CHAPTER SEVEN

GENDER & THEATRE

By Nyager, E.A.
DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE
AND COMMUNICATION ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF JOS
JOS-NIGERIA.

INTRODUCTION
Theatre is a social institution. Gender is a social construct. The word 'social', which is derivative from 'society', is thus a common denominator to Gender and Theatre. Also common to both Gender and the Theatre is the issue of 'roles' and this will be looked at in detail in the course of this discourse.

Gender does not exist in a social vacuum and has been viewed as a spin-off from globalisation. Actually however, Gender is a spin-off from Feminist discourse even if today it is perceived more in relation to Development studies and Globalisation. Some have even tried to disassociate 'gender' (as a field of inquiry) from Feminism. However, according to Busfield (1996, p.32)

In British sociology, Ann Oakley's text Sex, Gender and Society, first published in 1972, heralded the new linguistic and analytic precisions that allow feminists not only to distinguish the social from the biological when considering male and female behaviour, but also to avoid the old ambiguity in meaning between sex as sexuality and sex as the broader corpus of male-female differences.

Gender is, therefore, an analytical category that was designed
to refer to and aid the understanding of the social and cultural origins of male-female differences in personal characteristic and behaviour and was introduced as a challenge to biological determinism.

Biological sex was to be contrasted with social 'gender'- the former denoting bodily differences between men and women in the reproductive organs, the latter differences in male and female qualities and behaviour which were held to be a product of social factors and could not be reduced to matters of biology.

If gender is accepted as a spin-off from globalisation and gender works within society, as theatre also does, the question to be asked is: what are the gendered effects of globalisation on women's and men's lives? This chapter attempts answers to this question as it looks not only at changes that affect the lives of men and women in a globalized world but also how theatre can become an instrument for setting a new agenda either to challenge or accommodate these changes and perhaps to promote new values that will create a more equitable society for both men and women.

Gender analysis reveals the simultaneous restructuring of states, markets, civil society and even households. These changes must profoundly affect the lives of women and men both domestically and professionally.

Global restructuring, for instance, increases the needs of and opportunities for women to struggle against economic social, cultural and political oppressions that arise from it or in reaction to it (Marchand, et al; 2000). Much Feminist scholarship on gender, according to these scholars, has emphasized the marginalization and exploitation of women's productive and reproductive labour under globalisation by pointing to the rise of unregulated, benefit-less and casualized service (Ibid, p. 226). Women's identities and practices are shifting not just to accommodate restructuring, but also to improve or escape their existing conditions even if only momentarily. For example research has shown that when women migrate or enter the labour force out of economic necessity they are challenging gender roles by leaving home and renegotiating gender relations at the household level where they can no longer be solely responsible for reproductive labour. On the other hand men are also having to renegotiate and resist restructuring in one way or another.

Global restructuring is also being reflected in the theatre. The theatre as part and parcel of society must serve the social purpose of reflecting a changing social order. It is an art that focuses on social relationships and reflects social movements and concerns.

The global theatre scene is witnessing for instance an emergence of feminist theatre identities both in research and practice. This is happening not only in the West but also in Africa. A number of female playwrights and theatre practitioners are emerging on university campuses in Nigeria tackling issues of gender particularly in the context of development. In Europe and America similar scholarship efforts are being registered. Elaine Aston (1995) thus argues that because of a male bias of teaching and research in a wide range of academic disciplines, including the theatre there is a need for this reality to be challenged by Feminism.

The importance of feminism in recent thinking about theatre history, theory and practice is becoming considerable as... current study sets out to demonstrate its importance through a survey of the feminist project in theatre studies... considering stages in Feminism and hopefully making feminist
interventions in the field. (Aston: 1995 p. 1)"

In the same vein Goodman (1998) makes the point for emerging feminist theatre studies by compiling a number of contemporary feminist theatres in the text: Gender in Performance Contemporary Feminist Theatres: to each her own. This title, according to her, is justified by the fact that there is not one feminism, nor one feminist theatre. Each form of feminism and theatre can be studied in relation to the idea that feminist theatre is itself a form of cultural representation influenced by changes in the geographies of feminism, women's studies, economics, politics and cultural studies.7

FEMINISM AND WOMEN STUDIES
Gender analysis according to Imam and Mama (1997, p6) developed from women's studies and is due largely to Feminist research. Busfield (1996: p 48) also argues that an adequate theory of gender must be based on feminist foundations. For, given the history of women's oppression, a feminist standpoint is an essential foundation for the analysis of gender. So then, research into women's issues is of recent date (Ostergaard, 1992)9 and studies related to the role of Third World women in the development of their countries have only been carried out regularly during the last thirty years.

Women and gender were made a central social concern by the women liberation movement of the late 1960s (Crawford & Unger: 2000)10. During this time, the field of psychology began to examine the stereotypical thinking and bias that had characterized its knowledge about women. It began to be realized that women had been left out of many studies and social theories were being constructed from the perspective of male-as-norm and women's behaviour explained as a deviation from the male standard. Thus psychologists began to realize that most psychological knowledge about women and gender was androcentric, or male-centered. They began to rethink psychological concepts and methods and to produce new research with women as the focus of study. They also began to study topics of importance and concern to women and to develop ways of analysing social relations between women and men.11

Women within psychology became a very important force for implementing this change. Many books and articles got published by women showing how psychology was misrepresenting women and how it needed to change. This challenge is still valid and real. Today ideas about women's roles and the meaning of gender are still the subject of much study and debate. Thus Feminism begins with a keen awareness of exclusion from male cultural, social, sexual, political and intellectual discourse. It is a critique of prevailing social conditions that formulate women's positions as outside of dominant male discourse (Dolan, 1988: p.3).12 Again according to Dolan the routes Feminism takes to redress the fact of male dominance... are varied; and consequently Feminism has in fact given way more precisely to Feminisms.13

So, the emergence of interest in women and gender took place in a social context of changing roles for women and the emergence of a feminist social movement in the late 1960s. As also concurred by Busfield, (1996) "the term gender entered sociological discourse...at the end of the 1960s as a product of the rise of the women's Liberation Movement. Feminism's second wave".14 But feminism as has been already suggested above has many meanings and contemporary Feminist theory has many variants. Although Dolan (1988:5-6) identifies three dominant feminist positions namely: Bourgeois, Radical and Materialist, Tong (1998)15 claims that Feminist theory has
many more variants. According to Tong, each of these can be viewed as a different lens through which to view the experiences of women and like different lenses each is useful for focusing perception on particular phenomena. This diversity of feminist perspectives means that different feminists take different positions on women's issues.

Although Dolan in identifying three dominant positions of Feminism was speaking for both British and American contexts, Tong whose work is more recent, identifies five categories of Feminist positions in the United States. These include: Liberal, Radical Socialist, Womanist (Woman of colour) and Cultural Feminisms.

For illustrative purposes, we may briefly look at Dolan's categorization.

1. Bourgeois or Liberal Feminism proposes the amelioration of women's position in society without any radical change to its political economic or social structures e.g. through legislative reform.

2. Radical Feminism locates the oppression of women in the patriarchal domination of women by men and advocates the abolition of the man-made structures which reinforce gender-based inequality (Radical Feminism has recently been termed cultural Feminism in America).

3. Materialist Feminism has now been widely adopted as the nomenclature for the theoretical position which in the 1970s was labelled as Marxist or socialist Feminism. This position critiques the historical and material conditions of class. It emphasizes that there are many kinds of divisions between groups of people that can lead to oppression. Socialist Feminists believe for instance that discrimination based on social class, race and gender is equally wrong. Moreover it views these social categories as inseparable since sexism, racism and classism reinforce one another.

In spite of the plurality in definition and viewpoints on Feminism, two important themes are identifiable in Feminist discourse. First Feminism places a high premium on women. Women are considered important and worthwhile human beings. This, for feminist scholars, means that women are worthy of study in their own right. Secondly, feminism recognizes the need for social change if women are to lead secure and satisfying lives.

The simplest definition of a feminist might thus be: that individual who holds the basic beliefs that women are valuable; and social change to benefit women is necessary. And the core social change that feminists advocate for is; an end to all forms of domination of men over women and even women over women (Kimball, 1995, in Crawford & Unger, 2000 p.8). According to bell hooks (1984) Feminism is a movement to end sexism and sexist oppression. Tall order! The question may arise can men be feminists? Feminists differ on this score. Crawford and Unger (2000) seem to hold the opinion that men can be feminists since men can hold feminist values. Indeed according to them, some men who share these values call themselves feminists. However, Stanley and Wise (1993) seem to think differently about this. They seem to argue that qualification to be feminist should be based on experience rather than on the basis of values held. According to them, an emphasis on research by women is absolutely fundamental to feminist research. We reject the idea that men can be feminists because we argue that what is essential to 'being feminist' is the possession of 'feminist consciousness'. And we see feminist consciousness as rooted in the concrete, practical and everyday experiences of being
and being treated as a woman. Feminist consciousness is a particular kind of interrelation of the experience of being a woman (Stanley and Wise 1993, p.32).

Thus a major concern of feminist social sciences is to fill gaps in knowledge about women. Including women's 'world' in academic work, it is believed, would lead to the concerted reordering of established beliefs, perspectives and also to a greater understanding of the many different stratifications which exist within society.

The emphasis on 'filling the gaps' about women's interests and experiences is reflected in much of the literature about sexism in the social sciences. The epitome of such an approach is to be seen in the foundation and operation of 'Women's Studies' in which research on and for women has become the focus for feminists and some other academics (Tobias, 1978). The insights of women's studies and feminist theory show that the inclusion of women and women's issues necessarily changes the terrain of academic enquiry. Gender analysis must therefore spread out from women's studies and into mainstream social studies. The theatre also must serve the purpose of social science research in advancing the cause of gender inquiry through an appropriate reflection and highlighting of gender issues and approaches to their resolution.

Gender analysis, women studies and feminist research necessarily involve critiques of and challenges to dominant and sexist paradigms and approaches in academic discourse and research. They hold and express a political commitment to women's liberation and the construction of egalitarian gender relationships.

**DEFINING GENDER**

Gender analysis developed from women's studies and is due largely to feminist research (Imman, et al. 1997, P.6). Gender is important to knowledge as a system of human pursuit since 'gender' is a major way by which society classifies people. It is a central part of identity and is determined frequently by power and status but is more than the differences between women and men.

Gender has been defined variously both in research and in public circles. An early definition according to Riley (1997, p.4) was meant to distinguish social and biological aspects of the differences between women and men. The term 'gender' entered sociological discourse as a way of conceptualising male-females differences at the end of the 1960s (Stroller, 1968).

Whereas "Sex" is generally used to refer to biological aspects of women and men, "gender" refers to those aspects that are shaped by social forces or to the meaning that a society gives to biological differences. This difference between 'gender' and "Sex" continues to be commonly used. It is central to arguments about whether nature or nurture accounts for differences between women's and men's lives.

Since the 1960s however, the value and meaning of the concept have been widely contested amongst feminists, sociologists and other academics. Some feminists have contended that attention to gender and gender relations can lead to a denial of women's oppression and 'exclude and silence many women' (Jackson 1992, p.31). They claim that the use of the term 'gender depoliticises the feminist project.

In recent years, social scientists seem to have tended towards a broader definition of gender. Gender has come to be described more in terms of the way that societies are organized rather than just as attributes of individuals. In this wise therefore, whether the differences between women and
men are biologically or socially driven is less important than the ways that societies are organized around those differences (Riley 1997, p.5). Gender is thus viewed as a set of social and cultural practices that influence the lives of women and men in every society. Gender is created and maintained by complex social processes. Interpersonal processes involving gender help to maintain a pattern of male dominance so gender and power are intimately connected (Crawford et al; 2000, p.78).

Since, gender as a social construct shapes the lives of all people in all societies it deals with the different roles men and women play in society and the relative power they wield. In no society do men and women perform equal roles or hold equal positions of power. Gender orders social relationships in such a way that some individuals (usually men) have greater power than do others and in every society, the roles women and men assume accord women fewer opportunities and privileges.

Gender also refers to the qualitative and interdependent character of women and men’s positions in society. Gender relations are constituted in terms of the relationship of power and dominance that structure the life chances of women and men. Thus, gender divisions are not fixed in biology, but constitute an aspect of the wider social division of labour and this in turn, is rooted in the conditions of production and reproduction and reinforced by the cultural, religious and ideological systems prevailing in a given society (Riley, 1997,p.6).

Since the relations between men and women are socially constituted and not derived from biology, gender thus resides in the province of social science; it holds qualities which are shaped through the history of social relations and interactions.

The concept of gender makes it possible to distinguish the biologically founded sexual differences between women and men from the culturally determined differences between the roles given to or undertaken by women and men respectively in a given society. The first are unchangeable, like a destiny. The latter are workable and may be changed by political and opinion-shaping influences. (Østergaard, 1997:7)

**GENDER AND THEATRE AS SOCIAL ENDEAVOURS**

The theatre is a social institution even as gender is a social construct. The theatre takes from the society but also gives back to society finished productions constructed out of the raw materials of ideas and issues gotten from the society. The theatre thus serves a social purpose. Gender on the other hand is constructed out of social processes with resultant practices that go to perpetuate the same processes.

The theatre must serve a social purpose as there can be no theatre without an audience. The theatre is thus a public enterprise unlike other art forms such as painting or sculpturing which can be produced privately. The issue of public performance is therefore central to the theatre. Performance cannot take place without the 'assumption' and acting out of roles. Role-playing is thus central to performance in the theatre. Role-taking is also central to the construction of social gender. Herein is the interface between gender and theatre. Both gender and theatre operate in the context of social (inter) actions and both have central to their operation and 'propagation' the activity of role-taking. Indeed, one of the most important aspects of Feminist theory has to do with the
critical role of the family in socialization. Socialization is perceived as that process by which children are transformed into social beings who have taken on particular norms and values. Thus, feminist theory of the family includes two key theoretical concepts: 'socialization' and 'role' (Stanley & Wise 1993, p.93). It is within the family that the values, norms, expectations and ideologies of society as a whole are internalised by individuals. The family turns individual egos into social beings. The family is thus a miniature society, a crucible for learning and acting out roles that confirm gender femininity or masculinity. The theatre on the other hand as a miniature society, a contracted society through the assumption and acting out of roles, can be made to deconstruct learned norms, values, expectations, ideologies or to promote them. There is a lot then to be learned about roles (gender roles inclusive) both in the theatre and in the larger society. And since the theatre takes out of society to project on the stage in a way that does not only offer entertainment but also educates, the theatre can become a forum/instrument for social change. What was socially constructed through socialization can be deconstructed through the theatre while promoting new values, new ideologies and new realities.

For instance, within Feminist theory of the family, women's roles within family life are seen as crucial to the perpetuation of the system which may be patriarchy or capitalism. Women are seen as central for two roles they play in family life; the biological role as child-bearers and their social role as the family member most responsible for socialization. Feminism’s main concern and focus in this socialization process is that which touches on women's oppression which is sex-role socialization. Sex-role or gender-role socialization is that bit of the process by which children come to be not only social beings but either 'Feminine' or masculine ones. 'Femininity' and 'masculinity' as gender involve clusters of attributes and behaviour seen within particular societies to be appropriate for females and males respectively. What is seen as the 'content' of this process norms, values, behaviours and so for this also seen as a content which derives from the needs of the system whether patriarchy or capitalism. And it is the demands and requirements of the so-called 'system' translated into ideology that become social reality. It is this reality that is capable of deconstruction by and through the theatre. And if this instrument of change is in the right hands the hands of gender-sensitive individuals, then much good will be served in the feminist project of confronting and eliminating all forms of oppression of and discrimination against women in the society.

Most Feminists argue that at birth all children are assigned a gender which is based on the appearance of their genitals. Gender is then inculcated, first by their mother's differentiating between children of different sexes through their behaviour towards them. Some feminists believe that the direction of personality, more specifically its femininity or masculinity is set in the very earliest interactions between an infant and its parents, more particularly its mother (Staley and Wise, 1993, p.94). What a responsibility for mothers in the moulding of children and ultimately society! Since this power to 'mould' lies primarily in the hands of 'mothers' (women) it remains a challenge to mothers/women to re-direct the social processes that create norms and values (socialization), thus changing prevailing social reality. This new reality through the theatre can thus serve the dual purpose of
art form and platform for social change. Acquiring a critical consciousness for women is therefore the challenge to combating patriarchy and other gender-related social ills. Women must be made aware of their potential for changing society. This can be done through education. The theatre can serve this purpose. As a medium of 'mass' communication, it can be made to project the new values and norms that must mould a new social order that is based on gender equity and social justice.

**GENDER IN THE THEATRE**

Work is a part of virtually every woman's life. Women's work in the informal sector may fail to be recognized and remunerated but even in the public arena when women do work for pay, their compensation and status are most likely to be lower than men's work. The world of work is thus a gendered world. For often, women and men do different kinds of work, face different obstacles to satisfaction and achievement and receive different and unequal rewards. This is not different in the theatre. Indeed it would seem that the challenge for women in the theatre as a workplace is even more acute since the theatre over the ages seems to have held some inherent hostility towards women (Nyager, 2001). The theatre has been a man's world primarily due to its public nature. Women whose work has traditionally been perceived as domestic-bound have had to work against huge odds to be accommodated in the theatre and challenges still exist for women in the theatre that are gender-based. The theatre is a profession in which women were virtually absent in the past and are even now expected to remain in restricted specializations like acting, design, costume & make up rather than say directing and production. One remembers with amusement that during one's years of training we were expected as the female students in our class to all specialize in acting. When one of us opted to take up directing, she was expected to fail. She didn't! Again in the Playwriting and Criticism course, we girls were expected naturally to take up criticism rather than playwriting. When I opted to write a play my effort was dismissed outright by a male classmate as being a closet drama (it wasn't) until the assessment of our works put him in great distress as he could not move his plot forward. These biases and prejudices in judgement of and expectations from female theatre workers are a great challenge to breaking in and staying on in the theatre profession for women.

In most societies, sex segregation by occupation and gender inequality within the work place are the core reasons why women's jobs often have lower pay and status. Women are less likely than men to be promoted to jobs with higher status and pay, even if their qualifications are similar. Part of this inequality is accounted for by the responsibilities that women have at home. Family and home commitments often limit the time and energy women can devote to work, which makes them appear less committed or competent than men, who can spend more time at their jobs. (Riley, 1997 p.12). This so true in the theatre.

The phrases 'working woman' and 'working mother' suggest that a woman is not really a worker unless she is in paid work force. It also implies that it is an abnormality for her to be working publicly (Crawford and Unger 2000, p.393). If it is considered an abnormality for women to work publicly, it is doubly so considered when she is working in the theatre. If she is both wife and mother, the challenge of meeting the demands of these different roles must impede on her satisfaction and achievement on the job.

Combining the multiple obligations of spouse, parent and worker has often been described as a 'balancing act' for women. Therefore setting high goals and persisting despite setbacks must remain important factors in women's career development (Crawford and Unger 2000, p.428).
un-recognized, unpaid work behind them since much of the work that women do is unpaid and not formally defined. But women's unpaid work benefits the career development of their husbands while their own careers suffer. For women in the theatre, the time-demands of their job (long and sometimes extraordinary hours) can become a source of much tension at home if they do not have an understanding husband. For the world of work and particularly the theatre world assumes that workers are men and that these men have wives to take care of them and the home front. Men in the theatre for instance, can keep long hours at work without worrying that something will go wrong at home. Professional theatre women may not be able to do this, as they are unable to be efficient and available at both home and work. This becomes even more critical when a woman's work takes her out of town. In the theatre this can happen very often and many a woman's career choices in the theatre have been limited because she opted for career offers that would keep her close to home.

To illustrate the imperatives that could bear on women to make close-to home career choices is this personal experience. In the year 2000, I became a victim of a motor accident that occurred while I was returning from an out-of-town workshop. One of my husband's colleagues in the office on hearing about this indicted him for allowing me to travel out for a workshop! Thank God for an understanding husband. I still attend out-of-town workshops and conferences.

Men in the corporate workplace, are told, are seen as bringing two people to their jobs, and women, because of their family duties as bringing less than one (Wajcman: 1998 in Crawford & Unger: 2000). Also the qualities valued in women such as services, empathy, care taking, sexual and intellectual flattery of men keep women out of the top ranks of business, government and professional life since these characteristics are feminine but also subordinating. Again one personal example will illustrate this.

While training as an undergraduate in the theatre a friend of mine had to take strong exception (during a late-night rehearsal) to a classmate's (male) suggestion that she prepare tea for the group! As a female theatre practitioner, one has always had to insist on being treated on an equal footing with male colleagues.

So, many women's paid jobs are characterised by service to others in ways that are extensions of the unpaid work wives and mothers do (Nieva & Gukek, 1981). Even when women and men are in equivalent jobs, women are expected to be more caring and supportive than men, creating extra demands on their time and energy (Wayman, 1998 in Crawford & Unger, 2000).

Women also have to work extra hard to keep in tandem with male colleagues in the professions whether in terms of earnings or in terms of promotion. Some years ago I was denied training on the basis of my age! It was actually suggested (albeit unofficially) that I already had four degrees (the number of my children). In academics as in other professions, training very often translates into promotion as any academic exposure and experience should always result into publication(s) and further exposure.

To conclude this chapter on Gender and theatre, here are two episodes of personal experience since "the personal is the political" (Stanley & Wise, 1993).

It is a laudable trend to note that 'gender' has taken centre-stage development in in discourse and practice. This is offering unprecedented opportunities to many women. Although sometimes included in professional ventures on the insistence of donor organizations supporting certain professional/academic projects, these opportunities are helping to train and expose many women and build their skills. One remembers being included on the executive council of a professional organization on the basis of donor-
demand for gender-sensitive representation. Although this inclusion along with that of another female colleague was only token, it afforded us great opportunities in professional training and exposure even though we were initially relegated to the management of welfare rather than doing work in the field. However things changed when we protested and were subsequently offered the opportunity to work in the field. Needless to say that we were keenly supervised for errors and mistakes. When we succeeded, faults were still sought in the report-writing component of the work which unknown to our superiors had been done by a male colleague!

Working in the theatre of my university has been one tough experience of challenges, hostilities and stereotypical attitudes. Colleagues may excuse you when you teach theatre and drama, as a female in the theatre but venturing into doing productions might be ‘putting your life on the line’ as it were. I remember being grudgingly and patronizingly congratulated after my first production in my Department. According to a male colleague, I was the first woman to have successfully done a production in the department! I did not believe him. This same production received a huge dose of negative criticism from the mostly male group of colleagues in the audience that night, which to me was of great academic benefit. It became very gratifying to me when I found out later that my play (an improvised piece) had inspired the writing of two other plays in the department!

Sometimes, a highly competent performance by a woman may actually be evaluated more positively than comparable performance by a man. This can be patronizing and is of course unacceptable as the unspoken posture is that female competence has more value because it is unexpected (Abrahamson, et al: 1997). Finally, even women in power positions experience sexist attitudes. According to Crawford and Unger:

Studies of women who work as professors, surgeons, attorneys, police officers and firefighters show that they face hostile and dismissive treatment at work.”

In all professions, therefore, including the theatre, the social construction of women as different from men (Gender) is a continuous process that poses much challenge to the female gender and is a major way of maintaining male power in the workplace. (Wajeman, 1998 in Crawford & Unger, 2000).

NOTES AND REFERENCES


8. Tong R. Cited in Crawford & Unger, Ibid p. 1


