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

THE PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN “THE LION AND THE JEWEL” AND “THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST”

Gender, according to the English Oxford dictionary is defined as a division of nouns and pronouns (and sometimes of other parts of speech) such as masculine or feminine or neuter or animate or inanimate. It can also be in form of a biological sex; the sum of the biological characteristics by which male and female and other organisms are distinguished. It means a sociocultural phenomenon of the division of people into various categories such as male and female, with each having associated clothing, roles, stereotypes, etc. Sexuality is somehow connected with gender and therefore similar with it in terms of someone being characterised or distinguished by sex. In these two modern comic plays, “the lion and the jewel” and “the importance of being earnest”, its theme or the main or central idea is certainly connected with gender and sexuality. The inequalities that exist between men and women in all spheres of life have generated a lot of interest both at national and international levels. With regards to women issues, for socio – economic and political change, a lot of seminars, conferences were held in various places. This paper attempts to discuss feminism from African perspective and Soyinka’s distortion of female image in “the lion and the jewel”. African feminism is not a clear cut concept that can be precisely defined. This problem of definition does not deny the existence of African feminism, but acknowledges the complexities denoted by being an African and a feminist at once. An attempt is made to define African feminism as essentially two things. It is a theoretical paradigm in social theory that seeks to advocate and enhance women emancipation in a predominantly patriarchal world. It is also a movement that mobilises for women’s emancipation and equality with regards to gender. As a movement, feminism mobilises for productive rights, affordable health care and improved working conditions among many other causes. Note that in most feminist writings, African women are portrayed as confused, powerless and unable to determine for themselves both the changes in their lives and means to construct these changes as seen in the lives of both Gwendolene and Cecily Cardew. Gwendolene is a young woman who is being controlled by her mother, Lady Bracknell who her life is only centred on material things, wealth and influence.

Lady Bracknell is a formidable woman who decides on the totality of her daughter's life emotionally, financially, educationally, socially, and even in terms of marriage as she refuse Jack in marrying her daughter due to so many trivial reasons. Jack does not have a family, no job or even money, and therefore, he is not worthy of marrying her daughter. In case of Cecily Cardew, she is a young lady who her life is centred on her age. As far as she is not up to a certain age, she is not allowed to own her business or wealth and because of that, Jack is the one in charge of her wealth. Cecily can not even speak for herself in this matter and even if she do, nobody will even hear her speak, talk more of even listening her talk. Therefore, she is caged in an helpless situation where everything that concerns her is taken to nought. Western feminists usually act as superiors who seek to help and enlighten women. Women have always been active in agriculture, trade, and other economic pursuits as seen in the lives of Lady Bracknell and Miss Prism. Lady Bracknell who is the mother of Gwendolene and Algernon is a woman of influence, very wealthy and well known in the city. On the other hand, Miss Prism is a prolific writer, well known and established in her literary works. Women are the guardians of their children's welfare and have explicit responsibility to provide for them materially. They are the household managers, providing food, nutrition, water, health education and family planning to an extent greater than elsewhere in the developing world. It is the same situation when compared with colonial era where Nigerian women participated actively in the economy. Apart from being mothers and wives and taking charge of the domestic sector, women contributed immensely in the production and distribution of goods and services. Upon all the contributions of women in the development of the nation (Nigeria), they are denied socio – economic and political opportunities. In most of the literary writings, women are also pushed to the background as seen in the life of Sidi. Sidi is a young lady that two men are struggling to marry. Lakunle is a young man who loves Sidi and wants to marry her but refuse to pay her bride price as he sees it as barbaric. On the other hand, Baroka is a very old man who is 72 years of age and also has 73 children. He wants to marry Sidi not because he loves her but because he wants to partake in the fame of Sidi appearing in a magazine. Hence, Sidi is put at the background as also other women who Baroka married. How can a very old man marry so many wives and also desiring to marry a very young girl to his list of women who are his wives? This is the very height of it, women being degraded and put in a very shallow limelight where few or nobody recognises them anywhere anytime.

Women are presented in a degrading picture. Women with little brain to understand simple things, as in the case of Sidi, a female central character and Lakunle, a male central character who tags Sidi as a woman with a smaller brain than him, since she refuses to marry him unless he pays the bride price; “a natural feeling, arising out of envy; for as a woman, you have a smaller brain than mine”. And when Lakunle senses that Sidi is not happy with his attitude, instead of consoling her, he worsens the situation by saying, “please, don’t be angry with me. I didn’t mean you in particular. And anyway, it isn’t what I say. The scientists have proved it. It’s in my books. Women have smaller brains than men, that’s why they are called the weaker sex”. Women sometimes are the architect of their misfortune. Some or most of them do not even have value in their feminine structure while some are not proud of it while some depend solemnly on the men for their own very survival. This is seen in the life of Baroka’s first wife Sadiku who told Sidi this when she was trying to convince her to marry her husband, “Sidi, have you consider what a life of bliss awaits you? Do you know what it is to be the Bale’s last wife? I’ll tell you. When he dies and that should not be long; even the lion has to die sometime – well, when he does, it means that you will have the honour of being the senior wife of the new Bale. And just think, until Baroka dies, you shall be his favourite”. Women are also degraded as Lakunle sees indecent pictures of women printed in newspaper as a show to progress the society as he says “we’ll print newspapers everyday with pictures of seductive girls. The world will judge our progress by the girl that wins beauty contests”. Also, in terms of character to compare it with foreign culture. They consider women as property that men can inherit. It is known that from both Christian and Islamic religions, children and wives inherit the property of the man when he is no more there. The marginalisation of women as property has become a thing that may or may never be solved. Traditionally, they were seen as properties that could be bought, sold or accumulated. Even the modern Lakunle falls victim to this, by looking down on Sidi for having a smaller brain, and later by thinking it will be easier to marry her once she’s lost her virginity, since no dowry was required in such a situation. In the other text, “the importance of being earnest”, reverse is the case as women were portrayed here as the saviour of the nation as they were the most successful and most influential people as seen in the lives of Lady Bracknell and Miss Prism.

Therefore, in all these two plays, “the lion and the jewel” portrays women in a very offensive and degrading manner as seen in the life of Sidi , a beautiful yet somewhat egotistical village girl who is wooed by both Baroka and Lakunle. She is also the village belle and the titular harem while Sadiku, the ist wife of Baroka is the chief’s sly great wife and chiefless of his harem. Then, in the other text, “importance of being earnest” portrays women in a positive limelight as seen in the lives of both Lady Bracknell and Miss Prism. Lady Bracknell is a woman of authority and has the final say in her home while Miss Prism is a well writer whose manuscripts are always published. In this text, there is no mention of men being great or influential in the society. Rather, Jack lies all the time to the extent of bearing a name that is not his just because the lady he loves likes the name while in the case of Algernon, he lies about his fake brother that is sick in the city and also lies to Cecily Cardew about his name being Jack also. These men are portrayed in a degrading manner as they are seen in a cunning, dubious and cheating attitude. Their lifestyle do not portray or show any good in them at all and they do not take life serious. They waste their time doing the trivial things and abandoning the most important ones. In “the importance of being earnest”, Gwendolene base her love on marrying a man that bears the name Ernest as apply to Cecily also. Lady Bracknell base the qualifications on marrying her only daughter on family background, wealth, influence and job as that is what she is busy asking Jack when he came to marry Gwendolene. Miss Prism is a writer that leaves a baby in a handbag in a train station. Therefore in all these, women are being presented in a very low picture in terms of intelligence as in Sidi, in terms of being reasonable in Gwendolene and Cecily, in terms of being careless in Miss Prism, in terms of being nonchalant in Lady Bracknell and in degrading their other fellow women in Sadiku. Women should therefore see themselves with high value and priceless before other people can see them that same way. They should also empower themselves and stop or devaluing themselves as they are what they think and see themselves as.

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