

NAME: NWANERI, FORTUNATE OGECHI

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COURSE TITLE: MODERN COMEDY: MOLIERE TO SOYINKA

TOPIC: PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY

I would examine the issues of gender and sexuality in Wole Soyinka's *Jero's plays* and *The Lion and the Jewel*. The issue of gender and sexuality are in fact inseparable in the way we nowadays classify sexuality. Gender is significant in the construction of self. It is the condition of being male or female. The term gender denotes those socially approved roles, behaviours, actions and features that are considered by a society fit for men and women. These specific roles result in gender inequalities i.e. those differences between men and women that deliberately give favour to one group by disavouring the other. Women have been left out of history not because of the evil conspiracies of men in general or male historians in particular, but because we have considered history only in male-centred terms. According to Foucault, sexuality must not be thought as a natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct. The primary concepts Gender and Sexuality must first be understood in relation to the time prior to the publication of the different works.

In the plays of the first generation playwrights in Nigeria, female characters were largely influenced by traditional values which saw the woman as subordinate to man. These dramatists were male writers, whose visions were and are to a large extent traditional as well as cultural. Their texts are phallogocentric reflecting the Lacanian position that social arrangements such as culture, language and writing are dominated by the phallus, which is the symbolic order. Female characters are often depicted only in relation to male protagonists rather than as seats of consciousness in themselves. In these texts, negative attributes are assigned to female characters.

This work shall analyse select male authored plays in Nigeria with the intent to exteriorize how women are portrayed in the light of their gender and sexuality.

Amope in *The Trials of Brother Jero* is portrayed in a negative light. Her outstanding characteristic is her quarrelsome nature, which drives her husband almost to the point of insanity and forces him to ask for brother Jero's permission to beat her just once in order to satisfy his ego and do away with the feeling that he is not a weakling. There is also the young girl who always passes before the prophet on her way to take a swim, and Jero refers to her as 'dirty-looking thing,' but she comes back remarkably transformed from being dirty to 'clean, wet, shiny face and hair' and ultimately becomes a distraction to the prophet. This happens during his times of meditation and prayers and is a source of temptation as he is normally sexually attracted to her. This informs his prayers for deliverance assisted by Chume in the following dialogue:

Jero: Tear the image from my heart. Tear this love for the daughters of Eve... :

Chume: Adam, help' am. Na your son, help'am. Help this your son...

Jero: Burn this lust for the daughters of Eve. (p.21)

Another female character is the one that runs after the beggar drummer boy who had abused her. She is described in the following way: 'Sash tightened around her waist wrapper pulled so high up that half the length of her thigh is exposed. Her sleeves are rolled above the shoulder....' The effect the woman has on the prophet is so much that he abandons his congregation to Chume and goes after her. Women on the whole are presented as being either quarrelsome or seducers of men. The women are presented as sexual objects that pose a form of distraction to even a self-professed prophet.

Similarly, in *Lion and the Jewel*, Soyinka presents a gullible female who at first seems to be proud and strong-willed but is gullible. We see how Sidi is easily flattered by the photographs and is ecstatic when she hears that her picture has been taken to the city. Soyinka greatly portrays his belief that women are less informed and that their brain capacity cannot be compared to that of a man. In her otherwise heated conversation with Lakule, the latter tells Sidi that;

For, as a woman, you have a smaller brain...

The scientists have proved it. It's in my books.

Lakunle also uses word like 'ignorant' to define Sidi. Although Sidi places high value on the payment of her bride price before she marries Lakunle, Soyinka carefully manipulate and adumbrate Sidi's gullibility and self-esteem can be served equally well by modern means; once she has been flattered by the photographs. Most ironically, Sidi finally ends up accepting Baroka for a husband even though he seduced her, because she does not care to have her gullibility mocked at great length. In the play, Sidi is represented as a priceless object to be sought and possessed by men. This image of woman as a helpless but priceless possession to be protected by the stronger sex is graphically enacted in the pantomime in the play (pp.15) in which Lakunle plays the lost-traveler. She is also represented as an active participant in the fight against the trampling of culture. In the play, Sidi boldly confronts Lakunle, iconic of cultural contamination, especially on the issue of bride-price. Soyinka also presents women as gossips especially in his depiction of Sadiku, the eldest wife to Baroka who after Baroka tells her of his feigned impotency could not keep it to herself but instead tells Sidi because she is a gossip.

The overriding focal thrust of Soyinka plays has always been to foreground the physical, prurient, negative nature of woman. By his negative portrayal of women, men expose their propensity to suppress women. Women are seen as responsible for all the ills of the society. They are noted for moral bankruptcy, loose tongue, gossip, flippancy, rumour mongering, hypocrisy, treachery, and many more. These allegations against women are mere figments of male imagination. Women's portrayal as sex objects and mostly as mothers and wives forecloses their other capabilities. Feminists are engaged in the struggle for a fundamental change in gender relations so as to recognize the role of women as full and active participants in the development process.