
**Deconstructing Gender Binaries: A Study of Sentimentality vs Rationality in
The Selected One-Act Plays from ‘Glimpses of Theatre’**

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Abstract

Gender has recently emerged as the most combustible and contentious topic of discussion due to its fluid nature and many cultural constructions. The concept of sexuality, a key marker of gender identity that is intended to be proportional to anatomical specification has become increasingly complex and nuanced in present times. The systematic mechanism of subordination of the ‘other’ sex existed in society consistently, but its forms changed with time. This paper focuses on a deconstructive study of the gender binaries in the One-Act plays from the book ‘Glimpses of Theatre’. In all these plays, an interplay of Sentimentality and Rationality can be seen, with a stereotypical gender association. Where, all the male characters are the voice of reason, and contrastingly, all the female characters embody the voice of sentiment. Understanding of these binaries is crucial in a feminist discourse as it sheds light on gender as a social construct. This paper is going to explore and identify the persisting gender stereotypes while unfolding the power relations between the sexes. The paper offers a new perspective on deconstructing essentialism and how these prevailing binaries often operate on a subconscious level, shaping our perceptions covertly, making gender constructs highly social in nature. The different texts taken in account are from different playwrights, but somehow project the similar “otherness” towards the women characters, often through the annulling and limiting stereotypes. This study challenges these portrayals and offers a fresh perspective on how gender norms are perpetuated through plays, emphasizing the need for a more nuanced and equitable representation of gender roles.

Keywords: Gender roles, Sentimentality, Rationality, Stereotypes, Dichotomy, Essentialism

Introduction:

Binary opposition or “binaries” is a key concept in structuralism, a school of thinking that believes all the aspects of human culture are interconnected and can only be studied in relation to one another. Binary oppositions, hence, refers to a framework of thinking and language that categorizes concepts into two mutually exclusive and opposing categories. In other words, binary opposition is a structuralist philosophy and a way of communication that divides ideas into two opposing and distinct groups that reveals the underlying structures of the society. Binary oppositions have insidiously permeated every aspect of our social fabric, including the construct of gender. Hélène Cixous, a prominent French feminist, has paid a significant contribution in this discussion as she terms it ‘death-dealing binaries thought’, she emphasized the far-reaching consequences of this phenomenon. (Cixous and Clément, 1975). By relentlessly reinforcing the distinction between men and women, these binaries have not only intensified the differences between the sexes but have also perpetuated damaging stereotypes, rigid gender roles, and systemic inequalities. Therefore, the binaries like Day/Night, Strong/Weak, Head/Emotion, Intelligible/Sensitive, Rationality/Sentimentality correspond to the deep-seated distinction between Male/Female, and will always end up being interpreted with the underlying implication of Positive vs Negative and Superior vs Inferior. Perpetuating a hierarchical power dynamic where the ‘female’ or the ‘feminine’ side will always be associated with the less impactful or the subordinate position within the binary. (Toril Moi, 1985)

What has to be taken into account is that these dichotomies are not only hierarchical but also profoundly patriarchal, reflecting and perpetuating essentialist philosophy of gender roles. They are roles imposed by the society, and that is why believed to be biologically derived or historically confirmed. This eventually resulted in a system where man as the provider, also became the one to control economic power. The once logical allocation of roles became a lopsided arrangement where one sex became subservient to another. The double incentive of a position of power in economic terms and gender superiority in interpersonal relationships became the driving force behind the quest for institutional foundations to uphold to maintain and perpetuate the status quo. This according to Elaine Showalter resulted in frozen identities for both the sexes where woman were portrayed in terms of “angelic beauty, sweetness, passivity, docile and selflessness. Men, on the other hand men were depicted as assertive, capable, and endowed with environmental mastery. Both thus became definable being, the definition being commanded by the logic of resemblance to socio-sexual stereotypes. (Elaine Showalter, 1993).

Traditionally, a woman is viewed as the opposite, the 'other' of man: she is nonman, an incomplete man, assigned a chiefly negative value in relation to the male archetype. Yet, man is defined only through his continuous rejection of this otherness, establishing his identity in contrast to it; thus, his entire sense of self is ensnared and jeopardized in the very act that seeks to affirm his distinct, independent existence. Woman is not just 'an other' in the sense of something beyond his ken, but 'an other' closely connected to him as a reflection of what he is not, serving as a crucial reminder of his own identity

Man, therefore needs 'this other even' as he spurns it, is constrained to create a positive identity for what he perceives as nonexistence. Not only is his own being parasitically dependent upon the woman, and upon the act of excluding and subordinating her, but one reason for this exclusion is that she may not be entirely other after all perhaps she symbolizes those aspects of man himself that which he needs to repress, expel beyond his own being, relegate to a securely alien region beyond his own definitive limits. Perhaps what is outside is also somehow inside, what is alien also intimate - thus man must guard the absolute boundary between these two spheres with utmost diligence as it may always be transgressed, as it has always been transgressed formerly, and is much lower than it appears. Even in Indian mythology, figures like Kunti and Draupadi have served as iconic representation when it has suited the narrative, yet it is evident that they could never attain the haloed status of others, as they dared to breach the boundaries stepping into the outer world. As Deshpande says "When women can fulfil themselves.....and do not have to sacrifice themselves, it will eliminate the need to engage in power struggles within the home, to thrust ambitions on husbands and children, to work out frustration on them" (Viking, 2003.)

Deconstruction, in other words, has captured the notion that the binary oppositions with which classical structuralism tends to work reflect a perspective typical of ideologies. Ideologies like to draw rigid boundaries between what is permissible and what is not, between self and non-self, truth and falsity, sense and nonsense, reason and madness, central and peripheral, surface and depth. Such metaphysical thinking, as I mentioned, cannot be simply eluded: we cannot catapult ourselves beyond this binary way of thinking into an ultra-metaphysical realm.

Deconstruction seeks to reveal how such dichotomies, in their effort to maintain stability, occasionally betray themselves by reversing or collapsing their own meanings, or need to banish to the text's margins certain niggling details which can be made to return and

plague them. There is a continual flickering, spilling and defusing of meaning - what Derrida calls 'dissemination'-which resists easy confinement within the text's structural frameworks within the categories of a conventional critical approach to it. (Eagleton, T. 2011) The deconstruction of gender binaries involves addressing and disassembling the traditional, rigid distinctions between male and female that have historically defined and limited gender identity. It analyses how these binaries are socially constructed and how they sustain power dynamics.

The primary objective of this paper is to excavate and expose the insidious, deeply ingrained patriarchal ideologies that perpetuate gender binaries, as starkly manifested in the One-Act plays under examination. Through a critical lens, this study aims to lay bare the implicit and explicit power dynamics that are reinforced through the portrayal of the characters and the role they play within the narrative, thereby perpetuating the subjugation and marginalization of women. It also offers a new perspective on deconstructing essentialism and how these prevailing binaries often operate on a subconscious level, shaping our perceptions covertly, making gender constructs highly social in nature.

Gender Binaries in One-Act Plays

In the play *'The Will'* Gender is shown to be a driving force in character development and the struggles of women to attain equality in all levels of life are quite noticeable. At the very onset of the play, when Mr. Phillip Ross and Mrs. Ross visit the solicitors to draft the will, Mrs Ross is shown crying relentlessly. This lack in stability and control underlines woman's emotionalism. Therefore, women are subject to display of agitation as tears, hysterical laughter, and nervous crises. Moreover, Robert's comment that, "I'll know at a glance if she is married or single," which reinforces gender stereotypes and societal assessments of women based on appearance, exhibits a feminist bias. This comment reflects a number of unsettling presumptions. The idea that one can find a woman's marital status just by looking at her suggests that women are mostly defined by their relationship to men. It reduces women to their outward look rather than appreciating them as unique people with own ideas, goals, and identities apart from marriage (Barrie, 1921).

Not only this, as the play progresses, Barrie depicts a marriage in which the husband exerts complete authority, both emotionally and financially. Mr. Philip Ross, under the impression that he is nearing death, creates a will that bequeaths everything to his wife, Mrs. Ross. Yet, upon recovering, his remorse regarding this choice unveils a deeply entrenched belief that women ought not to have full control over wealth or decision-making. By doubting his own generosity, Mr. Ross suggests that a husband's financial stability should not

inherently be passed to his wife, reinforcing the notion that men possess family wealth. This reflects a wider societal view that competition and wealth are not attached to careers of care taking that includes women. So, she decides early, to equip herself with power attributed to maleness, by abandoning the helpless feminine prototype. Mrs. Ross does not overtly confront her husband's perspective, which mirrors the anticipated submissiveness of women in marriage. Her silence may not signify acceptance but instead points to a lack of viable options—divorce, financial autonomy, and households led by women were uncommon and frequently frowned upon. This play underscores how Mrs. Ross' destiny is entirely at the mercy of her husband's fluctuating views. The narrative subtly prompts the audience to ponder why a woman should be financially vulnerable to her husband's shifting sentiments. Had he passed away, she would have achieved financial independence; his survival means she remains subordinate. This irony highlights the unfairness of a system where a woman only attains autonomy through becoming a widow. Barrie's use of irony is essential for grasping his feminist implications. Mr. Ross' initial kindness seems admirable, yet his response after surviving reveals his hypocrisy. The play ridicules the notion that men bestowing financial security on women is a generous gesture rather than an entitlement. This highlights a prevalent anxiety among men of the time: that women, if granted financial liberty, might no longer rely on them. Not only a wife is viewed with suspicion, but even a mother is not considered trustworthy when it comes to passing down her assets to her own children's. Moreover, surprisingly "a more dedicated mother" can also be held responsible if her offspring become spoiled individuals. (Barrie, 1921). As Mr. Philip Ross blames Emily saying "A more dedicated mother- if you have one failing, it is that you spoil them". This implies that instead of outrightly blaming her, he holds Emily responsible for his children's behaviour. Although, this play lacks a radical feminist protagonist, it challenges the gendered power dynamics present in marriage, family, wealth, and autonomy. Barrie's depiction of Mr. Ross' shifting perspective reveals the vulnerability of patriarchal authority, encouraging audiences to reflect on the justice of a system that ties women's security to male choices.

In the play '**Villa for Sale**', a noticeable imbalance in the character dynamics is deliberately crafted, where the three female protagonists are overshadowed by the dominating presence of Gaston, the only male protagonist. This choice in storytelling deeply highlights the deep-seated patriarchy that runs through the narrative. Gaston, an alluring and calculating Frenchman embodies a blend of street smarts, wit, and rationality, allowing him to easily outmanoeuvre and manipulate the women around him. On the contrast, the female characters are consistently depicted as the voice of sentimentality, with their emotions and instincts driving their choices. Juliette, the villa's owner and the first female character introduced, is a complicated female, showcasing a touching mix of sentiment and

vulnerability. Her strong emotional connection to the villa is palpable, but it's juxtaposed with a crippling anxiety about selling it. This inner conflict highlights Juliette's natural politeness and amiability, which, however, also reveal her lack of business astuteness. Through Juliette, the playwright critiques the societal expectations that dictate how women behave in business realm. Her tendency to lean on her emotions instead of shrewd business strategies is a deliberate on the part of the author, one that heightens the clash between emotional expression and logical thinking. Juliette's character becomes a striking commentary on how women are viewed, judged and perceived in the business world. Portrayed naivety and lack of business acumen of Juliette, aren't projected as flaws, but rather as reflections of the societal norms that have influenced women's expectations and experiences.

Similarly, the second key female character in the play, Mrs. AL. Smith perpetuates yet another harmful gender typecast that project women being primarily motivated by a pining for materialistic possessions. Mrs. Smith, since coming from a wealthy background, characterizes an extravagant lifestyle and an unquenchable appetite for luxury. However, this female character is also underscored with a poor business judgement, as her predisposition with material gain baffles her judgment, making her susceptible to Gaston's sly manipulations and fraud. Mrs. Smith's character acts as a reinforcement of the idea that women are essentially impractical and hence, unlike men, lack financial intuitiveness, eternalizing a negative gender binary. The power dynamic shared by Mrs. Smith and Gaston is a testament to this binary, as she is shown to be naive and foolish compared to his shrewdness and business prowess. This contrast further foregrounds the patriarchal narrative that positions men as the dominant, rational, and intelligent sex, while women are relegated as the incompatibles.

Jeanne, Gaston's wife and the third female character in the play, is an intricate concoction of both the previously introduced females in the play. She sways between the sentimentality of Juliette and the materialistic tendencies of Mrs. Smith. Jeanne's motivations are multifaceted, driven by emotional ties as well as a longing for the finer things in life. Yet, Gaston's perception for Jeanne is quite one-dimensional. As the narrative unfolds Gaston attempts at annulling her to a simplistic and misogynistic caricature, place emphasis on his attitudes toward women being truly appalling, revealing a deep-seated misogyny. He dismisses her opinions as unimportant and invalid, regarding her as too emotional and incapable of logical reasoning. His disinclination to acknowledge her wish to buy the villa for her parents underscores his lack of respect for her independence. His comments, such as women being "always curious for sticking their noses into another woman's bathroom" and seeking "some cold cream which is better than the one you use yourself," reveal a disturbing

perception of women as vapid, materialistic, and confined to trivial concerns. Through Gaston's masterful orchestration, the play reinforces a disturbing narrative of male supremacy, where women are relegated to subordinate roles and denied agency. This deliberate narrative choice raises important questions about the perpetuation of patriarchal power structures and the ways in which women's voices and experiences are marginalized and silenced."

In St. John Ervine's play '**Progress**', challenges the rigid gender binaries through the striking contrast between the roles of male and female. Ervine reconfigures traditional roles offering a progressive perspective on gender relations. The male characters, especially those engaged in technological and industrial progress, display characteristics typically masculine- driven by logic and a tendency to detach from emotions. Mrs. Meldon, on the other hand, exemplifies the sentimental, considerate, and morally aware traits that are frequently connected to traditional femininity. This contrast demonstrates how male rationality clashes with Mrs. Meldon's emotional wisdom. Mrs. Meldon warns against the dangers of unbridled development and stands for emotional intelligence and foresight. Mrs. Meldon is worried about the repercussions of her brother's ambitions and advancements in technology. Her conversations frequently express concern, grief, and emotional pain, contrasting with the more practical and ambition-focused male characters. However, her apprehensions are often dismissed or eclipsed by male characters who emphasize rationality, profit, and scientific progress. This mirrors larger societal expectations where women are seen as passive supporters rather than active decision-makers. Although she is directly impacted by progress (through personal grief and hardship), yet she is not allowed to hold the same authority in making decisions as her male peers. Her emotional appeals can be viewed as a feminist commentary on how women's viewpoints—especially those that question male ambition—are often regarded as sentimental instead of logical. A crucial feminist inquiry is whether Mrs. Meldon ultimately conforms to her role or subtly rebels. Although her warnings serve as a critique of unbridled ambition, she is powerless to change the course of events. The morally reprehensible act of Mrs. Meldon's murder of her own brother breaks the binary. In this situation, she takes on the typically male roles of enforcer and decision-maker. Throughout the play, Mrs. Meldon's warnings and emotional perspectives are predominantly overlooked. Her final action could be interpreted as a tragic outcome of being silenced (Ervin,1919). The writer illustrates how society frequently disregards women's wisdom and forces them to take extreme actions when their worries continue to be invalidated. Her behaviour would typically be frowned upon in a patriarchal society but the play validates her effectiveness. Rather than accepting her anticipated position as a mourning mother or quiet sufferer, she embraces a role typically assigned to male characters: that of the executioner, the judge, the one who meets out justice. This reversal

reflects the limited choices available to women in oppressive systems and can be interpreted as both empowering and deeply tragic.

Next play under examination is the intense and gripping one-act play '**Sorry, Wrong Number**' by Lucille Fletcher. Here, we come across a woman manifest the feelings of helplessness, feebleness, and vulnerability, cornered in a world predominated by men. The narrative revolves around a single female character, Mrs. Stevenson, who is bedridden and an invalid. Her condition is symbolic of the metaphorical position of women in society: defenceless, vulnerable, and unheard by the male characters surrounding her (Fletcher, 1943). Lucille Fletcher's gripping one-act play testify a stark portrayal of a woman's desperate struggle for agency in a world ruthlessly dominated by men. Her cries for help are consistently ignored or dismissed by the male characters, underscoring the alarming reality of women's voices being silenced and marginalized (Beauvoir, 1949; Butler, 1990).

Mrs. Stevenson's characters serve as a stark reflection of the harsh reality faced by women in our society, where they are perpetually relegated to a state of dependency on men and viewed as cumbersome burdens. The egregious sense of burden is shockingly exemplified by the plot to murder the bedridden wife, orchestrated by her own husband (Fletcher, 1943). This disturbing scenario lays bare the dichotomy that propagates the notion of men being the providers, while women are the mere burdens. This inefaceable dichotomy sets another gender-based binary of provider and recipient, where men are always seen as the providers or the breadwinners and women are reduced to the role of recipients and the beneficiaries (Tong, 2009). This gender binary incessantly strengthens the design to belittle every effort of women, and buttress their marginalization as the "lesser" gender (Butler, 1990; Tong, 2009) in the society. Reducing them to just the position of a taker and eventually being a burden, this binary effectively strips them of their dignity, reinforcing the notion that they are nothing more than burdensome appendages to society (Beauvoir, 1949).

Moreover, a glaring reflection of societal insensitivity is surfaced through the play's usage of the term "invalid" to describe Mrs. Stevenson. This label not only underlines the disparaging attitude towards women with disabilities but also perpetuates a worldview that devalues their experiences (Garland-Thomson, 2002). The term's implications are further elaborated by the way Mrs. Stevenson's desperate cries for help, are responded by other characters throughout the play (Fletcher, 1943). Her pleas are met with indifference, strongly obliterating her attempts to speak up, rendering her as "invalid" in every sense of the word. This disturbing dynamic accentuates the intersections of marginalization of women with disabilities, who are not only silenced but also, erased from societal consideration.

Although '*The Monkey's Paw*' by W.W. Jacobs' is mainly a horror narrative about the fate and consequences, a feminist reading of the story brings out various underlying themes regarding gender roles and the limited agency of women within a patriarchal society (Tyson, 2015; Moi, 1985). There is a subtle feminism in *The Monkey's Paw*, that can be analysed critically through the lens of Mrs. White's character and the way her role reflects the conventional expectations of women in the early 20th century (Showalter, 1977).

Mrs. White is primarily depicted as a supportive, domestic wife—caring towards her husband and son, speaks politely, and confined within the private/domestic realm. Her role embodies the idealized role of women during that era: nurturing, obedient, and subordinated to male authority (Plain & Sellers, 2007). As the narrative unfolds, Mrs. White becomes the emotional centre of the plot, particularly following the demise of her son, Herbert. Her grief drives the main conflict in the second half of the story—she urges Mr. White to use the paw again to bring Herbert back to life, revealing her deep maternal instincts and emotional resilience (Barry, 2017).

Her calm demeanour actually shows a deep emotional strength, but her authority is still restricted since her husband ultimately decides their son's future. This epitomizes how female agency is suppressed by male dominance, illustrating how women's aspirations are frequently disregarded or feared within patriarchal frameworks (Moi, 1985; Tyson, 2015). *The Monkey's Paw* depicts Mrs. White as driven by grief and love for her son, while Mr. White's fearful reluctance symbolizes the patriarchal inclination to regulate supernatural or unknown forces—reflecting how society seeks to stifle female agency (Plain & Sellers, 2007). She cannot make the three wishes herself.

She physically struggles to open the door to reunite with her son, but is ultimately overruled by her husband's final decision. *The Monkey's Paw* highlights how a woman's wishes, like Mrs. White's longing to bring her son back, end up being stifled by the choices made by men, particularly Mr. White's ultimate decision to reverse it all. Her transformation from a passive wife to a determined mother can be interpreted as a challenge to the established male order—swiftly neutralized by Mr. White's final action (Tyson, 2015; Showalter, 1977).

The next one-act play under scrutiny is an excerpt from George Bernard Shaw's seminal play "*Saint Joan*". Specifically, it's the introductory act that showcases the enigmatic Joan of Arc, a female protagonist endowed with extraordinary persuasive abilities. In the course of the story, Joan is intriguingly linked to the unexplained phenomena of the farm, where hens have ceased laying eggs and cows have stopped producing milk. This connection somehow indicates that Joan has mystical powers and that impression is strong.

This does not change the fact, however, that there seems to be a disturbing trend in women's portrayal in literature (Beauvoir, 1949). In representing Joan as a seemingly ostensibly spiritual being, this Shaw's play unwittingly tries to suggest that women, quite on the contrary, are generally considered to be pushed into two main extremes: either revered as paragons of virtue or scorned as blasphemers and heretics, threatening the established order (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979). This rigid framework ignores the complexities and nuances that exist between these two extremes (Butler, 1990).

The snippet 'No Eggs No Eggs' from George Bernard Shaw's play *Saint Joan* showcases the pervasive gender roles and binaries put in society. Joan's interactions with the male characters serve as a microcosm for the social struggles women go through in a society dominated by men, particularly in areas traditionally reserved for men, such as the battlefield. Captain Robert De Baudricourt's line, "Oh! You think the girl can work miracles?" (Shaw, 1924, p. 15) is soaked in the patriarchal mind-set. Other such equally dismissive comments, "I suppose you think raising a siege is as easy as chasing a cow out of a meadow. You think soldiering is anybody's job?" (Shaw, 1924, p. 16) captures with shocking premise the embedded stereotypes of gender roles shackled throughout the play. The dichotomy in the whole idea of chasing a cow, a simplistic task, something often relegated to women, versus the more complicated business of being a soldier, an endeavour reserved for men, really emphasizes the suffocating gender binaries that govern societal expectations. This oppressive dichotomy reinforces the notion that women are inherently incapable of performing tasks requiring strength, strategy, and bravery, while men are just naturally built for them.

The pervasive gender dualisms are reinforced yet again in the end of the play, as the narrative voice describes Robert's lingering uncertainties: "Robert, still very doubtful whether he has not been made a fool of by a crazy female, and a social inferior to boot" (Shaw, 1924, p. 123). The author's deliberate choice of words- "crazy female" and "social inferior" reiterates the essentialist idea that women are inherently inferior and subservient to men (Beauvoir, 1949; Gilbert & Gubar, 1979). This narrative closure denies much space to the reader in which to challenge or subvert these deep gender binaries, instead underpinning harmful stereotypes that associate women with a lack of reason, inferiority, and impotence in exercise of agency (Butler, 1990). The text's language and narrative structure thus collude to perpetuate the patriarchal ideology, emphasising the need for a critical re-evaluation of these representations. (Showalter, 1993, p. 23).

The subsequent witch trial that Joan faces, serves as a stark reminder of the societal consequences of deviating from prescribed gender norms. The fallacious charges of heresy and witchcraft that seals the fate of Joan elaborate the fatal consequences of infringing social norms (Beauvoir, 1949; Gilbert & Gubar, 1979). This emphasises society's deep-rooted fear

bordering female empowerment and the lengths to which societal institutions go to stifle it, ultimately leading to the damaging effects of viewing women through narrow, misleading, and often suffocating stereotypes (hooks, 1981; Showalter, 1993).

Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative, critical discourse analysis approach to explore the narrative arcs and character trajectories within each one act plays.

Results:

This study brings out a consistent pattern of gender stereotyping deeply rooted in traditional binaries. The results of this study show that these dichotomies function both within the narratives' structural framework and at the character level. The opinions of female characters are usually ignored or used as "emotional counterpoints" to the "reasonable" male heroes, and they are usually denied authority. Moreover, the deconstructive method demonstrated how these stereotypes operate covertly and unconsciously, suggesting that both producers and audiences usually internalize the gender norms portrayed in these plays.

Conclusion:

This paper has endeavoured to re-evaluate the gender binaries, seeking to comprehend the intricate harm they inflict upon society. Toril Moi, a renowned feminist literary critic and theorist, astutely posits that deconstructing gender binaries is crucial in unveiling the complex ways these binaries perpetuate and reinforce gender differences (Moi, 1999, p. 12). Binary thinking has effectively solidified the idea that men and women are just polar opposites, instead of recognizing and celebrating the rich diversity and complexity of human experiences (Butler, 1990, p. 2). This mind-set has serious implications, such as limiting individual potential, reinforcing patriarchal norms, and hindering social progress (Foucault, 1972, p. 50). By breaking down these binaries, literary critics aim to foster a more inclusive, open, and less judgmental environment where writers can explore fresh perspectives on femaleness and femininity (Moi, 1999, p. 20).

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