

**UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA NSUKKA**  
**FACULTY OF EDUCATION**  
**DEPARTMENT OF ARTS EDUCATION(ENGLISH)**

**TOPIC**

**THE PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN ANY TWO  
MODERN COMIC WORKS**

**AN ASSIGNMENT PREPARED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE  
COURS ELS 240**

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

**BY**

**IGWE, JULIUS UCHENNA**

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**LECTURER: MR. O. ODOH**

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## INTRODUCTION

This piece aims at evaluating the presentation of gender and sexuality in modern comedy. Gender and sexuality are such long-aged controversial matters in human history, and in essence, every age always has its attention focused on them based on how they are viewed or any issue that they raise. In the classical era, there was freedom in sexual expression in whichever way one wants it; both in religion and general societal consensus. Norms in different societies have tried to control gender and sexuality in one way or the other. This has risen to conventional constructs and coinages of terms in regard to them. The regulations towards these concepts have been seen in different ways by many people based on the effects and inclinations they depict in the lives of different classes of people in the society. As a result of this, different movements have risen to examine them; some to challenge and others to support them. For instance, decadence and aestheticism rose in the late nineteenth-century to challenge the markedly distinction of male and female genders, popularly called masculinity and feminism respectively. Aestheticism is often defined by the phrase 'art for art's sake'. In this view, art has no responsibility except to beauty, and as such is separate from any moral considerations (Denisoff, 2007), cited in (Aalto, 2010). Since the traditional sources of comfort were rejected, the consequence was to live in the moment constantly seeking, 'the new, the rare, the strange and

the refined.' There were myriads of other movements such as feminism, to mention but these two.

Oscar Wilde's two comedies: 'An ideal husband and The importance of being earnest' will be examined with this work. We shall critically analyse the plays based on the take of the queer's theory on feminism which is summarized to mean 'deconstruction' as influenced by postmodernism. This theory focuses on feminine criticism of underlying patriarchal mind-set that created and perpetrated gender inequality. Wilde's plays chiefly set in the English Victorian period, showcase sexual intricacies which border on triviality towards sexual activities and other debased attitudes towards it. There were series of sex scandal during that period. Wilde tries to use these play to balance some of the issues raised in the era.

## **Gender**

I am specifically interested in what kinds of gender roles were acceptable or even available during that time (i.e. Victorian era). With this, I will be able to represent in the plays with the norms of the time. Of particular interest are: 'dandy and the new woman' as two figures that are prominent in the plays. Let us first of look at the underlying assumptions of the time. According to (Terry, 1999:33) as cited in (Aalto 2010), there were three key assumptions: that only two sexes exist, that the two are fundamentally different and mutually exclusive, and that men are superior to women. The difference between men and women was seen as biologically determined that ordained which separate the sphere person

would occupy. Women's defining role was that of reproduction. Intelligence and ability to bear children were considered mutually exclusive for women. Because propagating the line was essential, women were ruled out of men's domain of reason and public sphere which required its use (ibid). since women were considered inferior to men, it is fitting that self-sacrifice for the sake of husband and child was the ultimate virtue of an ideal woman. While men were encouraged to actively work and rely on themselves, women were confined to dependent role and expected to stay in the sanctuary of home. In terms of sexuality, the old woman was still repressed.

It was only on spirituality that a woman could be considered superior to man (Showalter, 1992). Showalter therefore observed to some extent, that defining the roles of different genders is not quite simple as the convention may have it. The woman's unable to marry, whom showalter dubs the old woman, began to unsettle the established system. Also, her unable to fulfil her role as a mother or a wife, in order to support herself, the old woman was forced to seek employment thus invading the sphere of men. The new woman was the next way forward from the old woman. The term (new woman) was coined in 1894 (ibid). wilde writes in 'The soul of man under socialism' that 'the only thing one really knows about human nature is that it changes' (Wilde, 1950) as cited in (Aalto, 2010).

In this regard, wilde paints lady cheverly in 'An ideal husband' to embody the complex man, bearing both masculine and feminine

characteristics as seen in her assertiveness and as seen as unmarried. This is where we see the new woman showcasing. Her assertiveness based on manly prowess of Victorian period is her ability to hold Sir Robert Chiltern ransom in revealing his scandalous past life if he refuses to support what she demands of him. She also says this in respect to freedom for all 'in our modern mania for morality everyone has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility and all other seven deadly virtues-and what is the result? You all go over like ninepins' (p.15). We also see her self-sufficiency and fearlessness in her approaches to other characters in the play. Furthermore, it is also recorded that she has a position in Vienne embassy. On the part of lady Chiltern, she encourages women in her society to find purpose in life, especially in education. Her other attribute of new woman is her involvement in women's liberal association where they discuss: factory acts, female inspectors, the eight hours' bill and the parliamentary franchise and she is a great champion of higher education for the women. However, the complex nature of man still shows in her character when she reverts to total loyalty to the life of man(male) when she asserts, 'A man's life is more value than woman's. it is larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions. Our lives revolve in the curve of emotions. It is upon the lines of intellect that a man's life progresses. I have just learned this and this much else from lord Goring, (p.75).

Much like the new woman, the dandy also questioned the culturally assigned roles of gender. Perhaps, this is why the figure of the dandy is such a prominent one in Wilde's comedies, (Aalto,2010). Cambridge advanced learner's dictionary 3<sup>rd</sup> edition defines dandy as an obsolete

term used to describe men who are much interested in expensive and fashionable appearance. In essence, women are often seen in every society to be much concerned with their appearances. But in Wilde's comedies, we see him painting his male characters in women's behaviour. For instance, Algernon in 'the importance of being earnest, asserts: 'it is awfully hard work doing nothing. However, I don't mind hard work where there is no object of any kind. (p.25). It means that doing nothing is an object itself. Both Jack and Algernon appear often in lavishly dressed state to appeal to their girls- what should have been from the ladies (Cecily and Gwendolen). Similarly, Lord Goring in 'an ideal husband' rides in the Row at 10 o'clock in the morning, goes to the opera three times a week, and dines out every night of the season (p.2). That is to say he too works very hard at maintaining his lifestyle of idleness and fashions. Conversely, he takes control of the tension risen against sir Robert Chiltern by Lady Cheverly by dissuading her from doing so through the diamond jewel she left behind in the banquet hall previous day, which he said was purloined from his relative. The changing nature of man is therefore exhibited here, having displayed the manly nature in contrast to what he is earlier known for-the feminine acts.

### **Sexuality**

Homosexual, bisexual and pederast are just few labels that have been affixed to Wilde (Aalto,2010). Other coinages about sex also arose at different ages in man's history. Homosexual as a term came in the year

1869 and followed by heterosexual eleven years later (Sullivan,2003:2) and (Barry,2002:144) cited in (Aalto,2010) respectively. The major issue here is the question on sex pertaining our era of discourse-the Victorian's. In the ancient period, there have been different sexual feelings and identities among people as observed by (wilchins,2004:54) as cited in (Aalto,2010), where in ancient Greece, a man could copulate with virgins, prostitutes, married women, boys or sheep. Of the era we are discussing, we shall consider the activity of 'same-sex' (in women, it is known as lesbianism, while in men, it is homosexual). In a nutshell, lets reflect on this dialogue of Jack and Algernon in Wilde's 'The importance of being earnest':

ALGERNON: Nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury, and if you ever get married...you will be extremely glad to know Bunbury. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it.

JACK: That is nonsense. If I marry a charming girl like Gwendolen...I certainly won't want to know Bunbury, (p.14).

Here, we can see Algernon identifying himself as a homosexual. Bunbury is an English slang for male's brothel. Similarly, the privacies of Cecily and Gwendolen is to be questioned critically. For instance, the two ladies are revealed to have secret records in their diaries. Particularly, Gwendolen is seen not to joke with her diary, thus never travels without it. Her statement in (p.46) is questionable in her lesbian identity, hear her: 'one should always have something sensational to in the train.'

## **Conclusion**

With these analyses, we can see the mode of gender and sexual presentation in modern comedy. It is based on deconstructing the strict categorization of sexes. It is all about levelling the activities of mankind for every sex's participation. Therefore, to capture the general characteristics of modern comedy, gender and sexuality is often presented in different variety, as modernism is more comfortable with varieties; after all variety is the spice of modern life. Although Wilde is always careful in handling these intricacies so as to still retain the importance of marriage and family in the society. This, he does by making sure that no matter the betrayals and scandals, reconciliation is always the end, thereby making them the means to social criticism. The marriage of Chilterns, for instance, is reconciled after feeling disappointed on the discovery of Sir Robert's past scandalous life by his wife, Lady Chiltern.

#### References:

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