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Assignment topic: The Presentation of Gender and Sexuality in any Two Modern Comic Works.

## **Introduction**

Gender refers to the widely shared set of expectations and norms linked to how women and men, and girls and boys, should behave. Unlike 'sexuality' which refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women, gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that are assigned to men and women in any given society. These expectations are not fixed but are continually being constructed and reinforced through social relationships and economic and political power dynamics. Social expectations linked to gender influence how women and men behave and this includes their sexual behavior, 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 also a basic assumption in development policy and programming that gender is linked to biological sex and that the recipients of development interventions are heterosexual. The assumption that the normal and natural sexual relationship and basis for the family is a man and a woman in a heterosexual marriage is sometimes described as heteronormativity.

There is huge variation in the gendered norms and expectations relating to sexuality. The pressures to conform to the norms of any given society can have negative consequences for both women and men.

## **Gender and Sexuality: using J.P Clark's Wives Revolt and Emeka Nwabueze's Parliament of Vulture as a case study.**

Whatever be the genre, womanhood attracts a significant attention in all creative works of every generation. This assignment focuses on Nigerian Drama.

This is mainly because drama is distinguished from other literary genres essentially by its intensity and immediacy. This assignment is sets out to explore two contemporary Nigerian plays, namely: The Wives' Revolt by J. P. Clark, and A Parliament of Vultures by Emeka Nwabueze.

The role of women in current sociopolitical events in Nigeria as projected in the two plays chosen for the assignment. It should be pointed out, however, that the views expressed in each of the plays as a reflection of the Nigerian contemporary assessment of women and not just the playwright's personal perception of women. It shows that gender balance can only be reached when women assert their rights and that the Nigeria of our dream where there will no form of political corruption can only emerge through concerted efforts of men and women of integrity.

Wives Revolt is a comedy set in an oil producing community in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. In this comedy, Clark presents an interplay of men and their wives in a society where two thirds of everything to be shared for the benefit of all adults go to two categories of men, that is, the elders who get the lion share and the young men who get the second largest share leaving the least and often menial or despicable share to the women. However, trouble began in this community when the women decided to fight this injustice against them by refusing their share of money paid by an oil company. To register their protests against the men, they abandon their wifely and motherly duties. The men, who could not cope effectively with the traditional women roles of cooks and mothers, accuse the women of being witches who turn into goats to destroy lives. Consequently, without consulting the women, the men enact a law forbidding the rearing of goats in the community, the seizure and eventual slaughtering and consumption of any goat caught by any man. The wives perceived this law as obnoxious and asked the men to repeal same as goat rearing was the women's economic mainstay. Adamant in implementing the law, the wives exiled themselves to an enemy community and vowed not to return until the obnoxious law of goats is repelled. The women also demanded that the men would pay a token as damages to them before they would resume their duties as wives and mothers. The men eventually acquiesced and the women returned and peace was restored in the community.

Emeka Nwabueze's A Parliament of Vultures, is also a comedy and a vitriolic critique of corrupt unpatriotic Nigerian politicians who equate politics with money stealing and self aggrandizement. In consonance with the present practice in the country, there is gross gender imbalance with regards to the number of male and female politicians. However, Madam Omeaku, the lone woman politician among the men, is as much of a vulture as her male counterparts. Through a symbolic representation of these politicians as vultures, Nwabueze paints the picture of a depraved political system where morality and integrity have no place.

Gender imbalance, gender inequality, gender bias, gender discrimination these are all labels given to the practice of favoring and giving preferential treatment to males at the expense of their female counterparts. Gender inequality is no myth and its social geography has striking issues. The evaluation of the two plays would be shaped by the concepts of wifehood, motherhood, politics and revolution.

**Wifehood:** wifehood, according to this Biblical account becomes the first biological and sociological role of womanhood. Although recent gay culture in some parts of the world assigns the role of wifehood to a man, in contemporary Nigeria, wifehood has remained the exclusive right of women as would be seen in the three Plays under study. In Clark's The Wives' Revolt, the wives in question are undoubtedly women and not men. Just at the beginning of the Play, Okoro, Koko's husband and the town crier, proclaims this:

‘ Erhuwaren! Erhuwaren! ....It is the matter of the oil money sent by the oil company in our land... However, our women folk, led by a few reckless ones, fed up with doing simple duties for their husbands and children as befits good housewives...’

Since this play is set in a typical traditional community in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the women could be qualified as rural women as used in contemporary Nigerian parlance as seen in such programs as ‘Better Life for Rural women.’ These rural women are conscious of infringement on their rights by their husbands and they decide to fight for their rights through non violent means. Clark artistically develops this idea of the oppressed fighting for her liberation without recourse to violence.

Firstly, the wives are organized as could be inferred from Okoro’s words ‘our women folk, led by a few reckless ones...’

Secondly, the women have a focus, that is, the unequal distribution of the oil money paid to the community by an oil company. Thirdly, the women do not just weep and moan over the injustice meted out to them by the men through an oppressive sharing formula that ascribes two thirds of community proceeds to the men and only one third to women, rather they take an action against the injustice. According to Okoro, ‘our womenfolk... are repudiating this fair and reasonable distribution of the money.’

These women therefore raise their voices in vehement protest against that sharing formula and reject their share of the money which they consider to be dehumanizing.

In Nwabueze’s *A Parliament of Vultures*, there are essentially two wives, one visible one, Madam Omeaku and an invisible one, Barrister Umeh’s Canadian wife. Contrary to the situation in *The Wives Revolt* where at the beginning of the play none of the wives was part of the political class, of the two wives in *A Parliament of Vultures*, one of them, Madam Omeaku, is not only a top politician but a unique one in that she is the only honorable member of the House of Assembly who is a woman. We see in her a wife who is busy not just running her household but helping to run the affairs of the state with her male counterparts.

Wifhood has different connotations in the three Plays. In *The Wives’ Revolt*, a wife is a mere cook and an housekeeper who is treated as a door mat by the husband. When we come to *A Parliament of Vultures*, we see an irresponsible wife that treats her husband with levity and has no regard for virtue and integrity.

**Motherhood:** wifhood naturally leads to motherhood as an attribute of womanhood. Procreation and nurturing of children become the mark of acceptability and a guarantee for the wife that she would not be seen as a failure in marriage. To Okoro, a woman’s greatest achievement is to be a good housewife, that is, one who uses all her natural endowments doing simple duties for her husband and children. In Nwabueze’s *A Parliament of Vultures*, Nkechi, the second visible female character is Madam Omeaku’s daughter. Whereas in *The Wives’ Revolt* we do not see the lessons of a mother to her children, in *A Parliament of Vultures*, Nwabueze gives us certain details about the lesson Madam Omeaku gives Nkechi, her nineteen year old daughter as follows:

MADAM: What's this you're wearing, Nkechi? You people have sworn to kill me in this house...What will my political colleagues say if they find out that I have a daughter who dresses like this...'

Madam Omeaku tries to undermine her husband's efforts to give Nkechi some lessons on morality. He emphasizes the supremacy of knowledge to riches and desires to give his daughter a University education.

Contrary to his emphasis on knowledge, Madam states emphatically that 'what matters now is not what you know but whom you know.' Hence, Madam starts off her young daughter on the lesson of life on outward dressing with no lesson on morals that would guarantee her inner beauty and enable her grow into a virtuous woman. To Madam, diligence is a waste of time and her axiom of life which she strives hard to teach her daughter is that 'What matters now is not what you know but whom you know.' Madam's home becomes a battle ground between morality and immorality.

The young Nkechi, is now expected to be influenced by either her father's morality or her mother's immorality. It becomes clear that Nkechi has rejected the virtuous lessons of her father as she now becomes notorious for bringing down Madam's political opponents. With her mother as her tutor, Nkechi ends up becoming as sexually immoral as her mother, a true case of like mother like daughter. Indeed, in consonance with her husband's prophecy that with her lessons on dressing and make up that she would end up messing up another daughter of theirs, Nkechi's life becomes highly morally decadent. Hence, we see womanhood at its lowest ebb as the two visible female Characters in *A Parliament of Vultures*, see themselves as mere sex objects and are squarely treated as mere toys by the men in the play. Madam's vision is to amass immoral wealth and herself assigned mission of motherhood is all about training her daughter, Nkechi, in the art of prostitution and pulling down men with her youth and beauty. Nwabueze then shows us how destructive an immoral mother could be to the family and to the society at large.

**Politics and Revolution:** politics is conceived here as the art of governance. We would align politics and revolution in this part of our study given that culture is dynamic and customs and traditions ought therefore to change in consonance with present societal realities. Marginalization of women in politics has remained from ancient times till today. Sometimes when one considers the nocturnal and the financial undertones of politics in Nigeria, one would understand why a few women have been able to participate actively in Nigerian politics over the years. Our study shows that politics and revolution feature prominently as aspects of womanhood in contemporary Nigerian drama, as seen primarily in Clark's *The Wives' Revolt*. At the beginning of the play the women do not participate in the decision making process. Koko, the representative of the voice of women in Erhuwaren, voices out her dissatisfaction to her husband:

One would think that Koko, being an illiterate, as she intimates us in the following speech to her husband, '...Koro...You know I never went to school; so how can I write.'

It would be politically unconscious. Surprisingly, she is extremely politically conscious and no doubt, this political consciousness equips the women to confront the men and demand that they no longer be marginalized. The courage and boldness with which she disagrees with her husband

who wants her life to be restricted to the kitchen is incredible. She categorically tells the husband that life would be worse in the community if the men do not consult the women before laws are enacted.

Koko and her fellow rural women who know very well that charity begins at home decide to settle scores with their husbands who refuse to carry them along in the political affairs of the community. These women know that if they win the grassroots battles, that the State or Federal battles would also be won someday. Clark teaches us through these women the need to fight from our vantage point. Although Clark does not tell us how these women were trained for battle, Koko bluntly tells the husband that they, the women, would not accept the unjust law enacted by the men against them.

In *A Parliament of Vultures*, Nwabueze paints a realistic picture of the present political structure in Nigeria where politics is seen by many as an opportunity for personal aggrandizement. Madam Omeaku, the only female politician among the males, is as much of a vulture as her male colleagues. Hence, being a woman does not prevent her from being corrupt. Quite contrary to *The Wives' Revolt* where action is taken against certain unjust practices bringing about a revolution and a positive change, in *A Parliament of Vultures*, there is a measure of cynicism as the few male politicians who do not approve of the gross misconduct of their political colleagues take no positive action against them and the play ends with the nation being highly politically decadent.

**Conclusion:** we see that the two plays give a clear point on gender and sexuality. *The Wives Revolt*, tells us about gender bias community which have marginalized the right of women limiting them to just domestic roles while *A Parliament of Vulture* has enlightened us on the contemporary perception of womanhood in Nigerian drama. Womanhood could be virtuous or immoral. Madam Omeaku's nauseating sexual immorality, corruption and disdain of her husband and political opponents, is not a universal mark of womanhood but a trait of just a woman. Symbolically then, immoral men and women politicians have made Nigeria sick not as a result of their gender but as a result of their individuality. Again, the revolt of the wives, who could be regarded as uneducated rural women, which led to the revoking of the obnoxious law against women brings to the fore the fact that women, no matter their educational background or lack of same can enjoy their rights only through a fight .

