1990, p. 12).

Women soldiers, even in their conversation with men, do not avoid obscene words. It is true that this may be familiar in American societies, but at the same time women complain that they are oppressed and harassed by men. Their revolt against the inequality and their protest against the gendered violence take a verbal form. Even in the military and even when she shows power and courage she is treated in the same way any other women are treated in their bias and binary society. Acting and perpetrating physical or verbal violent acts do not save her from violation even the sexual one. Even when a woman soldier proves valor and the ability to survive, this does not exempt her from falling a prey and a victim of the stereotyped violence. Moreover, the obscenity in women's speech encourages men more to harass and assault women, especially in the army sector. For example, we find Rebo who is a female specialist in A.J.'s unit does not avoid mentioning bold words in front of men, including that she says to Pisoni, who is a male specialist in A.J.'s unit "whipping our butts" (Ajax in Iraq. S.I., 20). Actually, polite speech works to reduce violence, including violence of sexual assault, and adherence to public decency includes adherence to modest language, and in this regard Butler states that "Learning the rules that govern intelligible speech is an inculcation into normalized language" (1990, p. xix). Rebo further tells Pisoni "You're so butch" (Ajax in Iraq. S.I., 20). Rebo's speech does not show any kind of respect, at the same time, her words do not indicate her modesty and do not indicate her self-respect.

All the women soldiers (Mangus, Rebo, Sickles and Abrams) direct obscene words to the male soldiers (Charles and Pisoni) for the sake of fun to ridicule and as an expression of women's revolt against the male dominating culture and their physical and sexual humiliation. As Mangus begins to address Charles saying "Don't you mean that whore?" (Ajax in Iraq. S.I., 21). Then, Sickles says "if she was a whore she'd have slept with him" (Ajax in Iraq. S.I., 21). Rebo also has role in participating in the obscene talk, she says "Whereas, a bitch, as we all / know" (Ajax in Iraq. S.I, 21). Abrams couldn't stop herself from sharing the dirty talk with her fellow soldiers, so she says "A whore is someone who sleeps with everyone, / a bitch..." (Ajax in Iraq. S.I, 21). The shameful thing is that all the four women soldiers say together as a way of ridicule men and the abusive binary construction of the society which encourages the inequality between men and women depending on a baseless claim that "A bitch is someone who sleeps with everyone but you" (Ajax in Iraq. S.I, 21). The filthy speech

does not end here, Abrams and Rebo say more hideous words, Abrams says "Gotta be a bitch, a whore or a dyke" (Ajax in Iraq. S.I, 21). While Rebo says "And dykes / aren't worth screwing anyway" (Ajax in Iraq. S.I, 21). This obscene discourse prevalent among women soldiers works to form the gender identity of these women soldiers, as Salih declares "Gender identities are constructed and constituted by language, which means that there is no gender identity that precedes language" (2007, p. 56).

It is very clear that the feminine language is undergoing a severe decline that is detrimental to a woman's femininity, as Vincent & Naidu (2013) declares that "the degradation of traits associated in dominant culture with femininity" (p. 60). And that this regression increases the risks of violence in two directions. The first direction is verbal violence against men as the only means left for them to empower and prove themselves, while the second trend is that the obscene words uttered by women may indicate their bad morals and thus encourage men to sexually harass them.

### Conclusion

The current research explores the inevitable stereotyping of violence in light of Judith Butler's *The Performativity Concept* which questions women soldier's constant endeavors to demolish the binary system of understanding violence. Thus, this objective has been achieved through examining the violent performance of men soldiers against women soldiers and vice versa to prove the still-ongoing male-based narratives of violence that perpetuates gender inequalities in McLaughlin's *Ajax in Iraq*. The focus on male violence against women is in line with the binary system of understanding violence and thus the performance of repeated male violence incidents against women leads to the formation of the gender identity of women. The study concludes that both men and women can perform acts of violence and both have supporters and antagonists as happened with A.J., the female soldier and Ajax, the male soldier. Thus, it states that violence is gendered and socially constructed following the narratives of binary system of gender definition.

Moreover, the obscene language of women soldiers, which carries a lot of verbal violence against men, indicates that the nature of feminist violence has not been gendered too, and it can be reconstructed. Thus, the violent verbal performance of women soldiers against male soldiers proves violence in the female gender-narrative. These verbal acts are the results of the social and cultural environment, as referred by Butler (1999). Thus, this study proves that acts of violence are de-gendered, which is a matter of performance as Butler claims in her *Performativity Concept*. Accordingly, the present study concludes that both man and woman can be victims and perpetrators of violence.

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