

UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA, NSUKKA

FACULTY OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND LITERARY STUDIES

**THE PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY
IN OSCAR WILDE'S *A WOMAN OF NO IMPORTANCE* AND
WOLE SOYINKA'S *THE LION AND THE JEWEL***

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MODERN COMEDY: MOLIERE TO SOYINKA (ELS 240)**

BY

JACOB, PRISCILLIA CHIDINMA

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LECTURER: MR ODOH ONYEKA

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Gender and sexuality are serious intricate issues of concern in modern comedy. The presentation of women in most comic works is always within the frame of gender bias,

women's strong qualities have being despised because of their weaknesses. Whereas, the acceptance of male dominance is widespread. Women had little power and even their possessions become their husband property on marriage.

With the view of these, we are going to see a critical presentation of gender and sexuality in Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* and Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*.

First in *A Woman of No Importance*, as the title clearly suggests, the reader or audience cannot help but think on the prospects of this woman who actually is of no importance. In this society, women themselves encourage the concealing of emotions or praises of any sort they have about the opposite sex, because they believe that it shows less worth on the woman's part. This is seen when Lady Caroline rebukes Hester when she admires the good nature of Mr. Arbuthnot, she says:

“It is not customary in England, Miss Worseley, for a young Lady to speak with such enthusiasm of any person of the opposite sex. English women conceal their feelings till after they are married, they show them then.”

Also they do not condone friendship between a young man and a young girl. They feel it a sign of irresponsibility especially with the female gender.

However, men in this society as Wilde presents them, are held in high esteem, they pay so much respect to the male gender, especially the married ones. They see marriage as a criterion for representation in diplomacy that is why we see Lady Caroline worried about the appointment given to Lord Illingworth as a diplomat at Vienna. For her, she does not think England should be represented abroad by an unmarried man, they believe the world is made for men and not for women.

Sexuality also is viewed in a more debased form. Marriages can go on within an individual, that is the joy of it, but being stuck in a particular marriage or act of romance makes a woman look like a ruin according to Lord Illingworth.

The women folk of the puritans represented by Hester are also regarded as being carefree and not secretive with words. For Hester to openly announce to Mrs Allonby that she is only eighteen which seems very annoying to her, and Lord Illingworth affirms by saying that a woman who is able to tell her real age is not to be trusted because, she can tell of so

many other things. They see age as something that should be secretive and need not be known in public.

When it comes to sex, they believe that women must fulfil their sexual obligation during sex and that is why Lord Illingworth says he does not believe if puritan women exist, because he does not think there is a woman in the world who would not be a little flattered if one made love to her, for him that is what makes women irresistibly adorable, and he does not believe that any woman can object to being kissed because his world paints women as being obliged to fulfil the desires of men that is why he strikes a bait with Mrs Allonby on kissing Miss Hester

Women are also presented as 'not worthy to be noted' class of individuals in the society. When Lord Illingworth stumbles on Mrs Arbuthnot letter on the table, he recognises the handwriting and exclaims that it reminds him of someone, but when Mrs Allonby inquires to know who she is, he simply answers 'no one in particular. A woman of no importance.' The women folk also helps to ascertain this fact, they see themselves as people who do not deserve any perfect treatment from the male folks, as Mrs Allonby says 'how can a woman be expected to be happy with a man treating her as if she were a perfectly rational being?' with this statement she suggest that women should be happy and satisfied with being treated as less than equal to men, she believes that men are rational being with common sense, and for the women they are very different from this view because there have always been picturesque protests against the mere existence of common sense. Men also takes women in the same light, they believe that women have got no memory, in Lord Illingworth words

'No woman should have a memory. Memory in a woman is the beginning of dowdiness. One can always tell from woman's bonnet whether she has got a memory or not'

This clearly suggest that the woman is just a shallow-minded person, and is not expected to have a memory. The presence of memory in a woman depicts her unattractiveness, dullness and unfashionable, as opposed their male counterpart as Gerald tells his mother that men are different from women, it is natural for the women to have different views. Positing that their (men) views on any matter should stand because according to them 'men know life too early as opposed the women who know life too late.

In this play, Wilde exposes, through piercing wit, the hypocrisy of a society which scorns and punishes a woman for her sexual misdemeanours but applauds and grants honour

to the man who perpetrated the act. Such is the case with Lord Illingworth and Mrs Arbuthnot.

However, Wilde does not fail to present a woman who stood strong for what she decides, no matter what the society will say regarding the identity of her illegitimate son. As a result of being neglected and treaded upon by the only man who she has loved in the days of her ignorance, she stands to protect the interest of her son and herself by refusing to marry Lord Illingworth. Mrs Arbuthnot stands to defend womanhood as they have really being neglected and shamed as a result of their gender and place in the society. In the end of the play, she reverses this case and position women have being placed .When Gerald notices that she has had a visitor, and that is after Lord Illingworth visit, he inquires to know who it was that visited, she abruptly replies

‘oh! No one. No one in particular. A man of no importance’

Reversing the words of Lord Illingworth when he stumbles on the letter and regaining the stance of womanhood.

Furthermore a view of the presentation of gender and sexuality is studied in Wole Soyinka’s *The Lion and the Jewel*.

The society in which Soyinka writes of sees women as a precious possession that needs to be safeguarded and looked after with utmost care, even as the title suggests ‘The Lion and the Jewel’, the jewel which stand to means a valuable stone such as diamond. Sidi is used to depict the jewel in this work, that is why Lakunle is so concerned about how she treats and exposes he body. He advises her against carrying load on her head, he said it is ‘unwomanly’. Also, coming to her way of dressing she is expected to be modest and not to expose any part of her feminine structure for fear of catching the lustful eyes of idle men in the village. Lakunle says to Sidi:

“how often must I tell you, Sidi, that

A grown up girl must cover up her...

Her...shoulders? I can see quite...quite

A good portion of – that!

He bothers himself so much about this and reminds Sidi of the lewd jokes, the tongue licking noises, girls who dress uncovered like her attract. Modesty on the women in this

society is something valuable and any girl who fails to abide by this falls prey of the idlers, showing the idea of sexuality.

Women also are seen in the light of being the weaker vessel. Lakunle tells Sidi that as a woman, she has smaller brain than him, which suggests superiority of the male gender over the female folks. However, Sidi confronts him and reminds him of all the things the supposed weaker vessel achieves like pounding of yam, bending all day to plant millets with a child strapped to her back. Lakunle confirms the strength of a woman by affirming that a man can prepare to fight alone but will need the help of a woman who can understand to stand by him.

The payment of bride price before marriage is another important factor to be considered in this society. A girl who marries without her bride price being paid is as very humiliating, that is why Sidi does not consent to marrying Lakunle without her bride price being paid for the fear of what the people will say:

“They will say I was no virgin
That I was forced to sell my shame
And marry you without a price”

Similarly, Sidi initially rejects the offer from Baroka to be his wife, because she feels that he is an old man, and also because of the fame she now acquires. The fame gets to her head and she worships and oraises herself for it. Baroka taking as many wives as he wants clearly show here that women are regarded as objects of possession and also because of his status in the village that confers on him such privilege. And so he feels that taking the jewel (Sidi) will mean attaining a great feat.

Hence, he succeeds in winning Sidi over through his many tricky way, and also by showing his prowess as the lion which he is said to be by proving to Sidi that no matter his age he is still strong and capable of performing his conjugal duties which seems to be Sidi's major fear.

With these two works, we see how the female folks are viewed and placed in the societies in which they find themselves as against the male folks, and issues of sexuality.