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TOPIC: THE PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN ANY TWO MODERN COMEDIES.[MODERN COMEDY ASSIGNMENT]

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THE PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN WOLE SOYINKA'S "THE LION AND THE JEWEL" AND BENARD SHAW'S "ARMS AND THE MAN"

Gender and sexuality play a key role in comedy whether modern or ancient. Comedy is characterised with a spirit of revelry, merriment and celebration. Celebration without women and eventually sex is not complete. This is why through ancient to classical, neoclassical, restoration, Victorian, romantic and modern era, great emphasis has been on women, marriage, love and sex. Little wonder why Milander says that modern comedy deals on the complications of love.

Sexuality and gender are prominent themes in modern comedy. They are used as a tool of manipulation, a form of propaganda or sometimes both. It is no longer news saying that literature reflects and represents man in his environment and society. As it is today, there is a social construct of gender and sexuality and controversies that follow them such that issues of feminism and masculinity become the order of the day. under this arrangement, there is a hierarchy of sexes and each lead their role in their society , men are masculine, they are not ruled by emotions, they are strong and hardworking, women belong in the home, they are ruled by men and by their emotions and therefore are thought to make bad decisions.

The context of Wole Soyinka's discussion makes it even more unavoidably important to choose characters along gender and sex poles. The political, cultural and economic dispositions of Africans towards gender make it difficult if not impossible to talk about gender equality. The perception of gender among Africans particularly people from the west, the most frequent examples being Nigeria has a traditional undertone such that it is considered a felony to write or say otherwise. Roles are conventionally conceived along

gender poles. Questions are not usually asked as it has been a pathological and generational issue. Soyinka's lion and the jewel simply display the prevalent issue in African society.

One can hardly say that this is the case in Bernard Shaw's Victorian society. Though, gender role is seen, it is not as water tight as that found in African society. In Victorian society, one unavoidably senses class consciousness and the desire to 'belong' and to be recognised. As different as it is from the kind of gender and sexuality issue prevalent in Africa, class consciousness has become synonymous with Victorian women and as such, a gender issue.

Masculine superiority and domination is explained in 'The lion and the jewel'. Women seem not to have any say about anything. Gender role is clearly spelt here. As the play begins, we see Sidi carrying a bucket of water on her head coming from the stream in the morning. This is a conventional duty of every 'well behaved' growing girl in African tradition. Early in the morning, you see them in their numbers, with calabash and pots heading towards the stream to fetch water for the family. The boys, even if they are younger are not accustomed to this kind of role. The ease with which Sidi balances the bucket on her head denotes over familiarity with this act. Soyinka describes it as 'an accustomed ease'. Sometimes, men who help their women carry these buckets are laughed at as it is very tainting of their gender. Lakunle offers to help but Sidi refuses as she would not want to be laughed at. Sidi describe these roles thus: "...who pounds the yam or bends all day to plant the millet with a child strapped to her back". This gives us an overview of the roles of typical African women

In 'Arms and the man' we see gender roles as well. Catherine is the lady of the house. She oversees everything that happens in the house while Major Petkoff goes out for war even if he doesn't fight. She puts everything in their place in the house. The servants are answerable to her. She buys and replaces every gadget in the house, the electric bell for instance. Catherine is a typical 'house wife' just like the many wives of the Bale.

Polygamy is a prevalent issue in gender. In Soyinka's work, The Bale has many wives already but still wants Sidi for her beauty. The wives have no say about their husband's choice to take a new wife. The man is not bound by any law to take as much wives as possible, in fact, marrying many wives in African tradition makes a man worthy of some positions. In this polygamous setting, the man is usually the subject. Baroka's wives have their turns at night. They pick his grey hairs with alacrity and sense of duty, yet, a denial of this practice makes the woman feel unwanted and jealous men exercise ownership over

women. Lakunle dictates what Sidi should and should not wear even before he marries her. Women are simply designed to obey.

In western culture, polygamy is not a matter given attention. Catherine has her man to herself. Unlike the many wives of the Bale, Catherine has a say in her marriage. She is somewhat domineering. She treats Petkoff like a kid. In her marriage, she could be described as the head as all decisions directly or indirectly come from her. Petkoff as Shaw says is a cheerful, insignificant, unpolished man of about 50 naturally unambitious (pg 37). He is not interested in modern way of life and as such, Catherine describes him as 'a barbarian at heart'. This gives her an edge over the husband. Soyinka does not give women this right in his play.

Most often, what makes a man a hero is being able to win the woman of his dream. In this case, a woman becomes a trophy, a marketable commodity. Often times, men prove their masculinity by acquiring the women of their dream. Men like proving their masculinity more than anything. They love their dignity. In cases where there is the presence of a rival, some men would rather die than lose their face by losing a woman to their opponent. At some point, Baroka's yearning for Sidi goes beyond the fact that she is beautiful. His dignity as a Bale is at stake for no one ever turns his marriage offer down not even Sidi the Jewel of Ilunjile. No woman rejects him. Rejection is an insult to his dignity. It is unacceptable. He would rather become a trick star than a loser. Lakunle is a loser, an anti hero who even having youth as an advantage cannot win his woman. This makes Baroka's victory more profound.

Serguis on the other hand, is more interested in saving his face. He challenges Bluntschli to a duel not because he loves Raina but because he is a 'man'. Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* would say that the greatest weakness of a man is to sit back and watch another man sleep with his wife right under his nose. Serguis cannot just let it go. It is a blow on the face. He has to react like 'a real man'. After all, that is what men are known for.

Women are portrayed as weaker sex. Lakunle tells Sidi that her reproach is a natural feeling arising out of envy for 'as a woman, you have a smaller brain'. Though Sidi defends her sex, she proves her insensibility when she falls for Baroka's trick. She detests Baroka, calls him the fearless, the scourge to womanhood, yet, she blindly falls into his trap. Baroka, knowing that women are insensible, cashes in on the foolishness, stupidity and naivety of both Sadiku and Sidi. Sadiku is loquacious, most women are. This is why Baroka laments his state of impotence in Sadiku's presence knowing quite well that being a woman, she cannot

keep a secret. His strategy is double edged. It traps both Sidi and Sadiku. Sidi who is impatient and has a nagging tendency to mock, just like most women, runs off to Baroka's house just to make mockery of his supposed predicament. The bale makes use of this opportunity and leaves Sidi pregnant at last she marries him leaving Lakunle a total failure.

Women are not portrayed as insensitive in *Arms and the man*, they are purposive, they act with a calculated result. In fact the reverse is the case here. Lauka is quite ambitious, she doesn't let Serguis take advantage of her. She is a servant but a proud one. Nicole describes her as a woman with 'a soul beyond her status. She is not intimidated. Just like Sidi, Lauka is fearless but unlike Sidi, she knows how to put her fearlessness into good use. She is gossip facilitated like Sadiku, this is how she breaks up Raina and Serguis engagement and when confronted, she declares unabashedly 'my love was at stake, am not ashamed (pg 77) She makes Serguis publicly apologise to her and he eventually marries her. She is a complete opposite of a typical African Woman who is easily exploited. Raina's attribute of putting a written note in bluntschli's pocket suggests western women's intention to woo instead of to be wooed. Such act would have been shameful coming from an African woman.

Women are most often portrayed as objects of sexual satisfaction. This is how Baroka sees women. He has a Harem of them for his pleasure and sexual satisfaction. Is Lauka not a wilful, fearless woman, Serguis will have taken advantage of her position as a servant under that delusion that women were created for one thing- satisfying men sexually.

Conclusively, It is not accidental that two plays from two different geographical context are chosen for this discussion. The aim is not just to expose the issues of gender and sexuality in modern comedies but also, to explore the cultural forces contributing to these differences. Without even a critical look at both plays, one readily believes Chimamanda when she says 'there is a problem with gender as it is today and we do something to fix'. Looking at the cultural undertone of gender and sexuality in Africa, one cannot help but becomes confused as to where to begin the fixing.