

# AN ESSAY ON THE PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN TWO COMIC WORKS

## INTRODUCTION:

The issue of gender and sexuality remains highly topical in contemporary literature and society. This seems to be enormously reliable on the fact that literary constructions offer variation in presentation of sex.

Certain literary theorists present an aspect of gender as unworthy of attention, while the reverse remains the case among others. For instance in Freudian system, women “are mutilated and must learn to accept their lack of penis”( in Freud’s term, a “deformity”). And Lacanian lens, both the male and the female partake in the “phallic” organisation. This is a clash in the intellectual views of these individuals. And still regarding gender and sexuality, Simon de Beauvoir holds that, “one is not born a woman, one becomes a woman.” This view proposes that the term “gender” should be used to refer to the social and cultural constructions of masculinities and feminities, and not the state of being male or female in its entirety.

On this note, this essay shall be preoccupied with the exploring of the presentation of gender and sexuality in Shaw’s comic work, *Arms and The Man* and Soyinka’s *The Lion and The Jewel* on the different social, biological and cultural constructions in the light of the spirit of masculinity and femininity, and the social contexts despite the binary views of individuals.

Shaw is said to have comically pictured gender and sexuality through his treatment of class struggle and aristocratic mannerism in the Victorian England, showing the influence of global processes upon the lives of his males and females. Unlike Shaw, Soyinka in his *The Lion and The Jewel* presents gender and sexuality from the cultural lens and context of the African society, and the historical atmosphere of colonial impact on the African people.

At the beginning of *Arms and The Man*, Shaw shows the audience a beautiful young upper class Victorian lady filled with the spirit of transcendentalism through her romance with nature at the night of the battle of Slivnitza. Shaw himself claims:

*“On the balcony a young lady, intensely conscious of the*

*Romantic beauty of the night, and of the fact that her*

*own youth and beauty are part of it, is gazing at the*

*the snowy Balkans.”*

Through this manner, Shaw affirms that women’s beauty also rhyme with the sort of grandeur that providence has bestowed unto nature. Their beauty is even said to be more expensive than the materialistic tendencies of the universe. The audience is told, in Shaw’s words, that,

*“She (Raina) is in her nightgown, well covered by a mantle*

*of furs, worth, in a moderate estimate, about three times*

*the furniture of her room."*

And irrespective of the belief of the society that women are mostly meant to look beautiful no matter the circumstance life engenders them into, this still remains a brave credit coming from Shaw to their personality, though the men, in the person of Sergius Seranoff are never dumped into the inverse of beauty.

This is just what Soyinka does in the character of Sidi, the village belle. She is pictured to be beautiful in the manner the playwright presents her:

*"She is a slim girl with plaited hair. A true village belle. She balances the pail on her head with accustomed ease. Around her is a wrapped the familiar broad clothe which is folded just above her breasts, leaving the shoulders bare."*

The token difference between Sidi and Raina is that while we see a woman furnished with native and domestic lifestyle – fetching water for home utility – in the latter, the former is adorned with civilised and modern sense of existence by Shaw. Instead of Raina being responsible to fastening her shutters, her mother asks Louka – their housemaid, to do that. A woman with home training ought not to need a housemaid to manage her domestic front. On this observation, Soyinka elevates the expected virtue in the gender of

Sidi from the cultural context and setting whereas Shaw grants depreciative one in Raina respectively.

A following observation is that Bernard Shaw enlightens the audience that the woman as a gender serves as an instrument for the safety and survival of man. Despite the tumultuous thunders and booms of gunshots outside the city at the night of the Slivnitza war, Raina still nurtures such manly courage to offer a soldier who is possibly known to equip himself with ammunitions, and an enemy fugitive too, protection from their Bulgarian troop in her chamber. She even goes to the length of satisfying his instant need for chocolate cream after the whole threats unleashed in her by the fugitive chocolate cream soldier. At the end of this very scene, the fugitive who escapes the search of the Bulgarian soldier, is given Major Petkoff's coat by Raina to disguise his identity. As earlier said, this is the construction of masculinity in a woman by means of the comic imagination of Shaw, unlike the sort of picture Soyinka paints in the character of the belle of Ilujinle village, who is lopsidedly vulnerable to the "sugarcoated" tongues of Lakunle and Bale Baroka, exposing the ideal weakness in a woman. But the case still holds that Sidi never entirely accepted the notion about her feebleness as a woman. When Lakunle tries to wave aside the probable masculinity in her by saying,

"A natural feeling arising out of envy;

For, as a woman, you have a smaller  
brain

Than mine,”

she(Sidi) furiously checks his masculine excesses as she questions:

“Again! I’d like to know

Just what gives you these thoughts

Of manly conceit.”

She balances her feminine weakness along with the masculine curiosity ingrained in her.

Far from her fluctuating spirit of masculinity and femininity, the audience views the elevated masculine position the stranger places Sidi’s portrait – at the centre of attraction – causing this to be at the expense of the Bale’s portrait and personality attached to a corner of the village latrine. When the Girls inform her of the development, Sidi utters:

“If this is true, then I am esteemed

Than Bale Baroka,

The Lion of Ilujinle.

This means that I am greater than

The fox of the undergrowth.

The living god among men...”

To every keen observer, this is spontaneous because it is none of her doing to occupy a position that is due to a royal individual like Baroka, the Bale. This enhances the claim that the female gender has a fair place than the male counterpart here.

Shaw is also seen presenting the bravery in women through the obstinate character of Louka. Louka tends to be acquainted with some secrets about the Petkoffs and their class. For instance, she tells Sergius on his return from the war, that the higher love (Raina) betrays his love for her at his back. This betrayal Louka talks about in Raina's encounter with the chocolate cream soldier, Bluntschli, in her chamber at the night of the Slivnitsa war. And Louka intends to rely on this secret to win Sergius Seranff's heart and challenge Raina. Incontrovertibly, it comes to be a rare spirit of a lower class lady against the upper woman in matters of physical bravery.

Still on the matter of feminine bravery and wisdom, Catherine Petkoff is never equal in thought with Sadiku, the Bale first wife. She is able to convince her husband on her motive for the installation of an electric bell in their mansion. But on the portrayal of Sadiku, she never been witty of a means to talk sense into the Bale, instead she takes every of the deceitful opinion of the Bale hook and sinker, leading Sidi into a sudden damnation. This varied instance between Shaw and Soyinka presents and justifies that all women are not equal in reasoning; some are intelligent than the others.

Then on the presentation of the male gender, we see two civilised young men with no prowess and the lack of vivid knowledge of what they claim to know in the characters of Sergius – the soldier, and Lakunle – the village school teacher. Major Sergius Seranoff is said to be the commander of the Bulgarian troop who

led the calvary through a wrong means by betraying his troop, and also lacks the idea on how to successfully transfer the regiment to Phillipopolis, if not by the intervention of the humorous lowly-classed Serbian mercenary – Bluntschli who goes to the war front with food instead of ammunitions. And in the case of Lakunle, he is known to possess the psychological and intellectual resources on how to manipulate not just only a woman but also an illiterate’s sense to his own gain because of his root in western civilization(though he is a blind follower) and education. But it backfires on him that the illiteracy in the person of Baroka – an agent against western civilization – outwits and overshadows his wealth of knowledge in obtaining Sidi’s hand in marriage, though he never wanted to observe the bride-price tradition. From these notes, the audience perceives the inferiority of masculine claims and knowledge in both texts. Too, Major petkoff – man of the house – never an exception from this inferiority of man. Even Nicola himself is disturbed by fear of the unknown as he strives to calm Louka’s brave obstinacy towards the Petkoffs down. Due to such fear he says to Louka:

*“you don’t know the power such high people have over the likes of you and me when we try to rise out of our poverty against them.”*

As an inferior individual, he doesn’t want anything that will hinder the success and goodwill he will realise from the Petkoffs, unlike his radical co-servant, Louka.

More instances verify that within the texts, male genders are presented as agents against the rise of women to masculinity and freedom of expression. Major Petkoff castigates his wife, Catherine, when she complains of the constant sour throat she undergoes when he comes back from the war. Nicola too rebukes Louka when the latter tries to express her possible reaction if she is eventually made to be an object of discussion amidst the Petkoffs. Nicola interjects:

“I shall have expected more sense from  
You, Louka. But you’re young: you’re  
young!”

On this same vein, Sergius depreciates the worth of Louka’s brave claim that there is every tendency that Raina will marry Bluntschli on his return, when Sergius says,

“...you are a little clod of common clay with  
the soul of a servant.”

And these makes Louka to feel hurt, but she hides her anger because no one seems to be sensitive to it. Not even Nicola.

Baroka also believes that Sadiku is senseless and naïve about what she hears. This is why Baroka acts as if his virile strength has waned, and for this he claims to be impotent, using this for suppression of Sadiku’s manly reasoning and triumph over feminine sense just to trap Sidi into his harem, or sustain his desire. At the end of it all, Baroka’s intention is fruitful. Lakunle also does this when he says to Sidi that she has smaller

brain compared to his. Events of these sorts depict the true contempt men have against women.

Finally, the two texts present men as critics of their fellow men. Bluntschli, while describing Sergius at the battle front, lays mockery upon Sergius' personality when he says:

*“He did it like an operatic tenor. A regular handsome*

*Fellow, with flashing eyes and lovely moustache,*

*Shouting his war-cry and charging like Don Quixote*

*At the windmill.”*

At the end of this statement, he giggles such laughter that upsets Raina. While laying contempt on the personality of the Bale, Lakunle calls him “devil among women,” when the Girls inform Sidi of her superior position on the drawing made by the Stranger. This makes Sidi to shout him up, but Lakunle persists and makes a statement that shows poetic justice unto the Bale:

*“I know him what he is. This is*

*Divine justice that a mere woman*

*should outstrip him in the end.”*

Through this way, the male genders are pictured to be antagonistic to each other in nature.

On a note of conclusion, Shaw and Soyinka have been fit enough to present gender and sexuality from their individual perspectives to the reader/audience in *Arms and The Man* and *The Importance of Being Ernest*, marking out the varieties in the strengths and weaknesses of these characters which also have a link to the entirety of human biological make-ups.