

UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA NSUKKA

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TOPIC:

**THE PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN ANY TWO MODERN
COMIC WORKS**

AN ASSIGNMENT ON

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GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN ‘THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST’ BY OSCAR WILDE AND ‘THE LION AND THE JEWEL’ BY WOLE SOYINKA

INTRODUCTION

GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Gender is a term that refers to the social or cultural distinctions associated with a given sex. It is generally considered to be a socially constructed concept. It is the socio-cultural phenomenon of the division of people into various categories according to their sex, with each having associated roles, clothing, stereotypes, etc. Gender also denotes social and cultural characteristics that are assigned to different sexes. It can also be seen as the mental analogue of sex i.e. one’s maleness (masculinity) or femaleness (femininity) which is otherwise called *gender identity*.

Also, gender refers to a widely shared set of expectations and norms linked to both sexes (male and female) should behave. In other words, it is the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that assign men and women as well as distinguish them in any given society. These expectations are not fixed but are continually being constructed and reinforced through social relationships, economic and political power dynamics.

Sexuality on the other hand refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women. It also refers to people’s sexual interest in and attraction to others, as well as their capacity to have erotic experiences and responses. Sexuality may be experienced and expressed in a variety of ways including thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. These may be manifested in biological, physical, emotional or social aspects. Sexuality is impacted by cultural, political, legal, philosophical, moral, ethical and religious aspects.

Both terms are intimately related. Sexuality is influenced by gender norms. Social expectations linked to gender influence how women and men behave and this includes their sexual behaviour, attitudes and feelings. These expectations tend to be based on the assumption that there are two categories of people, men and women and that they behave differently based on their biological sex.

There is a huge variation in gendered norms and expectations relating to sexuality. The pressure to conform to any given society can have negative impacts on both men and women. Also, Ideologies around sexuality work to control women. Sexuality is often used to control women who are seen to step outside the norms of femininity.

GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN ‘*THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST*’ BY OSCAR WILDE AND ‘*THE LION AND THE JEWEL*’ BY WOLE SOYINKA

‘*The importance of being earnest*’ as written by Oscar Wilde addresses the Victorian social issues. The play is a Victorian satirical drama showcasing the social, political, economic and religious changes that affected the 18th century England. Gender was one of the main issues criticized by the popular writers of the Victorian era. During this period, men and women were expected to act when it comes to sexual identity as well as suppressing the sexual identity to conform to the society’s standards.

‘*The Importance of being Earnest*’ is a play which shows in different characters how the society suppress sexual identities. This is evident in the characters of Jack and Gwendolen. Jack creates an alter ego named ‘*Ernest*’ to keep his honourable image intact in the Victorian society when in fact creating ‘*Ernest*’ was not all an honourable act. Gwendolen whose image consciousness is blurred by the ideals instilled in her society can obsess on nothing but marrying a man named *Ernest* because she believes the name inspires *absolute confidence*. She does not seem to realize that Jack is not even earnest at all.

Algernon is another character that reflects the suppression of sexual identity where he creates an alter ego named *Bunburyin* order to act out indulgences outside his normal life,

In the play, the Aristocratic society had fixed views for both men and women when it comes to jobs, education, and social interaction. Also, sexual identities and desires were suppressed because their effects on society did not fit Victorian standards.

The issue of gender can also be seen in the inconsistency of the nature of men in the play. None of the male characters are serious in life or earnest in nature and there is lack of moral values in each characters. However, the female characters depicted in the play are much more consistent and seem to follow the general rules of marriage and love. Gwendolen Fairfax and Cecily Cardew are in love and they want to get married as marriage seemed to provide the essential social security that was needed by women in the Victorian era.

Also explored in the play is the theme of gender debate which suggests that the male sex is superior to the female sex. Prior to the entry of the men (Jack and Algernon), the women, Gwendolen and Cecily have agreed to keep a dignified silence concerning issues of the true identities of the two men. When the men enter behaving in an unexpected way, the women resolve not to speak first. Unfortunately, they lack strength to stand by their own words as they realize that their silence seem to be producing an unpleasant effect. They capitulate and speak first.

Despite having the gravest doubts about the claims and explanations of Jack about his true identity, Gwendolen believes him because 'style not sincerity is the vital thing'. Cecily asks Algernon why he pretended to be her guardian's brother and he replies that it is because it would provide him the opportunity to meet her. On hearing this, she is pleased. Although she does not believe him, she is carried away by the beauty of his answer. Both women are not satisfied by the claims of the men but they surrender to feeling instead of reason. On the

other hand, the men are depicted as courageous and clever. Even the women are made to admit the male superiority as they accept the men's excuse of pretence without being convinced.

In spite of their satisfaction with the explanations given by the men, the women are still uncomfortable with the Christian names of Jack and Algernon. As such, they jointly declare the names as 'insuperable barrier'. The men in turn inform them that they have arranged to undergo another christening, Cecily and Gwendolen are surprisingly and absolutely thrilled commending the superiority of the male sex.

On the part of the women their superiority over the men lies in the name '*Ernest*' as they emphasize on marrying no one except one who bears the name '*Ernest*' because they believe that the name inspires absolute confidence. This makes the men, Algernon and Jack to do every [possible to present themselves as '*Ernest*' in order to win the hearts of the women.

In '*The Lion and the Jewel*' by Wole Soyinka, we also see the issue of gender where the male sex is superior to that of the female and this is evident in the case of the Bale, Baroka and Sidi. Sidi a superficial but beautiful young woman in the village of Ilujinle is coveted by both Lakunle, the school teacher and Baroka, the Bale. She initially agrees to wed Lakunle even though she does not care for him. She fears that he will not pay her bride price and that he has so many modern ideas.

Along with Sadiku, Baroka's wife, she hopes to trick Baroka whom she dislikes and does not want to marry but Baroka succeeds in the end by raping her and as such taking her virginity and having her agree to marry him. Sadiku, the chief wife of Barokaa who seems to be a great source of comfort to Baroka eventually decides to plot against him and tries to get Sidi to destroy him but her plan is found out and she is shamed.

Here, there is superiority of the male gender over the female gender as the male dominates the female. Also evident in the above illustration is the case of sexuality as Baroka sexually abuses Sidi by raping her and taking her virginity without her consent. She is used as a sexual object by Baroka who wants to marry her just because she is famous. Sidi is also tricked and sees her elation over Baroka's impotence. Her power as a woman vanishes as his plot is made clear. This still boils down to the gender of superiority, the male gender.

The women are rendered completely powerless as the power of the men supercedes the women. Sidi sees both men, Lakunle and Baroka as what they are. Lakunle, she sees as a pompous charlatan and Baroka, an ageing leader trying to cling to power. She has interest in none of them at this point because she knows her worth but she is proven wrong by Baroka who forcefully deprives her of her worth by raping her and subduing her to marrying him of which she does not desire.

Lakunle on the other hand is a twenty three year old school teacher who has the intentions of marrying Sidi and wants to make her a modern wife but he is of the belief that women are naturally inferior to men.

In both comic plays, we see the issue of gender and sexuality as portrayed by various characters and the relationship between both plays in terms of gender is that the male gender is superior to the female gender. In the case of sexuality, the male is still superior as in the '*The Lion and the Jewel*' where Baroka takes advantage of Sidi by tricking and raping her.

Sidi's experience in the hands of Baroka portrays women as weaker sex and as sex objects in the hands of men where men believe that women are inferior to them and as such use their superiority to conquer women through both gender and sexuality. Gender and sexuality is one of the major problems in the society. It is an issue which raises conflict between men and women where women stand out to be the major victims.

