

## Masqueraded Identities: Explicating Queer in Damilare Kuku's "Beard Gang"

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the representation of queer consciousness and performative identity in Damilare Kuku's short story "Beard Gang," a story in the collection *Nearly All the Men in Lagos Are Mad*. Drawing on queer theory, particularly Judith Butler's concept of performativity, the study explores how characters construct masqueraded identities in order to conform to heteronormative expectations enforced by culture, religion, patriarchy, and social surveillance. Through qualitative textual analysis, the paper interrogates themes of secrecy, emotional fragmentation, performative masculinity, and social camouflage, revealing how queer individuals negotiate survival within an environment hostile to non-normative sexualities. The study finds that Kuku portrays queer concealment as a survival mechanism necessitated by societal intolerance and demonstrates that performative heterosexuality often produces emotional instability, fractured relationships, and psychological isolation. The paper further finds that patriarchy negatively affects both queer individuals and women who become participants in deceptive social arrangements designed to maintain public respectability. The study concludes that "Beard Gang," is an important contribution to contemporary African queer literature because it humanizes marginalized identities while critiquing the rigid structures that suppress authenticity and emotional freedom. The paper recommends increased scholarly engagement with African queer narratives, greater literary openness toward marginalized identities, and the promotion of inclusive social conversations that encourage empathy, visibility, and human dignity.

**Keywords:** Queer consciousness, beard, identity, masculinity, secrecy

## Introduction

Contemporary African literature has increasingly become a fertile site for the interrogation of identity, sexuality, gender performance, and social anxieties surrounding non-normative sexualities. In recent years, Nigerian writers have expanded literary conversations beyond the traditional themes of colonialism, nationalism, corruption, and migration to include intimate questions of bodily autonomy, desire, and queer existence. Within this literary shift, Damilare Kuku's short story "Beard Gang," emerges as an important narrative text that interrogates the complexity of hidden identities and performative heterosexuality within a deeply conservative society.

The concept of "beard" in queer discourse refers to a person, usually of the opposite sex, who publicly serves as a romantic partner to conceal another individual's queer sexuality from society. In "Beard Gang," Kuku deploys this notion not merely as a comic or social trope but as a critical framework for understanding how societal pressures compel individuals to perform identities that align with heteronormative expectations. The short story becomes a narrative of concealment, performance, survival, and emotional fragmentation.

This essay examines the ways "Beard Gang," explicates queer consciousness through masqueraded identities, emotional duplicity, performative masculinity, and the politics of silence. It argues that Kuku's

narrative exposes the psychological burden of compulsory heterosexuality while simultaneously critiquing Nigerian society's hostility toward queer existence.

## Queer Theory as a Theoretical Framework

Queer theory is a critical theoretical framework that emerged in the late twentieth century from the fields of gender studies, literary criticism, cultural studies, and post-structuralist philosophy. Influenced by scholars such as Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, queer theory challenges fixed and essentialist notions of gender, sexuality, and identity. Rather than viewing categories such as "male," "female," "heterosexual," and "homosexual" as natural and unchanging, queer theory argues that these identities are socially and culturally constructed through discourse, institutions, and power relations.

As a theoretical framework, queer theory examines how societies create and maintain norms regarding sexuality and gender expression. It interrogates heteronormativity—the assumption that heterosexuality is the normal or preferred mode of sexual orientation—and explores how individuals who fall outside these norms are represented, regulated, or marginalized. In literary and cultural studies, queer theory is used to analyze texts, characters, and narratives for the ways they reinforce, challenge, or subvert dominant ideas about gender and sexuality. The framework also pays attention to silences, ambiguities, and hidden identities within texts, recognizing that meanings related to sexuality are often

complex and fluid rather than explicit or fixed.

In research, queer theory provides scholars with tools for investigating the instability of identity categories and the operation of power in shaping social experiences. It encourages a critical examination of binaries such as male/female, masculine/feminine, and heterosexual/homosexual, arguing that these oppositions often oversimplify the diversity of human identities and experiences. For some critics like Chris Dunton,

“...the practice of homosexuality within African society remains an area of experience that has not been granted a history by African writers, but has been greeted, rather, with a sustained outburst of silence. Whether this has been carried out within or beyond the limits of the stereotype, the identification of homosexuality with the West has helped defend that silence. An “official” history has concealed the reluctance of African writers to admit homosexuality into the bounds of a different kind of discussion (733).

Consequently, queer theory is valuable for studies of literature, media, culture, and society because it reveals how identities are negotiated, performed, and contested. By foregrounding issues of difference, marginalization, and resistance, queer theory contributes to a deeper understanding of the ways individuals and communities challenge dominant social norms.

In many African societies, sexuality is often viewed through moral, religious, and communal lenses. Consequently, queer individuals are compelled to suppress their desires in order to avoid stigma, violence, ostracism, and legal persecution. Nigeria’s Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act of 2014 intensified this social atmosphere by institutionalizing hostility toward queer communities. Literature therefore becomes one of the few spaces where queer realities can be explored, represented, and humanized.

Kuku’s “Beard Gang,” participates in this literary resistance by unveiling the hidden emotional worlds of queer individuals who are forced into social camouflage. The short story reveals how identity becomes a theatrical performance where appearance matters more than authenticity.

### **Masqueraded Identities and Social Performance**

One of the central thematic concerns in “Beard Gang,” is the performance of socially acceptable identities. The characters occupy dual realities: the public self and the private self. Publicly, they embody heteronormative ideals of masculinity, romance, and social respectability; privately, they wrestle with desires and emotional truths that contradict societal expectations.

The metaphor of masquerade is particularly significant within African cultural contexts. Traditionally, masquerades conceal the human face while projecting a socially meaningful identity. In Kuku’s

novel, queer characters become metaphorical masquerades who hide their authentic selves beneath layers of performance. Their heterosexual relationships function as costumes designed to satisfy family expectations, religious morality, and communal surveillance. This concealment creates psychological fragmentation. Characters experience emotional exhaustion because they are compelled to continuously negotiate between authenticity and survival. Kuku portrays this duality as emotionally violent, emphasizing that silence and repression can be as destructive as physical persecution.

Moreover, the “beard” arrangement itself becomes symbolic of societal hypocrisy. Society rewards appearances while ignoring emotional realities. Relationships are judged not by sincerity or affection but by their conformity to heteronormative standards. Thus, Kuku critiques a social structure that prioritizes public performance over genuine human connection.

### **Masculinity and Queer Anxiety**

Another significant aspect of “Beard Gang,” is its interrogation of masculinity. In many African societies, masculinity is measured through heterosexual conquest, emotional stoicism, authority, and marriage. Men who fail to conform to these standards risk social ridicule and exclusion.

Kuku demonstrates how queer men are pressured to exaggerate masculine

performances in order to avoid suspicion. The male characters often adopt hypermasculine behaviors, aggressive heterosexual performances, and emotionally detached attitudes as protective strategies. Masculinity therefore becomes theatrical rather than natural. The short story also reveals the fragility of patriarchal masculinity. Beneath the confident exterior of many male characters lies fear, loneliness, and emotional instability. Their anxiety stems not only from the fear of exposure but also from the impossibility of living authentically within a hostile society.

By exposing the instability of socially constructed masculinity, Kuku dismantles the assumption that heterosexual masculinity is natural or absolute. Instead, masculinity appears as a rehearsed identity sustained through repetition and social policing.

### **Silence, Secrecy, and Emotional Isolation**

Silence operates as both a survival mechanism and a form of imprisonment in “Beard Gang.” Characters avoid open discussions about sexuality because language itself becomes dangerous within a homophobic environment. The inability to openly articulate desire results in emotional suppression and alienation. Kuku’s portrayal of secrecy illustrates the emotional consequences of queer invisibility. Relationships become transactional rather than emotionally fulfilling because honesty is impossible. Trust is constantly undermined by fear of exposure. The emotional isolation experienced by queer characters reflects a broader societal refusal to acknowledge

queer humanity. Families prioritize social reputation over emotional well-being, while religious institutions frame queer identity as moral failure. Consequently, characters internalize shame and self-censorship.

The short story therefore suggests that silence is not merely individual but systemic. Society manufactures silence through laws, cultural expectations, and religious condemnation. In this way, “Beard Gang,” critiques not only personal deception but also the societal structures that necessitate such deception.

### **Female Characters and the Burden of Complicity**

An equally important dimension of the novel is the role of women within the “beard” arrangement. Female characters are often positioned as unwilling participants in performances designed to conceal male queer identities. Some women knowingly cooperate with these arrangements, while others become emotionally exploited victims of deception.

Kuku complicates simplistic victim-perpetrator binaries by revealing how patriarchy harms both men and women. Women are pressured into relationships that deny them emotional fulfillment, while men are trapped within performative masculinity. The result is a cycle of mutual dissatisfaction sustained by societal expectations. The emotional labor performed by women in maintaining appearances also reflects broader patriarchal structures within

Nigerian society. Women are expected to preserve relationships, protect family honor, and ignore emotional inconsistencies in order to maintain social respectability. Thus, “Beard Gang,” critiques heteronormativity not only as a system that oppresses queer individuals but also as one that destabilizes authentic human relationships across gender lines.

A careful investigation into the life of Otunba—a character in Kuku’s “Beard Gang” highlights homosexuality and hidden identities personified. Otunba’s wife—Deborah, explains why she remained in the marriage even after finding out Otunba’s sexuality: “...he had used her to hide the fact he was a gay” (“Beard Gang” 193). Following this, we can apprehend the theme of concealed sexual identity. Visibly, Otunba’s wife realizes that her marriage functioned as a “beard”—a heterosexual façade used to mask her husband’s homosexuality.

“Beard Gang,” explores how Gay men engage in marriage to women, as a tool to conceal their sexual orientation. Additional themes explored in “Beard Gang” include: marriage as a social disguise, the use of women as “beards” to mask, and successfully enjoy public respect and acceptance; other themes are: economic dependence and silence, female solidarity and compromise, amongst others.

Female solidarity and compromise, as a theme, is amplified in these words by Otunba’s wife: “I thought like a man and took a cold-blooded business decision (“Beard Gang” 193). These words are strikingly

significant and worthy of explication. Specifically, she made them after she finds out that her husband is homosexual and has used their marriage as cover up for his true sexual identity. So, rather than exiting the marriage through divorce, she chooses the option of remaining in that marriage for reasons best known to her.

Summarily, her words critique a society which places appearance over and above authenticity. Although Deborah is fully aware that her husband, Chief Otunba, is involved in homosexual relationships and is the leader of a network of closeted gay men in Lagos, yet rather than rocking the boat, she adopts a strategic, pragmatic approach to her circumstances. Symbolically, Deborah represents the compromise many individuals make in pursuit of social status, financial security, and emotional survival. Although she is aware of the deception at the heart of her marriage, yet she chooses accommodation over confrontation. Through the character of Deborah, Kuku portrays a woman who is neither a helpless victim nor a confrontational wife who reacts with public outrage, but a resourceful figure who learns to survive and even exercise influence within a deeply complicated situation.

### **Humor, Satire, and Narrative Strategy**

Although the themes of “Beard Gang,” are emotionally heavy, Kuku employs humor and satire as narrative strategies. Humor softens the tension surrounding taboo subjects while simultaneously exposing societal absurdities. Through witty dialogue and ironic situations, the novel reveals the

contradictions embedded within social morality.

Satire becomes a tool of resistance. By ridiculing performative social behavior, Kuku undermines the authority of rigid moral structures. The comedic dimensions of the narrative invite readers to question why society demands elaborate performances of heterosexuality in the first place. Furthermore, humor humanizes queer experiences. Rather than presenting queer characters solely through tragedy and victimhood, Kuku allows them emotional complexity, wit, vulnerability, and agency. This narrative choice resists stereotypical depictions that reduce queer existence to suffering alone.

### **Queer Visibility and Literary Intervention**

“Beard Gang,” contributes to the growing archive of African queer literature that seeks to challenge erasure and social silence. African queer narratives have historically faced censorship, moral condemnation, and accusations of cultural betrayal. Yet writers such as Chinelo Okparanta, Akwaeke Emezi, Romeo Oriogun, and Damilare Kuku continue to foreground queer experiences within African literary discourse.

Kuku’s intervention is significant because it situates queer existence within everyday Nigerian realities rather than presenting it as foreign or exceptional. The short story emphasizes that queer individuals are embedded within families, friendships, workplaces, and social communities. Their

invisibility is therefore not evidence of absence but of forced concealment. The text also raises important ethical questions about authenticity, freedom, and emotional survival. Can genuine intimacy exist within a society structured around fear and concealment? What are the psychological costs of performative living? How does society itself become complicit in emotional deception? These questions position “Beard Gang,” as both a literary and socio-cultural critique.

### **Findings**

The study finds that “Beard Gang,” portrays queer concealment as a survival mechanism within a deeply heteronormative society. The story demonstrates that performative heterosexuality produces emotional instability, fractured relationships, and psychological isolation. The study also finds that masculinity within the text is represented as performative rather than natural. Male characters continuously enact socially approved masculine behaviors to avoid suspicion and maintain social acceptance. Furthermore, the story reveals that patriarchy negatively affects both queer individuals and women. Women become emotional participants in deceptive relationships designed to sustain public respectability.

Finally, the study finds that humor and satire function as tools of resistance through which Kuku critiques rigid moral expectations and exposes societal hypocrisy.

### **Conclusion**

Damilare Kuku’s short story “Beard Gang,” is a powerful exploration of queer consciousness within a society governed by heteronormative expectations and moral surveillance. Through the motif of masqueraded identities, the novel exposes the emotional and psychological consequences of compulsory heterosexuality.

Kuku reveals that queer concealment is not simply personal deception but a survival strategy necessitated by social hostility. The short story interrogates performative masculinity, emotional isolation, silence, and the fragile nature of socially constructed identities. At the same time, it critiques a society that prioritizes appearances over authenticity. By combining satire, emotional realism, and social critique, “Beard Gang,” contributes meaningfully to contemporary African queer literature. The short story challenges readers to reconsider assumptions about gender, sexuality, and identity while emphasizing the human cost of repression. Ultimately, “Beard Gang,” demonstrates that beneath every social masquerade lies the universal human desire for recognition, authenticity, and emotional freedom.

### **Recommendations**

- Scholars should engage more critically with African queer literature in order to expand conversations on

identity, gender, and sexuality within African literary studies.

- Educational institutions should encourage inclusive literary discussions that promote empathy and critical understanding of marginalized identities.
- Writers and publishers should support literary works that address underrepresented social experiences within African societies.
- Society should promote open dialogue on identity and human rights in order to reduce stigma and emotional repression.
- Further studies should examine queer representation in contemporary Nigerian literature from interdisciplinary perspectives such as sociology, psychology, gender studies, and cultural studies.

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