

## The Enactment of Male Mothering in Clark's *The Wives' Revolt*

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### Abstract

*The predominantly conventional situation in indigenous and contemporary Africa has been a practice of female mothering within the domestic space. Given the postmodern spirit of professionalization that is affecting numerous entrepreneurial outfits and agencies around the world, men have entered into spaces of mothering, hitherto reserved for women. Examples abound in Europe and America of male nannies while a sizeable number of men in Nigeria secured employment through the growing influence of the Macdonaldization witnessed in fast food companies. This has influenced the gender changing roles witnessed in a number of homes in Nigeria and in Africa. This paper therefore examines the representation of male mothering in Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* with a view to establishing the artistic agency of the playwright. Judith Butler's gender theory of Performativity is used to analyze representations. The discussion of representation in the play shows that the playwright mismanages the male mothers and thereby demonstrates a clear misapprehension of gender as performance.*

**Key words :** *Female mothering, domestic space, male nannies, performativity, representation, performance*

### Introduction

The context of male mothering in Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* is located in the exploration of oil in the Niger Delta, a southeastern part of Nigeria. Oil was discovered in Nigeria in the 1950s in Oloibiri (Mosobalaje, 2015 :443). It became exportable in commercial quantity in 1958. Oil commerce took a different turn in the early 1970s when Nigeria witnessed what was aptly referred to as the oil boom. With the oil boom, Nigeria abandoned all other natural means of generating wealth such as cocoa, gold and other agricultural products to solely concentrate on oil commerce. The oil commerce attracted many foreign investors and multinational corporations that later settled in Nigeria for oil drilling. Not long after these multinational corporations settled to oil drilling, the oil-bearing states began to feel the heat of environmental degradation as a result of oil drilling. The Niger Delta communities were largely farmers and fishermen. Gas flaring and acid rain destroyed farmlands, rivers and the entire environment was damaged (Jike, 2004:692).

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The environmental degradation resulted in massive resistance from the people of the oil-bearing communities. They demanded that the government intervene in the issues of the degradation by making adequate provision for revenue allocation that would bring about the enhancement of the battered environment of the Niger Delta. Following poor revenue allocation, the people of the communities decided to make oil drilling and lifting unbearable for the multinational corporations. Unfortunately for the Niger Delta people, the Nigerian government entered into a triadic relationship that involved the Nigerian government, the multinational corporations and the American government. In the relationship, the Nigerian government started to offer protection to the multinational corporations by creating a good and well secured environment for oil drilling and lifting. The resistance from the Niger Delta people took different forms that ranged from the physical to the legal and the literary. Bodies and movements were formed to campaign against the Nigerian government both within and abroad for its role in aiding the environmental degradation in the oil-producing communities and the lack of provision of viable amenities for the Niger Delta people.

The Nigerian government, however, designed reprisal strategies that would curtail the growing waves of the Niger Delta resistance. One of such was armed mobilization of the Nigerian army to the locations of oil drilling. A major blow to the resistance struggle of the Niger Delta people was the government execution by hanging of a foremost Nigerian environmental activist, Ken Saro Wiwa on a frame-up murder charge in November 1996 (Soyinka, 1996:148–149). This reprisal attack by General Sani Abacha junta on the oil-bearing communities irked Nigerians and the international communities. The cold murder of Ken Saro Wiwa by the government worsened the resistance struggle of the Niger Delta people. The communities thereafter formed a vigilante group known as Egbesu boys that used spirituality to bolster its frame of resistance manifested in pipeline vandalization and kidnapping of white workers and officials of the multinational corporations.

Two measures therefore have been put in place by successive governments and the multinational corporations to court peace in the region. The Nigerian government has settled for dialogue with the Niger Delta militants which led to the amnesty granted to the militants by President Sheu Musa Yar Adua. The amnesty empowered the Niger Delta militants in several ways. This made

majority of the militants to surrender their weapons of destruction and left the creeks. With the amnesty wealth, Niger Delta militants have taken up jobs, some have gone for further studies while some have set up businesses on their own. The multinational corporations also came up with different forms of compensation for the oil-bearing communities for the incalculable loss done to the oil-bearing communities.

Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* chronicles the crisis of oil in the Niger Delta oil-producing communities and the monetary compensation provided by multinational corporations to buy peace in the region. It also chronicles the reception of the compensation and the eventual gender crisis that the compensation brought upon the community of the play. In resolving the crisis that follows the compensation in the world of the play, the playwright demonstrates his delicate understanding of gender consciousness.

### **Theoretical Approach: Judith Butler's Gender Theory of Performativity**

There have been theoretical insights devoted to the study of gender identity and power relations before the promulgation of Butler's Performativity theory which seeks to denounce the existence of a pre-discursive identity and subject. One of such earlier scholars was Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal work entitled *The Second Sex* (1953). In this work, she categorically states that there is nothing called feminine nature but there is feminine situation. To quote her directly, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (1953:273). In other words, a man is not born but also becomes man within society. What this therefore means is that the gender categories such as femininity and masculinity come into being through processes of socializations. They are products of social constructions.

Arising from de Beauvoir's notion that both biological sex and gender are culturally determined, it is reasonable to see through the agency of different societies in the crucial political process of social constructions of identities. Drawing from most societies in which social constructions of gender have taken place, there is a huge correlation between gender identity construction and power relation. The construction of masculinity speaks to a privileging power over and above the social construction of femininity which places women across the globe on the marginal scale in relation to their male counterpart.

The context of power relation can truly provoke a discussion of gender conception of power. Two schools of thought have contributed to scholarship on gender conception of power. One conception (Mackinnon, 1987; Dworkin, 1987) considers power to be a form of domination. This school posits that there are two participants inhabiting this conception of power. There is the dominating agent and also the receiver of the domination. In this arrangement, men are the dominating agents while women are the receivers of the domination. This school of thought sounds plausible given the fact that men dominate women because of the socially constructed identity of femininity. We also must note that this school of thought does not give cognizance to the fact that there are equally widespread female-on-female violence and female-on-male violence. The only female victimhood may not be a totally plausible argument as held by this school.

The second school of thought approaches the conception of power from an opposite direction. The school (Hoagland, 1988; Ruddick, 1989; Held, 1993) rejects the notion of domination outright claiming that power can be empowering, affirmative and transformative. The fact of being women, through its traits and practices, can be empowering. It is established that women can be caring and not aggressive. They equally manifest mothering traits. These are traits that are positive and therefore needed to enable peaceful coexistence in nations. Femininity, going by these traits, has all it takes to transform individuals and nations for positive ends. It is no wonder that it is sometimes prayed that the future is feminine. Nonetheless, no one is denying the fact that women, in spite of these empowering traits, still face domination in the hands of men

Both schools have also been criticized because of their internal weakness in spite of their being good models to study relations among the genders in society. The domination conception has been criticized for not recognizing the fact that the receivers of domination do have capacity for action and have therefore at different times assumed agency to subvert male domination and male spaces. The conception of power as empowering has also been punctured. It is argued that the conception has turned the traits of caring and mothering which men have used to subjugate women to points of empowerment. Further on this is the issue of contradictory experience of power with respect to men. Men can be said to be enjoying power as a social group. Some men, however, lack power as individuals (Kaufman, 1994 :144).

Judith Butler goes into the heart of gender theorizing with her Performativity theory which debunks notions of pre-discursive subject to asserting that “gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or ‘a natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive’, prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts” (1990:7). Butler adds her voice to the argument that sex is culturally constructed and not in any way natural. Central to Performativity theory is the argument that sexuality, gender and any forms of identity are wholly performative.

She argues that identities are produced through a process of re-signification and repeated performance of identities legislated by privileging gendered discourses. She argues that femininity and masculinity are ideologically sanctioned acts that gain prominence through continual and repetitive performance. Arising from the fact of repetitive performance, gender identity, she claims, cannot be said to have any ontological foundation. It is therefore, a permeated act that is repetitively enacted in order to imitatively structure gender identity and thereby give it a natural legitimacy.

Butler seems to reject the notion of conscious agency since gender identity is all about a re-enactment of established acts of gender performance. Unknowing to men and women, they act out the traits socially constructed for them by the society. The task of Butler’s Performativity theorizing is actually to restore conscious agency after having established the fact of the performative nature and strength of gender. A thorough process of re-signification and unlearning processes can evolve new sets of acts that would be performed over a period of time in such a way that would rival the earlier repetitive acts that structure oppressive gender configuration. With the emergence of new sets of acts for subsequent repetitive performance, the pre-discursive stereotype and natural validity undergirding oppressive gender would be supplanted for a battle of rivaling acts for supremacy or equality.

### **Hierarchies of Gender Violence**

It is important in this section to first of all examine the context that led to the emergence of male mothers and male wives within the domestic spaces. It has to do with some form of violence that can be framed as being largely gendered as shown in *The Wives’ Revolt*. The gender violence is divided into three. The first form of gender violence is described as multinational masculinity. The second is

called patriarchal masculinity while the third one is referred to as female masculinity as expressed in exilic encounter.

Multinational masculinity is a kind of male enactment of violence demonstrated by multinational corporations in the oil-producing Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Given the establishment of oil commerce in Nigeria, as stated above, multinational corporations supported by their home governments flooded the oil-bearing communities and consequently destroyed natural habitation and endangered indigenous agricultural occupations of the members of the oil-bearing communities. This led to the impoverishment of the land and the people such that they were left with nothing but to be dependent on the government of the land and the multinational corporations for survival. The government of the land has, overtime, not yielded to the full demands of the oil-bearing communities in terms of revenue allocation for the physical and social development of the region to the comfort of the people.

This impoverishment carried out by a group of foreign business men on the Nigerian men and women of the oil-bearing communities is termed multinational masculinity. The violent act and the consequent impoverishment of the oil-bearing communities by the multinational corporations is a process of feminization of these communities. As a mode of production, the oil commerce and its successes reproduce the multinational corporations and gave them the new identity of multinational masculinity. The loss of the aboriginal work of the oil-bearing communities through oil exploration and commerce has therefore turned the people of oil communities to women who depend largely on the multinational corporations as breadwinners. The gender clash between men and women of Erhuwaren in the play is an indicator of the feminization as the multinational corporations became the plunderer men who in turn feed the people of the community with stipend as emergency breadwinners.

The second form of gender violence is patriarchal masculinity which comes about as a product of the breadwinner status of the multinational corporations within the home of the oil-bearing communities. From time to time, the multinational corporations drop off stipend to the oil-bearing communities to be used for the upkeep of the community. The stipend creates the enabling environment for dictatorial men (Orabueze, 2010 :86) of these communities to enact their own acts of gender violence described as patriarchal

masculinity. In their wisdom, men and women must not have equal share of the stipend because men are greater than women. They therefore consider it appropriate to share the stipend along the patriarchal divide which is largely considered to be natural and equitable as shown in the excerpt below:

**Okoro:** It is the matter of the money sent by the oil company operating on our land. The amount is known to all. This sum, after due debate in the town hall, has been shared out in three equal parts, one going to the elders of the town, the second to the men in all their age groups, and the third by no means the least, to the women, also in all their age grades (1)

Conscious of their subjugation by the multinational corporations also, women in *The Wives' Revolt*, rise against the distribution formula devised by the men of Erhuwaren community of this play. They raise their hands to vehemently speak against the formula. The speaker of the community meeting, however, does not give them the equal opportunities to speak up to the case. Right at home, Koko is holding up her husband to the wrongdoing the men-folk meted out on them in the community gathering arising from the sharing formula. Okoro, the husband, falls back onto the usual stereotypical defence of men as shown in the following:

**Okoro:** We didn't, I swear. You know as well as I do that it was in strict observance of tradition that we shared the money into three parts. And it is also in the strictest interest of the community that we have passed the law banning goats from town. We cannot have goats wandering about our streets and home-steads uncontrolled. It was enough having them fill the place with filth, but now that we know they also provide refuge for forces of evil, oh, yes, that wherever there is a herd of goats there is a coven of witches, our immediate and mandatory duty to the community is to see them safely out of town (7)

Irrked by the fact that women could gain the capacity to act and speak up to violence, men decide to punish them for gaining voice to speak on such issues. The punishment is realized through a genderization of animals. Commonly, in most parts of the Nigerian societies that produced this play, women rear goats which are considered household animals while men rear pigs. Unknowing to

women in the community of this play, men tend to keep pigs because of the commercial value of swine. In spite of the clear resemblance that pigs have with men and the multinational corporations in their destruction of women's farmland, men prefer and protect pigs while they frame goats up in gender terms as being abodes of witches, a charge which is traditionally leveled against women in most parts of Africa. The politics of genderization of animals is vividly expressed in the following by Okoro's wife:

**Koko:** Responsible men! Now, if you are looking for a creature other than man in this town that causes havoc physically and immediately, you people really should have done better than pick upon the goat. But, oh, no, all you want to do is get on top of us women. There you have your pigs prowling all over the place unmolested, but because you hold the swine in common trust and sell it at inflated prices to Ughelli people at times of their festival, while goats are household animals kept by us women, you protect one animal and expel the other out of town (8)

The third category of violence comes from the women of Erhuwaren in the form of female bonding and exilic encounter. These women cannot stand the oppressive sharing formula and the consequent banning and expulsion of their goats from town. Goats that are not sent out of town after the deadline set up by men are confiscated by almost all the men in the community with festival gusto. The exilic encounter is framed in terms of violence because of its effects on the men of Erhuwaren and the entire household left behind by the angry women. The men of Erhuwaren are, undoubtedly, like all other men who suffer from a stereotype that comes from another form of genderization. Men genderize action and consider it a wholly male preserve. Men push all women into the province of gossip in which women lack any iota of inkling for action, let alone being capable of mass action. Okoro challenges his wife when he says:

**Okoro:** It is your business to cheer us all right, since you aren't made for action. But you must first inspire us, yes, inspiration must come before action, so inspire us, first. (15)

This genderization must have come from biology which opines that women are not as physically strong as men given the presence of some male hormonal composition (Reaser, 2010:74–75), which



women do not have. This also must have led the global community from time immemorial to be fielding men in spaces that require much physical energy such as military expeditions, wars and other tasks of the same rank. Okoro must have been coming from the female lack of capacity for action ensured by biology and past experiences of non-fielding of women in such powerful spaces. Lumping them altogether within the province of gossip arising from another biological consideration which sees women as being less intelligent than men, Okoro cannot figure women as being capable of rational thinking but gossip and noise as shown in the excerpt below:

**Okoro:** I don't see what you women can do. You cannot even speak with one voice on any one matter at any time. We saw a good display of your unity today at the assembly, didn't we? All you can do is buzz about an issue like a swarm of houseflies, unable to move a little object in the way that ants in all their mute state do so well with ease. (11)

Still coming from the stereotypical genderization of mental acuity and knowledge always done by men, the men of Erhuwaren think that women naturally lack the capacity for action because they lack the power of rational thinking that would power such. Men, therefore, lay absolute claim to knowledge about the nature and state of women at all times. However, the men of Erhuwaren, are, however, held in contradiction. They reflect their male anxiety in their charge of witchcraft against women but at the same time they go ahead claiming that they know women in totality that they are incapable of action. This contradiction belies the male absolute claim to knowledge of the psyche of women as represented in the apprehension of Okoro in the quote below:

**Okoro:** Am I sure? If I don't know my wife inside out, who should? Of course, she's still in her dreamland, pursuing a herd of pigs pulling up her precious crops. Now, let me call her for you so you can see for yourself, Koko, Koko! She is not in her room and she is not at the well either. Now where can she be so early in the morning when every decent woman should be getting her husband a decent breakfast and the children off to school? (18)

The march of the women out of town, abandoning their homes because of the obnoxious male laws confirms their capacity for action

and to assume agency as against the male empty claim to absolute knowledge of the women's condition and psyche. Okoro shows this empty claim thus: "Who would have thought they had the might and mind?" (19) This is an acknowledgement of their capacity for action and mental acuity. They declare their assumption of agency and exilic manifesto thus:

**Koko:** The law you have passed is bad, unfair and discriminatory, being directed against women because of our stand. We will not accept it (10)

Contrary to popular male empty claim to absolute knowledge, the women of Erhuwaren have marched into exile as a movement. They have shown to have a greater potentials and power for mobilization than men have obviously been thinking. Okoro's friend thus laments aloud:

**Idama:** Of course, I'm sure. My own Titi, too, is gone. Yes, all are gone – handmaid, headwife, most favoured wife, nursing mother and pregnant wife, they have all left town. There look around you and see if you can find a single female in town except old unmarried girls and wives retired home from their husbands. (19)

The gender violence inflicted by these women is peculiar because it cuts across all the gender grades. The men are the hard hit by the violence of the march because of household chores which kill them to the bones. They cannot also have their sexual gratifications even from their free girls. The children also suffer the pains of the absence of their mothers. The entire community also partakes in the effect of the absence of women because the entire community becomes exceedingly unkempt. The old women who are left behind in Erhuwaren refuse to placate the women in exile and even unwilling to assist in any manners of household chores to relieve the men. They firmly show solidarity for the women in exile. The other form of violence is on the women themselves. It is the liability of the exilic encounter. They are inflicted with a contagious disease from a popular prostitute assigned to them in the host community as recollected by Idama in the following excerpt:

**Idama:** We unwillingly delivered our wives into the hands of our arch-enemies at Eyara who wasted no time in assigning them the most gorgeous maid of honour with no less a name than Ighodayen (55)

### **Strategic Enactment of Male Mothering and Artistic Agency**

In view of the oppressive sharing formula backed up by the force of tradition and the obnoxious male law banning goats belonging to women from town while keeping destructive pigs belonging to men in town, women come together as a socio-cultural and political movement, hitherto unbelievable by men, and decide to go on exile and never to come back. The exile, as mentioned above, involved abandoning even their children.

The question to ask is: what happens to the domestic and community duties naturally anchored by women as a result of their exile? Answering this question would take us back to the issue of sex role discussed above. From a biological standpoint, certain roles were hitherto distributed to men and women based on their sexes. With the works of scholars such as de Beauvoir (1953) in her reconfiguring of gender as a product of sociological construction, biological determinism was laid to rest. As a result of this, gender is seen as being created by different social forces in the society.

The intervention of Butler appropriately situates gender or sexed nature as the products of repetitive performances by different social agents in societies. As repetitive acts, overtime, they become modes of production that give birth to certain identities. The productive nature of the repetitive acts, therefore, have conditioning power which structure gender and sex which can alienate the carrier of such gender or identities. This alienating capacity was what informed Butler's earlier notion of lack of conscious agency on the parts of the holder of the gender.

In the context of our study, the repetitive acts of oppressive gender are the ones created and sustained by sex role theory and which are kept alive, unknowing to sex role theory, by Performativity. In the Nigerian or most African households represented in *The Wives' Revolt*, it is the women that carry out most of household chores such as cooking, washing of clothes of the household, fetching of water, bathing of children and attending to the entire gamut of child care while men provide the financial wherewithal for the house as the breadwinner.

The contention by these scholars is that this distribution is gendered and not natural and that each repetition of these acts tends to perpetuate them and condition the gendered sex created in the first place. These household chores are therefore known as conditioning

acts from which generations upon generations have learnt their gender. As children grow in most African households, the repetitive acts condition their passages into different spaces in the household. The girl child is given repetitive acts that condition her passage to the kitchen and the bedroom while the boy child is given repetitive acts that would lead him into the spaces of decision making and leadership in the house and subsequently into the public square.

The duty of Performativity is to open up the condition of existence of gender as being based on repetitive performance undergirded by social constructions. This, therefore, means, as stated earlier, that these repetitive acts can be reframed and unlearned for a new set of repetitive actions to take their place and begin a new form of conditioning. Whatever new set of actions that are put up, their performative condition of existence must be born in mind. The march of the women into exile has therefore thrown up an opportunity for the exposure of the performative condition of existence of the supposedly female household roles or chores. In their absence, it can actually be tested whether the spaces of the domestic repetitive acts belong to women by nature or not. The male characters in the play take up the challenge and promise to enter into the spaces with gusto as boasted thus:

**Okoro:** Bah! How many women know how to cook? Many cook by rote, although they call it a different recipe every day. The gravy always of one colour, red or yellow all over with palm or groundnut oil, and if the pepper is not of the strength to blow off the roof of your mouth, the salt is a sufficient dose to burn up your bowels. In the wide world outside, the greatest cooks are to be found among men. From ships to palaces, all the great cooks are men. Oh, I can tell you exactly what my wife will cook one month from now. Now, you tell me one wife in this day and age who can cook as well as our mothers did.

**Okoro:** Wash our clothes? You mean ruin our clothes for us. Remember my fine George I danced *udje* with last year? Koko has ruined it completely with her washing. The children will do equally well. (21–22)

The above account from Okoro goes beyond a boast given the fact of the extra-literary reality he has culled up with regard to cooks in

ships, palaces and even in planes. This is due to the fact that cooking has become professionalized as a highly paying job. Men have equally moved into the domain and have proven some high level of excellence and expertise. Okoro's challenge and that of other men in the play is a discursive intervention necessary for emulation in his Erhuwaren community.

The above takes us to the issue of conscious agency. Butler contends that the alienating condition of repetitive acts prevents conscious agency. This can be true to the extent that the repetitive acts condition the social agent eternally. There can be a conscious agency in a situation in which a check is placed on the repetitive acts. The entrance of men into the supposedly natural domestic spaces of women breaks down the repetitive acts of these spaces and their conditioning power.

The acts are now reconstituted with new social agents and new gender configuration. Here is a new enactment which can be termed a subversive agency. As a subversive act in these spaces, we now have characters we can call conscious male subjects or autonomous male agents who have debunked the sex role distribution, opened up the spaces for both genders in order to foreground the truth of Performativity as the basis of gender practice. The annexation of the domestic spaces is, however, presented with a twist in the quotes below:

**Okoro:** Then let's start the fire. You'll find the match box up there in that corner. That's where Koko normally hides it so I wouldn't find it to light my cigarette. The foolish woman, to run out on me. I'll show her I can do without her. Let me get some firewood, already split. Good for her, it's fresh bundle she brought from the farm yesterday. [*Both men go on their knees and begin making the fire, bringing the pieces of wood together downstage centre. They strike a match, it doesn't light the first time. When it does eventually, they apply the flame to the wood splinters but it does not light.*] (23)

[*Still the fire does not come to life, although both men, now on their knees, necks craning, crawl around it bumping their heads in the process, until thoroughly spent, they fall back on haunches*] (24)

**Okoro:** Come, you give up too easily. Any child can light a fire. Now, why didn't I think of that before? Let me call Omote to see to it; while you and I go to settle the serious matter of carving up the meat. Now, that's a man's job. Are you coming? (24)

The firebrand takeover of the female domestic spaces by Okoro and his friend is without doubt with some male nationalism. However, a twist is being introduced in the stage direction pointing to the possible failure of their occupation of these spaces. Yet, the two friends refuse to see their failure to light the fire as a result of their not being women. Instead, they call forth the male child to handle this while they go ahead to handle a harder job considered to be men's job.

Herein lies the contradiction of the autonomous male agent who dedicates himself to opening up the female domestic spaces for the inclusion of men but who also at the same time considers a certain action as being a job for men only. This contradiction obviously reveals the artistic agency of the playwright. The playwright is supposed to use this play as a vehicle to establish the performative condition of existence of repetitive acts that form gender by following up on the agency of the male characters in their laudable attempt to open up the supposedly natural female domestic spaces for the inclusion of men. However, the playwright thwarts the active agency of the male characters by presenting them, in the end, as naturally unfit for the female domestic spaces in households because they cannot breastfeed, light fire, fetch water and cannot withstand children strapped on their backs wetting on them. The excerpts below show the above:

**Idama:** I see in these days of emergency men play many roles. Great orators in the assembly, and poor nannies at home (27)

**Idama:** Look, this morning I wanted to wash my mouth and face, and found there was not water around the house. 'Oh, no, don't come to me!' says the old girl, even before I had opened my mouth. 'I bathed you coming into the world, and now you should be arranging to wash me when I'm gone!' So with that I took up rope and pot, and went to the well. Man, I didn't know it takes some trick bringing water up a well. I won't tell

you how many times I tossed the thing this way and that way to get it under water. The short end of it is I broke the pot against the side of the well. And all the old woman said when I came back wet all over was: 'So there are certain things men can't do after all?' Oh, yes, the old girl and her kind are standing firmly behind the wives in their march (28)

**Okoro:** Wetting himself on me, you mean? I believe he has gone and done the big one too on me. Oh, my friend, for a moment, I thought I had burst my bladder or worse (37)

**Okoro:** Several days gone and I've not been able to go to the market, while other people are busy making money, all because of these foolish, misguided women (39)

It is from the above performative perspective that I intend to situate the artistic agency of the playwright. The playwright's agency manifests false gender consciousness. He genuinely sets out to defend the rights of women and to restore equitable power relations. He is able to achieve this at the end of the play because the power scale tilts back to the equilibrium expected by the women in the play. However, his artistic agency is bogged down by a false consciousness in his inability to see that gender is a set of performance with regard to male mothering and male domestic worker.

He creates male characters that enter into the stereotypically reserved spaces of mothering and domestic work. Instead of him to have sharpened them strongly well in line with realities in the contemporary world in which men have successfully demonstrated expertise as cooks and nannies, the playwright, suffering from the sex role differentiation, presents the male mothers and domestic workers as inept, thus arguing that those roles can only be handled by women given their nature.

He aims to use the ineptitude of the male mothers as a point for which men are forced to plead for the return of the women within the context of complementarity. His intention to smoothly resolve the contradiction in the play in favour of the women-folk has also led him to committing a gender faux pas of further authenticating gender oppression in the act of perpetuating domestic work as the natural habitat of women.

While it would be some good argument that the men miss their women because of sex, this would abundantly be mutual on the part of both genders in the same way that household chores be socially configured as being mutual exercises. The case drawn up by the playwright to establish the ineptitude of men in the play pale off in the outside world as evidences abound in several professionalized macdonaldized spaces.

His gender consciousness must have been mixed up with the African patriarchal notion of the place of women in the house. The playwright is, however, thereby, in his rejection of the performative condition of repetitive acts for biological or pre-discursive gender identity, enmeshed in poor understanding of gender struggle and thus deploying false gender consciousness.

### **The Male Showdown and the Female Breakage of the Conditioning Act**

The contradiction and the false gender consciousness that undergird the artistic agency of the playwright can be examined further within the context of actional representation between the genders in the play. One wonders why the playwright gives the female gender a full agency while the male gender is allotted partial agency that breaks at the seams when it is mostly needed to resolve a crisis. Women in *The Wives' Revolt* are positioned to breakdown the performative repetitive acts and its subsequent conditioning acts that sustain oppressive gender prosecuted by men. However, men are able, through the partial agency, to make a false start that goes nowhere in calling off the conditioning acts and the eventual oppressive gender which is the product of the conditioning acts of male oppressive gender.

The partial agency is demonstrated in the failure of male characters in the play to successfully enter into the supposedly natural female domestic spaces that have been dismantled in real world as shown in the analysis above. The full agency to disrupt the repetitive acts and the conditioning acts that bring about the disempowering femininity created by men can be shown in three ways in the play. The first is unity and formation of a movement by women. The second is capacity for social mobilization and action and the third is the capacity for beating back. Through their full agency, women have broken down the repetitive acts of men and their conditioning acts in the above three sectors. The breakdown has thus led to the final male showdown realized at the end of the play.



Beginning with the first one, it would be appropriate to dig into the roots of the repetitive acts that ensured the prominence of men in the area of unity and formation of men's movement. The age-long voicelessness of women in most African societies must have contributed to their lack of unity that would bring them together for the formation of a political movement. In most homes, when men are talking, women commonly excuse the gathering of the wise men into the closet or into the kitchen. This age-long practice has, over the years, positioned men in the domain of public affairs while women operate in the background. Taken to the public domain, men form the greatest number in the decision making bodies of most African societies whereas women consume the decisions arrived at by men. The recent upsurge of the female breakdown of the monopoly of male repetitive acts in the areas of female unity and formation of female movement towards political participation comes as a surprise to the men-folk and this is why Okoro warns persuasively thus:

**Okoro:** A witch in the kitchen, that's what you are. Why don't all women stay that way and leave affairs of state to us men? Life would be so much better for everybody (14)

The women in *The Wives' Revolt* do not stop at only forming a united movement, the movement launches into social mobilization. With the assumption of voice and formation of a movement, women reel out a new set of actions that would be perpetuated with repetitive acts that would bring about a new gender identity. The mobilization gathers all the grades of women in Erhuwaren excluding the old women who decide to stay back and give solidarity support to their sisters in arms who are in exile. This mobilization for action testifies to the existence of conscious agency to stem out oppressive male constructed repetitive acts geared towards oppressive female identity. As autonomous social agents, they engage a new set of performative acts to checkmate the forces of social constructions of patriarchy presented as divinity.

The third act recruited by women is the beating back capacity. From time immemorial, in most African societies, wife beating is the typical practice of men which is largely termed a corrective measure. Husband beating is a misnomer because the husband is the leader of the house. The male capacity to beat draws its strength from this leadership status and also from the supposed physical power of men over women. Trends in other climes in the world have shown that

spouse beating is not a domain of male preserve. Women have now entered into the domain to break the monopoly of men. Arising from this full agency granted to the females in the play, Koko has disrupted the repetitive act of wife beating by including husband beating in the manner of beating back or spouse beating. Going by this stall to male repetitive act of wife beating, women have instituted a new act that would by way of Performativity lead into another set of repetitive acts that would create and govern empowering female identity. The beating back enacted by Koko is captured as follows:

**Koko:** [*Rushing at her husband*] What form? Who is showing what form? Are you now calling me a witch? Are you now branding me a witch? [*Such is the surprise and the speed of her attack, he reels before her fury, trips over the mortar, and falls flat on his back, his wife tripping over him from the sheer of her own onslaught*] (52)

This full agency given to women to institute new acts that would disrupt the male disempowering repetitive acts while men are given a partial one that cannot achieve the same objective brings us back to the contradiction at the heart of the artistic agency of the playwright which forces one to conclude that the playwright manifests false gender consciousness.

From the resolution of the play, the full agency given to women has been exceedingly effective. Through the new acts of disruption, the male-oriented repetitive acts have been checked and put under control. It has eventually resulted in a male showdown as shown thus:

**Idama:** The consensus shaping up is that we send the old girls to go at once and bring them with the firm promise that they may keep their goats (31)

**Idama:** In general, yes. There is, however also the proposal that those who impound must also pay (36)

And the age-long repetitive acts of male-on-female violence are retraced with adequate compensation from the men as announced by the Town-Crier, the husband of Koko, who announces the reenactment the violent male law at the opening of the play:

**Okoro:** By the same token, our womenfolk whose insight into these matters passes the understanding of all men, deserve the specially fattened cow, the hundred heads of yam, the ten barrels of palm oil and all the other items of reparation required in the act of settlement. No award is too much for this singular set of women, who in fearless opposition to an unjust law, staged a walk-out on all their men, bringing life to a standstill, not even sparing their children ... As for the original matter of the oil company money that started all this fire, let it be known here and now that it was not such a big sum of money anyway. Certainly, not so big that it was going to change the condition of our lives permanently for better. It has left the poor, poorer, and the rich perhaps a little richer as our oil continues to flow to enrich other people across the country. But that is another story. Right now, let nobody pour more petrol on a fire that is already dying down in all households. Since it cannot even build us a road or a clinic, it has been decided by consensus that we open a school building fund with what is left of it for the benefit of our children (59-60)

### Conclusion

The study has looked into the portrayal of male mothering in *The Wives' Revolt* with the sole aim of unraveling the artistic agency of the playwright within the framework of gender. As a piece of literature, the method has been a study of representation based on Butler's Performativity theory which posits that gender is a performance guided by routinely performed socially constructed repetitive acts.

The analysis reveals that the oppressive gender and identity perpetrated by men is not a product of nature or a pre-discursive identity steeped in biology but a product of sociology. Gender is, therefore, a socially-sanctioned set of acts that are perpetuated by repetitive performance. It is observed that the characters in both genders in *The Wives' Revolt* are pushed to a point of realizing that gender is a set of performance that can be unlearned and subverted. Through the artistic distribution of the playwright, the female characters are endowed with full agency. This agency enables them to use their understanding of the condition of existence of gender as a performance to institute new set of actions to disrupt the hitherto

socially constructed repetitive acts that create and perpetuate oppressive gender identity for women. With this agency and subversive new acts, they, as conscious and autonomous social agents, stall the performance of the oppressive female identity created by men. The male characters, on the contrary, are given partial agency which prevents them from carrying through their new set of performance which is geared towards freeing the oppressive female gender identity from the clutches of male domination.

I, therefore, opine that this is a contradiction in the artistic agency of the playwright which he seems not to have realized in the course of using the play as a vehicle to bring about equitable distribution of power among the genders in such a way to remove the women from the marginal space. By sustaining the domestic space as the domain of excellence for women in which men are unfit, the playwright is rejecting Performativity and regarding domestic work as a pre-discursive space for women. This thus shows the artistic agency of the playwright as manifesting false gender consciousness.

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