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### Subverting Gender Norms: The Reversal of Traditional Masculine Roles in Bongo Flava Songs

Yohana John Makeja<sup>1\*</sup> & Emmanuel James Kilatu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Open University of Tanzania, P. O. Box 23409, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

<sup>2</sup> University of Dodoma, P. O. Box 259, Dodoma, Tanzania.

\* Author's Email: [yohanajohn122@gmail.com](mailto:yohanajohn122@gmail.com)

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This paper reports the findings of a study that examined the reversal of traditional masculine roles in Tanzania, exploring whether this shift contributes to gender equality and harmony or threatens hegemonic masculinity. Using twenty purposively selected Bongo Flava songs as primary texts, the study adopted a qualitative approach grounded in Butler's Gender Performativity Theory. Through a close reading of the songs' lyrics, the analysis uncovers subtexts and hidden meanings related to gender role reversals. The findings reveal a significant transformation in gender dynamics, with women asserting greater emotional and financial autonomy, while men face mixed reactions to the changing expectations. This shift reflects a broader cultural movement towards more fluid and equitable gender relationships, driven by female empowerment and the dismantling of traditional gender norms. The study concludes that the reversal of masculine roles in Bongo Flava can be seen as both a positive step towards gender equality and a challenge to hegemonic masculinity. The study offers insights into the complexities of evolving gender dynamics and recommends addressing both the opportunities and challenges these changes present.

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**INTRODUCTION**

The objective of this study was to examine the reversal of traditional masculine roles as portrayed in Tanzanian *Bongo Flava* songs. Specifically, the study aimed to explore how these role reversals influence gender equality and social harmony, and to assess whether they serve to challenge or reshape the concept of hegemonic masculinity.

Traditionally, gender roles have been rigidly defined, with men expected to be dominant and assertive and women nurturing and submissive (Mangesho, 2003), though scholars like Butler (1990) and Connell (1995) argue that gender is socially constructed and fluid. Traits like strength and leadership are labelled masculine, while sensitivity and gentleness are seen as feminine (Olali, 2015), a division maintained by traditionalists (John, 2023b). However, shifting cultural, social, and political dynamics have led to increasing instances of gender role reversal, where individuals take on roles traditionally associated with the opposite gender (Mangesho, 2003; Connell, 2005; Kasiga, 2021, 2022, 2023). Though not inherently problematic, such reversals often face resistance, unequal burdens, stigmatisation, and societal tension (John, 2023a; Mahonge, 2016; Khamis, 2020; Mulokozi, 2017; Harris, 2024). Feminist movements globally, including in North America (Petrusić, 2021; Zajdow, 2011), Europe (Bonatti et al., 2019), Oceania, South America (Waylen, 2007), Asia (Safire, 2022; Gailey, 2017), and Africa (Chukwuma & Onwuekwe, 2022; Braidotti, 2017) have played a major role in challenging these norms. In Tanzania, efforts include legal reforms, international commitments, awareness campaigns, and involving men in gender advocacy (Waling, 2019; Harris, 2021; Bonatti et al., 2019; John & Mahonge, 2022; John, 2023b). Still, gender reversals remain rare in traditional African contexts and often lead to conflict and

uncertainty about their implications for gender equality and masculinity (John, 2023b; Ibrahim, 2013). Tanzanian *Bongo Flava* artists such as Mwana FA, Professor J., and Vanessa Mdee have addressed these tensions in their music, using their songs to explore the nature, causes, and meanings behind gender role reversals.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The study utilized Judith Butler's (1990) Gender Performativity Theory to examine gender role reversals in *Bongo Flava* songs, interpreting gender as performed rather than inherent. The theory distinguishes sex from gender, viewing gender roles as socially constructed, unstable, and reversible, thereby offering insights into how individuals challenge traditional norms to foster gender inclusivity. It emphasizes how language and bodily actions enact gender, guiding the close reading of lyrics to reveal subtle performances that question hegemonic masculinity. Recognizing the theory's limitation in explaining the causes and conflicts of gender role reversals in Tanzanian society, the study compensates by integrating Butler's concept of gender fluidity and contextualizing lyrical performances within local socio-cultural dynamics, thus grounding the analysis in specific societal realities.

**METHODS**

The study, grounded in a constructivist paradigm and Butler's Gender Performativity Theory, explored gender as fluid, performative, and socially constructed. It employed a descriptive case study design to analyse gender performances in 20 purposively selected *Bongo Flava* songs released between 1990 and 2024. Songs were chosen for their diverse, underexplored representations of gender roles and reversals using purposive sampling based on criteria such as thematic focus, artists' intent, social relevance, lyrical depth, cultural

impact, historical context, and male-female collaborations. The sample included: 3 songs on role reversals, 3 collaborations, 3 on social relevance, 3 for lyrical depth, 3 for cultural impact, 3 showing artists' intent, and 2 reflecting historical context.

A qualitative approach examined artists' perspectives through symbols, emotions, and social roles. Lyrics, sourced via Shazam, were analysed using close reading focused on themes, symbols, and gendered performative actions within Butler's theoretical framework. Ethical measures ensured respect for artists' intellectual property and accurate message representation, with reflexivity maintained to reduce researcher bias.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Men's Reluctance to Endure Love Relationship Challenges

Diamond Platnumz and Jux in *Bora Ni-enjoy* effectively portray men's reluctance to endure love relationship challenges, describing themselves as stoic or distant. In describing such challenges, they reflect a complex mix of emotions and social dynamics, including disillusionment with love, stating a preference to celebrate themselves rather than invest in a relationship that feels unfulfilling. They say:

*Siyataki mapenzi*

*Nataka jipongeza*

*Unaemwita your baby*

*Kumbe nae ana baby*

*Ooh unaemwona kipenzi*

*Ni mshenzi hakupendi*

*Ama kweli mtihani*

*Mambo mengi duniani*

*Na mi stress siwezi*

*Ooooh siwezi*

*Aahh*

*Bora ni enjoy (Mmmmmh)*

*Maisha mafupi ni simple*

*Yanini niteseke roho*

*Jiunge nami upoze koo.*

(Diamond ft. Jux, 2023)

I don't want love

I want to celebrate myself

You call her your baby

But she has a baby too

Oh, the one you see as a darling

Is wild, doesn't love you

Truly, it's a test

So many things in this world

And I stress, I can't

Oh, I can't

Ahh

It's better to enjoy (Mmmmmh)

Life is short and simple

Why should I torment my soul?

Join me and ease your throat.

The quote underscores the challenges of unreciprocated love and societal pressure to conform to traditional romantic norms, with a woman's infidelity symbolising the betrayal and insecurity that can undermine trust in relationships. In response, Diamond and Jux advocate for self-love over romantic attachment, promoting the idea that personal growth and emotional independence are more fulfilling than seeking validation from a partner. This stance marks a reversal of traditional male roles, where men were expected to be providers and protectors, and instead challenges the

notion that male identity should be tied to romantic success. By prioritising self-care and emotional well-being, this perspective contributes to a redefinition of masculinity that values self-worth and individual happiness over societal expectations. They say:

*Kilichoniponza ufala*

*Kujiona simba kumbe swala*

*Kuzama kwenye penzi uchwala*

*Badala ya kusaka miamala*

*Ai yoooo oh*

*Toka ni date pesa (Enhee)*

*Sa napendeza (Enhee)*

*Na tena naenjoy (Enhee)*

*Na wanangu ma homeboy (Enhee)*

*Ooooh account inasoma (Enhee)*

*Na kamwili kananona (Enhee)*

*We mwenyewe si unaona yani (Enhee)*

*Ai nasema bora*

*Bora ni-enjoy*

(Diamond ft. Jux, 2023)

What messed me up is foolishness

Thinking I'm a lion, but I'm a gazelle

Drowning in love, struggling

Instead of looking for money

Ai yoooo oh

Since I'm dating money (Yeah)

Now I look good (Yeah)

And I'm enjoying (Yeah)

With my homeboys (Yeah)

Oh, my account is growing (Yeah)

And my body is looking good (Yeah)

You see for yourself (Yeah)

I say it's better

It's better to enjoy

These verses reflect a cultural shift in which men are encouraged to prioritise personal growth, passions, and mental well-being over traditional expectations of romantic success, promoting a redefined form of masculinity that values emotional intelligence, self-care, and individual goals. By moving away from the provider-protector stereotype, this shift supports gender fluidity and flexibility, fostering healthier relationships rooted in self-fulfilment rather than dependency, as men increasingly reject outdated roles in favour of authentic self-expression.

### **Men's Reluctance to Provide in Love Relationships**

Vanessa Mdee and Mwana FA in *Dume Suruali* portray men's reluctance to provide in love relationships. The song is presented in the form of a dialogue between a man and a woman. The woman wants to be given money by her male lover, but the man refuses to give her. As a result, the woman uses two derogatory terms, "*dume suruali*" and "*dume kaptula*" which both mean "good-for-nothing man", to address a stingy or tightfisted man; a man who is financially unsupportive to his female lover. The woman says:

*Aje aje ajee mi mtoto fulani ghali*

*Nihonge gari, ma sweet sweet baby*

*Wanna see you today, unipeleke party*

(Vanessa Mdee ft. Mwana FA, 2016)

How are you, how are you? I'm a certain expensive child

I want a car, my sweet sweet baby

Wanna see you today, take me to a party

In turn, the man responds to her by saying:

*Hudat hudat hii ni salam na ufahamu*

*Kama unauza mapenzi siyo kwa binamu*

*Huna haja ya kusubiri hii ni hukumu*

*Hakuna kitu utapata; utangoja kama askari wa zamu*

*Dume suruali, dume kaptula*

*Shauri zako ilimradi sipati hasara*

*Usione utani me sihongi hata kwa ishara*

*Utaniambia nini mpaka unigeuze fala*

*Kwanza nasikia hongo zinaleta mkosi...*

*Sentano yangu hugusi hata ukiongea kidosi*

*Yabaki mapenzi tusileteane ujambazi*

*Hata upige sarakasi utachonga viazi*

(Vanessa Mdee ft. Mwana FA, 2016)

This is a greeting, and you should understand

If you're selling love, not to a cousin

There's no need to wait; this is a judgment

You won't get anything; You'll keep on waiting like a guard on duty

Man in trousers, man in shorts

It's none of my business as long as I don't suffer losses

Don't take it lightly; I won't even gesture

What will you tell me until you turn me into a fool?

First, I hear bribes bring bad luck...

You won't get my five cents even if you speak softly

Let love remain; let's not bring each other thievery

Even if you summersault, you'll just be chopping potatoes

The song excerpts offer a critical perspective on relationships by highlighting men's reluctance to provide emotionally or financially, questioning the transactional nature of love where mutual exchange is expected, as illustrated by the verse "You won't get anything; You'll keep on waiting like a guard on duty." The male partner's distrust and resistance to financial demands, evident in the verse "What will you tell me until you turn me into a fool?" reflect concerns about manipulation and a desire to protect personal resources, while references to bribes and playful gestures like "somersaulting" and "chopping potatoes" suggest that surface-level affection is insufficient when deeper issues of commitment remain. Analysed through Butler's (1990) Gender Performativity Theory, the man's stance subverts hegemonic masculinity, which traditionally casts men as providers, exposing his vulnerability and the emotional strain caused by rigid gender expectations. The woman's efforts to fulfil her gendered role are undercut by the man's perception of her intentions, revealing how societal scripts around gender and reciprocity create tension. Ultimately, the study uses Butler's theory to argue that such transactional dynamics can lead to emotional disconnect, underscoring the need for genuine support and mutual investment in relationships.

### **Men Being Bribed and Seduced by Women for Love**

Prof. Jay, Juma Nature, and Diamond Platnumz portray men who are given money by women for love. To start with Prof. Jay and Juma Nature in *Zali la Mentali*, the song is about Jay's journey from poverty to prosperity, driven by Vickie's love for Jay. Vickie is a rich young woman from a wealthier background. Regardless of societal judgment and their differing social statuses, their love blossoms, and Jay's life is transformed. However, in the song, Jay is bribed and seduced by Vickie as it is portrayed in the following verses:



*Na alitoa elfu kumi na alikuwa akitaka dafu*

*Nilipokea hela, alichotaka nilimletea*

*Akakipokea, tabasamu zito akanitolea*

*Nilimpa chenji*

*“Oh no, keep change, una mawazo mengi itakufaraji weekend”*

*Alikunywa maji ya dafu alitupa na kunikonyeza*

*Niliganda kama nyamafu nikahisi alinibeza*

*Alinipa busu la huba shavuni akanichombeza*

*“I love you”, akawasha gari akateleza*

(Prof. Jay ft. Juma Nature, 2003)

And she pulled out ten thousand and wanted a coconut

I received the money, and what she wanted I brought to her

She accepted it, gave me a heavy smile

I gave her a change

“Oh no, keep the change, you have many thoughts, it will comfort you over the weekend.”

She drank the coconut water, tossed it, and winked at me

I froze like a carcass, feeling she teased me

She gave me a soft kiss on the cheek and whispered to me

“I love you,” she started the car and slid away

Based on these lyrics, the scenario in which Jay is given money by Vickie for love is considered a gender role reversal because it flips traditional gender dynamics in romantic or transactional relationships. This is on the basis that in most historical and cultural contexts, traditional gender roles have often positioned men as the primary economic providers, with women being the

recipients of material goods, gifts, or money (Moshia, 2017; Bent-Goodley, 2005). In such contexts, men are generally the ones who offer money or material wealth to women as part of the courtship process or in exchange for affection, normally reinforcing a power imbalance where men are seen as the providers and women as the receivers or objects of romantic or economic interest.

Likewise, Diamond Platnumz’s *Nataka Kulewa* conveys a man’s pain of being let down by love and the desire to escape those feelings through drinking, alongside the recognition of being manipulated or taken advantage of by his lover who has so many boyfriends, some she bribes for love. Diamond says:

*Mi kwa mapenzi maskini*

*Nikamvisha na pete kwa kumuoa*

*Kukata vilimi limi*

*Vya wazushi wanafiki wanaomponda*

*Kumbe mwenzangu na mimi*

*Ni bure tu najisumbua*

*Si tuko kama ishirini*

*Mabuzi ving’asti wengine anawahonga*

(Diamond Platnumz, 2010)

I’m poor in love

I put a ring on her to marry

Cutting down fake talkers

Who criticises my partner

Turns out, my friend

It’s just a waste, I’m just troubling myself

We are about twenty

Some she bribes for love

The verses depict a gender role reversal where a man complains that a woman is unfaithful and bribes men for love, showing women as economic

providers and men as recipients of material benefits. This challenges traditional gendered power dynamics and highlights the fluidity of power in romantic and economic relationships, aligning with findings by Mosha (2017), Tang (2020), Wilson (2018), and Bent-Goodley (2005), who demonstrate that shifting socio-economic structures and cultural narratives increasingly enable women to assume dominant roles in intimate relationships, thereby unsettling entrenched gender hierarchies.

Using Butler's Gender Performativity Theory, the analysis of Prof. Jay's *Zali la Mentali* and Diamond Platnumz's *Nataka Kulewa* reveals how these songs disrupt traditional gender norms. The theory frames gender as a repeated performance shaped by societal expectations. In these songs, women assume provider roles while men benefit materially, subverting the typical narrative of male economic dominance and female dependency. This performance of reversed roles emphasizes that gender and power are not fixed but are performed and changeable. Through these portrayals, *Bongo Flava* artists interrogate and reframe assumptions about love, economic exchange, and gendered power, exposing the contestable nature of gender identity in relationships.

### Women Initiating Acts of Love Towards Men

Prof. Jay and Juma Nature's *Zali la Mentali* and Ray C's *Touch Me* both portray a woman initiating acts of love towards a man. In *Zali la Mentali*, Vickie initiates acts of love towards Jay through a combination of emotional expression (telling Jay, "I love you"), physical affection (a kiss on the cheek), financial support, and persistence in expressing her desire for a relationship. These actions reflect her genuine affection and her commitment to making their relationship work, even in the face of challenges related to social class. Jay says:

*Alishuka toka garini na kusema, "Jay nakupenda"*

*Akaruka kwangu mdomoni nakuanza kupata denda*

*Nilichomoka kwake na kuanza kurudi nyuma*

*"Tafadhali mpenzi Jay jamani nionee huruma*

*Acha kubeba mizigo panda ndani kwenye mchuma*

*Twende Mbezi Beach kwangu upepo unapovuma"*

(Prof. Jay ft. Juma Nature, 2003)

She got out of the car and said, "Jay, I love you."

She jumped to me and offered me a tongue kiss

I pulled away and started to back off

"Please, dear Jay, have mercy on me

Stop carrying loads; get inside this expensive car

Let's go to my home at Mbezi Beach where the breeze is blowing."

The song showcases a gender role reversal by presenting a woman who actively and assertively pursues a romantic relationship with a man. Vickie not only initiates emotional and physical affection, but she also takes on financial responsibility, offers comfort, and makes decisions regarding the future of their relationship. Likewise, In Ray C's *Touch Me*, the woman says:

*Nakuona baby boy, machoni mwako baby*

*Kuna kitu unataka kuniambia*

*Usiteseke nami boy, mi mwenyewe niko hoi*

*Chochote waweza kuniambia.*

(Ray C, 2009)

I see you, baby boy, in your eyes baby

There is something you want to tell me

Don't suffer alone with me, I'm also feeling down

You can tell me anything.

The verses depict women taking the lead in emotional and physical intimacy, offering empathy, initiating affection, and creating a supportive space for men, thereby reversing traditional gender roles typically assigned to men in romantic pursuits. Songs like *Zali la Mentali* and *Touch Me* portray women engaging in behaviours such as expressing love, proposing commitment, and assuming financial responsibility, actions traditionally associated with masculinity. These portrayals align with Butler's Gender Performativity Theory, which frames gender as a socially constructed performance that can subvert patriarchal norms. By showcasing women in dominant romantic roles, the songs contribute to contemporary gender discourse, highlighting the fluidity and performative nature of gender while challenging normative expectations and promoting more egalitarian relationship dynamics.

### Women Openly Expressing Their Feelings of Love to Men

The findings reveal that many *Bongo Flava* artists have depicted women openly expressing their love to men, including Prof. Jay and Juma Nature in *Zali La Mentali*, Lina and Mwana FA in *Yalaiti*, Lady Jay Dee in *Nakupenda*, Nandy in *Ninogeshe*, *Hazipo*, and *Aibu*, and Ray C in *Unanimaliza* and *Oh Baby*. This recurring theme indicates that such portrayals are common in society.

In *Zali La Mentali*, Prof. Jay and Juma Nature present a woman who actively expresses her love and desires, challenging traditional gender roles and expectations. The character Vickie defies norms by openly pursuing Jay, expressing affection, and showing that love can transcend socio-economic divides. This reflects a broader narrative of women asserting their agency, breaking free from passive roles, and taking ownership of their emotions and relationships. Vickie is portrayed saying:

*“Tafadhali Jay usitamke maneno hayo*

*Naomba unielewe haya machache niyasemayo*

*Hadi huu wakati mimi nimekupenda kwa dhati*

*Ukikubali niwe wako nitajiita mwenye bahati.”*

(Prof. Jay ft. Juma Nature, 2003)

“Please, Jay, don't say those words

I ask you to understand me; these few words I say

Up to this time, I have loved you sincerely

If you accept me to be yours, I'll call myself lucky.”

These verses highlight Vickie's direct confession of her feelings to Jay, where she expresses her love and hopes for their future together. Likewise, in *Yalaiti* by Lina and Mwana FA, the woman expresses her love for the man openly and passionately in several parts. Here are just two instances that reveal this. In the first, the woman says:

*Yalaiti napenda pasi kifani*

*Tofauti sikutilii moyoni*

*Sikuachi leo na kesho peponi*

*Aaa aaa aa, I love you.*

(Lina ft. Mwana FA, 2011)

Oh my, I love you without measure,

The difference doesn't bother my heart

I won't leave you today or tomorrow in paradise

Aaa aaa aa, I love you.

Here the woman openly declares her love for the man without any doubts or reservations. The verse “I love you without measure” shows her unwavering commitment, while “I won't leave you today or tomorrow in paradise” emphasises her dedication to being with him no matter the circumstances. In another instance, the woman says:

*Nshasema sipendi mapenzi napenda mapenzi nawe*



*Usinikatae utaniumiza mi na biashara na wewe.*

(Lina ft. Mwana FA, 2011)

I've said I don't like love; I like love with you

Don't refuse me; you'll hurt me, I've a business with you.

This is another clear expression of her love. She is not only professing love but also making it clear that rejecting her would hurt her deeply. She connects love with personal fulfilment, showing that it is something she wants to share with him. The verses portray a woman who is confident in her love, unafraid to express it, and committed to building a future with the man she loves.

In the same vein, Lady Jay Dee's *Nakupenda* also portrays a woman telling a man:

*Nakupenda, nakutaka, nakuhitaji*

*Moyo wangu wakuwaza mpenzi uko mbali nami...*

*Uwapo safarini mawazo mengi kichwani...*

*Moyo wangu wakuwaza mpenzi uko mbali nami.*

(Lady Jay Dee, 2005)

I love you, I want you and I need you

My heart is thinking of you but you're far away from me...

When you are traveling, many thoughts in my mind...

My heart is thinking of you, but you're far away from me.

The song depicts a woman expressing her love for the man through repeated affirmations, emotional vulnerability, and dreams of a shared future. Even in his absence, her feelings remain strong and constant, as she expresses her longing and deep emotional connection, saying, "When you are travelling, many thoughts in my mind, my heart is

thinking of you, but you're far away from me." Her desire to be with him and envision a life together highlights her commitment.

Similarly, Nandy's *Ninogeshe* portrays a woman embracing love with full intensity, expressing joy, vulnerability, and commitment without reservation. She openly shares her emotions and desires, reflecting on the challenges and rewards of loving another person.

*Nalilia mapenzi*

*Chochote utachonambia (sawaa sawaa)*

*Mi nitaridhia baba...*

*Presha kupanda kushuka kisa nini (kupendana na wewe)*

*Mi mwenzako nakupenda nafurahi*

*(Kupendana na wewe)*

(Nandy, 2017)

I'm crying for love

Whatever you say to me (alright)

I'm going to get along my father...

Reason for high and low blood pressure (being in love with you)

My dear I love you, I enjoy

(Being in love with you)

The verse "I'm crying for love" illustrates a woman who is emotionally open, freely expressing her love, sorrow, and joy. It conveys that love brings both happiness and pain, and she is unafraid to show her emotions. She also promises to agree with whatever the man says, which mirrors the way a man might speak to a woman he dates.

In Nandy's *Aibu* and *Hazipo*, women are portrayed as openly expressing their love with emotional intensity and vulnerability. In *Aibu*, the refrain "I wanna be solo" reflects a desire for independence,

but it is paired with a longing for emotional connection, shown through the verse “Baby give me some more,” where she openly asks for affection. The phrase “control my feelings” expresses her desire for deeper emotional engagement. The repeated use of “*Aibu*” (“shame”) signifies emotional vulnerability, with the speaker embracing her feelings despite the potential embarrassment.

Similarly, *Hazipo* portrays a woman who is captivated by the man’s beauty, charm, and emotional power over her, highlighting a direct and awe-struck approach to expressing love. She repeatedly describes the man with expressions of admiration, such as:

*Uzuri wako mashallah na macho yako ndo balaah*

*Sauti yako noma sana na mwendo wako ndo balaah*

(Nandy, 2019).

Your beauty mashallah and your eyes are balaah

Your voice is very good and your movement is balaah

In *Aibu* and *Hazipo*, Nandy challenges traditional gender norms by portraying a woman who is unapologetically open about her love, desire, and vulnerability. The woman in these songs is not shy to express her deep emotions, whether it is longing for intimacy or appreciating the man’s qualities. Her love is portrayed as intense, passionate, and consuming, reflecting a bold emotional openness.

Similarly, in Ray C’s *Unanimaliza* and *Oh Baby*, the woman confidently expresses her love with both tenderness and desire. She openly declares her affection and loyalty, rejecting any outside influences that could interfere with their bond. In *Unanimaliza*, she reveals how deeply his love affects her, using phrases like “Your love has captured me” and “Don’t make me feel conflicted or neglected”, highlighting her vulnerability and

emotional intensity. Likewise, in *Oh Baby*, the woman says:

*Sitaki kuishi mimi namna hii*

*Nataka penzi lako karibu nami*

(Ray C, 2018)

I don’t want to live like this

I want your love close to me

The findings indicate a shift in gender dynamics within contemporary *Bongo Flava* songs, where women, including artists like Nandy, Ray C, and Lady Jay Dee openly express love, desire, vulnerability, and emotional complexity, challenging traditional portrayals of passive femininity. This mirrors a broader global trend, particularly in Western pop culture, where female artists assert emotional agency, as observed by Michelle and Weaver (2003). *Bongo Flava* songs balance personal emotional expression with communal values, reflecting East African relational contexts, while also serving as a platform for gender role reversal. These portrayals align with Butler’s (1990) Gender Performativity Theory, which views gender as a constructed performance rather than a fixed identity, marking a cultural shift in Tanzania and East Africa as women reclaim their emotional narratives and reshape the dynamics of love and intimacy.

### **Women Teaching Their Male Lovers How to Make and Express Love**

This study’s findings also reveal that *Bongo Flava* artists have effectively portrayed women teaching their male lovers how to make and express love. Diamond Platnumz in *Kamwambie* uses lyrics that suggest that the woman in the relationship takes on the role of a guide or teacher for the male lover in matters of love. For example, in the first verse, the man admits:

*Si alinifunza mapenzi*

*Nilikuwa sijui, kamwambie*

*Akanidekeza kishenzi*

*Kwa nyimbo nzuri nimwimbie*

(Diamond Platnumz, 2009)

She taught me to love

I didn't know, go tell her

She pampered me like crazy

With beautiful songs to sing for her

The song depicts a woman as a teacher in emotional and sexual intimacy, guiding her inexperienced male partner, a reversal of traditional gender roles that positions men as leaders in such matters. Through her nurturing and communication, the man learns to express affection, symbolising a move towards more egalitarian relationships where emotional intelligence is a shared responsibility. This portrayal challenges patriarchal norms and aligns with feminist ideals of sexual agency, mutual respect, and the belief that intimacy is learned through dialogue and effort. It supports Butler's Gender Performativity Theory, which views gender roles as performed rather than innate and reflects shifting gender dynamics in Tanzania in line with global movements promoting balanced and collaborative romantic relationships.

### **Women Becoming as Assertive as Men**

*Bongo Flava* artists, such as in the song *Kijuso* by Queen Darleen featuring Rayvanny, have portrayed women as assertive as men. The song explores themes of female confidence, self-image, and relationship dynamics, but also presents a complex and contradictory view. While it highlights the woman's assertiveness and independence, especially through harsh exchanges with a man, it also includes critical and dismissive attitudes towards certain aspects of female assertiveness. This blend reflects the challenges women face in navigating empowerment and societal expectations. Briefly, the man starts the dialogue as follows:

*Unaringa kitu gani we mwenyewe ujisute*

*Afadhali hata nyani sio we mwanamke*

*Hupendezi asilani so unyoe au usuke*

*Nilifuata kitu gani umefanya nijute.*

(Queen Darleen feat. Rayvanny, 2017)

For what are you flaunting, you yourself should be ashamed

It's better even a baboon than you, woman

You don't look good at all, whether you shave or plait your hair

What did I follow? you've made me regret it.

The woman replies:

Hah

*Mimi nakuona punguani, na usikurupuke*

*Kwanza naongea na nani naomba nikumbushe*

*Mimi na wewe hatuendani jipandishe jishushe*

*Usinipande kichwani namba yangu ifute*

(Queen Darleen feat. Rayvanny, 2017)

Hah

I see you as a fool, don't rush

First, who am I talking to, please remind me

You and I don't match, examine yourself

Don't try to control me, delete my number

The song portrays a woman's assertiveness as a sign of confidence and independence, yet it is met with criticism, as reflected in lyrics like "What are you flaunting, you proud one?" which reveal societal discomfort with women who challenge traditional gender roles. While the woman affirms her self-worth, the man's dismissive response highlights how assertive women are often judged more harshly than men, exposing persistent double standards. This tension illustrates a broader cultural renegotiation of gender roles, where women's empowerment is gaining ground but still faces

resistance. Aligned with Butler's Gender Performativity Theory, the song demonstrates how gender is socially constructed and performed, with the woman defying conventional feminine norms and encountering conflict with entrenched masculine expectations, reflecting wider gender dynamics in both African and global contexts where shifts in power and identity remain contested.

### **Female Leadership, Empowerment, and Confidence**

Yemi Alade challenges traditional gender norms by promoting female empowerment, leadership, and confidence in her songs. In *Show Me What You Got*, she showcases assertive, independent, and self-controlled femininity, with lyrics like "Me no dey kiss and no dey tell ooh" and "Me ah no dey drink and drive," highlighting a woman who sets boundaries and values herself. The song reverses gender roles by focusing on the woman's strength and presence rather than her appearance, and it celebrates financial independence with references to "billions" and "thanking my money in trillions." Additionally, it challenges the expectation that men are the primary providers, as seen in "Why you gonna drive while I got a lot." This portrayal of empowered femininity not only reshapes societal expectations, especially in patriarchal African communities but also aligns with global trends in female empowerment, as seen with Western artists like Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj. The song aligns with Gender Performativity Theory, demonstrating how gender identity is constructed and can be redefined, as she performs a version of femininity that challenges traditional passive roles, asserting control and leadership.

### **Women as a Powerful Source of Affection**

In *Bongo Flava* songs, women are frequently depicted as powerful sources of affection, with their beauty and emotional influence driving male desire and actions. In *Show Me What You Got* by Harmonize featuring Yemi Alade, this theme is evident through the lyrics and the male persona's

expressions of admiration and desire. The song emphasises the physical and emotional attraction the male character feels towards the female, highlighting her captivating presence and allure.

#### The lyrics state:

If never see you, no go sleep oooh

I swear to God your body nice...

Show me what you got

Say your body ooh ... body oooh...

Baby baby oooh, (mmmh Yemi Alade)

Yes, me no dey kiss and no dey tell ooh...

Plenty, plenty, plenty, plenty

Plenty they guys follow me oooh

In *Show Me What You Got*, women are depicted as powerful sources of affection, with their physical beauty and emotional influence captivating the male protagonist. The song emphasises the woman's allure, with her appearance and emotional impact driving the man's emotions, as reflected in his inability to sleep without seeing her. The chorus, "Show me what you got," positions the woman in control, highlighting both her physical and emotional power. This challenges traditional gender roles by portraying the woman as the emotional and physical catalyst, reversing the typical male-dominant dynamic. The song aligns with Gender Performativity Theory, showing how gender roles are performed, with the man's emotional vulnerability and admiration representing a performance of masculinity, while the woman's power combines emotional influence and physical allure. This shift reflects a broader cultural change in African music, where gender roles are becoming more fluid, with women depicted as active, powerful figures shaping emotional dynamics, offering a more balanced view of gender compared to traditional portrayals of passive femininity.

## Women Deciding to Leave Unhappy or Betraying Love Relationships

In recent years, *Bongo Flava* songs have become a powerful medium through which complex emotional experiences, particularly those related to love and relationships, are expressed. One recurring theme in many songs is the portrayal of women deciding to leave unhappy or betraying relationships. Through artists like Nandy, songs such as *Kivuruge* vividly capture the emotional turmoil, self-reflection, and empowerment that accompany such decisions. The song directly portrays the emotional toll of being in a toxic relationship, as the woman experiences feelings of betrayal, neglect, and disregard from her partner, as she says:

*Uliyenipa maumivu mi kama nyang'au*

*Na tena maumivu dawa ninywe vidonge*

*Kwa marafiki, mashosti unakanidharau*

*Ukanitia uvivu, stress niwe mnyonge*

*Leo sina thamani, ndo maana*

*Unawafuata milupo ohh baba*

*Nitapona mdogo mdogo nitapona (niache niende salama)*

*Nitapona mdogo mdogo nitapona (we niache)*

(Nandy, 2016)

You gave me pain like an unwanted creature

Once again pain, I'm going to take medication

To my friends, and colleagues, you despised me

You made me inactive, stressed, and weak

Today I'm worthless, that's the reason

You're following prostitutes, ohh daddy

I'll heal little by little, I'll heal (let me go in peace)

I'll heal little by little, I'll heal (leave me)

In *Kivuruge*, Nandy expresses emotional pain and betrayal in a toxic relationship, where she feels unappreciated and neglected by a man who pursues other women. Despite her efforts, including bringing gifts that go unnoticed, the woman decides to leave, asserting her empowerment and self-worth with the refrain, "I'll heal little by little". The song subtly reverses traditional gender roles by portraying the woman as an active agent who chooses to prioritise her emotional well-being, challenging societal norms where men are typically seen as emotional caretakers. This reflects a shift in gender dynamics, where women assert their autonomy and emotional independence. *Kivuruge* aligns with Gender Performativity Theory, showing how the woman defies the passive role often expected of women in toxic relationships, offering a progressive portrayal of women rejecting traditional narratives of passivity and embracing emotional autonomy.

## Women Seeking for Money Instead of Waiting to be Provided by Men

In *Dume Suruali* by Vanessa Mdee featuring Mwana FA and *Niambie* by Harmonize, women are portrayed as financially independent and assertive, shifting away from traditional reliance on men for support. Both songs reflect a cultural shift, presenting women who actively seek money and engage in relationships with a more self-reliant, financially-driven attitude. These portrayals highlight the evolving dynamics of gender roles, where women take control of their financial and relational autonomy. In *Dume Suruali*, Vanessa Mdee says:

*Kama dume suruali kaa mbali nami, uendani nami*

(If you're a good-for-nothing man stay away from me; you don't match with me)

I want that Gucci, Fendi, spend it on a girl like me



My name is Vee Money, money, spend it on a girl like me

(Vanessa Mdee ft. Mwana FA, 2016).

She promotes independence and financial self-sufficiency, rejecting reliance on men and expressing a desire for luxury items like “Gucci” and “Fendi” to show her value for wealth and success. Her message encourages women to pursue their own financial empowerment, warning that “money sells your soul”. Similarly, Harmonize explores the tension between love and money, with the male protagonist questioning whether he can be loved without financial means. He says:

*Tumeumbiwa shida maradhi*

*Ndo chanzo mpaka wengi wadange*

*Niweke wazi ni kipi kimefanya unipende*

*Nambieeee*

*Ooh basi nambie (ooh basi nambie)*

*Tell me baby lol*

*Usijenitenda ukaniumiza roho ooh*

(Harmonize, 2017).

From creation, we have faced troubles and disease

That’s the reason many make love a business

Let me know what made you love me

Tell me

Ooh then tell me (Ooh then tell me)

Tell me baby lol

Lest you cheat me and heart my soul ooh

Recent *Bongo Flava* songs like *Dume Suruali* by Vanessa Mdee and *Niambie* by Harmonize reflect a shift in romantic relationships, portraying love as increasingly tied to financial security. In *Niambie*, the line “Tell me, how do you love me while I don’t

have money?” reveals a transactional view of love, while *Dume Suruali* promotes women’s financial independence and rejection of reliance on men. These songs challenge traditional gender roles, aligning with Gender Performativity Theory by showing both genders performing new roles, women asserting self-sufficiency and men redefining masculinity through financial capability. Compared to earlier African music that emphasised female dependence, these tracks highlight empowerment and independence, though they also raise concerns about materialism overshadowing emotional intimacy.

## CONCLUSION

The study investigates shifting gender roles in *Bongo Flava* songs through Butler’s Gender Performativity Theory, focusing on the subversion of traditional masculinity and gender role reversals. Findings reveal a notable transformation in gender dynamics, with women increasingly portrayed in traditionally male roles, symbolizing empowerment and independence. The research highlights both progress toward gender equality and persistent tensions, particularly male resistance to non-traditional roles. It underscores the complex reactions from both genders to these changes, positioning music as a key medium for challenging and renegotiating gender norms.

The study also addresses Tanzania’s evolving cultural landscape, where gender norms are becoming more fluid but challenges, especially for men remain. Recommendations include educational programs promoting gender equality, support for men to embrace emotional flexibility, and media campaigns to normalize role reversals. The researcher calls for culturally sensitive gender equality initiatives and suggests further research into music’s role in reshaping gender dynamics across African contexts, as well as evaluating the long-term impact of such efforts.

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