

**A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF GENDER BENDING IN THE UNIVERSITY OF  
BENIN THEATRE PRODUCTIONS**

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**A RESEARCH PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE  
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OF THE BACHELOR OF ARTS, (B.A) HONOURS  
. DEGREE IN THEATRE ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF BENIN.**

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## **DECLARATION**

I declare that this project work is based on a study undertaken by me in the Department of Theatre Arts,

Faculty of Arts University of Benin under the supervision of Mr. Israel Meriomame Wekpe for the purpose of acquiring Bachelor of Arts B.A (Honours) degree in Theatre Arts.

All ideas and views are products of my research where others' views have been used and expressed, they were acknowledged.

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**ESTHER CHIAMAKA ORJI**  
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## **CERTIFICATION**

This is to certify that this research study was embarked upon by Esther Chiamaka Orji in the department of Theatre Arts under my supervision.

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Mr. Israel Meriomame Wekpe  
Project Supervisor

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Date

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this research work to God Almighty who has continuously helped me mature during my time in the university and safely kept me through all my endeavors and to my family and friends who has been my backbone and support system.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Blessed be the name of God Almighty for life and good health Amen. I am grateful to my family, Mr Mascot Orji and Mrs Mary Ann Orji for their whole round support of ensuring that I am loved, spiritually well, financially stable, mentally sound and level headed. Also their encouragement throughout this journey and providing my school fees from the beginning till the end I am immensely grateful.

To my older siblings Miss Deborah Orji, Mr Michael Orji and my cousin who is a brother, Mr Marious ,my uncle Mr Lyon I appreciate you too. For everyone else who has helped me in ensuring that this project is a success I say thank you, to my supervisor Mr. Israel Wekpe, I am immensely grateful to God for having you as a lecturer and a supervisor, thus I contribute this project success to you, you are indeed the hallmark of excellence you have also been a great support in your corrections and guidance to me, thus I want to say a very big thank you sir.

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## Abstract

This project explores gender bending in the theatre as both a creative expression and a way to question social ideas about gender and identity. It examines how actors take on roles of the opposite gender to expand the boundaries of performance. With the Use of interviews with student actors who gender bent roles in plays such as ‘The Lion King’, ‘Things Fall Apart’, and ‘What’s Wrong with Janet Peterson’, the study looks at their experiences, preparation, and audience responses. This link shows that gender bending is not entirely new but continues a long history of flexibility and not entirely recognized as gender bending in African performance culture. Guided by Judith Butler’s idea of gender bending being a continues performance, the study concludes that gender bending in theatre encourages creativity, challenges stereotypes, and helps audiences see gender as something fluid and expressive rather than fixed.

Keywords: Gender bending, African theatre, gender performativity, identity, Nigerian drama.

## CHAPTER ONE

### 1.1 BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Over the years, gender bending has been in existence, people dressing in contrast to how they traditionally ought to; this existed both in the everyday lives and in the theatre although, gender bending in the theatre occurred due to societal restrictions of women being on stage.

Gender bending in the theatre refers to the act of casting a character to an actor of the opposite gender and also changing the gender of a character to fit the gender of the actor taking it. One of the most intriguing and dynamic element theatrical performances is the depiction and enactment of gender. Gender bending in the theatre formally began In classical Greek theatre and during Shakespearean England where male performers took on both male and female roles due to the prohibition of women on stage. This early example of gender cross casting established the foundation for what has now developed into yet more sophisticated and deliberate practice of gender bending in modern theatre. African performance traditions and festivals have long provided spaces where gender bending is not only accepted but also celebrated as part of cultural expression. In many African communities it is not even seen as

bending gender. Some festivals often erase the boundaries between gender roles through masquerades, dance, and ritual performances. Male performers take on female roles in masquerade traditions, These performances do not only entertain but they reflect the fluidity of identity embedded in Africa, where the physical body is seen as a vessel rather than a fixed marker of gender. Such practices demonstrate that gender transformation on stage is not a Western import but deeply rooted in African performance history. Through dance, costume, and song, these festivals affirm that storytelling and ritual can transcend the two genders, using performance as a sacred and social tool to explore identity, power, and belonging.

Gender bending has become a strong medium for artistic expression in recent years especially in the theatrical community. In contrast to prior eras, when cross gender performance was mostly caused by societal restrictions for example, women being forbidden from the stage. In present years, performing modern gender bending is frequently a conscious and creative decision made to question traditional gender norms and investigate the fluidity of identity.

Modern theatre increasingly embraces non-traditional casting, where actors are chosen irrespective of gender, which allows for a more inclusive and varied narrative. Judith Butler and other gender theorists endorse the notion that gender is performed rather than fixed, and that female actors are now playing historically male roles and vice versa in order to reinterpret classic writings and emphasize this.

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

It is remarkable how one can completely embody another gender different from the norm of how the person was born and raised into by society, gender as a whole is an interpretation of what society defines it as, and gender norms as well can differ in various societies as well further proving it is what the society deems it to be; today's gender bending

defies traditional notions of masculinity and femininity by questioning the notion that a person's sex should determine their roles, behavior, or authority.

The reason for gender bending is that women were prohibited from performing onstage. For example, in Elizabethan England or Ancient Greece, males had to play female roles. This practice is significant because, in recent years, directors, playwrights, and performers have employed gender bending to convey strong messages about gender identity, representation, power, and equality. In some productions, the casting is intentionally gender-bent in order to make a point about representation. For example, all female Shakespeare performances, such as the Donmar Warehouse's *Julius Caesar* in London, challenge established power.

The ban of women from the stage greatly contributed to gender bending in the theatre, not just by men playing female roles but also by the majority of scripts being male-dominated. Most of the ancient plays were written by men, for male actors, in male dominated societies.

Even today, male centered stories are performed more frequently because the majority of producers, directors, and artistic directors are still men. Themes that are deemed 'important' or 'universal' have historically been defined by men's experiences, which has excluded women's stories. Men are frequently given the most complex, powerful, and important roles in many ancient plays. Women's roles are often restricted to love interests, spouses, or supporting characters. This is also due to the fact that it is believed that male-driven stories are viewed as more bankable or serious.

This is also a problem nowadays. The scripts that are chosen are influenced by the fact that women's tales are frequently categorized as domestic and uninteresting.

In recent times, more women have challenged this imbalance as writers, directors, and performers by imposing the inclusion of female driven stories.

Despite the fact that gender bending in the theatre has become more visible and accepted in modern performances, it continues to provoke more debates and oppositions, particularly in more traditional settings. It is often misunderstood in terms of its social and cultural importance.

This study aims to examine the reasons behind gender bending, the social responses it brings out, and its effect for audiences and performers.

The visibility, awareness and international discussion of gender bending performances have increased with the help of social media.

As a result, this research aims to investigate the concept of 'gender' as a whole, including gender bending in contemporary theatre, analyzing its development, importance, differences, and reception.

### **1.3 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

1. This study aims to; To understand gender bending in Nigerian theatre.
2. This objective is to provide a clear conceptual and practical understanding of how gender roles are reinterpreted and performed on stage, showing its relevance within Nigerian theatres.
3. To identify the causes of male-dominated theatrical writing.
  - a. This objective is to examine the cultural, historical, and societal factors that influence playwrights' tendency to create more male than female characters.
4. To explore the reasons behind women playing male characters in theatrical productions.
5. This objective is to investigate both practical and creative motivations such as actor availability, directorial choices, and artistic experimentation that lead to women embodying male roles.
6. To aid proper understanding of the term 'gender' and how it is performative.
7. This objective is to highlight the idea that gender is not a fixed identity but a repetitive performance made by society.

### **1.4 SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

This project is concerned with the production in the department of Theatre Arts, University of Benin between 2018-2025.

### **1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY**

This study acts as a milestone, a foundation for seeing the theatre in a new light. The findings of this study will prove that gender is indeed a thing of performance .

This study may inspire theatre practitioners, actors, directors, and playwrights to experiment with casting and storytelling. Also encouraging playwrights to write more complicated and diverse female roles, reducing the amount of stories that are dominated by men.

## **1.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What is gender performativity?
2. Why cross casting in the theatre?
3. Why do women take on male roles more than men take on female roles?
4. Why are more of male dominated scripts used
5. What is gender bending

## **1.7 DEFINITION OF TERMS**

- i. Gender: Gender is the social and cultural role, behavior and expectation that a society deems suitable for males and females.
- ii. Gender bending: gender bending is the practice of a person who dresses up and presents themselves in a way that does not align with the societal expectations of their gender, especially as the opposite sex.
- iii. Roles: The parts that actors perform in a play, movie, or performance

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

The chapter is concerned with a review of related literature of the phenomenon under this study . It explores gender bending, its historical roots, its practice both globally and in Nigeria, and its impact on theatrical representation. Although gender bending has a long tradition worldwide, its significance within the Nigerian context remains evolving and requires deeper scholarly investigation, particularly because theatre has historically mirrored cultural traditions and social standards.

Gender bending in the theatre goes beyond a performer simply dressing as the opposite sex to fit a role. It also involves restructuring a character to fit the available actor.

This study draws on Judith Butler’s concept of ‘gender performativity’, first articulated in *Gender Trouble* and later expanded in subsequent works. Butler argues that ‘gender is not an essence but an identity constituted through repeated performance (Judith Butler). This emphasizes that gender bending is not just about performance technique but also about questioning what it means to be ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ on stage.

Thus, this chapter situates gender bending within both global theory and Nigerian practice, demonstrating how theatre functions as a site where cultural norms are both reinforced and resisted.

Questions of identity have long been explored and debated in the theater. Gender bending, the act of playing roles across gender lines, is one of the most well known strategies in this area. In the past, this practice developed out of necessity. ‘The exclusion of women from the stage meant that men and boys played female characters’ as Jill Dolan points out in the chapter 3 of her book *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*. 1988. This demonstrates how social

limitations on women influenced theatre practices, compelling men to embody femininity and, in turn, demonstrating that gender is something that can be performed rather than permanent.

## **2.2 GENDER BENDING: CONCEPT AND MEANING**

The biological categorisation of people based on physical and physiological characteristics like reproductive organs, hormone systems, and chromosomal patterns is known as sex. These traits set humans apart biologically, while gender is the social and cultural role, behaviour, and expectation that a society deems suitable for males and females. 'Sex is rooted in biology, but gender is socially and culturally produced'. This highlights the distinction between natural categories and socially constructed identities, which theatre often brings into question.

The practice of defying and canceling culturally mandated norms of what it means to be a man or a woman in society is known as gender bending. By adopting conduct or roles that are often linked with the other sex, it demonstrates that gender is a social concept rather than an biological fact. This occurrence goes beyond simple clothing decisions and provides a more profound analysis of how societies define masculinity and femininity. The origins of this practice are historical For example Ifi Amadiume in her book *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (1987) states that, in Nigeria's Igbo community, traditional practices permitted gender fluidity via roles such female husbands and male daughters where women took on socially approved male identities in order to maintain family line or inheritance rights (90).This demonstrates how traditional societies accommodated fluid gender roles, challenging rigid binaries long before contemporary discourse. Gender bending is still noticeable today in cultural expression and individual identity For example, some contemporary Nigerian designers are using gender fluid themes from Gelede masquerade traditions to produce fashion that defies established norms. The Gelede masquerade is a masquerade used in a Yoruba festival called the Gelede festival in Nigeria that

celebrates womanhood, honouring the female deities and elders. The masquerade performed by men wearing elaborate costumes and colorful masks. This demonstrates how cultural heritage can spark creative expressions that challenge rigid gender definitions.

Understanding gender bending also needs recognizing that gender goes beyond the binary male or female categories. A lot of people identify in ways that contradict their biological assignment, either combining stereotypical masculine or feminine characteristics or completely rejecting them. Gender is not solely based on biology but is constantly moulded by social practices, as seen by people in diverse cultures creating identities that mirror cultural norms or individual expression.

Additionally, these functions are supported by cultural tales. Men are frequently portrayed in Nigerian communities as providers and protectors through proverbs, storytelling, and rituals, while women are praised for their nurturing or attractive attributes. However, these straightforward ideals are contradicted by the fact that women often show off economic, political, and symbolic power in reality.

There are several aspects of gender that extend beyond simply being male or female. Society assigns roles according to a person's sex and over time particular standards have emerged regarding masculinity and femininity. This showcases how social definitions create unequal expectations, which often reflect in theatre and performance. In society men are commonly portrayed as strong, dominant, and authoritative while women are regarded as caring, weaker and sensitive. These societal views extend into creative expression, male characters are often depicted as warriors, chiefs, and rulers, while women are relegated to the roles of mothers, wives, and love interests proving how theatrical narratives reproduce patriarchal ideas, giving men authority while silencing women.

The pressures of gender identity extend into the body itself; the beauty industry has normalized flawless skin and body enhancement as markers of ideal womanhood. This

highlights how society reconstructs the female body through cultural and media pressures, showing that femininity is continually being redefined. Similarly, men increasingly adopt bodybuilding and voice training to assert masculinity in both life and in performance. This showcases that just as women reshape themselves to fit ideals of beauty, men reconstruct their bodies to fit ideals of strength and dominance.

### **2.3 GENDER BENDING: A HISTORICAL EXCURSION**

The history of gender bending shows that it is not a recent invention but an old cultural practice deeply rooted in African cultures. Societies have long established environments where men embodied feminine roles or aesthetics as symbolic representations of cultural ideals, ranging from masquerades in Igbo villages to the cosmetic ceremonies of the Bororo (Wodaabe) tribe.

The Adamma masquerade in Igbo society is a perfect example of this. Adamma is a term meaning 'beautiful daughter' that portrays the ideal young woman but the part is always played by males who exaggerate feminine gestures, melodies, and speech. The Adamma masquerade is not merely entertainment but a symbolic reconstruction of the female body in male performance, this shows how outside of biology, gender might be imitated and represented in traditional Igbo culture.

The Mmanwu masquerade system also demonstrates guys performing both male and female spiritual roles; Performers sometimes display extremely feminine traits demonstrating that Igbo ritual practice included gender flexibility in its spiritual expression. The Ogbodo masquerade operates in a similar manner for comedic effect, it frequently depicts exaggerated female behaviors. Ogbodo masquerades function as both social commentary and a playful inversion of gender expectations, this demonstrates that men taking on female roles were not kept secret; rather, they were seen as normal and even praised as social art.

The Bororo (Wodaabe) people of Niger, who are a subgroup of Fulani people also exhibit gender bending in their sense of beauty and aesthetics. The Bororo, a branch of the Fulani are famous for their tall and thin bodies, symmetrical faces, and sophisticated grooming practices. The Fulani of the Wodaabe, men spend hours perfecting their appearance, applying makeup, arranging hair, and adorning themselves with beads and feathers ,This emphasises that, unlike in other cultures where it is frequently coded as feminine, beautification was a valued male pastime for the Bororo people. Their most well known ceremony, the Guérewol festival, reinforces this reversal. The Guérewol festival is a courtship ritual competition that is done annually by the wodaabe Fulani people of Niger where Young men paint their faces with red ochre, darken their eyes with kohl, and use chalk to whiten their teeth and highlight their smiles throughout the celebration. In beauty contests judged by women, they compete by dressing up in embroidered attire, beads, and ostrich feathers. According to *'Thirty Years of Male Daughters, Female Husbands' Journal of Contemporary African Studies* (2021), Siphokazi Magadla and coworkers note that 'the Guérewol festival functions as an inversion of gender roles in which men, not women, compete for beauty and adornment' (521). This demonstrates that the social ideal of beauty in Bororo culture belongs mainly to men.

These instances taken from the Guérewol festival of the Bororo to the Adamma masquerades, collectively show that gender bending is rooted in African cultural history. They demonstrate that gender roles are not static but rather are recreated through ritual, aesthetics, and communal performance. These customs emphasise that gender identities are influenced by symbolic expression, cultural innovation, and biology.

The practice of gender bending adopting appearances, clothing, or behaviors associated with the opposite sex has existed across civilisations for centuries. Its roots extend beyond modern times appearing in Europe, Asia, and Africa in diverse cultural, military, and ritual contexts.

In medieval and early modern Europe, women often dressed as men to escape restrictive roles. A famous case is Joan of Arc, who put on male armor in 15th-century France while leading troops in battle. As Marina Warner explains in *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism* University of California Press (2000), ‘her adoption of male dress was not mere disguise but a symbol of defiance against restrictive gender codes’ (64). This highlights how clothing was used as a strategy of empowerment and resistance.

In the 18th century, Deborah Sampson of Massachusetts disguised herself as a man to fight in the American Revolutionary War under the name ‘Robert Shurtliff’. Alfred Young notes in *Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson* (2005) that ‘her military service was only possible through a carefully maintained male identity, proving the permeability of gender roles in times of crisis’ (Young). This showcases how necessity often blurred gender distinctions.

Also, men engaged in gender crossing during ritual and festive occasions. In ancient Rome, the festival of Saturnalia temporarily reversed social norms, with men sometimes wearing women’s clothes. This shows that men’s gender bending often carried symbolic rather than survivalist meanings.

In Asia, cross gender practices were also visible. During the Ming and Qing dynasties in China, women sometimes dressed as men to pursue education or independence. Dorothy Ko in *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* Stanford University Press (1994) notes that ‘female cross dressing served as both disguise and a symbolic rejection of women’s prescribed domesticity’ (Ko 89). Similarly, in Japan’s Edo period, some women disguised themselves as men in urban areas for protection or economic reasons. Gary Leupp in *Male Colors* University of California Press (1995) observes that ‘cross gender dressing was embedded not only in performance but in urban culture, where it blurred expected distinctions of male and female’ (Leupp).

In Africa, gender bending was also historically present particularly in military and cultural life. The Dahomey Amazons of the Kingdom of Dahomey (present-day Benin Republic) were women trained as warriors, adopting masculine encrypted attire and roles of combat usually reserved for men. Stanley Alpern in *Amazons of Black Sparta: The Women Warriors of Dahomey* (1998) explains that these women ‘discarded the domestic image of wife and mother, embodying instead the physical discipline and command expected of male soldiers’ (73). This highlights how gender bending could serve political and military functions. Likewise, Ethiopian history records instances where women assumed male roles in warfare. Empress Taytu Betul, wife of Emperor Menelik II, led troops during the Battle of Adwa in 1896 while adopting militarised male coded attire. Bahru Zewde in *A History of Modern Ethiopia* James Currey (2001) notes that Taytu’s leadership “destabilized assumptions of female fragility and reinforced the cultural flexibility of gender roles” (James Currey).

These examples across Europe, Asia, and Africa demonstrate that gender bending has long been woven into human societies. Women have historically crossed into male roles to gain power, freedom, or survival, while men often engaged in cross gender practices in ritual or celebratory contexts that temporarily inverted established hierarchies. The recurrence of these practices across cultures and centuries illustrates that gender boundaries, though socially enforced, have always been negotiable and open to transformation.

## **2.4 WE-MEN AND WOMEN**

For a long time, the difference between men and women has gone beyond biology to include social roles, cultural norms, and symbolic significance. Society frequently creates complex layers of identity around the meanings of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ even though sex is based on physiological and physical characteristics. These layers which have an impact on behavior, responsibilities, and even ideas of value, are the basis of culture.

Men are frequently thought of as protectors, providers, and leaders, whereas women are associated with nurturing, care, and domestic duties. In *The Invention of Women* (1997), Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí contends that ‘gender distinctions in many societies are not just biological categories but cultural constructions that dictate hierarchy and power’ (124). This demonstrates how cultural frameworks restrict women to supportive positions while granting males more access to power. Men are expected to be the epitome of strength, bravery, and decisiveness in many African communities.

This notion is supported by proverbs, folktales and rites that emphasize bravery and leadership as masculine characteristics. On the other hand, women are frequently commended for their beauty, patience, and fertility, which reflects societal norms regarding nurturing and family continuity. In *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture* (2006), Nkiru Nzegwu points out that ‘the cultural positioning of women as mothers and men as decision makers is deeply embedded in symbolic language and social organization’ (Nzegwu). This demonstrates how identity is influenced by social values outside of physical appearance. These opinions are not held by everyone or are they set in.

Men have occasionally participated in activities seen as feminine, while women have historically assumed positions regarded as masculine in certain societies. For instance, Akan women traders in Ghana have considerable economic influence, which is often thought of as a male role in other cultures. The fact that the meanings of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are contextual and determined by local needs and customs is evidence of this.

Fixed definitions of men and women have been further challenged by modernity, globalization, and education. Men are increasingly visible in domestic and care giving roles, while women are pursuing careers in leadership, politics, and science. The shifts in education and modernity have disrupted hard gender divisions, yet cultural memory continues to exert

pressure on men and women to perform traditional identities; this demonstrates that societal perceptions are still strong despite improvements.

As a result, the notion of ‘we men and women’ is a negotiated identity that combines cultural tradition, social organization, and individual performance rather than just a reflection of biology. The expectations placed on men and women continue to define them, even as these expectations are challenged and changed throughout time and geography. The expression ‘We Men and Women’ indicates the biological difference between sexes as well as the social and cultural responsibilities associated with it. Historically, these differences have influenced audience expectations, character depictions, and casting decisions in theatre. Women are often associated with nurturing, sensitivity, and domesticity, whereas males are commonly associated with authority, power, and leadership; These assumptions carry over to the stage, where women are often depicted as wives, mothers, or objects of desire, while men are portrayed as heroes, leaders, or decision makers. Theatre reproduces the cultural stereotypes of men as leaders and women as dependents, demonstrating how theatre as a reflection of society, reinforces more social notions of masculinity and femininity. Consequently, the term ‘we men and women’ cut across mere biological distinction; it is an expression of identity influenced by cultural imagination.

Nevertheless, Nigerian university performances demonstrate how these boundaries might become unclear due to a lack of male actors, female performers in universities often assume male roles; For instance, female students have effectively portrayed leaders, soldiers, and chiefs, exhibiting characteristics culturally linked with men, such as authority, strength, and bravery. In a similar manner, female performers have assumed historically male parts in plays not only to fill gaps but also to disrupt stereotypes of weakness, this further demonstrates how necessity results in gender bent casting while also allowing for fresh interpretations of what it means to be a man or woman in theatre.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler states ‘gender is constituted through performance, through the repeated stylization of the body’ (Judith Butler) This implies that when a woman plays a king or a man takes on a maternal role, the term ‘we men and women’ becomes unclear. The performance shows that gender roles are socially constructed rather than inherent, and as a result, they may be altered therefore, in the theatre context, we men and women refers to both the social definitions that assign men and women distinct roles and the creative potential that permits these roles to be challenged, twisted, and redefined. Nigerian university productions demonstrate that theatre not only mirrors societal divides between men and women, but also reveals their fabricated nature, making the stage a place where identities may be both affirmed and challenged.

## **2.5 GENDER BENDING AND THE NIGERIAN THEATRE**

The term ‘gender bending’ in theatre refers to the practice of casting or performing in a way that challenges accepted gender norms, such as by men playing female roles or women playing male ones. This practice has significant historical and cultural origins in Nigerian theatre, as it is a reflection of both need and creative expression. Cultural ideas about female modesty and public visibility frequently limited women's participation on stage throughout the early eras of Nigerian theatre, especially in traditional performances and the traveling theatre companies of the 1940s and 1970s and thus was due to the fact that women were prohibited from performing on stage during the Elizabethan era, men often took on female parts. This demonstrates that the act of gender switching on stage was first influenced by cultural norms rather than by artistic taste.

In her groundbreaking book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler contends that gender is a performative act that is constantly created through repetition, not a set essence (Judith Butler). This emphasises how gender bending in Nigerian theatre undermines conventional expectations, demonstrating that, as in society, identity is

flexible and subject to reinterpretation. By placing women in roles like kings, warriors, and political leaders, directors are not only questioning patriarchy but also demonstrating the performative aspect of gender itself. Nigerian playwrights such as Ola Rotimi, Tess Onwueme, and Zulu Sofola explore gender, power, and authority. This illustrates the imaginative application of gender bending in performance to highlight women's opposition to patriarchal systems. For instance, Onwueme's plays frequently focus on powerful female characters who challenge conventional hierarchies, and when such plays are produced with gender bending decisions, they emphasize the intense ties between artistic expression and social commentary. Nigerian theatre's gender bending is a reflection of both history and change. Although it started out as a reaction to cultural limitations, it has grown into an intentional political and creative instrument. This demonstrates how Nigerian theatre employs performance to do more than simply amuse; it also uses it to examine, rethink, and change gender relations in society. This same creativity is also seen in smaller and more adaptable performance formats like skits, in addition to major performances and formal productions. Skits exaggerate gender roles in order to not only amuse but to also question accepted norms, giving both performers and audiences the opportunity to discuss the performative aspect of gender and its significance in daily existence.

Skits are frequently seen in Nigerian performance practice at university theatre schools, church plays, street performances, and comedy programs, where women perform male roles and males perform female roles by engaging in this light-hearted performance. Performers can examine social norms associated with each gender. For example, a male actor portraying a 'market woman' or a female actor playing a stern male 'headmaster' makes fun of stereotypes while also highlighting the flexibility of acting.

This importance has been highlighted by academics. Skitting across gender roles allows performers to lessen and dismantle rigid gender codes through exaggeration and humor

demonstrating that skitting is more than just humor; it's also a cultural critique of gender expression, power, and authority.

Popular Nigerian comedians like Gloria Oluruntobi also known as Maraji, Nosa Afolabi better known as Lasisi Elenu, Apaokagi Adedoyin Maryam better known as Taaooma often play cross gender roles in their sketches.

## **2.6 CONCLUSION**

Gender bending in Nigerian theatre is more than a theatrical practice; it is a reflection of how society itself defines and redefines gender. Across traditions and contemporary practices, the theatre shows that gender is not only about biology but also a social agreement, a definition shaped by culture, history, and performance. From masquerades where men embodied feminine identities, to university productions where women step into male roles, Nigerian performance has long questioned boundaries.

Gender bending on stage becomes a form of cultural reflection, reminding us that theatre is a living space where societal definitions of gender can be rehearsed, challenged, and reimaged.

## CHAPTER THREE

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

In Nigerian theatre, gender bending is more than just actors taking on roles different from their biological sex. It is a creative device that challenges cultural norms, emphasises power relationships, and rethinks the boundaries of identity. Nigerian theatre artists have employed gender bending in various play texts and live performances like ‘Odidigboigbo’ by Austin Asagba etc, this is done to elevate women's voices and initiate discussions about inclusion and representation on the stage

In this chapter, I will be looking at the practical manifestations of gender bending in Nigerian theatre, with an emphasis on the University of Benin Department of Theatre Arts productions from 2018 to 2025, where the practice of gender bending has been researched, portrayed, and perceived.

In Nigeria, the practice is not only artistic but also practical. For instance, the University of Benin Theatre Arts Department often employs gender bent casting due to shortages of male performers, with female actors frequently stepping into traditionally male roles. Female performers in Nigerian universities frequently take male parts, not only to fill gaps but also to disrupt stereotypes of weakness revealing that gender bending emerges from necessity but also carries transformative cultural implications.

The University of Benin Theatre Arts department is a creative and academic environment where one may try out various casting options and performance methods. The performances produced during this time will showcase the creative vision of their directors and student performers, as well as a variety of interpretive methods to both traditional and contemporary plays where female students have been cast in roles that were historically written for men, while in other cases, male students have played female roles due to practical casting

requirements or directorial choice. These situations will offer plenty of evidence that gender bending is a conscious artistic choice that increases the interpretive possibilities of performance, not merely a need.

### **3.2 GENDER BENDING IN UNIVERSITY OF BENIN THEATRE PRODUCTIONS (2018/2019 – 2022/2023)**

This section explores gender bending in selected theatrical performances in the University of Benin's Department of Theatre Arts, covering the academic years from 2018/2019 to 2022/2023. The productions demonstrate practical examples of how gender roles are negotiated, adapted, and occasionally reversed in the university environment. The findings show a consistent pattern of female performers often portraying male roles, whereas male performers rarely portray female roles. This imbalance reflects male domination in dramatic scripts, which are primarily written from patriarchal cultural frameworks that place men in roles like warriors, chiefs, political leaders, or heroic figures, while putting down women to fewer supporting roles.

One of the first examples in this research is the play *Something's Wrong with Janet Peterson* (2018/2019). The casting was crucial here because a character Barbara Peterson, a female figure was portrayed by a male actor, which is not typical in other shows; The less typical type of gender bending, in which male actors play female parts, is brought to light by this change. Even though this was the exception, it raised issues about how audiences see masculinity and femininity when performed by members of the opposite sex.

However, the frequent pattern among the works studied is that female actors often portray male characters. For instance, the part of Agogo in *Rogbodiyan* (2020/2021) was played by a female actress. In *The Lion King* (2020/2021), the clearly male character of 'Young Simba' was also played by a female actor, showing how institutional casting practices adapt to screenplay demands when there are not enough male performers available. In the same vein, the characters of Fala and Player One (Remi), both portrayed as males in *Igbandu* (2020/2021), were played by female actors.

This pattern shows that there are more male characters in plays than there are male actors in the department. This means that women actors are often given the job of ‘filling in’ for male roles, which extends their acting range outside traditional gender norms. Gender itself is not inborn but rather a repeated performance influenced by cultural expectations, according to Butler (Judith butler). In light of this, the capacity of female actors to portray masculinity demonstrates how performance reveals gender as constructed rather than fixed.

Future productions followed suit with this trend. Women played roles in *Joromi* (2021/2022) that were held by men, such as those on the Elders' Council and those who embodied the Okao. Similarly, in ‘If...The Tragedy of the Ruled’ (2021/2022), a female student played the part of Onyema, which further defied gendered assumptions about how people embody characters.

Perhaps the most notable example is ‘The Man Who Never Died’ (2021/2022), in which female performers played three separate male roles: ‘Joe Hill’, ‘Ed Rowan’, and ‘Marshall’, although the performance were monologue. This work highlights the degree to which women actors predominate male roles, thereby fading the distinction between biological sex and stage gender identity. According to Butler, such acts of embodiment demonstrate that gender identity is maintained through ‘stylized repetition of acts’, implying that it can be reconstituted in novel forms through performance (Judith Butler).

The ‘Landlord’ in *In Redeem of Faith* (2022/2023), the Lawyer in *Sunset in the Lagoon* (2022/2023), and the Chiefs in *Venom of Vengeance* (2021/2022) are some more examples. In every instance, female performers took on male roles of authority, leadership, and social control, thus questioning the expected masculinity of these characters on stage.

The phenomenon is just as prevalent in classic plays like In ‘Things Fall Apart’ (2020/2021), where a female actor played the part of Ikemefuna. Likewise, the roles of Chief, Warriors, and Chief Warrior were similarly gender bent in *Jangumolu* (2020/2021), *Drums of*

War (2020/2021), and Battle for Death (2018/2019), respectively. These cases are noteworthy because they demonstrate a cultural contradiction; on one hand, traditional Nigerian society is profoundly patriarchal, but on the other hand, its theatrical depiction at the University of Benin has enabled women to portray male authority on stage.

Last but not least, the casting of a female actor as Chief in *Esohe* (2022/2023) reinforces the idea that in general roles of authority, combat, and leadership are continuously uneven in favor of female actors.

The plays performed at the University of Benin between 2018/2019 and 2022/2023 demonstrate a consistent trend of female performers playing male parts. The vast majority of the nineteen roles discovered across eleven productions are male roles that women play. In *Something's Wrong with Janet Peterson*, a male actor portrayed a female character, which is the sole noteworthy instance of the opposite.

This difference emphasises the gendered aspects of playwriting, where there is little representation for women since there are more male characters. Female performers often adjust by broadening their range and venturing into traditionally male domains. This places gender bending in Nigerian university theatre as a structural need rather than just an artistic option, influenced by both the subject matter of theatrical pieces and the availability of actors.

Consequently, this study demonstrates that the University of Benin's gender bending productions are not just an artistic tool but also a practical approach that questions and disrupts gender binaries on stage. It highlights Butler's idea of gender performativity, according to which gender is not predetermined but rather performed and re-enacted via action (Judith Butler). By portraying chiefs, warriors, lawyers, and political leaders, female performers at once reveal and wear away the patriarchal leadership that is written into theatrical works

### **3.3 SUPPORTIVE ANALYSIS OF ACTORS RESPONSES**

Nowamagbe George Irenuma's portrayal of Barbara Peterson in the play 'What's Wrong with Janet Peterson' (2018/2019) stands as a rare but significant example of male to female gender bending. Initially he was reluctant but later on accepted the role out of necessity due to the fact that his group was small and he was the only male among five female colleagues; Yet this necessity became an opportunity for artistic experimentation and empowerment. His preparation process drawing from his mother's fashion sense for costumes, adopting wigs and accessories and also manipulating his voice to channel a convincing femininity, this highlights Butler's argument that gender is not natural but performed through repetitions of acts such as voice, gesture and dress. Interestingly, George critiques his own vocal choices to a 'Kim Kardashian' high pitch rather than a deeper, maternal tone which reveals the pressure and difficulty of performing an unfamiliar gender convincingly. His case shows that necessity often drives experimentation but in doing so it exposes the performative nature of gender itself, where even 'failure' or 'exaggeration' reveals gender's creation. His reflections also highlight how gender bending can provoke strong audience reactions for example, the slap scene between Barbara and Janet shocked and captivated the audience affirming that his cross gender performance had achieved dramatic authenticity. Furthermore his response reveals how performance allowed him to explore gender from a place of empathy having been raised by a single mother he was able to interpret Barbara's role not simply as 'playing a woman' but as embodying the struggles of irresponsible motherhood. In doing so, his acting blurred the line between performance and social commentary, echoing his conviction that gender bending can help dismantle stereotypes and elevate the importance of women's roles in family and society. I agree with this as it shows that gender bending on stage can foster deeper empathy in actors and audiences alike, allowing performers to embody and communicate the social realities of

the opposite sex with authenticity.





In contrast, Garba Rose Blessing's performance as Little Simba in the play 'The Lion King' and Ikemefuna in 'Things Fall Apart'(2020/2021) illustrates the more common practice of female to male gender bending in UNIBEN productions. Unlike George, whose cross casting

arose from group necessity, Garba was deliberately chosen by her lecturer and directors (Kosidichukwuma Ezinwa and Joan Salami respectively) who saw her potential to embody male roles convincingly. Her excitement and readiness reflect her view that acting is fundamentally about embodying any character, regardless of gender. Reflecting on this, I believe that Garba's case demonstrates that gender bending is not only a fallback solution to casting shortages but can also be an intentional artistic decision that validates the versatility of female actors. Garba's preparation further reinforces the performative nature of gender. She adjusted her voice to sound like a young boy and paid close attention to gestures and physicality to inhabit masculinity naturally. Costumes also helped her step into character, underscoring how theatrical transformation relies heavily on external markers of gender identity. Her natural 'tomboyish' nature eased the process, but the most telling evidence of her success lies in the audience's reaction; many did not realise she was female until after the performance. This further demonstrates how effectively performance can suspend and weaken biological assumptions about gender, validating Butler's claim that gender identity is socially enacted rather than biologically fixed. For me I believe her success illustrates how theatre can temporarily erase rigid gender categories, allowing audiences to see the actor firstly as a character and not as a man or woman. Importantly, Garba frames gender bending not merely as a pragmatic solution to casting shortages but as a creative and political act. She observes that such performances challenge stereotypes, open conversations about identity, and prove that 'talent and ability matter more than gender'. Her statements suggests that gender bending in theatre can serve as a fine critique of patriarchal structures by enabling women to embody roles of strength and leadership typically reserved for men. George's and Garba's experiences illustrate two sides of gender bending in Nigerian university theatre, the less common but significant male to female embodiment, and the frequent female to male embodiment. Both cases reveal that gender on stage is performative, and open to reinterpretation. While George's

role of 'Barbara Peterson' challenged perceptions of femininity through humor, empathy, and transformation, Garba's role of Simba and Ikemefuna demonstrated how women can convincingly perform masculinity, often to the point of erasing audience awareness of biological sex. By comparing their cases, I am convinced that gender bending is both necessity and strategy by serving the practical demands of casting while also weakening rigid gender roles through live performance.





### 3.4 CONCLUSION

My study has demonstrated so far that, gender bending is shaped not only by necessity but by strategy as well because the scripts were male dominated and there were more female actors than male, women often played roles such as chiefs, warriors, and leaders.

Men, however, rarely took female roles although with *Something's Wrong with Janet Peterson* standing as the main exception; also proving that gender bending in the theatre is also for artistic purposes and not only due to shortage of cast. What this reveals is that gender

bending goes beyond filling casting gaps; it also challenges traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity on stage. It shows that gender in performance is flexible, opening new ways of imagining identity in Nigerian theatre.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **4.1 SUMMARY**

Gender bending in the theatre has a long history of being used as both a creative technique and a means of social analysis.

The practice continues to question how audiences view identity, performance, and representation, from classical traditions where restrictions on female actors meant that men frequently played women, to modern plays where women often play male roles.

One consistent observation is that gender bending is hardly neutral; rather, it has implications beyond the stage by embodying authority in ways that society might not typically permit, women momentarily lessen patriarchal systems when they assume positions as chiefs, warriors, or leaders.

On the other hand, when men play female roles, the performance frequently highlights cultural concerns regarding masculinity and femininity, bringing up issues about vulnerability, ridicule, and the boundaries of gender norms. Actors can go beyond their biological sex and assume roles that are distinct from their own by using attire, motions, vocal tone, make up and body language. Due to this fluidity, the stage becomes a testing ground for gender itself. It teaches us that gender, similar to theatre, is something we perform rather than something static.

### **4.2 CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, gender bending in the theatre is a performative act that questions the limits of gender identity rather than simply a casting choice; Regardless of whether it's driven by necessity, creativity, or intentional artistic decision, it creates opportunities for the redistribution and reimagining of power, authority, and vulnerability.

Theatre emphasizes the manufactured nature of gender and challenges fixed binaries by enabling male and female performers to break traditional barriers. This allows viewers to

consider larger social problems, such as representation, equality, and the ability to redesign one's identity.

In the end, gender bending only serves to reinforce the theatre's ability to change people. It shows that the stage is more than a reflection of society; it's a place where options are tried out and debated. Theatre keeps reminding us that, like performance, gender is adaptable and subject to change via this method.

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