

## **Gender Relations and Fair Hearing: The 'New' in Ola Rotimi's '*Man Talk, Woman Talk*'.**

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### **Abstract**

*Interests in gender relations, conflicts, and perhaps 'wars' have been sustained preoccupations in Nigerian literature since the arrival of the dissenting voices of female writers on the literary scene. As illustrated by robust scholarship within and outside the continent, several studies and attempts at providing learned responses to gender issues seem to have only generated more uncertainties in this field of study. Nevertheless, it is only in response to the lingering uncertainties that new approaches and perspectives on gender discourse and relations have emerged in literature and scholarship. This paper examines the new perspective in striking the balance between men and women in Ola Rotimi's *Man Talk, Woman Talk*. It is predicated on the legal concept of fair hearing. The paper reveals that Rotimi, by means of a theatrical mode laced with humour, pushes to 'better the balance, better the world' as he projects gender claims and counterclaims as serious intellectual discourse that must be attended to. It argues that, with a vibrant prototype of male and female voices, the play, couched in court proceedings, voices gender biases, misgivings, and sentiments that are silenced in due course. The study concludes that the play provides a premise for the mutual resolution of gender issues and also attests to the existence of a new perspective on gender equity in Nigeria. The paper has therefore argued that with actual attitudinal change in men and women alike, gender relations would exist devoid of provocation and conflicts.*

**Key words:** Fair hearing, gender relations, gender balance, equity, bias

### **Introduction**

Interests in gender relations, conflicts, and wars have been sustained preoccupations in Nigerian literature since the emergence of dissenting

female voices on the literary scene. Robust scholarship both within and outside the continent illustrates that numerous studies and attempts to address gender issues have only generated more uncertainties in this field. Nonetheless, this subject and related topics occupy a significant position in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were implemented globally in 2015 (UNDP). According to the United Nations, these goals are essential for sustainable development. Goal two, which focuses on gender equality, asserts that women must be granted equal rights in society, as this is crucial for a sustainable future. The issue of gender equality in relation to peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG Goal 16) remains significant to this study. In response to the ongoing uncertainties, new approaches and perspectives on gender discourse and relations have emerged in literature and scholarship.

This paper examines a new perspective on improving the balance between men and women in Ola Rotimi's "*Man Talk, Woman Talk*," grounded in the legal concept of fair hearing. It reveals that Rotimi, through a theatrical mode infused with humour, employs the *kami suotoi* (a dramatic form in Ijaw land where mutual insults serve as entertainment and social commentary). Rotimi aims to 'better the balance, better the world' by presenting gender claims and counterclaims as an essential intellectual discourse that demands attention. The paper argues that, with a vibrant mix of male and female voices, the play, framed as court proceedings, articulates gender biases, misgivings, and sentiments that are often silenced. The study concludes that the play provides a foundation for the mutual resolution of gender issues and demonstrates a new perspective on gender equity in Nigeria. Ultimately, the paper posits that with genuine attitudinal change among both men and women, gender relations and equity can exist without provocation and conflict.

### **Conceptual Considerations: The Principle of Fair Hearing**

This paper is based on the legal concept of fair hearing. It examines the significance of the right to fair hearing as dramatized in Rotimi's "*Man Talk, Woman Talk*" and explores the proposed solutions for resolving conflict and achieving sustainable gender equity in Nigeria and Africa. Jhaveri asserts that the origin of the requirement for a fair hearing in administrative law can be traced back to historical constitutional documents and rights instruments, such as the Carta (1215), issued by King John of England (2). Jhaveri notes that the rationale behind the fair hearing is rooted in its capacity to enhance "the chances of a just outcome as decision-makers are presented with an optimal amount of information by all relevant persons." Additionally, it creates a fair and enabling environment that fosters respect for individuals affected by administrative decisions by treating them equitably from a procedural standpoint (2). The resolution of this issue largely depends on the specific source of the right to a fair hearing that an applicant relies upon. However, Oni argues that while the Carta significantly contributed to the English notion of fundamental human rights, various myths persist that seek to explain the origin of the concept of fair hearing. He further contends that:

Indigenous Nigerian concept of fair hearing did not conform ... with the United Kingdom concept, does not mean that fair hearing never existed in the indigenous Nigerian justice system. The indigenous justice system has its own traditionally unique concept of fair hearing that was premised on the culture of the individual indigenous society. There is no doubt that the concept of fair hearing possesses a long and rich history but it did not originate exclusively from any single legal system, from any single geographical region of the world or from any single country...(127).

Thus, fair hearing is derived from the principle of natural justice; it "means giving equal opportunity to the parties to be heard in the litigation before a court or tribunal, including an ad-hoc tribunal..." (Usman 2). Fair hearing is a fundamental right of all individuals. Oni corroborates this, but asserts that although fair hearing is a universal right, it is often abused globally. He insists that this abuse is not without consequences. While some of the resultant effects may be mild, others can be devastating with wide-ranging impacts (126). In the context of fair hearing, parties are given equal opportunity to present their cases, and this principle is crucial because each individual should typically have the right to be heard without partiality. Ibingo Evans asserts that "fair hearing is a trial or determination of rights in which a party is granted a hearing showing no partiality, prejudice, and is therefore just, upright, and honest" (76). Similarly, Oni points out that "hearing can only be fair when all the parties to a dispute are given the opportunity to be heard regardless of status, age, race, religion, tribe, political affiliation, etc. If any party to a dispute is denied the opportunity to be heard, such a hearing is devoid of the principle of fair hearing; thus, everyone involved in a case must be assured that he or she will be given an opportunity to be heard" (126).

In the administration of justice, a person should have the opportunity to be heard. The right to fair hearing is enshrined in Section 36(1) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Citizens' rights and privileges are protected through the principle of fair hearing. Fair hearing can be applied in both judicial and non-judicial proceedings, and it includes:

the broad idea that all parties should be heard: *audialterampartem*. The right to a fair hearing can include access to a court or tribunal (→administrative dispute in civil law jurisdictions); an oral hearing; a timely hearing; an opportunity to present evidence or information relating to the decision and have notice of

information held by the executive with a chance to respond to such information; access to legal representation and the need for reasons on the making of an administrative decision (Jhaveri 2).

Although studies in Africa and Nigeria seem to argue for the universal existence of fair hearing, one wonders why it is readily muted in cases where women are involved and seem to crave opportunities to be heard or served justice in many societies and indigenous communities in Africa. Aiyedun and Ordor assert that "the dispute resolution process in African societies provided individuals with an opportunity to air their grievances, an element which connotes fairness (158) and had appeal across indigenous communities, however, these traditional processes "are criticised for not adhering to international fair trial standards" thus, women suffer discrimination in their proceedings. (163) Olusegun and Oyelade state succinctly that women have limited access to justice..." and this is not without consequences (4). Perhaps it is safe to implicate patriarchy and its multifaceted dynamics in the abuse of fair hearing in cases involving especially women and men.

### **Gender Relations and Conflict Resolution**

Gender can be described as an identity and the expectations associated with it, shaped by the roles assigned by society to men and women. Sikoska and Solomon points out that gender is a process individuals are born into, which connotes a "system of roles and relationships between women and men that are determined not by biology but by social, political, and economic context" (2). They further argue that gender and its patterns imply situations in which women are disadvantaged compared to men, and this disparity is a fundamental source of conflict between the genders in society. Metell contends that until responsibilities and opportunities are equally shared between men and women, gender equality will remain an elusive phenomenon (5).

Gender relations between men and women in Africa may appear cordial; however, when perceived otherwise, socio-cultural norms, expectations, and demands inherent in a community's way of life can become problematic. Dasi asserts that in African societies where male normativity is prioritized, gender norms have adversely affected women, as many of these norms "are far from ensuring protection and participation, particularly for women" (60). While African communities may pride themselves on indigenous principles of social justice and equity—especially in conflict resolution—Dasi's insights on male normativity challenge the effectiveness of these systems. She further claims that the system "both oppresses women and denies them equal rights and opportunities with men" (60). This perspective significantly accounts for the lack of cohesion between men and women in Africa, where women's responses to these restrictive norms are often deemed unacceptable and become a source of considerable conflict. Sikoska and Solomon state that "if conflicts are about different needs, interests, and perceptions of needs and interests, then gender identity becomes an important determinant in creating, maintaining, and ending violent conflicts..." (2). This implies that understanding and conceptualizing gender norms and perspectives is crucial. Gender conflicts and tensions arise from gender dynamics, which warrant significant attention.

**Gender balance: 'Woman Talk, Man Talk'**

'*Man Talk, Woman Talk*' is one of Ola Rotimi's plays published posthumously in 2007. It is set in a court scene in contemporary Nigeria. The play highlights the difficulties that could characterise gender relations in Nigeria. The stereotyping of gender roles and expectation. The different sensibilities of men and women in society are expressed through the two major characters, Boy and Girl who are given the privilege of fair hearing. In this play, Rotimi's characters are given the opportunity to voice their biases, misunderstandings and misconceptions of the opposite gender. This account for the title of Rotimi's play: '*Man talk, Woman talk!*' (*The Epilogue* 65). Men and

women alike should voice lingering biases and grievances that have complicated their relationship, caused gender wars, inequality and bias up until modern times.

A number of issues are raised in the court proceedings where interestingly, Rotimi creates an environment where women in Africa can also be heard and not merely seen. With intermittent interjections from the Judge (who significantly goes by the personal name, Charles Nnolim) and the Counsellor (an assistant to the Judge, who goes by the name, Lara Ogunsipe), the gender representatives – BOY (Michael) and GIRL (Karina) do not shy away from raising issues in the courtroom that revolve around age long grievances between men and women. The issues raised are not based on religion or emotion, but 'logic' which provides a premise for each gender to uniquely demonstrate and build their cases in a manner that creates balance without either of the debaters emerging as 'victor' or 'vanquished.' Some of the notable issues raised include: improper dressing; prostitution; artificiality and the concept of beauty; masculine fallacy/chauvinist notion; and the practice of morality by both genders.

As the play opens, the first gender bias pointed out by the male vibrant prototype is the concept of corruption. The corruption that is metaphorically referenced at the start of the court proceeding is the loss of integrity in dressing. Here, BOY accuses the women folk of indecent dressing as the basis of prostitution in society. Without denying the aforementioned fact, GIRL is quick to hinge the social menace (prostitution) on sexual solicitation by the male gender. This to her is often occasioned by the uncontrolled sensual urge/desire of men, who "in the context of campus socialising," are quick to "invade female hostels," waylay them "... on the way from classroom, or to the cafeteria, and start rattling verbiage on our eardrums". GIRL ends that argument on the note that it is men who solicit the women's attention for a fee (*The Epilogue* 11). Since the only way to prevent the miscarriage of justice is fair hearing, the judge makes his court room conducive for

Karina to also have an opportunity to speak, and reply when a case is being made against her.

In taking the debate further, BOY anchors the solicitation on reaction. He holds that men simply react to the provocative dressing of women, who most times are near naked in the guise of fashion: "...you women are the initiators, the stimulators, the eternal facilitators of the 'soliciting' game" (*The Epilogue* 11). He adds that the game is "silently," "speechlessly," and "cunningly" unleashed on the men, who find the body language of the woman irresistible: "The way you people dress, for instance, it's getting more and more brazenly shameless! .... In short, your lordship, these days' girls dress to kill. 20<sup>th</sup> century fashion, they call it. Well, it's plain madness, you hear? What will you be wearing in the year 2000? Stark nakedness?" (*The Epilogue* 12). Even though couched in humour, it can be deduced from the aforementioned that the playwright, by means of invectives, aptly deployed by the character, BOY, denounces immodest dressing. This is suggested in expressions like: "shameless," "plain madness," and the rhetorical question - "What will you be wearing in the year 2000? Stark nakedness?" (*The Epilogue* 12).

As the action in court unfolds, GIRL attempts to counter the aforementioned argument, she speaks in favour of the women folk by first acknowledging the reality of the issue raised. She views the assessment of her male counterpart as an expression of misplaced brains, which by implication indicates that "men's seat of thought is not in their heads ... but between their thighs" (*The Epilogue* 14). To strike a balance with the male folk in the foregoing argument, Karina faults men, who under the guise of fashion expose their hairy chest by deliberately unbuttoning their shirts. With a sense of humour, she describes such provocativeness as the male intent to dress to kill hence, "exposing a jungle of dark fuzzy hair on a self-conscious plateau of macho chest?" (*The Epilogue* 16). She adds that such a display is nothing

but “the verdant spread of dark Bermuda grass on the hypnotic landscape of their masculine thorax” (*The Epilogue* 17).

Artificiality and the concept of beauty is another age long grievance men hold against their women counterpart. In advancing the logic of their argument, BOY faults the female gender for embracing artificiality at the expense of their natural beauty. Put differently, women in the quest to enhance their physical appearance, tamper with their natural make-up – their hair and body alike. BOY laments the extent the women folk disregard their traditional or African hair styles in preference for European hair styles, which they straighten in salons where “...you all ‘stampede’ to have your hair mangled, pulled, wrestled and stretched to look the same” (*The Epilogue* 18). The picture BOY paints here is the seeming act of hair mutilation and the denial of their *Africanness*. This sequence is significantly reflective of the stance of the 20<sup>th</sup> century African American playwright – Lorraine Hansberry’s – who in *A Raisin of the Sun* decries assimilationist attitude of some African American women who hide their *Africanness* by acting white. This is aptly portrayed through the character of Asagai, who as a Nigerian and proud of his African heritage criticises Beneatha (his African American Girl friend) for straightening her hair, persuading her to rather cut it to enable her keep a more natural and African look. Accordingly, Ola Rotimi amplifies the necessity of retaining cultural identity and looks by challenging or criticising the application of foreign ointments, which through BOY, the male prototype, humorously dubs it as ‘fumigation’: “Next, you anoint it with – nonsense, what’s anoint? Fumigate – that’s what you fumigate your hair with, the same insecticide you call ‘hair spray’” (*The Epilogue* 18).

Furthermore, with a sarcastic tone, BOY clamps down on women who bleach their skin to enhance their outlook. While elaborating on the artificiality of the modern-day woman, he argues that the application of “predictable” body creams/lotion, such as “Cocoa Butter,” “Sliver Rose,” “Movate Gell,” amongst others, is capable of altering the

complexion of the African woman's body, which "the good Lord made ... beautiful in their shades of blackness" (*The Epilogue* 20). To drive home his point, BOY unequivocally describes such alteration of skin colour as a "lie" and pretence to be white:

What lie is more sinister than pretension? .... You prefer to pretend, to lie – lie about them. Pretend to be white. Bleach upon bleach, and all colours of exotic make-up to transform yourselves into three – dimensional graffiti in motion: "Fanta face with Seven-Up lips on top of a Coca-Cola body." Such multicoloured patchwork – all in your desperation to dazzle the unwary jack-asses among the male folk. You pretentious, whitened Sepulchers – shame on you all! (*The Epilogue* 20-21).

By inference, "whited Sepulchers" is a metaphorical reference to women who artificially lighten their skin, and a biblical allusion. The biblical Pharisees (i.e. Members of a Jewish sect), who with great strictness carried out every rite and ceremony of the Law, were on many occasions publicly condemned and labelled "whited Sepulchers" by Jesus for outwardly portraying themselves as righteous when inwardly were full of hypocrisy, rottenness, and deception (Mathew 23:23-28 KJV). Correspondingly, the deception of women claiming to be white when in actuality are created black, is decried by the playwright, who through the character of BOY, underscores the dangers associated with such 'transformation.' One of such side effects is the ununiformed discolouration of the skin and body hence, such women go about displaying "Fanta face with Seven-Up lips on top of a Coca-Cola body" (*The Epilogue* 20). To draw a logical conclusion on the artificiality of the contemporary woman, BOY leaves no stone unturned by emphasising the adverse effects the afore mentioned treatments have on the women folk: monotony, and this to him has rendered such women "boring" and repelling to the male folk in Africa. With a tone of disgust, BOY is quick to aver: "These days, one can't even distinguish one woman from

another. You all spray your bodies with the same kind of perfume; lubricate your limbs with the same predictable cream ... At the end, every head, every skin comes out smelling the same. How monotonous can any creature be?" (*The Epilogue* 18).

When GIRL (Karina) is given the floor and right to be heard, she debunks the claim on monotonousness, as she insists that such perception of women by the male folk is borne out of misunderstanding and lies. She insists that the falsehood stems from the African men's mentality, and in this context, considers the judgmental stance of men surprising. This is because men, from her standpoint, are the stimulators of the monotonousness of the women folk: "Men are at fault. Why? Those kinds of commodities: women who go about displaying, "orange, Fanta face, on top of brown, Coca-Cola body ..." labelled with silver lipstick ... such women are merely responding to the demands of the mentality of men like you" (*The Epilogue* 22). In other words, the African man's preference for light-skinned ladies is the subtle motivation for body bleaching, which sadly has cobwebbed "the shallow minded, birdbrain's among us kill their skins and bury their bodies in bleach, all to please your mentality" (*The Epilogue* 22). Karina's bluntness and castigation does not only have the men as its object, but gullible women who have been trapped within the web of "perfumed liars" that parade themselves as men. It is not surprising, therefore, that her submission on this matter of monotony, attracts the attention and applause of the Judge, who impressed at her defence of female folk announces: "Good counter logic: penetrating historicity, delicate nuance" (*The Epilogue* 22).

BOY presses another charge against the women: frequent illness. He views the frailty of their health as a consequence of abuse and misuse of their bodies, particularly due to living immorally. To vividly illustrate this accusation, he describes the women as "mobile clinics," "itinerant sick-bays," and "infirmarys on two legs" (*The Epilogue* 22). However, GIRL dismisses this position, considering the male

assessment "prejudiced mouthings" and an outright fallacy aimed at sustaining their "bloated ego of moral superiority" (The Epilogue 26). She reinforces her point by relating this jaundiced generalization to the Hamlet Complex—a situation where men are inherently cynical towards their female counterparts. Using allusion, she underscores her argument with the character of Hamlet, the eponymous hero in William Shakespeare's play. Prince Hamlet confronts his mother, Gertrude, about her incestuous relationship with his paternal uncle, Claudius, who murdered the former king, old Hamlet, and married his brother's widow.

Furthering her critique of the use of the female body, BOY accuses female students of being playthings for businessmen, trading their bodies in pursuit of grades and exam questions from lecturers. He expresses his bias with the assertion: "... if you girls don't get money from running after them, what about exam questions or high grades?" (The Epilogue 37). In response, GIRL counters BOY's claims from two perspectives. First, the shortage of university lecturers in Nigeria has rendered many unfit "to polish a steady babe" (The Epilogue 36). To her, this is evidenced by the rickety cars owned by such lecturers, who, like their male students, are financially inept and "depend on month-end crumbs!" (The Epilogue 36). By inference, male lecturers barely survive on their monthly salaries, which are often spent on "feeding wife, self, children, and the long assembly line of mouths in their extended family; do you think whatever is left goes to girlfriends?" (The Epilogue 36). The chuckles from the courtroom perhaps spur GIRL (Karina) to add that even what is left is often "surrendered" to those who repair and service their cars, humorously described as "gwongworos," "Ancient Mariners," "Born-Again 'alupandugbe,'" "farioro number 1," and "puruku-puruku."

Secondly, male students actively participate in the game of 'sniffing' exam questions. Unlike the female students, who have been accused of

having illicit affairs with lecturers in exchange for exam questions, Karina exposes the male students for breaking "into offices at night to steal exam questions" (37). While BOY seems to feign ignorance or live in denial in his attempt to salvage the image of men, he questions, "How d'you know, are you the night watchman?" (37). In response, GIRL is blunt and somewhat flippant as she alleges that this act of stealing makes them a "generation of armed robbers in training!" (37).

The court processes in the administration of justice allows BOY and GIRL, the major characters, the opportunity to vent these misgivings and grievances as representatives of both genders in society. Each gender demonstrates uniqueness in make-up and sensibility in the course of court proceedings where logic and counter-logic are employed to build their cases and demand for fairness subsequently. During the court proceeding and hearing, the Judge strives to maintain objectivity in sensibility and sensitivity and not interfere with the entire process. However, Rotimi projects this as a difficult task as the judge and other court officials take sides at times with their gender and compromise their neutrality in the course of the hearing. Rotimi's theatrical mode is laced with humour. It presents vibrant prototype male and female voices: this shrouds the personal names of the major characters. The play couched in court proceedings voices gender biases, misgivings and sentiments that are silenced in due course through the process of fair hearing. Thus, men are not presented eventually as superior to women and vice versa: they are just different in Rotimi's view and search for solution, perhaps an end to gender misunderstanding and imbalance.

### **Conclusion**

The play dramatises a significant attempt by the author to "better the balance" in gender relations in Nigeria and Africa. It addresses gender claims, counterclaims, biases, and stereotypes as serious intellectual subjects, all within a dramatic form that effectively incorporates humour, confrontations, and responses to complex social issues. The

Judge does not deliver a verdict, as the power to do so lies with the jury—the audience: you and I—after being granted the opportunity for a fair hearing. This fair hearing presupposes an effective procedure in conflict analysis that allows for the clarification of complexities inherent in gender dynamics, which often trigger conflict, tension, and "wars" between women and men. The study highlights that the play serves as a foundation for the mutual resolution of gender issues. It also presents fair hearing as a sincere attempt to mitigate gender conflicts and attests to the emergence of a new perspective on gender equity in Nigeria. The study concludes that with genuine attitudinal changes in both men and women, alongside the sincere application of fair hearing principles, positive gender relations can exist free from provocation and conflict.

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