

# **UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA, NSUKKA**

## **DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND LITERARY STUDIES**

**TOPIC:**

**PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN ANY TWO  
MODERN COMEDY WORKS.**

**AN ASSIGNMENT PREPARED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE COURSE ELS 240  
(MODERN COMEDY: MOLIERE TO SOYINKA)**

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**2015/198591**

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**JULY, 2017**

**INTRODUCTION**

Gender criticism is part of gender studies which is based on the premise that, while sex (a person's identification as male or female) is determined by anatomy, while gender (masculinity or femininity in personality traits and behavior) can be largely independent of anatomy. Gender is a social construction that is diverse, variable and dependent on historical circumstances.

Gender criticism analyses different conceptions of gender and their role in writing, reception, subject matter, and evaluation of literary works. Gender studies have an overlap with feminist criticism, gay studies and lesbian studies, the distinguishing attributes of gender studies has come to be their special attention to the roles of males and females and varying conceptions of masculinity and femininity in the course of social, political and artistic history.

Sexuality has been a theme since the origins of literature itself. Its role in literature is undoubtedly a reflection of how various cultures view sexuality and its role in those cultures. Therefore, gender and sexuality can be used interchangeably.

In this essay, through two modern comic plays; Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* I will be discussing gender and sexuality from a perspective of discursive structures, narrative conventions, character assignments, historical and social context within which both narrative works operate.

Comedy has a strong influence on the development of the society. It doesn't only provide pleasure, laughter and creative inspiration but brings important issues to the public eye through **satire** which is central to all comic works. The satirizing of gender roles contributes to the overall humorous tone of the play.

The position and image of women in literature have most of the time reflected position and role in the society (gender stereotypes). In most traditions, women do not play any important role because they are considered as lacking the capability of reasoning and decision making. While most women have accepted this traditional role, there are some who reject the dictates of the society and emancipate themselves from the oppression of the society. This work looks at the position of the woman according to the tenets of culture and establishes the fact that the woman's position is universal. Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of being Earnest* and Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*. These two plays have been discussed to establish to what extent the woman has accepted or rejected the traditional role dictated to her by the society.

Women worldwide have been looked down upon by their male counterparts. Men have always enjoyed the privilege of superiority over women. According to De Beauvoir (1949), "very often this privilege depends upon inequality of numbers- the majority imposes its rule upon the minority or persecutes it. But women are not a minority, like the American Negroes or the Jews; there are as many women as men on earth." One just wonders about the basis of this sex stereotype where women are seen as inferior.

In Africa, the female sex has been stereotyped to such an extent that women have been given certain roles to play in the society, which most men will not associate themselves with. For instance, women are supposed to cook in the homes, care for their babies and wash the clothes of their families. Because of this, some women are asked by their husbands to be housewives with

active support from their families. To this end, such women are not allowed to engage in any meaningful income generating ventures so that they can have time for their household chores. All these have come about not because nature made it so but as a result of certain social practices in Africa. According to Umorem (1995), “the African child is born female or male. The girl child grows up as an African girl and later becomes a woman through the process of enculturation. This enculturation process has both cognitive and emotional elements. The girl child who later becomes a woman learns and internalizes both. This learning-to-become is comprehensive in the sense that one learns and internalizes the derogatory and positive concepts, judgments and attitudes towards womanhood. This learning takes place through examples, direct teaching and patterns of behavior, in songs, proverbs, wise sayings and folktales.” This shows that it is the culture of the African that dictates the position of women in the society. According to Oha (1998), proverbs, as forms of figurative communication with didactic functions in studied conversations were found to possess evidence of male attempt at maintaining control over discourse in society.” This explains why the representations of womanhood in most African proverbs are mainly negative. Addei and Addei (2010) state that, “Apart from the proverbs that support female subordination; there are others which celebrate women. For instance, there are a lot of proverbs that portray the woman as industrious, compassionate and a key player in the society.” However, such proverbs are hardly heard and men capitalize on the negative ones to suppress women. Generally, the African community is predominantly a male dominated one. It is a community in which men view women as extension of themselves. The man is always superior to the woman. Yes, even the male baby is superior to his female counterpart. Certain household chores are reserved for the girl child whereas the growing male child takes up ‘manly’ duties at home like fixing dead electric bulbs. In adult life, domestic work is regarded as the responsibility of the woman. In a typical African set up the man has made the woman the insignificant other. This study seeks prove that in spite of all these forms of discrimination, there are women who have stood up to challenge the status quo and have rejected the traditional role dictated to them by the society.

In his bid to bring out the woman’s role and position, shows that the women do not accept their role and position but crave for a reversal of this status quo.

#### THE PRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN OUR HUSBAND HAS GONE MAD AGAIN

The entire play can be summed up in the description given by Hawley (1996) in *Writing the Nation: Self and Country in the Post-Colonial Imagination*. The African woman struggling to assert herself against historically determined insignificance, a self (that is) constituted through the suffering of nearly every form of oppression, a self that must find its voice in order to speak not only for itself but for others similarly oppressed (p.127). The play opens when polygamist Lejoka-Brown is deep into politics. He has had enough military experience and maybe enough ‘marriage politics’ and is now deep into “real” politics. His party’s slogan forms the opening

words of the play. As a typical comedy Rotimi (1997) employs the technique of the chorus:

Chorus: freedom, freedom Everywhere there must be freedom

Solo: Freedom for you Freedom for me

Chorus: Everywhere there must be freedom

Solo: Freedom for Nigeria Freedom for Africa

Chorus: Yes, everywhere there must be freedom.

All: Freedom, freedom Everywhere there must be freedom

Against this cultural backdrop the man is already free; it is the woman who must be given freedom. Ironically, those who sing this song do not have the womenfolk in mind. The women are not considered here because for a fact the woman is and remains like a minor who must be protected and provided for by males. So there is a little distinction between the woman and the child. After all, are they not grouped together? In the community there are basically two groups of people namely: men in one group, the second group being women and children. Again in this play, Rotimi brings to light various themes including marriage, both western and traditional, polygamy and women's emancipation. Western marriage is dramatized in the marriage between Lejoka-Brown and Lisa. Their marriage is an ordinance marriage where the wife is not only the first wife but also the only wife. He meets her in Stanley Ville during the Congo war. She is at that time a medical student from Kenya, helping the Red Cross. She attends to Lejoka Brown when he is wounded. After a period of about two months they have a court wedding at the marriage registry. No wonder Lisa fails to see Mama Rashida and Sikira as co-wives and sees Sikira as a maid. Sikira cannot be bothered by the so called western marriage and explodes:

Sikira: ehen? Therefore! If you marry in magistrate court nko? I don't care If you marry in American Toronto! I don't care Whether you wear all the rings in this world, I don't care Whether you know book 'tele' you tire o, I don't care

It is against this background that when Lejoka-Brown gets Lisa's cablegram, he is momentarily thrown into a state of confusion. In Lejoka-Brown's own words, Liza's coming:

It is war...Gamalin 20 (p7) Simply because she's [Liza] arriving at five o'clock! ...from America!

It is as if he has so much to hide from Liza. So there is no way Liza must come and live with him in his family house. Lisa must not learn about his other wives therefore he must necessarily arrange to accommodate her somewhere else; this he discusses with Okonkwo, his friend.

Okonkwo: Man, you'd better hurry up, if you have to get A flat rented, pack your things into it and Be at the airport before five o'clock! Lejoka-Brown: That's no problem. We'll stop at

Maryland Estate on our way to the airport and get A furnished flat. As for parking in, I'll start Doing that tomorrow.

Traditional marriage is also illustrated in LejokaBrown's marriage to Mama Rashida and Sikira. It is a polygamous marriage. Mr. Lejoka-Brown in fact has three wives, an arrangement with which he is very comfortable and proud of. This is because it is an accepted norm in the society; after all his grandfather had 'one hundred plus ten plus five breathing wives all at once under his very roof. According to the African society in general and the Yoruba society in particular, a married woman is the property of her husband. If a woman gets married, she loses all personal rights and self-identity. In this type of marriage, the wife is constantly at the beck and call of her husband. Their responses below show just that.

Sikira and Mama Rashida: We will my Lord. Sikira: Coming my Lord Mama Rashida: Did my Lord call? Sikira: Has my Lord finished eating?

Again the tradition upon which some marriages are based can be difficult to understand; take for instance the one between Lejoka-Brown and Mama Rashida. LejokaBrown has not thought of or set eyes on Mama Rashida but in accordance with their tradition and culture she must quietly and obediently agree to marry the younger brother of her late husband. This is expressed in Lejoka-Brown's own words.

Lejoka-Brown: I didn't know I had another wife. ... two days before my marriage to Liza, I got a letter from my father ... he had gone ahead and married her (Mama Rashida) off to me, while I ... was in the Congo ... (page 9)

Again in this type of marriage a woman is there for a man's taking; a married woman loses all personal rights and self-identity. She must quietly take things as they come from her husband without showing any resistance whatsoever. So when Okonkwo questions Lejoka-Brown as to why he does not inform a senior wife before taking on a new one he reacts thus:

Lejoka-Brown: What type of question are you asking anyhow? "Why didn't I tell Liza; why didn't I tell"-what's the matter? Does a man have to broadcast to one wife every time he marries a new one?

So it is obvious how the man is not required by tradition to give any explanations for his actions and inactions. Tradition and culture also make it possible for a man to marry as many as one hundred plus ten plus five breathing wives all at once to live together as co-wives or 'sisters-in-marriage' cordially under one roof. Mama Rashida and Sikira know and have accepted this as part of their cultural upbringing and are therefore able to get along with each other. Liza on the other hand cannot accept this principle. It is that the play depicts the traditional subordinate roles of women; seen in Mama Rashida and to some extent, Sikira. The theme of women's emancipation is also very evident in the play. An illustration of this theme is seen in Lisa's role. She is a medical officer and a wife who believes that men and women are created equal and as such should enjoy equal rights. Indeed, Liza represents the new and modern values and institutions that give rise to the emancipation of the woman. Her only basis or justification for this stand is her education; formal education leading to her being a medical officer and from her

acquaintance, contacts and exposure to the western world. She feels she has successfully emancipated herself and sets out to help her 'sisters-in-marriage (co-wives) to realize their potential and not be slaves to their husband's whims and caprices. This role she successfully plays because after giving Mama Rashida tit bits on demand and supply and others on how to improve her trade, Mama Rashida's trade booms to the extent that she now makes sufficient profit and is even able to lend her husband money for his politics. Sikira is enthused about this new idea about women emancipation particularly the fact that men and women are both created equal. At a point in time she wishes she had a heart strong enough to tell her husband to go to hell. She tells Lisa.

Sikira: You are a strong woman, with a strong, strong heart. Sometimes I wish I too, had your kind of strong, strong heart So I could tell our husband to go to hell!

Through Lisa's efforts Sikira also becomes convinced that men and women are equal since they are created equal. Sikira finds so much joy in her mental liberation. If a woman is equal to a man, then women can also form and lead a party.

'suppose we form a party; she asks Liza ... every home there must be freedom. ... freedom for mothers Freedom for housemaids Yes in every home there must be freedom.

Her liberation is mental because physically and socially her environs are the same. She eventually becomes president of her husband's party thereby displacing her own husband. Women's emancipation is further illustrated in Madam Bambira Ajanaku's position and role. She is the mother of Sikira and more importantly head of the National Union of Nigerian Market Women. Ssshe teams up with her daughter Sikira in their political party and eventually pushes Sikira up to the top to become the president of the party. It is the spirit of emancipation that makes Sikira come out with the following outburst when Lejoka-Brown orders her Sikira to "go and take the rag off", referring to a dress he disapproves of; she is to hurry up 'and put on the type of dress human beings wear'. At this retortion, Sikira, who thinks that she has to assert her position as a wife and a woman, who is created equal to man boldly speaks back to Lejoka-Brown initially in his own words.

Sikira: do as you say, do as you say! It is always do as you say. Always command, command, command! Why don't you show some respect and let me do as I want, just once!

**Sikira: ... what am I in this house, anyway? ...am I a slave? ... or a housewife? ... I will get out of here Men and women are created equal! (page 57)**

Lejoka-Brown is stunned by the boldness of Sikira, who has suddenly become assertive, moving from the traditional passive woman to the modern active woman. She has moved from her traditional position where, as the property of her husband, she is expected to respect and obey to a position of challenging the traditionally established, inherited order. Liza does not represent only the African but also the concept of the woman in the entire universe.

**GENDER ROLES IN THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST**

Oscar Wilde's original audience was used to a traditional role for both men and women, and seeing people outside their respective roles in varying degrees of comfort gave Wilde's audience a different perspective on society. The plot, in summary runs on stock characterization and situations. Our main concern is in the way Oscar Wilde reinforces gender roles/expectations of his period (the Victorian period) through his characters and characterization.

Lady Harbury

In Victorian society, after the death of her husband, a woman was expected to confine herself to grief for many years, wearing only black and rarely leaving her house.

Lady Bracknell: I had some crumpets with Lady Harbury, who seems to be living entirely for pleasure now.

Algernon: I hear her hair has turned quite gold from grief.

Lady Bracknell: It certainly has changed its color. From what cause I, of course, cannot say.

(Wilde 21)

Gwendolyn and Cecily

"Women only [call each other sisters] when they have called each other a lot of other things first"

(Wilde 30)

Wilde implies that gender and personality have very little to do with each other. Some women, like Gwendolyn and Cecily, cannot really seem to handle power, while Lady Bracknell is very comfortable with it.

"This dignified silence seems to produce an unpleasant effect" (Wilde 59)

Lord and Lady Bracknell

"A girl with a simple, unspoiled nature, like Gwendolyn, could hardly be expected to reside in the country" (Wilde 26)

Jack and Algernon

When the two first meet, they believe they will be very good friends until a slight, not even real, problem breaks them apart. Once they realize they have both been wronged, they call each other "sister" and make up. This reinforces the stereotype that women are very mercurial in nature and quick to change their minds over the most trivial things.

The odd, secret-sharing distant, almost-friendly relationship Algernon and Lane have was more commonly seen between a woman and her maid during the Victorian Era.

"There were no cucumbers in the market this morning, sir. I went twice." (Wilde 21)

"Child, you know how anxious your guardian is that you should improve yourself in every way." (Wilde 33)

Despite the fact that Cecily is a girl, Jack still expects her to be knowledgeable and have a good education, whereas most attractive women with money were just expected to know how to make polite tea conversation.

"Well, I don't like your clothes. You look perfectly ridiculous in them. Why on earth don't you go up and change?" (Wilde 43)

After Gwendolyn and Cecily find out that the men they love have been lying to them, they realize that they now have the power in their respective relationships. Cecily and Gwendolyn must now decide when to forgive Algernon and Jack. Now that they have this power, however, they don't seem to know what to do with it and humorously try many different tactics to handle

their situation. This reinforces the idea that women should not be given any real power because they don't know how to handle it.

Both Jack and Algernon feel the need to uphold the standards of being a gentleman.

"Jack: [In a very patronizing manner] My dear fellow, the truth isn't quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice, sweet, refined girl. What extraordinary ideas you have about the way to behave to a woman!"

Here, Jack implies that women are too pampered, idealistic, and fragile to handle "the truth."

Both Jack and Algernon truly believe they are protecting their women from a harsh society.

Women of high society in Victorian times, not unlike upper class women today, had high standards they demanded were met. Lady Bracknell could not imagine her precious daughter being away from the upscale and bustling life of the city for extended periods of time; there was no way a true lady could cope with such uncivilized surroundings.

"Lady Bracknell: Pardon me, you are not engaged to anyone. When you do become engaged to someone, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact. An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she could be allowed to arrange for herself..." (Wilde 25).

Women in Victorian society were generally not allowed to marry without the consent of their parents or guardians. Many decisions in the lives of Victorian women were made by the men in their lives. For Gwendolen, most of her life is controlled by her mother, Lady Bracknell.

However, in the case of the marriage between Lord and Lady Bracknell, Lady Bracknell seems to have most of the power.

In traditional Victorian society, it is usually the man who controls the life of his wife.

Algernon: I am afraid, Aunt Augusta, I shall have to give up the pleasure of dining with you to-night after all.

Cecily and Algernon fall in love and wish to get married, but, before that can happen, Lady Bracknell must approve of them. Despite the fact that Cecily and Algernon love each other very much, Algernon's aunt does not approve until she finds out that Cecily has money. This reinforces the idea that the perfect woman is also rich. Had Cecily been poor, the two would have had to fight to stay together and prove that love can overcome social class, but the two were already perfectly matched in that regard, as were Ernest and Gwendolyn.

Despite Cecily's higher learning, all she really wants for herself is to find the perfect man and get married.

"I am not punctual myself, I know, but I do like punctuality in others" (Wilde 66)

"Lady Bracknell: As a matter of form, Mr. Worthing, I had better ask you if Miss Cardew has any little fortune?" (Wilde 63)

Lady Bracknell: [frowning] I hope not, Algernon. It would put my table completely out. Your uncle would have to dine upstairs. Fortunately he is accustomed to that.

(Wilde 21-22)

Wilde satirizes the gentleman through Jack and Algernon by portraying them as dandies.

By definition, a dandy is a man devoted to style, neatness, and fashion in dress and appearance.

The dandy represents the ideals of the Aesthetic movement of which Wilde was the face. Wilde's



goal was to make his dandies heroes with whom the audience could identify. Unlike the traditional dandies, Wilde's dandies are not meant to be laughed at. Instead, they use their role as truthful observers of society and individuals to point to what is ridiculous or hypocritical, and the audience laughs with them.

Miss Prism

"Jack: Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious blow..." (Wilde 69)

It was unspeakable to think of a woman having a child without being married in the Victorian era, for women were expected to remain chaste until they married. However, Jack does not see this as a problem, mainly because he's thrilled to have supposedly found a living relative.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the question of each gender's role in society often centers on power. In the Victorian world of this play, men have greater influence than women. Men make the political decisions for their families, while women work around the house, quietly taking care of the children.

Men are valued for their intellect and judgment, while women are attractive to men for their beauty and chastity. However, Wilde raises interesting questions about gender roles in *The Importance of Being Earnest* by putting women (like Lady Bracknell) in positions of power and by showing that men (i.e., Jack and Algernon) can be irresponsible and bad at decision-making.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, figures like Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen, and Cecily reverse gender role stereotypes by exercising power and control over the opposite sex.

Although the female characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* exercise power briefly, they also conform to many female stereotypes—ultimately ensuring that the play upholds traditional gender roles instead of challenging or changing them.

## CONCLUSION

From the fore-going it can be concluded that the position of the woman as dictated by her tradition and culture is virtually the same world-wide. This means, first of all, that there are some basic similarities among the traditions and cultures. In both Victorian and African culture, the woman is brought up to accept self-erasure and subordination. Generations of women world-wide, inherit cultural practices that inhibit the emancipation of women and delay their empowerment. While some women have accepted this culture-given role there are others who have rejected it and liberated themselves. The role of the woman, may be summed up in Chukwuma (1994) words: "If a woman keeps her place without asking questions then she is being cultural and unwestern. If she asserts herself, that is if she is feministic, then she is a deviant, unAfrican and multicultural. This then is the bane of feminism in Africa everywhere (127 p.)".

Modern comic works as seen by the two works has performed its functions such as finding creative solutions to social issues, documenting history, cross cultural understanding etc

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