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PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN WOLE SOYINKA'S *THE LION AND THE JEWEL* AND OSCAR WILDE'S *AN IDEAL HUSBAND*

With the rise of the quest for recognition, social and economical position and important pride of place by the male and female gender alike in our society, the issue of gender and sexuality has remained one of fierce concern and debate between the opposing parties. This instinctive quest by either of the gender is traceable to the time of the creation story in the Bible where many have argued over the superiority of the man to the woman given the Biblical accounts of the story of Adam followed by the accounts of the heroic conquest of certain notable male personages in the Bible. On the flip side, many (women-right activists and feminists alike) have also argued for the relevance of the place of women in the society, citing evidences from the Bible as well concerning, most especially, the biblical accounts of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, Dorcas, Esther and so many others.

What the idea of gender and sexuality entails generally is simply the nature of the sexes of male and female as regards society's defined roles, demands and expectations, the perception of the male and female gender in respect of themselves as individual and distinct members of the society by virtue of their sexes as well as their perception of each other in the society.

Literature, being an avenue where the views of writers are implied regarding a wide range of prevailing social happenings, phenomenon and ideologies, has not failed to expose and reflect upon the question of gender and sexuality as obtainable in specific societies where they are produced and in respect of which they are produced. It is no doubt that at some time in the past, and probably still evident in our present society (encompassing the European and the

African society), the female sex has been looked upon as being inferior to the male sex, hence the men have overtime been given more important pride of place than the women.

Accordingly, in Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* and Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*, one can't help but take note of the instances of the issue of gender and sexuality as obtainable in the different societies of early 20th century Nigeria (representative of the typical African society in this regard) and early 19th century England (representative of the typical European community of the time in this regard) as depicted in both works respectively.

To begin with, in *The Lion and the Jewel* we come across the prevalent conception of the typical African, not yet influenced by the acculturative tendencies, sensibilities and tenets of European civilization, with regards to gender and sexuality. Thus in this work we are made to realize that while the women folk are regarded as being substantially under the dominating influence of the male folk in the society by their African gender defined roles of servitude to the man as presupposed by their mere activity of "fetching, Carrying, scrubbing and bringing forth children in their gross" (paraphrasing Lakunle's words to Sidi in the first act of the play) all for the benefit of the men in their lives, basically as husband figures, the worth of the African man is justified by his level of intelligence, cleverness, bravery, the strength of his arms, the wealth of his farms and barns and, most importantly the capacity of his loins—his sexual virility--.

Typically the place of the woman in the society so depicted in this work essentially revolves around her beauty, disposition and charm, as well as her capacity of being very homely and domestic. This view and expectation of the woman in the African society invariably places the woman as being perpetually under the providence of the man in her life therefore, limiting her economical capacity as an individual in the society. She is thence expected to pay greater attention to her looks, her manners and her purity or virginity, if you like, so as to be able to meet up with and capture the interest of a desirable husband.

On the other hand the males in the society are expected to grow their intellect, strength of their arms, cleverness or wits, bravery and economical and social purchasing power as well as sexual whims and virility in other to be considered marriageable or being able to satisfy the demands of the woman in his life. This general idea invariably informs the words and action of major characters in the work. Sidi for example, the heroine in the text, is metaphorically, in the first place, termed a Jewel which demonstrates her as a charming and beautiful young woman who has the potential of attracting the bravest of men in the community. In another instance, her action of being homely and domestic, as seen evident in the first act where she frequents the stream to fetch water, as well as her virginity further justifies her as being a marriageable female. These are obviously the qualities of hers that interest Lakunle and Bale Baroka. The conversation that ensues between Lakunle and Sidi in the first act lends more credence to this:

Lakunle: Sidi, I do not seek a wife to fetch and Carry, to cook and scrub

To bring forth children by the gross.

Sidi: Heaven forgive you, do you now scorn child-bearing in a wife

Lakunle: of course, I do not, I only mean,

Oh Sidi, I want to wed because I love...

... to pay the bride price would be to buy a heifer off the market stall...you'd be my... mere property.

The above conversation, apart from giving some insight into some of the gender defined roles and expectation of the women in the society, further points to the fact of men in the society regarding women as mere properties acquired through the payment of bride price. This is why Lakunle a western acculturated fellows shuns paying the bride price.

Contrastively, the worth of the male folk as proven by his bravery, wealth and cleverness is evident in the text; Sidi says thus to Lakunle: "I would demean my worth to wed a mere village school teacher". In Sidi's conception a man cannot be considered worthy of marriage when he has a very low purchasing power, and so, the mere fact that Lakunle is a school teacher marks him out as one who is not worth much for Sidi, the 'Jewel's' standard'. Lakunle unconsciously proves this by refusing to pay the bride price, he is thus considered as not been a man. Thus Sadiku mocks him: "... she (Sidi) can take better care of herself than you can of her. Fancy a thing like you actually wanting a girl like that, all to your little self.../ what a poor figure you cut!/ The bride-price, is that paid?".

Additionally, Baroka's legibility as a husband is made to contrast Lakunle's incapacity as a husband for Sidi. Seeing that the former, in the text is presented as being wealthy, brave, clever and sexually capable, it is expected in the society of *The Lion and the Jewel*, that Sidi would definitely choose Baroka over Lakunle. This is what Sadiku implies in the second act of the play where she tells Sidi: "Sidi, have you considered what a life of bliss awaits you? /Baroka swears to take no other wife after you". Even Baroka ruminates over the substantial qualities he posses to prove himself good enough for any woman of his choice, that he considers Sidi as being insane for initially rejecting him. For as Sadiku says to Sidi: "for most surely, some angry gods have taken possession of you"—it is apparently shocking that the proposal by the 'worthy Baroka'(by the people's standard) would meet such stern rejection by a mere young virgin. Moreso, Baroka's cleverness which marks him as being of great worth for any woman he chooses is further proven by his clever intervention in the public rail way scheme, and in a much greater detail, his successful action of deception and trickery which he pools on Sidi in the end. In further vocalizing his strength as a man Baroka protests: "Did I not at the festival of rain defeat the man in the Log-tossing match? Do I not still, with the fearless ones hunt the leopard and the boa at night... / Do any of my wives report a dailing in my manliness". Baroka further speaks of the expected qualities of a true man when he tells Sidi: "is he not wise? Is he not sagely.../ Does he not beget strength on wombs?/ are his children not tall and stout-limbed?".

Another way by which the women folk perceive themselves in the society depicted in *The Lion and the Jewel*, that is quite on the contrary to what is obtainable in *Pygmalion* where Eliza, the heroine is not deterred by her looks or the influence of Mr Higgins, the influential man in her life, from pursuing her economic ambition, is the notion that their worth depends totally on the personality and affluence of their men. Thus, their idea of their economic self accomplishment is drastically reduced or completely absent. This is evident in Sadiku proclamation of enjoying her place as the Bale's wife for forty years and encourages Sidi

towards same. Even Sidi herself, realizing how beautiful she is, relishes on the thought as long as her beauty would grant her the opportunity of having possession of the finest, wealthiest and strongest of men; she sees her beauty as been up for grabs for the most capable man thus, presenting herself as being incapable of economical and social exploits like the man but as one who is meant solely to be physically and potentially good enough for the ‘best man’ who is most sexually capable. Her words of scorn to Lakunle at the end when she eventually leaves to join Baroka’s harem of wives bespeaks of this point. “marry who...? ... did you really think that you, and I... /why did you think that after him,(Baroka)/ I could endure the touch of another man? / I who have felt the strength, the perpetual youthful zest/ of the panther of the trees?/ And would I choose a watered-down,/ a beardless version of unripened man?”. It is thus, obvious that this time around having tested Baroka sexual prowess, Sidi no longer considers the fact the latter is way older than she is as this was the basis for her initial refusal of him. Finally, the common notion of the subjugating role of women in respect to men in the typical African society of *The Lion and the Jewel* is further suggested in Baroka’s Character in his action of having so many wives and manifestation of his ability to have any of the women do his bidding at any given time. The scene where he orders his favourite wife on how to pluck his armpit hair lends credence to this point.

In Oscar Wilde’s *An Ideal Husband*, We see a much different social construct as provided by the aristocratic England society of the time, which allows the men and the women the opportunity of expressing their independence and assertiveness, almost competitively, irrespective of their sexes. The angles where the idea of the superiority of the male gender to that of the female abound are not so significant. In this work we see a society where there are similar expectations from both the female and male most especially with regards to the issue of marriage. As a matter of fact, it is important to note the title “*An Ideal Husband*” in this regard. What this title simply presupposes is that the focus is not so much on the woman being of good moral conduct in other to be regard “ideal” as it is for the man to be the same. The concluding words of the text spoken by Mabel Chiltern makes clear reference to this fact: “ *An Ideal Husband*, Oh, I don’t think I should like that, it sounds like something of the next world/ all I want is to be a real wife to him”. The exhortive words of Lord Caversham to his Son should also be taken note of. Thus: “... And if you don’t make this Lady *An Ideal Husband*, I’ll cut you off with a shilling”. Additionally the society depicted in *An Ideal Husband* presents a situation where the dominating influence men wield over the women in their lives is quite minimal and, we also encounter male characters who do not try to be so confident of their power over women. This is in sharp contrast to what is obtainable in *The Lion and the Jewel* where Baroka, not minding his old looks and age, is certain of his ability to acquire the prettiest virgins in the community. The character of the noble, intelligent and influential gentleman of Lord Goring, thus contrasts, Baroka’s Character in this aspects. Hence when Mabel Chiltern accepts his proposal he proclaims: “.. do you know how awfully afraid I was of being refused”. What his remark simply drives home is the fact that despite Lord Goring’s endearing qualities which, believably most women of the time would die for, his level of self-confidence with regards to acquiring the choicest of women is not as outrageous as that of Baroka. Again in this text, we see a society where women have a certain level of regard for themselves with regards to contesting for places in the social, economic and political spheres with men. This is justified by Mrs Cheveley’s position in the society thus portrayed in the text, and also by her action of

wielding as much confidence and courage as to attempt blackmailing a man (sir Robert Chiltern) into doing her bidding in her economic and political strife.

Moreover, the marriage between Sir Robert Chiltern and Lady Chiltern is another scenario to explore with regards to examining the presentation of Gender and sexuality in the text in the sense that, this is a couple who have so idealized each other not minding their gender. It thus follows that; Lady Chiltern adores her husband as much as he himself adores and respects her. It is also evident that they both express a certain height of control over each other as well as respects each other's decision despite being female or male. This is exemplified in the scene where Sir Robert Chiltern confesses wholeheartedly his past crimes to Lady Chiltern and even accepts reproach and reprimand from her. He agrees to her instruction of resigning his parliamentary office. His action of changing his decision later in the play with regards to his office is also greatly influenced by her. To show that this feeling of respect and regard this couple has for each other is mutual, we are also presented with the scene where Lady Chiltern is utterly disenchanted and emotionally disturbed over the situation of her husband reading a different meaning to the letter that ran thus: "I want you, I trust, I am coming to you", which she addressed to Lord Goring. She is equally disenchanted by the mere thought of losing her husband from anger which is why she seeks Lord Goring's counsel. This situation is diametrically different from what is presented in *The Lion and the Jewel* where Baroka's Wives and concubine can hardly ever utter a word of disapproval, scorn or reprimand to Baroka. He obviously wields total control over them that he leads his lascivious life without any of them raising a finger in protest. As a matter of fact his wives are taught by the African society so depicted to accept wilfully any wife rival that comes into the household.

However, one must not fail to take note of few instances in *An Ideal Husband* where the intellectual frailties of the women are emphasized. Lord Goring, towards the end of the play, asserts: "A woman's life revolves in curves of emotion, it is upon lines of intellect that a man's life progresses". This obviously makes stark reference to the general perception of the women folk as allowing their emotions override their senses of reasoning and the perception of men as being always on the guard in the aspect of reasoning and cleverness. This is not so different from the view of men and women of the society of *The Lion and the Jewel* elaborated earlier—while women are easily swayed by occasions of deception because they allow their emotions overwhelm them, men have the tendency of keeping their emotions in check and sustaining their reasoning capacity and cleverness in order to achieve their aims. This is evidently the reason Baroka is able to sleep with Sidi despite the latter's initial staunch refusal and stubbornness.

Furthermore, in the early 19th century England society depicted in *An Ideal Husband*, the women just like the men aspire towards being educated so as to be able to clinch important positions of influence in the society. The female characters in the work even encourage this among themselves so that in the first act of the play Mrs Marchmont says: "Dear Gertrude Chiltern is always telling me that I should have serious purpose in life, so I have come here to be educated". This is very different from what we see of the society depicted in *The Lion and the Jewel* where Sadiku encourages Sidi into devoting all her skill, potentials and efforts into the Bale's household instead. The encouragement among the women folk of this society is thus not one of self development and self accomplishment as a woman but one of perpetual servitude to and reliance on the man. Again, the female characters in *An Ideal Husband* do not consider their

worth as depending upon their beauty and charm to capture and attract men's interest. In fact as indicated by the following conversation they consider the attitude of a man flattering and complimenting them very trivial :

Lady Basildon: ...the man who took me to dinner talked to me about his wife the whole time

Mrs Marchmont : how very trivial of him

Lady Basildon: what did your man talk about?

Mrs Marchmont: about myself

Lady Basildon: and were you interested

Mrs Marchmont: not in the least!

However, belated and funny the above conversation may seem, it speaks a lot of the way women perceive themselves in the aristocratic England society of the 19th century which is quite contrary to the way the African woman of *The Lion and the Jewel* perceives herself. Thus in Sidi's words: “ (unconsciously pushes out her chest...smiles mischievously) there's is a deceitful message in my eyes/ Beckoning insatiate men to certain doom.../Be just Sadiku, compare my image and your Lord's/ see how the water glittens on my face.../ But he- his face is like a leather pipe”. It is thus clear that Sidi(representative of the beautiful African woman) as opposed to ideals of the beautiful Mrs Marchmont, relies on her beauty merely as an instrument to attract men and becomes puffed up because of her looks and charm. No wonder she eventually falls to Baroka's whims in the end – the latter simply exaggerates her beauty.

Conclusive, as we have seen from the foregoing, a great deal of contrast and little comparison lie in the presentation of gender and sexuality in Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* and Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*. Although the Societies of the two text may not have entirely different perceptions and expectations from the males and the females as seen represented in the two text, the male and female characters of both works have been so construed as to embody disparate qualities and characters that serve to highlight the perception of the women with respect to herself, the perception of the men in respect to themselves and the perceptions of both the men and women in respect to each other given the social construct of the society they find themselves in as depicted in the two texts.

