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

**DISCUSS GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN ANY TWO MODERN COMIC WORKS**

**BY**

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## **A PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN WILDE'S 'THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST' AND SOYINKA'S 'LION AND THE JEWEL'**

It does not seem that Soyinka consciously tries to make a statement about gender, but he does so nonetheless. On the one hand, he creates two female characters that are sassy, opinionated, manipulative, and independent. On the other hand, both of them are ultimately pawns in the games of men. Sidi does not want to marry either Lakunle or Baroka, but Baroka tricks her, rapes her, and then gets to marry her. She is an object and nothing more. Sadiku is also tricked, and sees her elation over the Bale's impotence and the power of women vanishes as his plot is made clear. Women may seem like they have power in mid-20th century Nigeria, but they ultimately do not.

In the first scene of the play entitled "Morning," the village girls tell Sidi that she has become famous because her image is throughout an entire magazine. Sidi is excited and believes that she is more esteemed than Baroka because of her fame. When the girls discuss how many leaves of the magazine her picture takes up, Lakunle counts three leaves, and Sidi says, "One leaf for every heart that I shall break" (Soyinka 13).

In the second scene of the play entitled "Noon," Sadiku tells Sidi that Baroka asks for her hand in marriage. Sidi is quick to reject Baroka's offer and begins to criticize him for his old age. Sidi has become conceited and believes that she is more important than the Bale of Ilujinle. Sidi looks at her images in the magazine and comments that she never noticed her velvet skin before. Lakunle feels guilty for not mentioning her skin and says that he would have said something, but believed it was not the proper thing to do. Sidi pushes out her breasts and says, "There's a deceitful

message in my eyes beckoning insatiate men to certain doom. And teeth that flash the sign of happiness, strong and evenly, beaming full of life" (Soyinka 22).

Sidi's comments portray how she views her sexuality as a weapon to entice and bring doom upon men who become infatuated with her beauty. She mentions that she is looking forward to breaking men's hearts and views them as her opponents. In Yoruba culture, the payment of the bride-price is a very important custom. Sidi understands that her worth has elevated and views her virginity as a treasure. Initially, she is not willing to marry Baroka because of his age, which is a modern view of marriage, but eventually becomes his bride after he cunningly seduces her.

In 'The Importance of Being Earnest', the question of each gender's role often centres on power. In the Victorian world, men had greater influence than women. Men made the decisions for their families, while women worked around the house. Wilde raises interesting questions about gender roles in 'The Importance of Being Earnest', by putting women (like Lady Bracknell) in positions of power and by showing that men can be irresponsible and bad at decision-making. The traditional view of gender roles in the Victorian era was that men were active, manly, assertive, and economically independent whilst women were assumed to be passive, pliant and dependent. Wilde does challenge these traditional roles deliberately to make humour out of these characteristics and to make fun of the conventional roles of the society. The two main male characters, Jack and Algernon, cannot be regarded as masculine, or at any rate both of them do not fit the criteria for what characteristics a stereotypical Victorian man would be.

Wilde has reversed the roles of gender in the play, the females are those who take the lead and are seen as the most domineering characters throughout – a very bizarre layout in a period where men were seen as the head of the family and the most assertive figure. Lady Bracknell is the most domineering character throughout the play, and this is as a result of the eloquent and rather unnatural language she uses. She takes on the role of her husband in Act 1 when Jack asks for Gwendolen's hand in marriage- "I feel obliged to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men"- this was often the father's role.

Throughout the conversation it is quite apparent that Lady Bracknell holds all the power, and Wilde does this through the questions she asks. Additionally, her questioning seems rather irrelevant and ridiculous at times, she asks "Do you smoke?" to which Jack admits that he does and Lady Bracknell replies, "I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind." Here, the addictive habit that Jack has taken up is compared to a profession and is creating humor due to the nature of the question and how much apparent importance it holds. It seems as though Wilde is using Lady Bracknell to mock those in authority by presenting her as a character with no real agenda to her long and painful questioning – other than to talk. Algernon and Jack's ungentlemanly behavior and trivial pursuits can be seen as comic and deliberate in making men seem less powerful and serious.