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TOPIC:

**THE PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN OSCAR
WILDE'S *THE MPORTANCE OF BEING ERNEST* AND WOLE
SOYINKA'S *THE LION AND THE JEWEL***

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Introduction

The essay looks at the presentation of gender and sexuality in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest*, and Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*. However, we shall briefly look at some key terms on the topic, thereafter, do a critical analysis of the Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest*, and Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* in that respective order.

WHAT IS GENDER

Gender could be referred to as a state of being male or female which is typically used with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones alone. Gender is a constructed definition of women and men which is not the same thing as sex that is biological characteristics of women and men hence gender is socially assigned and not universal. Gender is determined by the conception of tasks, functions and roles attributed to women and men in the society (Udry, 2014)

Udry further asserts that, gender expresses the differences among women and among men based on age, wealth ethnic background and other factors. However, the way gender roles and relations change, often quite rapidly as the result of social, economic and technological trend.

WHAT IS SEXUALITY

According to Mikkola, (2008), the term sexuality in its broadest sense describes the whole way a person goes about expressing himself or herself as a sex being. Sexuality describes how important sexual expression is in a person's life, and how one chooses or how the society expects such an individual to express it.

Sexuality includes our gender role that is, the idea of how we should behave because we are a male or female. Sexuality is an integral part of who we are, what we believe, what we feel, and

how we respond to others. It is much more than body parts and sex, although it includes all these.

In summary, the difference gender and sexuality is that, while gender is widely shared set of expectations and norms linked to how women and men (including boys and girls) should behave, sexuality describes the sexual action and behavior patterns accompanied such norms and shared social expectations.

A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF OSCAR WILDES'S THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ERNEST IN THE PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY.

The entire play of *The Importance of Being Ernest* is satirical attack on the institution of marriage, however, it is obvious that, the play portrays the traditional patriarchal male-dominated marriage where women are largely confined to the domestic and financially dependent on the man, and marriage is based largely on economic reason other than natural and mutual feelings and attraction. For instance, when Gwendolen declares she is engaged to Jack, Lady Bracknell strongly disapproves thus,

Pardon me, you are not engaged to anyone; I, or your father...will inform you of the fact. An arrangement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she should be allowed to arrange for herself " (p.19)'

It is then, obvious that, the female gender is looked upon as mere article or property belonging to men, and as such, they have no will of their own, for instance, Lady Bracknell who is a female gender encourages and supports this convention as she goes on to assert that:

"I am not in favour of long engagement because they give people opportunity of finding out each person's character before marriage which I think is never advisable" (p.19).

Citing a reference from *The Ideal Husband*, in the similar vein, Lord Coversham takes the same stance to portray gender and sexuality as it occurs between young lovers that it should be purely prompted on economic reason rather than genuine love. He explicitly portrays this by telling son that;

“ as regards marriage, it is I who should be consulted and not you. There is property at stake. It is not the matter of affection” (Ideal husband page 51), so that both male and female genders are not exempted in this regard. The role of gender and sexuality among two lovers is clearly viewed as a mere economic reason. Furthermore, in order to buttress both male and female gender relationship as mere economic fortune, Bracknell initially been quite reserved towards Cecily, who wishes to marry her penniless nephew, Algernon. Lady Bracknell’s mind is quite changed once she hears about Cecily’s great fortune, therefore, highlighting marriage between different genders relationship as mere economic transaction.

Secondly, in the play, it is expedient and necessary to state that, female genders are mere tool for self-satisfaction and pleasure in the hands of men. Female self-fulfillment only comes when they diligently obey, in all submissive manner, their male counterpart who then use women as they deem fit.

For instance, talking to Lady Harbury whose husband has recently died, Lady Bracknell observes thus:

“I have nev’r seen a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger” (p.15).

We expect to hear that she looks older from grief, but not so. In fact *“ her hair has turned quite gold with grief”* (p.15). According to Lady Bracknell ,

“ the widow seems to be living entirely for pleasure now” (p.15), presumably because, with the death of her husband, she has been relieved of her duties as self-sacrificing saint.

The view of men dominating society where everything that goes on in the society lies at the whims and caprices of male gender which can also be seen in the character of Lane's discussion with Algernon about how he ended his marriage at will when it turned out against what he had earlier expected, he says thus;

“ I only married once. But that was consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person. I ended it (p.7).

On the ground of sexual morality, chastity is expected of female gender while an act of lechery and cuckolding is considered heroic among male folk. Reference to William Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, for instance, Sir Pinchwife always locks up Magery, his newly wedded wife, indoors in a most confined manner so that she doesn't, peradventure, indulge herself into any immoral act. But Horner who goes about frequenting people's houses in order to cuckold them was rather respected and feared among his folk. In a similar manner, Gwendolen is confined indoors for the sake of her chastity whereby Algernon receives no such confinement. This went deep even into sexual pervasion where keen eyes are kept on female and if for any reason they are caught relating with any other man other than their husband, they are socially disgraced and are made laughing stock of the society even among their very female associates as encouraged by their male counterpart. This is merely to deter, not only the culprits but also, all others from engaging in such acts. However, the male who commits such immoral act is looked upon as a hero. This fact is clearly depicted in William Wycherley's *The Country wife*. For men, there is such liberty for sexual infidelity but this is strictly an aberration on the part of female gender. They only indulge in it when they are treated with repulsion by their husbands. Consolidating this fact in

reference to the character of Mrs Marchmont in *The Ideal husband* ,while speaking for herself and for Lady Basildon, Marchmont declares that, "*our husbands never appreciate anything in us. We have to go to others for that*" (Ideal Husband page 10). It is this inequality that prompts Hester in the *Woman of No Importance* to also lament that, "*there should not be one law for men and another for women*" which also clearly depicts a sense of inequality among male and female sexes.

However, in the *Importance of Being Ernest*, it seems that the character of Lady Bracknell as a female dominated gender of family in the play is portrayed to bring the contrast and also reinforced idea of male dominated society in a satirical manner in order the ridicule the institution of marriage and trivialize it during the era. For this reason, Lady Bracknell insists on arranged marriage of both Gwendolen and Algernon rejecting the notion of marriage based on personal compatibility. Apparently, Lord Bracknell, who is socially supposed to be the head of the by taking important decisions in the family has relegated his important roles and duties to his wife. In fact, Lord bracknell does not appear in the play at all. He is only spoken of in quite a flattering terms thus;

"Outside the family circle, papa, I am glad to say, is entirely unknown. I think that is quite as it should be. The home seems to me to be the proper for the Man" (p.44). It is clear here that the traditional role of husband and wife has been inverted in a mockery show. This also gives an insight that, the role of the woman falls on the Lord Bracknell completing the reversal of the traditional roles even as he finds no more pleasure taking the lead to dine with his family together. (P. 60).

Again, Gwendolen emphasizes this fact of a dominated society and declares to Jack that,

“once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties, he becomes, painfully effeminate, does he not? And I don’t like that” (p.44). Therefore, a man must face fully his domestic roles head on.

In a similar vein, it is quite obvious that, society views women as inferior to men and the female therefore, consigned themselves to such demands and expectation. It is this light that Mrs Allonby in the *Woman of No Importance* comments that, *“ the ideal man should talk to us as if we were goddess, and treat us as if we were children”*(*Woman Of No Importance* page 44). This snobbish treatment can also be found in the relationship between Lakunle and Sidi, Baroka and Sidi, and Boaroka with his wives, which we shall soon examine. It seems therefore, that since the society views female gender as inferior to male gender, she might as well take full advantage and demand to be treated like a spoiled child so that she will be given everything she wants and have her vanities constantly catered for.

WOLE SOYINKA’S *THE LION AND THE JEWEL* IN THE PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Soyinka’s the *Lion and the Jewel* discusses majorly, the conflict between Western Civilization and African tradition in the character of Lakunle who depicts Western Civilization and Baroka, portrayed as African tradition respectively. However, the gender stereotype in the play is too obvious to ignore. For instance, The participant role of the play in the *Lion and the Jewel* are played by Lakunle, Baroka, Sidi and Sadikou. However, the first two characters which are Lankunle and Baroka are portray as the key actors doing something tangible while Sidi and Sadikou on the other hand, most of the time are portray as characters who are the goals or beneficiaries of those actions performed by the male characters. This leaves us with clear judgment that role of female gender in the society is to satisfy male gender. This is because, the society has accord the male sexual role as dominating, and in charge in

all aspect of life. This can be seen in the character Lakunle's conversation with Sidi, thus;

“Sidi, a man must prepare to fight alone.... Sidi, my love will open your mind... do you call this nonsense that I pour the waters of my soul to wash your feet” (page 6).

To reinforce this sense of authority among male folk as the guardian of knowledge and wisdom in all ramification the more, Lakunle tries to convince Sidi, thus;

“ I will teach you the twalts... I will show you the grandeur of town”

However, Sidi is quite sensitive to this deceptive inferiority sentiment attributed to female folk and laments against such attitude to Lakunle, thus:

“Every time your action deceives me of making me think that you merely wish to whisper something in my ears ” (p.9)

Lakunle, as can be seen, is presented most of the time as the actor of most of the actions expressed by the material process of which Sidi is the goal or beneficiary. This is because, most of the material process in a strict sense of action is directed towards Sidi there by depict the gender of Sidi as a mere material to be acquired by Lakunle (who is the male gender) in this regard.

Again, Lakunle, in the opening scene is dealing with love affairs in his attempt to conquer the heart of Sidi, he still uses processes totally detached from feelings. On the other hand, the action taken by Sidi are not the straight and direct ones which is usually characterized of feminine while those of Lakinle portrays that of masculine. The actions of Sidi towards Lakunle are rather designed to avoid men's tricks and deception, which is typical to female gender thereby portraying the female gender as inferiors in the society. Sidi, in the attitude of femininity responds to Lakunle, thus:

“ I’ve done the fold so high and so tight, I hardly believe” (p.4). She asserts further that, ...” I was forced to sell my shame and marry you without bride a price...(p. 7), “..why should I demean my worth to wed a mere village school teacher’ (p.9).

This summarizes that, all male actions are directed towards female who are the goal or beneficiaries of their male counterpart. It is a convention to marriage between two lovers can only be occurred when the bride price is paid. However, Lakunle decides to use his masculine wisdom and knowledge to convince Sidi (probably whom she regards as naïve and inferior) into circumventing the tradition and carrying out his bidings.

In the similar vein, Baroka and his choices of words and action towards Sidi, Sadikou and his others wives portrays him as the man of authority in the family. Sadikou reinforces this fact during her conversation with Sidi, thus:

“Baroka swears to take no other wife after you, Sidi....” And Sidi replies to Sadikou that “ ...Baroka merely seeks to raise his manhood above my beauty... (page 21).

Baroka confirms the assertion of male dominance in the society when he tries to reel out his masculine feat and achievement in line with social expectations of male sex in order to please and woo Sidi, thus;

“Did I not at the Festival of rain , defeat the men in the log-tossing match ... Did I not, still with the most fearless ones, hunt the leopard and the boa at night (p.28). in other to further portray female gender in a strict, as mere tool for pleasure and self-satisfaction to males, Baroka confirms that;

“I change my wife when I have learnt to tire them (p.43).

Baroka is thus presented in the light of dominating position. He professes his invincibility in the objective sense the both women

will be influenced, which to some extent depicts element of selfishness in the gender portrayal of males.

On the idea of portraying female gender as naïve, inferior and backward as opposed their male counterpart, Lakunle refers to Sidi in the manner of " Ignorant girl" who does not easily understand him even when he talks sensible ideas into her. He frankly asserts that, it is because the female brain is small and that is the reason Sidi fails to understand him easily (page 8). Baroka equally queried one of his wives, describing her as " unfledged birdling that lacks the wisdom to embrace the mustiness of age" (p. 28). To impress her husband, she asserts that she has improved in learning (p. 26) .

The analysis of these clauses on teaching- learning habit depicts Baroka and Lakunle as the principal authorities and actors are the custodian of knowledge and wisdom, while Sidi and Sadikou as naïve, those who lack knowledge and therefore, needed to be taught. Male are portrayed as professors while female are portrayed as learners. Female are care givers and attention seekers of males hence they do everything just to impress their male counterpart. All in all, women in the *Lion and The jewel* do not take initiative, they are rather passive and rely solely on male initiatives who are known to be the doers of the action and authority. Women are dependent of men. This prompts Lakunle's reaction to Sadikou " And now you have sucked him dry " (p.38) when he hears that her husband becomes important. This also inspires us with idea that, the existence of female gender is entirely based on the male and as such, women should be manipulated by the male for their selfish pleasure and comfort as the case between Baroka and Sidi where he lures Sidi into sleep with his sweet sugar coated tongue and thereafter, have her in bed chamber.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, female gender is represented as mere commodity and tool in the hands of their male counterpart. Again, the traditional role of gender is to take the lead in all aspect of life. Nevertheless, the power of male gender is showcased in his sexual prowess. Lastly, male gender are portray to be independent of their females counterpart, be aggressive, open, active and take initiatives whereby, their female counterpart are portrayed to be submissive, reserved, naïve, passive and subservient in behavior.

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