

**UNNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA NSUKKA**

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**TOPIC:**

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

**BY**

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# **The presentation Gender and sexuality in George Bernard shaw's pygalion and moliere's Tartuffe respectively**

## **Introduction**

Genders, as per the prevailing concept, are what is masculine and what is feminine in identity and behavior conceived. It is of significance in the definition of the self. It is a cultural construct. Gender is examined with special reference to feminism in this context. Feminism is a social movement that recognizes and criticizes male domination at the same time. Sexuality is the quality of being sexual, or the way people experience and express themselves as sexual beings. This involves biological, erotic, physical, emotional, social, or spiritual feelings and behaviors. Because it is a broad term, which has varied over time, it lacks a precise definition. The biological and physical aspects of sexuality largely concern the human reproductive functions, including the human sexual response cycle. Someone's sexual orientation can influence that person's sexual interest and attraction for another person. Physical and emotional aspects of sexuality include bonds between individuals that is expressed through profound feelings or physical manifestations of love, trust, and care. Social aspects deal with the effects of human society on one's sexuality, while spirituality concerns an individual's spiritual connection with others. Sexuality also affects and is affected by cultural, political, legal, philosophical, moral, ethical, and religious aspects of life. In this work I will be considering gender in pygalion and sexuality in Tartuffe.

Gender is one of the occurring themes that prevailed in Bernard shaw's play pygalion. Although British society is supposed to break down along class lines, Shaw makes a point of highlighting gender loyalties in this play. Mrs. Higgins initially is horrified by the idea that her son might bring a flower-girl into her home, she quickly grows sympathetic to Liza. As a woman, she is the first to express a concern for what will be done with the girl after the

experiment--the idea that her training makes her highly unmarriageable by anyone anywhere on the social scale. When Liza runs away from Wimpole St., she instinctively knows that Mrs. Higgins will take good care of her. Higgins's mother sides with Liza before even her son, not revealing that Liza is in the house while Higgins is dialing the police.

In contrast, relations between people of opposite genders are generally portrayed by Shaw as antagonistic. Higgins and his mother have a troubled relationship, as do the professor and Mrs. Pearce. Freddy and Liza get along better perhaps only due to his more passive, feminine demeanor.

Shaw idealized women and created the “stereotype, Woman-the-Huntress” (Holroyd, Shaw 112). He was comfortable in the role of the innocent man who is escaping the women’s grasp. He portrays love and sexuality as something negative and is proud of fleeing it. He constructs Higgins, a man who is also able to get away from women and the idea of romantic love. By doing this and putting Higgins’ ability as something positive, he glorifies his own personality at the same time:

*“I wont stop for you ... I can do without anybody. I have ... my own spark of divine fire. ... I care for life, for humanity; and you are a part of it that has come my way and been built into my house. What more can you or anyone ask?” (Shaw, Pygmalion 242, f.).*

It is obvious that Shaw was either afraid or rejected by sexual love; although he seemed to like the game of making oneself interesting. He used to talk about his attractiveness to women and then at the same time warned them against this attractiveness. However, he only wanted to start this game, but as soon as a woman was interested he retrieved: “Everyone who becomes the object of [sexual] infatuation shrinks from it instinctively. Love loses its charm when it is not free: ... it becomes valueless and even abhorrent, like the caresses of a maniac.” (“newcriterion”). Only once did he let himself fall

into passion and started an affair with Mrs. Patrick Campbell. However, after an unhappy ending he was convinced that romance is not necessary and that “the quantity of Love that an ordinary person can stand without serious damage is about 10 minutes in 50 years.” Shaw has gone miles to depict his ideals and <sup>philosophy</sup> about women as Higgins says:

*“I find that the moment I let a woman make friends with me, she becomes jealous, exacting, suspicious, and a damned nuisance. I find that the moment I let myself make friends with a woman, I become selfish and tyrannical. Women upset everything.*

And also in these lines, “

*I shall never get into the way of seriously liking young women: some habits lie too deep to be changed. [Rising abruptly and walking about, jingling his money and his keys in his trouser pockets] Besides, they're all idiots.*

Furthermore, as it is set in the early 20th century, before women gained many basic rights and privileges, [Mrs. Pearce](#) and [Mrs. Higgins](#)—are largely confined to their respective households. Nonetheless, they both play important roles. Mrs. Pearce ensures the functioning of Higgins' household and reminds him of his own manners. And Mrs. Higgins takes Eliza in when she leaves Higgins and Pickering, and helps resolve things at the play's conclusion. These two characters thus demonstrate how women might still exert some agency within an oppressive Victorian society. But despite any redeeming aspects to women's roles in the world of the play, they ultimately cannot escape the constraints of their sexist world. At the end of the play, Eliza must choose between living with Higgins, living with her father, or marrying [Freddy](#). In any case, her future can only be under the control of a man of some sort. She tells Higgins that she desires independence, but—although she is a strong character—we never see her actually obtain her

independence in the play. Eliza is greatly transformed over the course of the play, but it would take even greater transformations of society itself in the 20th century for women like Eliza to have real independence.

However, in considering sexuality in Molière's *Tartuffe* we see how Molière depicted sexuality. Even though there is no *actual* sexual encounter in the play, the theme of sex looms large throughout. Lust is the primary vice that both Tartuffe and Madame Pernelle lambast (Tartuffe when he refuses to look at Dorine's bosom, the latter in criticizing the household's lax morality). However, sexual desire also causes Tartuffe's downfall. In actuality, he is defined more by his body for the audience than by his soul. He is a glutton, a drunkard, a slouch, and most of all, a libidinous creature who cannot control himself with Elmire. It is only this final vice that provides the family with ammunition with which to destroy him. The play seems to suggest that sexuality is a natural part of humanity, and one most dangerous when we pretend it does not exist and hide instead behind flowery, empty rhetoric of abstinence and virtue.

Also on the issue of gender Molière did not mainly give the impression of a satirical play on religious hypocrisy, but apparently throughout the plot, "*Tartuffe*" also functions as a social commentary on women and the patriarchal hierarchy that deems them necessary for little purpose. This is most apparent on his use of several female characters to critique the social structure that oppresses them so unfairly and, through them, demonstrate that females are capable of much more. After all, it is the female characters that utilize logic and cunning to bring about Tartuffe's unmasking and succeed where the men failed to do so. Hence, it is through the female characters' insistency that guides the family through Orgon's foolish decisions and Tartuffe's scheme.

Firstly, Mariane is portrayed as an obedient and submissive female who refrains from outwardly expressing her opinion. In this respect, Mariane is the

most conventional character of her time. She reflects what society finds acceptable in women and displays what function women played within a hierarchical system. This is most apparent within several scenes between her and Orgon. The scene where Mariane expresses her disdain towards her father's plan only to have it utterly dismissed by Orgon shows the dilemma most women at the time faced. Their voices were largely unheard even though it is rational and morally right. Furthermore, Orgon states "to graft Tartuffe into my family. So he must be your husband" portrays women as intermediaries of wealth, power and ownership. Lastly, Mariane further supports the conventional ideal women by her soft spoken nature and her decision to delegate the responsibility of vocalizing her direct disdain towards her father's plan to Dorinne. During the time, it was expected of women to be submissive and obedient. In summation, Mariane portrays the conventional women who is oppressed under a patriarchal system. They were expected to hold blind obedience towards men even though men's decisions can lead to an unfavorable outcome.

Dorine and Elmire are perhaps the stars of "Tartuffe." They are largely outspoken characters that consistently defy conventional standards with tremendous vigor and enthusiasm. Dorine, the maid of the family, outwardly expresses her opinion despite her role as a maid. She openly expresses that Tartuffe is a fraud defiantly towards Orgon with reason and understanding in which Orgon seems to lack. Dorine's absolute disregard for her position combined with her rational ability to see through Tartuffe's scheme communicates Moliere's argument that women should pay no heed to their position within the hierarchy since they are capable of using logical reasoning and making rational decisions, just as much as or even more so than men. In addition, Elmire is shown to display a great degree of intelligence through her subversion of authority and using social conventions to convince her husband of Tartuffe's scheme. Most notably, Elmire uses cunning to expose Tartuffe by advancing on Tartuffe with Orgon hidden. This

ultimately leads to Tartuffe's demise, as well as, Orgon dismissing his plans for his daughter. In the scene. Elmire displays a great degree of intelligence in many regards. Firstly, despite Elmire's social status, she uses her position to convince Orgon to follow through with her plan. Furthermore, she displays a great understanding of men and expertly uses persuasive language to expose Tartuffe within her grand scheme. In summation, Moliere demonstrates that women are capable beings who deserve more than what the patriarchal hierarchy deems them.

In conclusion, women within the 17th century were largely oppressed due to the nature of society. As such, women's roles were limited to function as a bond or contract between wealth and power. Furthermore, due to society largely ignoring women, they were forced to use indirect tactics to influence social decisions. Despite this, Moliere recognizes this as evidence for women's rights and uses the play to shun the oppressive system women lived under. Thus we can consider both Shaw and Molière as having different view about gender and sexuality especially the women folk. When Shaw is ready to depict women in his works as problematic (Mr. Higgins in view) Molière seems to advocate for the right of women in the society.

## References

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