

## **Protest, Performativity, and Transgenderism in Stella Oyedepo's *The Rebellion of the Bumpy-Chested***

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### **Abstract**

Expressions of transgendered behavior in Nigerian drama have mostly been regarded as either comedy or mere feminist assertiveness. They have scarcely been seen as what they really are: acquisition of non-binary identities with which to resist oppression. Since such topics are seen as taboo in most parts of Africa, there is scant academic inquiry on transgender issues in the continent's literature, especially in drama. In order to open up scholarly discourses in this area, this study uses Judith Butler's "Gender Performativity," and then, through textual analysis and close reading, interrogates Stella Oyedepo's *The Rebellion of the Bumpy-Chested* (2002), with a view to identifying how characters resist oppression by rejecting culturally-assigned gender roles and dress patterns. It argues further that, in protest plays, characters cross-dress (in itself, a form of performance) to acquire new individualities with which they dislocate the oppressor into an image of frailty, thereby defeating an unfavorable status quo.

### **Keywords**

transgender, gender, performance, performativity, protest, protest drama

## Introduction

Characters that push beyond the limits of traditional gender roles have increasingly become attractive archetypes to Nigerian female playwrights. Irene Salami-Agunloye affirms that emergent female playwrights have begun to build “strong female characters who are able to hold their own and who enter the stage with confidence and enthusiasm” (128). In projecting varying women’s empowerment theories through playwriting, the dramatists create female characters that express themselves beyond the socially mandated borders of their sex-type, destabilizing typecast gender roles and monosexuality, and impelling gender ambiguities. For instance, Nneora and Edewede in Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh’s and Julie Okoh’s eponymous plays, respectively, are androgynous heroines who strike the audience with a multiplicity of gender identities. The emergence of these super heroines centralizes the equalist movement in Nigerian drama.

Existing critical studies on these emerging texts often emphasize their feminist significance, disregarding discourses on transgender expressions in the plays. Therefore, perhaps due to the sense of taboo surrounding LGBTQ subjects mainly in Africa, there is little or no literature on the nature of transgender relations within Nigerian drama and performance. Bashiru Akande Lasisi was right when he noted that discourses on non-heterosexual sex declined following “the promulgation of the law banning same-sex relationship in Nigeria” (35). Indeed, the seeming literary silence on transgender expressions is reinforced by existing government policies in Nigeria, particularly a law that received the president’s assent in 2014 which imposes a fourteen-year jail term on gays, lesbians, and other gender behaviors that challenge normative heterosexuality.

The issue of LGBTQ is considered an abomination in most parts of Africa. Even now, a good number of church doctrines in Nigeria exploit the Book of Deuteronomy to prohibit women from wearing any kind of trousers, as a measure of forestalling cross-dressing and other forms of transgender behavior. Consequently, gender studies in Nigeria largely focus on feminism and women’s rights to the near exclusion of varying categories of gender performance. As a contribution to the almost non-existent literary corpus on transgender expressions in Africa, this paper seeks, through textual analyses, to examine the manner in which dramatic characters take up personalities other than their assigned gender roles as a form of resistance to oppression.

This study is also an effort to foreground the issue of gender identity-swapping as seen in some African plays, using Stella Oyedepo’s *The Rebellion of*

*the Bumpy-Chested* (2002) as a case in point. The play represents texts that had been hitherto considered solely as feminist works, when in essence they are laden with transgender themes, and characters who dress and behave in ways that violate normative heterosexuality in Nigeria. Just recently, the Calabar Carnival—an elaborate street party held annually in the Southern part of Nigeria—witnessed its first cross-dressers on parade. Even with the trail of social media condemnations, such as attacks on the cross-dressers by Nigerian youths on Facebook and Twitter, it is obvious that the cloak of taboo on such matters is being challenged. Thus, this study adopts textual analysis as its primary tool for interrogating the play under study, with a view to underpinning how transgendered behavior aids the construction of new personalities within the dramatic work. The inquiry is specifically concerned with identifying how transgender expressions aid characters of the play in creating stronger personalities employed to confront oppression. The exploration of character and other aspects of form in the text as well as the issues of transgender shall be guided by Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. Butler’s view is adopted to analyze how gender identities are swapped, adorned, and construed as “performatives” within the text under study (*Gender Trouble* 4).

### **Judith Butler’s Gender Performativity and Protest Drama in Nigeria**

According to Butler,

[t]o say that gender is performative is to say that it is a certain kind of enactment; the “appearance” of gender is often mistaken as a sign of its internal or inherent truth; gender is prompted by obligatory norms to be one gender or the other (usually within a strictly binary frame), and the reproduction of gender is thus always a negotiation with power; and finally, there is no gender without this reproduction of norms that risks undoing or redoing the norm in unexpected ways, thus opening up the possibility of a remaking of gendered reality along new lines. (“Performativity” i)

Evident in the excerpt above is Butler’s position that gender binaries are established through performativity, through continual attempts to conform to the gender one has been assigned by dressing and stylizing the body in accordance with the allotted category. However, it should be noted that “performativity does not just refer to

explicit speech acts, but also to the reproduction of norms. *Indeed, there is no reproduction of the social world that is not at the same time a reproduction of those norms that govern the intelligibility of the body in space and time* (“Performativity” x; emphasis in original). Performativity also reveals the artifice of gender binaries: because they have to be endlessly bolstered, they are capable of being subverted, and performativity can be turned against itself and become subversive. Accordingly, the performatives, which mostly manifest as transgendered behavior in the drama text under study, are interpreted as a performance of protest.

Contrary to the notion that gender roles pre-exist an individual, Butler theorizes that “gendered acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (“From Interiority” 583). The implication of this is that, as Kris Kirk and Ed Heath define cross-dressing, when “people who consider themselves to be men and dress in clothes which most of society associates with women” (8); they are involved in the performance of a consciously chosen gender identity. Oftentimes, this choice is not fortuitous but, as seen in the plays under study, constitutes planned acts of dissent deployed to tackle a prevailing status quo. Furthermore, “When one sex adopts the clothes (and accessories) of the other” (Ackroyd 10), it is an act of gender identity (re)construction rather than an exhibition of a pre-determined personality. It is performative. “*In imitating gender,*” Butler explains, “*drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself . . .*” (*Gender Trouble* 175; emphasis in original). In Oyedepo’s *The Rebellion of the Bumpy-Chested*, cross-dressing and transgender conducts demonstrated by characters are largely viewed as performative: a protest against established socio-cultural precepts. This is in consonance with Butler’s view that, in performing gender on the “wrong” body, “we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity” (*Gender Trouble* 175).

Butler’s cardinal feminist work *Gender Trouble* presents a theory that has greatly impacted on the meaning of gender. In her theory of performativity, she argues that gender is instituted and de-instituted through consistent performances of gender norms, regardless of an individual’s genitals. In Butler’s opinion, “the gendered body utilizes semiotic and material signs (words, acts, gestures, and desire) to similarly create what appears to be an interiority,” which she calls “the effect of an internal core on the substance” (“From Interiority” 581). She further suggests

that, “gender is stabilized by the construction of a norm—heterosexuality—against which all other gender constructions are measured and found wanting. This norm may be stabilized, but it is not fixed. It constantly needs to be re-performed since it is constituted by its ‘acts,’ not by some essentiality” (“From Interiority” 581). Such reiterated demonstration shows that gender exists transitorily, in process, rather than being a constant fixture. In other words, an individual’s gender identity can be ascertained only when s/he successfully reiterates an established gender behavior. For example, in Tess Onwueme’s *Then She Said It!*, the normative traits of masculinity are fortuitously conferred on female characters during protests. This is made manifest when a character in the play called Obida, a victim of repeated rape, is endowed with demonstrable headship features. Her rebellion is a great change in posture as she is transformed and empowered with defiant, militant dispositions in protest against a repressive status quo.

Butler discusses performativity within different contexts, such as the potency of hate speech to constitute a subject in *Excitable Speech* (18), and within discourses on surviving various forms of discrimination in *Undoing Gender* (55). In her introductory remarks in *Bodies That Matter*, she addresses performativity in terms of the materiality of the body in different contexts: “I began writing this book by trying to consider the materiality of the body only to find that the thought of materiality invariably moved me into other domains” (ix). Thus, she could not “fix bodies as simple objects of thought. Not only did bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves, but this movement beyond their own boundaries, a movement of boundary itself, appeared to be quite central to what bodies ‘are’” (*Bodies* ix; emphasis added). Through these works, she discusses not only the various means through which performativity is demonstrated but additionally “the potential it creates for individual subversion and collective action” (Jenkins and Finneman 157).

Butler further proposes opportunities for subjects to subvert gender through disproving naturalized acts: “As a strategy to denaturalize and resignify bodily categories, I describe and propose a set of parodic practices based in a performative theory of gender acts that disrupt the categories of the body, sex, gender, and sexuality and occasion their subversive resignification and proliferation beyond the binary frame” (*Gender Trouble* 32). Subversion being the catchword, Butler rationalizes transgendered dispositions as categories that are determined by context and/or circumstance. This further implies that gender is not a consequence of sex but of cultural meanings attached to certain acts in a performance site. “If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 10). The prevailing

view that gender is constructed, Butler argues, implies a certain determinism of gender meanings “inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law” (*Gender Trouble* 12). This radical deconstruction of gender and sex suggests that both phenomena are constructed on the plank of cultural determinism. Thus, “[w]hen the relevant ‘culture’ that ‘constructs’ gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 12). The processes of gendering and sex-typing are dependent on cultural meanings. At birth, therefore, cultural definitions of sex and gender are “constructed” by the relevant “culture.”

Butler’s theory of performativity advances previous studies championed by Simone de Beauvoir in her work, *The Second Sex*, and Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics*, among others, which emphasize gender as rigid binary roles enunciated by various creation myths and sustained by patriarchy. Gender performativity indicates that the enactment of transgender expressions could be energized by prevailing circumstances and conditions of the subject. Thus, when an overly exploited woman impulsively masculinizes her attributes, it could be interpreted as the performance of protest.

Within protest plays in the Nigerian context, one is faced with a double demonstration of defiance: first, at the level of gender identity; and second, with the form of the drama. Scholars have explained protest plays in Nigeria as dramatic works that focalize the varying levels of disappointment Africans and Nigerians in particular experience(d) at the hands of indigenous post-Independence leaders (Gbilekaa vi; Osofisan 17). According to Alex Asigbo, a key reason that influenced “the writing of this period” was the impunity with which the military ruled Nigeria; hence playwrights of protest plays instigated “the masses to be awake to their rights” (21). Labelling them “emergent drama,” Olu Obafemi states that they are scripted by young playwrights who aspire to “break down societal problems in the light of real historical occurrences” (46). Furthermore, Obafemi posits that protest plays argue that the challenges of humanity are man-made and “not from the metaphysical realm or from the gods” (46).

The socio-political issues that necessitated protest plays in Nigeria are rooted in leadership failure and the then developing class consciousness which drew inspiration from

[the] socio-political and economic developments after Nigeria's civil war and the replacement of cash crops like cocoa, groundnuts, palm oil and beniseed by petroleum, as the major item of export . . . [which] further widened the gap between the haves and have-nots, thus creating a class-conscious society. This brought a gradual thematic shift from the individual lone ranger to the masses of the society. The gloomy and bleak picture of the future characterized by the plays of Soyinka and Clark, the single history-making individual in the plays of Rotimi gave way to the masses' hero in the drama of the new generation of playwrights like Femi Osofisan, Kole Omotosho, Bode Sowande, Bode Osayin and many others. (Gbilekaa vi)

The implication of the excerpt above is that the detachment of the masses from agriculture—their familiar means of livelihood—impoverished them while the sales of crude oil elevated a few others to unprecedented affluence. Thus, protest drama was kindled by the then emergent class consciousness and the numerous effects of incompetent leadership.

Discussing the failure of leadership in Nigeria's post-independence era, Chinua Achebe clarifies that

[t]he trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership. (1)

Therefore, dramatists of protest plays recognize inept leadership as the main source of the country's woes. James Booth illustrates the prevailing mindset of politicians such as Obafemi Awolowo, thus: "I was going to make myself formidable intellectually, morally invulnerable, to make all the money that is possible for a man with my brains and brawn to make in Nigeria" (49; qtd. in Achebe 11).

Certainly, such a mindset was constrained "to produce aggressive millionaires than selfless leaders of their people" (Achebe 11). Self-centered governance in post-independent Nigeria violated all the promises made by the pre-independence nationalists as well as bankrupted the average Nigerian. As a panacea, dramatists of

protest plays advocated for the dethronement of these corrupt leaders, using the theater platform. Gbilekaa remarks that

Besides challenging Aristotle's "commandments," theatre since the advent of Marx and Engels has taken a definite ideological position in the on-going class struggle. In African theatre today, most Marxist analyses of the society have been employed both in conventional and popular theatre to release the people from the claws of, and even to urge them to revolt against, the decadent social order that oppresses them. (i)

Gbilekaa's view above clarifies that, unlike the first generation of playwrights who sought to valorize Nigerian and indeed African values, protest plays do not attempt to validate Nigeria's indigenous cultural practices but to tackle problems of the country which are occasioned by ineffective leadership.

Playwrights of protest plays adopt the revolutionary quality of theater to conscientize the oppressed masses. They accomplish this by creating awareness on the existence of duplicitous leadership, and portraying revolt against selfish leaders in a manner that would stimulate emulation in reality. Therefore, whereas the first generation of dramatists in Nigeria "deal with universal verities and metaphysical profundities such as the part-psychic search for the meaning of life and death in Soyinka's *The Road*," the second generation of playwrights such as Bode Sowande, Esiaba Irobi, Femi Osofisan, Emeka Nwabueze, and Tunde Fatunde protest against social problems that are inimical to the progress of man (Obafemi 92).

A protest play that adopts transgender expressions exceeds the tough men/frail women divide to emphasize weaknesses and strengths that surpass normative gender stereotypes. This is evidenced in the fact that women's protest against an oppressive status quo imbues them with aggression, assertiveness, and even militant dispositions—attributes that exclusively belong to traditional masculinity in the Nigerian space. During revolt against exploitation, therefore, victims of oppression, in spite of their sexes, mainly cross-dress to confront their oppressors, propelling a situation where transgendered cross-dressing enkindles the requisite identity-constructs for protests. This is actually a common strategy in Nigerian protest drama.

## **Synopsis, Historical Contexts, and Analysis of Stella Oyedepo's *The Rebellion of the Bumpy-Chested***

*The Rebellion of the Bumpy-Chested* (2002) dramatizes the story of women's revolt against a sexist society. To achieve this revolution, they constitute themselves into a movement called the Bumpy-Chested Movement (BCM). Ably led by Captain Ara Sharp, a men-hater, the BCM serves as a platform for making the women view child-rearing and domestic chores as signs of weakness. Women are also trained by Captain Sharp to gain physical strength, in order to defy patriarchy and combat their husbands. The physical trainings that women, including lactating and pregnant mothers, undergo include: karate, endurance training, yoga, wrestling, kung-fu, and boxing. The Bumpy-Chested Movement, according to Captain Sharp, is aimed at liberating women from men's oppression and erecting a system in which men would be oppressed by women.

Effectively, Captain Sharp trains the women to implement this ideology in their homes and to even physically overpower their husbands to achieve a total state of gender role-reversal. What has escaped the notice of most critics is that it is precisely the introduction of transgender performances in different homes that impel domestic crises. Women perform traditional masculine roles and unleash their newly acquired muscles on their uncooperative husbands; the men eventually resort to gender role swapping, engaging in domestic chores, strapping babies on their backs, hawking rice, donning women's dresses, and even engaging in gossip over the physical abuses from women, among others. Caught unawares by this development, the women maintain that their protest persists.

Oyedepo's *The Rebellion of the Bumpy-Chested* captures the situational realities that characterize the beginnings of the new millennium in Nigerian drama. At the turn of the new millennium, gender discourses gained increasing attention amongst critics and playwrights. Kelly Bryan Ovie Ejumudo substantiates this view when he states that "the growing importance of gender equality . . . is reflected in the broad vision espoused in the Millennium Development Goals," beginning from the year 2000 (59). Thus, this situation derived impetus from the establishment of the Millennium Development Goals. The Millennium Development Goals, also known as the MDGs, are "the internationally agreed set of time-bound targeted goals for ensuring gender equality and advancing opportunities in diverse sectors of the global economy" (Ejumudo 59). Corroborating this view, Is-haq O. Oloyede and Adebayo R. Lawal state that the promulgation of "the eight Millennium

Development Goals (MDGs), prominent among which is the promotion of gender equality and women empowerment” fertilized the Nigerian literary firmament for feminist and gender-related discourses (160). The enunciation of these goals gave rise to charged discourses on feminism and the eradication of gender-based discriminations. Hence, Oyedepo’s drama—*The Rebellion of the Bumpy-Chested*—exudes an unrivalled belligerent approach towards reversing perceived institutional bias against women as it emphasizes the need for a violent overthrow of patriarchal ideals and of the enthronement of men’s oppression by women.

Considering that the MDGs foreground the uplift of women’s conditions in all facets of life, *The Rebellion of the Bumpy-Chested* addresses no specifics but the holistic prejudices that militate against women in Nigerian society. This approach is an overkill because it captures all the systemic problems that women face in Nigeria without proffering any way out. Rather than achieve workable panaceas on particular issues, the play becomes a mere exposé of patriarchy, founded on perverted liberation techniques which are aimed at imbuing women with family-crashing ideologies that are considered anathema to traditional African values.

As mentioned earlier, Stella Oyedepo, a prolific and popular Nigerian feminist playwright, crafts plays that mainly address family issues and place women at the center of drama. Negating African feminism which, according to Obioma Nnaemeka, entails the “valorisation of motherhood and respect for maternal politics,” Oyedepo’s plays seek to reveal, without proffering enduring panaceas, the conditions of women in patriarchal cultures (578).

*The Rebellion of the Bumpy-Chested* is rooted in protest. The play’s “Prelude” presents a panoramic revelation of the varying plights of women in a phallogocentric world. The playwright captures it as follows:

Spotlight is on a woman clad only in a knee-length wrapper tied across her chest. Her hands and feet are bound in chains and her head droops sideways. As she writhes in agony, some female figures step out rendering passionate songs about the sufferings of women; a woman carrying a heavy load on her head, trudging under her burden; a pregnant woman in labour, miming her pains; a woman whose baby, strapped to her back, is brought sideways under the armpit, to suckle; a woman sweeping the floor with a broom; a woman miming her agonies as she is being flogged by a man. . . . (1)

The images above correspond to the traditional notions of masculine and feminine gendered roles in a patriarchal society. In the Nigerian sociocultural space, women suffer domestic imprisonment and abuse while men supervise and perpetrate their oppression. As mentioned before, to forestall further subjection of women, the women in the play, led by Captain Sharp, form a movement—the BCM—to reverse men’s regnancy. Consequently, the prelude sets the tone for the streaks of protest that dominate the dramatic actions of the play. The aim of the BCM is to dismantle patriarchal paradigms and enthrone female supremacy, relying on feminism. In substantiation, Ngozi Udengwu states that “[t]he play parades a club of highly impressionable women led by an overbearing and frustrated men hater, Captain Sharp, in a revolt against their husbands under the guise of feminism” (26).

According to Guerin et al., (African) feminist critics pursue a tripartite vision: to expose patriarchal premises and resulting prejudices; to promote discovery and reevaluation of literature by women; and to examine social, cultural, and psychosexual contexts of literature and criticism (184; qtd. in Yeseibo, “Patriarchy and Feminism” 36). Apparently, none of these goals suggest the displacement of masculine hegemony with women’s domination. Therefore, Captain Sharp’s desire to turn men into women’s victims of aggression constitutes a betrayal of (African) feminism, and renders her motives suspect. When men confront her with the fact that roles need to be differentiated, she agrees but argues that “for a change we want the men to take on the traditional roles of women and vice versa” (124). Jeremiah S. S. Methuselah, while commenting on the impracticability of Captain Sharp’s agenda in the play, notes that “*The Rebellion of the Bumpy-Chested* was so radically and Eurocentrically feminist that in [Oyedepo’s] later works, she distanced herself from that testy and rancorous stance[,] choosing to adopt the more amenable and accommodationist womanist approach to project the women issue” (“Women Playwrights” 157). Even though protest remains recurrent in her other plays, such as *Brain Has No Gender* (2001), in which Osomo, the young daughter of Alani, defies her forced marriage to eighty-six-year-old Kelani and eventually emerges as a successful career woman offering helpful services to humanity, the revolts are channeled towards more meaningful purposes than hate.

The male-hater protagonist in *The Rebellion of the Bumpy-Chested*, Captain Sharp, teaches women to transcend their gendered roles by overpowering men and usurping traditionally masculine roles. To achieve the role-swapping process, she denigrates men, describing their famed strength as a myth; she further encourages women to take a lot of body-building food and vitamin supplements, as well as adhere to a balanced diet, to enable them to “meet the challenges of meeting force

with force” (20). This process of gender performativity illustrates Butler’s position on the subversion of gender identity through the de-institution of an already established gender self. Iyabode Omolara Daniel decries this status quo when he captures Captain Sharp’s parody of man’s maleness as follows:

The penis is “a dangling muscle between the thighs” and “ordinary erectile tissue” . . . in this way, Captain Sharp compels the women to see that the essence of maleness is a mere biological differentiation and not something to fear of itself. The choice of the word “ordinary” not only downgrades this centre of power but presents it as a tool which is essentially for male pleasure. (5)

This pattern of thought successfully reshapes the women’s view of men. Henceforth, they unanimously decide to hold men in disdain as well as revolt against them. Instructively, Captain Sharp’s teachings and pattern of protest are inspired by hatred against males, and thus, designed to subdue men and entrench an extreme instance of gender-role turnaround.

In “Part One” of the play, women who agonize over men’s repression in the “Prelude” become bellicose, participating in an arduous military parade, signaling protest. This belated “de-socialization” of women—the preparation of women for behavior that encourages aggression—is in tandem with the view that “socialization into patriarchy” is the basis for “gender attribution” (Oakley 16). Beginning from childhood, the activities traditionally assigned to girls in Nigeria center on domestic service and the nurturing of infants, while any strenuous tasks are exclusively preserved for boys. In other words, the strenuous pursuits young boys engage in help them train their muscles while the domestic engagements of young girls deny them of such training. The foregoing accounts for why Captain Sharp believes that, apart from her members’ engagement in kitchen and bed strike, the re-training of women into strenuous tasks would prepare them for the physical protest against oppression and for a crisscross of gendered performances. The following dialogue reveals the women’s mindset:

Sharp: I have often emphasized that we have to learn to eliminate fear from our minds. If we still hold the physical prowess of the male in so much awe we become so tremulous at the sight of our men’s muscles, then we have lost the battle before it is fought. And all the vigorous exercises would have been in vain.

Falilat: Captain Sharp has made a very strong point! The training is to enable every one of us [to] get herself into a state of preparedness, in case of a physical assault, expected or unexpected, from the species that claims to possess more bones than us. (9)

Albeit the play shares strategic and thematic kinship with Julie Okoh's *Edewede* and J. P. Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* in terms of effecting women's protests against a patriarchal order, through the formation of a "women's league" and the implementation of a "bed and domestic strike," it does not proffer any workable strategy of surmounting problems that ravage human society. Instead, it rather leverages the switch of traditional gendered roles between men and women, effecting provocative protests that collapse peaceful marital unions. Women's protest against male monopoly thus becomes central in the attainment of the swapping of gendered roles.

By rejecting femininity as "a euphemism for slavery" and "perpetual thralldom which society sugar-coats and calls motherhood," the women deliberately take on man-associated behavior such as aggressiveness and assertiveness. It is not surprising therefore that Ashake describes her new gendered self as distinct from the feminine features she earlier possesses: "This is my domain and I am the despot here! I am no more the Ashake who used to placate you at the expense of her self-esteem" (21). Ashake's hostility to her brothers-in-law thaws their masculine essence. Awe-struck in the face of Ashake's new gendered identity, James and Clem—her brothers-in-law—reverse their manliness and engage in gossip about why "[Ashake] who earned herself very high commendations as a good housewife in the village" (26) would suddenly derail from sanity, dressing provocatively and meting out physical punishment to them.

The young men's gossip and placatory dispositions are keyed into traditional feminine attributes, thereby justifying Butler's view that gender is performative, not a performance. Distinguishing between performativity and performance, Butler states that gender is performative because "what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, positioned through the gendered stylization of the body" such that "what we take to be an 'internal' feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts" (*Gender Trouble* xv). James and Clem's resort to normative feminine behavior is an impulsive demonstration of their internal feelings and thoughts. It is not a performance such as drag in which one deliberately chooses a gender to be "donned" during the day and then dropped at night (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* x).

This implicitly establishes that the difference between performance and performativity approximates the distinction between drag and gender.

Drag indicates a mimetic representation of a particular gender category. It is a transient, situational act; a performance. However, performativity suggests “an openness to [continual] resignification” of gender (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 176). The point being made here is that gender identity is attained through the consistent reiteration of a specific gender performance. Any shift in gender performance, however, is often fortuitous, propelled by an individual’s overwhelming circumstance.

Thus, when Jolomi and Falilat impulsively swap roles, their actions can be designated as performatives inspired by the ensuing women’s protest—the women take up man-associated gender roles as the identity required to execute their revolt. At first, Jolomi, Falilat’s husband, is swollen with masculine arrogance. He believes that “[women] can’t change the natural order of things. Women are better seen than heard. Just like a rope does not befit a fowl’s neck, a position of authority does not befit a woman. It mars her femininity. No way! [Women] are mere helpers” (32). Based on this mindset, he rules his family strictly. However, his command to Falilat not to attend a meeting prepares him for upturned gender performativity:

Jolomi: Now, Fali, you are not attending that meeting. . . . Any further association with those women who are compensating for something they lack in femininity [sic], will make you see my wrath!

Falilat: And what can you do?

Jolomi: (rises up and moves to the centre of the sitting room) I’ll make you taste some bile, by giving you a good thrashing which you will always remember . . . and I shall . . . (33)

Clearly, Jolomi’s disposition indicates his domination of Falilat. His ignorance of Falilat’s newly acquired physical strength makes him her first victim. Thus, when Falilat unleashes her muscles on him, he finds himself sprawling on the floor, pleading for mercy. This situation is captured in the stage direction below:

([Falilat] pounces on Jolomi suddenly with incredible agility sending him sprawling on the floor. She descends on him, raining down pellets of slaps and punches especially around the lower region. Jolomi lets out yells and struggles rather desperately. As quick as lightning, Falilat jumps up, snatches her hand-bag from the settee and hurries out of the

room. Jolomi remains in a recumbent position, groaning intermittently).  
(33)

The ensuing conflict reverses Jolomi's traditionally gendered attributes: he loses his authoritarian dispositions and acquires a feeble, helpless temperament. Confronted by his wife's new strength, Jolomi, like other men in the play, succumbs to traditional feminine behavior.

The swapping is triggered by Jolomi's attempt to restore stability to heterosexual norms by manning up according to previously rehearsed and regularly executed performance of his own masculinity. Falilat's desire to attend the woman's meeting provides him both with a challenge and an opportunity to reprise his manly "repertoire." The fact that he is oblivious to his wife's "newly acquired physical strength" clearly suggests that, visually Falilat looks unchanged and woman-like while she successfully beats down her husband. There is then the possibility for the audience to see in Falilat the emergence of a neither-male-nor-female identity, a truly "transgender presence," which is emphasized by how the scene concludes. She picks up an old and heavily "feminized" item of clothing, her handbag. She does not stage a man-hating celebration of her power; she runs out of the room.

On the other hand, the earlier vitality of BCM thaws, as both men and women engage in gendered acts that cross the limits of traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. The resulting roles construct emphasizes the reign of matriarchy, together with women's domination and oppression of men, constraining one to wonder if the playwright's notion of equality lies in subordinating men to women.

The conventional mode of gender roles, according to Oakley, endorses a pervasive assent to the superiority of masculine gender roles, and passivity, ignorance, docility, virtue, and ineffectuality in femininity (76). Thus, the gendered roles swap among the major couples in the play—Jolomi and his wife, Falilat; Akanbi and his wife, Tara; Saka and his wife, Ashake; Akins and his wife, Salwa—is viewed as a violation of the traditional order of social roles, occasioned by the women's protests. Accordingly, Saka, Akanbi, and Jolomi, subdued by their wives, take on woman-associated behavior: they wear women's clothing; Jolomi hawks rice with a baby fastened to his back; Akins becomes a domestic husband who dons a dress while Salwa, a smoker, takes on taxi driving as her job; and Sabina engages in palm-wine tapping.

The foregoing constitutes a graphic justification of Butler's postulation on "the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of

gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power” (*Gender Trouble* 44). The effectiveness of transgender behavior in the play is rooted in protest, reinforcing the view that gender is not a fixed phenomenon but a fluid occurrence which changes as individuals react to their current circumstances. Hence, the sustained women’s protests drive men to adapt to their current subdued positions and behavior. Their repeated performance of traditional feminine gendered roles—continued decking of female dresses; gossiping about their wives’ aggression and enthusiastic discourses on domestic subjects such as child-rearing—solidifies their emergent transgendered identity, and obliterates the suspicion that they are engaging in a retaliatory caricature of femininity in the face of women’s usurpation of masculine roles. Evidently, women adopt transgender behavior to confront systemic subjugation while men engage in role-reversal to withstand women’s aggression. This situation is usually passed off as comic instances in the play during performances, but the present study considers transgender expressions as women’s strategies of effecting change through protest and men’s method of surviving women’s revolt.

According to Yeseibo, the men’s quick adaptation to feminine gender roles in the play “mesmerizes [the women] who become pessimistic of the potency of the rebellion in achieving equality with men” (“Stella Oyedepo” 3). The men’s acquiescence to role-reversal, instead of resisting BCM’s stratagems, disarms the women who soon realize their dissatisfaction in protesting. According to Akins, the women have been caught in their own traps, and “[w]e have taken the wind from your sails” (94). This propels Salwa’s question, “How best can a woman fight a man? How best can the war of the sexes be waged without the woman being the sufferer or the loser?” (94). The women’s frustration, as represented in Salwa’s question, focalizes their discontent in the rebellion, and highlights the lacuna in the play’s vision. Rationalizing the rebellion, however, Yeseibo contends that

the confidence displayed by the BCM . . . is not hubristic. It is confidence arising from the pain of subordination by existing patriarchal paradigms in society. Despite the perceived setbacks in the play, the women rebels under the able leadership of Captain Sharp have succeeded in exteriorising the patriarchal values and beliefs which conspire to emasculate women in their efforts at self-determination and self-fulfillment. They have also risen up boldly to attack the male embodiments of this belief. . . . The probable reasons why the rebellion crumbled were two-fold; the uncertain and

unreliable leadership of Captain Sharp and the fact that the rebellion did not receive the support of men in the task of building a new invigorated society. (“Challenging Patriarchy” 144)

Incidentally, the excerpt above does not take into account the illogicality of Captain Sharp’s hate-based movement, and the attendant women’s preoccupation with vain militarizations. Interestingly also, the movement is a sweeping attack on only/all men as (potential) oppressors, justifying women’s aggression and rascally approach to liberation: oppressing their husbands, abandoning their motherly roles in homes, and starving their children of motherly warmth. The entire approach is not only extreme but also alien to the non-fictitious Nigerian setting. Thus, the result of the protest focalizes the possibility of inverting gendered roles, as evident in the women’s insistence on continuing their revolt in spite of its apparent failures.

The foregoing, perhaps, accounts for Charles Nnolim’s admonition to creative writers against practicing the brand of feminism that would precipitate the total collapse of moral values in our society (56). His assertion, according to Rowland C. Amaefula, dwells on the fact that “freedom is a beautiful state of being that must be attained through legitimate means” (267). Thus, any act of promoting women’s liberation through militancy or propaganda that is capable of inducing imitation in real life circumstances, while demonizing men as homogenous oppressors of women, should be discouraged.

## Conclusion

A conflation of the key points of the study reveals that a protest play that appropriates transgender or cross-dressed characters surpasses the strong men/weak women divide to project weaknesses and strengths that transcend traditional gender stereotypes. During revolt against exploitation, therefore, victims of oppression—in spite of their sexes—often cross-dress to confront their oppressors, propelling a situation where transgender expressions stimulate the requisite identity constructs for protest. On the other hand, as illustrated in Stella Oyedepo’s *The Rebellion of the Bumpy-Chested*, former aggressors—who incidentally are all men—adopt normative feminine roles to survive women’s revolt. This study thus establishes that whereas women take up transgender behavior to execute protest against a troubling status quo, men in the play under study also adjust to the normative feminine tasks, validating the view that women’s resort to transgenderism entails the acquisition of new frames and identities required to dislodge men from their oppressive positions.

The play has thus been analyzed as one that recognizes how gender emerges as a fluid “project” that seeks to but never manages to reach stability.

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