

MODERN COMEDY ASSIGNMENT

DEPARTMENT OF ARTS EDUCATION

(EDUCATION/ENGLISH)

NAME: UKONU ADA EMEA

REG. NUMBER: 2015/198032

COURSE CODE: ELS 240

LECTURER'S NAME: MR ONYEKA ODOH

DATE: JULY, 2017

ASSIGNMENT TOPIC:

**“THE PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN A WOMAN
OF NO IMPORTANCE *by Oscar Wilde* and OUR HUSBAND HAS GONE
MAD AGAIN *by Ola Rotimi.***

Whether a person is a man or a woman is determined by the person's anatomy which has to do with the person's physical build. The prevailing concept of **gender** is one of the traits that is conceived to constitute what is masculine and what is feminine in temperament and behaviour are largely, if not entirely social constructs which were created by the pervasive patriarchal biases of our civilization.

According to Simone De Beauvoir, “*one is not born, but rather becomes a woman... it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as feminine or masculine*”. By this cultural process, the masculine in our culture has come to be widely

identified as active, domineering, adventurous, rational, creative; the feminine by systematic opposition to such traits, has come to be identified as passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional and conventional. (*A glossary of literary terms* by M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham)

During the Victorian period, the roles of men and women became more sharply defined than at any time in history. The human society tended to assign different roles, codes of behaviour and morality, and even different feelings and thoughts to men and women. This era was not just a time for change and development, there were many with strong aspirations for social climbing such as gaining wealth, marrying into higher social classes or trying to get higher education. Thus, Victorian women were put in a position of dependency on men. There was hardly any opportunity for them to be financially independent, and being unmarried or rejecting motherhood was seen as a social faux pas. Therefore, women were seen as inseparable from men as the only way to live a respectable life was together with a man.

Thus, gender identity is the way in which an individual self identifies with a gender category as being either a man or a woman. Therefore, gender and sexuality are both social constructions that are fluid and elusive.

In discussing *gender and sexuality*, I would like to use two plays; one from Oscar Wilde (*A woman of no importance*) and the other by Ola Rotimi (*Our husband has gone mad again*).

Oscar Wilde is one of the most acclaimed, as well as criticized authors of his time. He was a writer of the Victorian era. Looking back at the Victorian era through descriptions of life and society, an image appears of a rigid society characterized by prudishness, tradition and strict social codes, thus, Oscar Wilde commented on and satirized in his comedies on society.

In this play, we see an intelligent dramatic comedy satirizing contemporary fashionable circles of society and its manners, as well as social expectations. This type of comedy by Oscar Wilde is represented by stereotypical characters, such as fallen woman, the good woman and the young innocent American maiden. Rita Felski in her feminist theory writes “*patriarchal power pervades verbal and visual systems of meaning. Within such systems, woman is always connected to and inseparable from man. Men’s ability to symbolize the universal, the absolute and the transcendental depends on the continuing associations of femaleness with difference otherness and inferiority*”. As already mentioned above, the Victorian society was much based on patriarchal power. Women were supposed to take the

roles of wives and mothers and to keep domestic life. Thus, this play comments on the paradoxical hypocrisy of the contemporary society. Despite the title, this is a play in which the male authority has to step back and make room for strong female characters such as Mrs Arbuthnot and Miss Hester Worsley. It redefines and challenges stereotype through the characters of the play.

Mrs Arbuthnot is a fallen woman. She is a woman with a regretful and sorrow past, an unmarried mother to Gerald Arbuthnot. Sometimes the Victorians would have regarded it as scandalous. But she is presented to the audience as a strong woman. From the beginning of the play, Mrs Arbuthnot is portrayed as a good woman. She knows she is not as good as others suppose her to be and thus she speaks openly of her sins. Furthermore, she is considered as a thoroughly good woman simply because she does charity works and helps the sick and the poor (even though it is in a sense retribution for her sins, which makes the action somewhat ambiguous). Although she sees herself as a sinner in the eyes of the society, she makes it very vivid that she does not forget her sin. She says to her son: *for, though day after day, at noon or evening, I have knelt down in Gods house, I have never repented of my sin. How could I repent of my sin when you my love were its fruit...! You are more to me than innocence. I would rather be your mother-oh! Much rather! Than have been always pure... oh don't you see! Don't you understand! It is my dishonour that has made you so dear to me. It is my disgrace that has bound you so closely to me. It is the price I paid for you- the price of soul and body that makes me love you as I do. Oh! Don't ask me to do this horrible thing of marrying lord Illingworth. Child of my shame, be still the child of my shame!*

This confident comment was made by Mrs Arbuthnot to her son Gerald when he asked her to marry lord Illingworth. Norbert Kohl comments on this passage, "This outspoken justification of her situation as an unmarried mother must have seemed to the people around like a progressive plea for a liberal attitude towards such problems". To criticize the Victorian disapproval of illegitimacy and treatment of fallen women, Mrs Arbuthnot has been living a life of shame and isolation while the father of her child has been able to live without complications, due to the fact that he is a man. Though refusing to marry Illingworth, Mrs Arbuthnot rejects convention. She could marry the father of her child in order to become respectable again but she refuses; instead choosing to live independently with her son.

In later acts, we learn that when she complains about how Illingworth dumped her, he tells her that his mother had offered her six hundred pence a year which Mrs Arbuthnot refused thus rejecting patriarchal power already in her younger years.

Oscar Wilde also makes the character of Hester Worsley comment on the double standard of Victorian society when speaking of Henry Weston. She says...*let all women who have sinned be punished. If a man and a woman have sinned, let them both go forth into the desert to love and loath each other there...don't punish one and let the other go free. Don't have one law for men and one for women...till you count what is shame in a woman to be an infamy in a man; you will always be unjust*". With this speech by Hester to lady Hustanton, she goes contrary to Victorian gender boundaries in that she overtly expresses that men and women are to be treated equally. This could be said to be a manifesto of female equality. Thus, even though Mrs Arbuthnot and Hester are examples of strong women who transgress contemporary gender boundaries, these characters are the same time good women. They are stereotypical characters based on a patriarchal notion of feminism.

Furthermore, the text offers an intriguing reversal of contemporary notions of gender. This could be seen in Mrs Alonby's long monologue about who an ideal man should be. She and Mrs Caroline, lady Stufield, Mrs Allonby and lady Hustanton engages in a discussion about how men are supposed to behave to their women. Mrs Allonby says that why most men are unhappy in their marriages is because they see their wives as their first love instead of being their last romance. Mrs Caroline tells of what an ideal man should be: *the ideal man! Oh, the ideal man should talk to us as if we were goddesses and not treat us as if we were children. He should refuse all our serious requests, and gratify every one of our whims. He should encourage to have caprices and forbid us to have missions. He should always say much more than he means, and always mean much more than he says*". Mrs Allonby and the others also concurs to this. This is thus contrary to the 19th century ideas on gender. The text invites us to a world in which patriarchy does not rule society and women, in a world in which the roles are reversed and women control men.

Rita Felski argues that within patriarchal systems "*women are always connected to an indispensable from man*". In this text, we see that this connection and inseparability is indeed very true. An obvious example is in the case of sir John who has no lines of his own but is mentioned in connection with his wife who treats him like a child and who can hardly survive without her. She directs his movements and orders him around. She says to her

husband: *John, you should have your muffler, what is the use of always knitting mufflers for you if you don't wear them.* She also goes further: *John, the grass is too damp for you. You had better go and put on your shoes at once*" all these he does immediately. Another is Gerald Arbuthnot, who cannot exist without his ever present mother. She tells him what to do at every given point in time. Thus, he seems to have full control of him. Mr Daubeny also is of a respectable profession; who has practically no life of his own as he spends most of his time talking about his wife to lady Hustanton.

In this play, it is the men who reside as in the female domestic sphere of the home. The play starts in the house of lady Hustanton where there is no Mr Hustanton to be seen. Also, we visit Mrs Arbuthnot's house, same thing applies. It is thus the men who visit the properties under female control only as guests. The women are the ones who move the play forward.

Conclusively, there is a situation in this play that sheds light on the repression of female sexuality. Because Lord Illingworth is bragging that there is "*no woman in the world who would object to being kissed*". Mrs Allonby dares him to kiss Hester the puritan. Hester holds a rather strict moral code that elevates purity and self-sacrifice. Hence she is not clearly charmed by his advances as she enters the stage in terror by screaming that he has insulted her. Thus Oscar Wilde's play explored the themes of gender and sexuality and exposed it cleverly in the form of humour.

Still on the presentation of **gender and sexuality** is a play written by Ola Rotimi entitled **Our Husband has gone mad again**. This is a comic work that shows the idiosyncrasies of Nigerian men and politicians. It reveals a situation in which men rule the world through their oppressive and power self-allocation have to bow to the dictates of women that learnt to assert their rights, authority and self for political negotiations. Many of the scenes in the play suggests that men make use of women for their end as long as women continue to be used. At the end, when women realised that with their number, they can negotiate and determine the part they play in political outcomes, they asserted themselves and took over political power. Sikira, the former wife of Lekoja- brown, becomes the new candidate of the party as he becomes discredited. Madam Ajanaku appeared to have just realised that the political marriage to her daughter was just exploitative. The other members of the party now acknowledges that Lekoja-Browns ways are crude and not likely to be of positive impact on their party's fortune at the polls. In this way, the women are able to

overturn the power balance. Through their new consciousness of the power inherent in their numerical strength, they use strategic negotiations to upturn the political force to be reckoned with. All this grew out of the realisation by the women that without the women's votes, the men-controlled parties are vulnerable to their opponents.

In this play, we see a representation of feminism and comical approach. In the early part of the play, before the emergence of Lisa, Ola Rotimi presents a group of dumb, docile women who are rendered inactive not by express command of the gods but by a long period of subjugation under patriarchal culture that has made their oppressed status to look like a natural way of life.

Lekoja-Brown has married three different women for three different purposes. First he marries mama Rashida, whom he inherited from his late brother, he married her for the mere fact that she had lost her husband and because she is well-mannered, very quiet and full of concern. She is more or less a dummy in Lekoja-Brown's house and she raises no opposition to his authority. She is obedient to him thus, she dares not ask questions when ordered. The second is Sikira, whom he marries because he needs the votes of the women if he has to win the elections as the president of the Nigerian union of market women. He says: *that woman's case is only for necessity, anyway for temporary measures. We need women's votes, man, if we must win the next election*". Liza is another of his wives. She is an American educated wife working with the Red Cross whom he meets in Congo when he is shot in the thigh during a war. He marries Liza because by her medical profession she will be more useful, presentable and befitting to his status in the near future of his political career, should he win the election.

Lekoja-Brown represents a number of Nigerian politicians who see political offices and appointments as an avenue for self-aggrandisement, and at the same time, who have no regard for the women folk. He perceives them only as an end to justify his means thus an instrument to his future ambition. He triumphantly says: *see what I mean? Everything would have worked out according to plan once the elections were over. See? I give Sikira lump sum capital to go and trade and look for another man or something like that; mama Rashida remains right in this house of my fathers; and I move into minister's quarters at Victoria Island. Lisa joins me there; everybody is happy*"

While Liza, mama Rashida and Sikira are perceived to be weaker sexes and who have been relegated to the back seat in the society, both in the economic, political and importantly

in the social sector, they are also regarded as an instrument in the hands of men to achieve various objectives and reach certain goals. Lekoja-Brown refers to his wives as crickets meaning that they are no bodies, after all a cricket is just a tiny, harmless insect which lives in a hole. The last scene of the play confirms that Lekoja-Brown's view and perception of women remains as rigid as ever, despite the fact that the two wives which are treated as invalids are able to bury their two feet deep in the ground and break free from the bondage of custom, tradition and culture which covered their vision right from the beginning of the play till that moment of discovery when Liza opened their horizon to reality.

His last statement '*this world has come to an end*' makes us understand whom he truly is. To him, the kitchen and the bedroom are the proper places where women especially his wives must be kept for the rest of their lives. He does not believe that anything good can come out of Nazareth; so it was a shock and it was distressing to him that Sakira, his wife left his house in anger and frustration was the same woman that her party nominated for the same post which he himself was offered but was later withdrawn from.

In conclusion, women through the ages have been made to pass through series/ phases of maltreatment. But modernization, qualitative education, positive awareness, series of workshops, campaigns against women slavery etc. with the help of international organizations through sponsorships have gone a long way in enlightening the whole society. Thus the fight and struggle to protect women is a collective effort and responsibility to all sundry.

