Neil LaBute's Reason to be Pretty and Reason to Be Happy - A Study of Gender

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A B S T R A C T

This research focuses on how the portrayal of a gender crisis, whether actual or imagined, necessitates and necessitates a revision of gender identity. Specifically, it examines "Reason to be Pretty" and "Reason to be Happy" by Neil LaBute. This paper will concentrate on a particular theoretical formulation of gender present in each play. The drama depicts an instantiated gender that does not allow for the renegotiation or reestablishing of traditional masculinity and femininity. The second chapter addresses the characters' attempts to renegotiate their sexist male identity in Reasons to Be Pretty and Reason to Be Happy. Greg's desire for reform and ability to retool his subjectivity creates the possibility of either genuine improvement or a more subtle manipulation and oppression of the feminine gender. The author explores the same characters in two plays at different dates and locations. Through this study, LaBute demonstrates how the American culture is preoccupied with outward appearances, be they beauty or external happiness.

K E Y W O R D S

Neil LaBute, Gender, Reason to Be Pretty

1. Introduction:

There are if any, modern American playwrights as prolific and prominent as Neil LaBute at the time of this study. His plays have launched and run at major theatres on both sides of the Atlantic for the past 15 years. These include the New York Public, the Off-Broadway MCC Theater (where he served as playwright-in-residence until recently), and the Donmar Warehouse and Geilgud Theatre in London. Reasons to Be Pretty, his debut Broadway production, was nominated for the Tony Award for Best Play in 2009, as did two of its players.

Since the year 2000, there have been numerous premieres and revivals of his plays at theatres, such as the Almeida in London and the New Ambassadors in the West End.

The quality of LaBute's work has drawn some of the most distinguished English-speaking stage directors to his list of artistic colleagues. His works have been staged by George C. Wolfe, Joe Mantello, Jo Bonner, Moises Kaufman, and David Leveaux, among others. In addition, Sigourney Weaver, Liev Schreiber, Ben Stiller, Jeffrey Wright, Ben Chaplin, Rachel Weisz, and Paul Rudd have all acted in his plays and been directed by him. Though individual reviews of his plays do not always reflect such devotion, the theatrical community agrees that LaBute is one of the most prominent playwrights of his generation and an aesthetic force to be reckoned with. Despite widespread acclaim and popularity, an examination of the existing literature reveals few substantial attempts to link certain historical theatrical styles with LaBute's distinctively modern subject matter.

2. Theoretical Framework:

In the past several decades, the study of gender roles and how men and women acquire various responsibilities has been the focus of numerous arguments. According to Musse, it is a truism that the sex role is the most prominent of an individual's multiple social roles. No other social role influences his overt behaviour, emotional reactions, cognitive functions, hidden attitudes, and general psychological and social adjustments to a greater degree than his fatherhood. Nor is the assignment of any other function more essential to the maintenance and continuation of society. In all civilisations, men and women are allocated separate tasks, qualities, and attitudes (707).

Because gender is such a defining aspect of society, scholars have diverse perspectives on the underlying causes that influence how humans comprehend gender and the evolution of gender roles. In reality, nowhere else in the field of gender and gender role study has "so much been published with so little consensus" (Fagot 2). Researchers propose six distinct explanations for how gender roles arise and why they exist. Biological, structural-functional, social learning, cognitive development, gender schema, and symbolic interaction are the six theories.

The term "gender" comprises a wide range of socially constructed roles and individual attributes, attitudes, behaviours, beliefs, relative authority, and effects that society deems suitable for men and women differently. Gender is a relational notion that describes how men and women interact. Gender emphasises that masculinity and femininity are acquired through social, cultural, and psychological variables while becoming a man or a woman. It refers to the characteristics acquired by men and women through socialisation due to their exposure to social life and culture. Gender is a concept used to examine how women's and men's behaviour are shaped by society's normative standards (Helmi et al. 1-2).

As a type of historical reappraisal, gender first occurs in the writings of American feminists throughout the 1970s. In the 1980s, English historians began employing this phrase, and by the middle of the 1990s, books and articles with gender in the title were being produced nearly weekly. Due to the political reality, gender also becomes a synonym for woman, as in the phrase "woman and gender." Some consider it synonymous with sexuality. However, the most important use of the term is as a substitute for sex to demonstrate the historical differences between men and women. Because it is typically obvious what a man and a woman are not, so studying one without wanting to learn about the other is difficult. The term "gender" indicates that the distinctions between men

and women are the result of social, cultural, and political causes, and these differences can evolve over time. It does not minimise the relevance of male and female biological differences. Consequently, biological facts alone are insufficient to explain the historically varied differences between men and women. Consequently, gender is a social term put on a sexed body (Shoemaker 1).

Miller said that gender is among the most prominent and influential components of an individual's identity. It influences the look, interests, activities, interpersonal interactions, friendships, love connections, and job choices of an individual (1).

In A Vindication of the Rights of Women, Wollstonecraft disproved the notion that women are normally weaker or less capable than men. She suggested that the contradiction in orientation relations was due to the lack of education that kept women in a secondary role. Wollstonecraft claimed that women should be treated equally since they have a vital role in public perception, namely in childrearing. Instead of merely becoming their husbands' wives, they should try to become their "friends".For this change in status and career, women must obtain an education. In this passage, Wollstonecraft criticises male philosophers such as Rousseau, who contended that women do not need an education. When she contended that a woman prone to high emotions abandoned reason, Wollstonecraft dismantled the caricature of the woman as an opinionated animal. She was the one who understood that gender roles are not intrinsic but rather socially manufactured (Mayar 121). In this light, we may consider Simone DE Beauvoir's statement, "Woman is not born," which suggests that women have no freedom of choice: "Woman is not born." Unlike Wollstonecraft, Fuller demolished specific gender roles. She stated that women do not need domestic confidence and that there are no "feminine" standards (122). In A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas, Virginia Woolf explored the complexities of gender. Moreover, she argued that authorship is manufactured. However, Woolf avoided favouring the female perspective. In A Room of One's Own, she first defined the hermaphroditic imaginative brain, which was an attempt to transcend the male/female binary. Woolf argued, expanding on the mental hypotheses of Carl Jung, that "in each of us two powers preside, one male and one female; and in the man's brain, the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain, the woman predominates over the man." The state of being is normal and comfortable when two parties spiritually cooperate and coexist in harmony. 102)" In her book The Second Sex, De Beauvoir asserts that men can mystify women. She argued that women have always been the polar opposite of men, with men representing the ideal and the standard and women representing the deviant or the other. The orientation of fundamental woman's rights is both a continuation and an unmistakable continuation of revolutionary women's liberation. Numerous women self-identify as activists for orientation-basic women's rights, speak, write, and engage in activism, and collectively construct a notion of what orientation-basic women's rights include. Some view it as a new name for an existing position, while others view it as a separate position. Many perceive it to be focused on a single topic: the societal acceptance of orientation personality. Its current focus on a single topic is justified by the significance of that issue but has no bearing on the larger women's liberation concept. It is related to orientation criticism, which has ramifications for many women's activism issues, not simply orientation identification (Lawford-Smith 13). By 1986, a feminist had invented the term "gender" to refer to the social construction of sex differences. Theorists had proposed "gender as a comparable analytic category to class and race." A limited number of historians had begun to utilise "gender history" in addition to "women's history." A few had investigated men and masculinity as part of a gender history that did not only focus on women. This historiographic process was significantly affected by Joan Scott's intervention. Many women's historians disapproved of the turn towards gender history. Some interpreted the decision to replace "women's history" with "gender history" and to include males and masculinity as a conservative retreat, a push for respectability, or an abandonment of the study

of marginalised and oppressed groups at the time. Scott identified the potential dangers and offered reassurance.

 She passionately opposed the use of "gender" as a depoliticised, social-scientific replacement for women or sex, and she vowed to renew feminist history by expanding its field of impact. Thus, she aided women's historians in approving (and other Dorians in recognising) this expanding trend in historical writing. Scott addressed a difficulty women's historians have and provided a solution. She asserted that twenty years after the field's start, women's history was mired in a descriptive rut and relegated to the narrow byways of social history research. Prior attempts to modify the master narrative of history had failed, and "chronic gender inequality" had not been adequately addressed (da Silva et al. 235-245). Scott claimed that current concepts are historical and reductionistic. She advocated an alternate strategy for reevaluating and rewriting history.

Informed by Derrida's deconstructionism and Foucault's formulation of distributed power, she suggested that historians study the language of gender, noting how historically recognised sex differences were presented as a natural and necessary opposition. She asserted that these discrepancies were the "main means of communicating" other hierarchical relationships, even though they frequently oppressed and constrained women. She encouraged us to analyse how the "so-called natural relationship between male and female" ordered, normalised, and legitimised hierarchical relationships, such as those between king and subject or empire and colony. It appears that the history of gender could have covered more areas in the past than could the history of women. It might potentially enter and redraw the maps of the history of warfare, politics, and international relations (Scott 1066-1073).

Stephanie McCurry discovered that clerics and politicians who supported slavery drew parallels between "the subordination of women" and "that of slaves" and, therefore ", endowed enslavement with the legitimacy of the family, especially marriage." They utilised gender terminology to mainstream other social ties, such as class and race." Laura Edwards uncovered analogies between women and other "dependent" groups in the works of elite white southern males during the Reconstruction period, who used the language of gender to justify their desire to dominate political power. Additionally, historians have noted that the southern states were classified as feminine in the United States. For instance, Nina Silber discovered a postbellum northern vocabulary of gender that portrayed the South as a "submissive wife" and contributed to the "romantic" of sectional reunion (Hall 214-224).

The term "gender" initially appeared in the scientific literature in the middle to late 1950s due to John Money and John Hampson of Johns Hopkins University. In a series of writings on intersexuality, they argued that "gender," "gender role," and "gender role and orientation" are all influenced by their respective social settings, similar to what previous academics had found about "sex roles" and "psychological sex".

"Gender" is a grammatical term derived from linguistics; it refers to the masculine, feminine, and neuter categories into which nouns in various languages are classified. Anthropology appropriated the phrase to analyse the social roles that men and women play in society. It was once believed that gendered duties in society were a 'natural' consequence of a person's sex, but cross-cultural studies demonstrate that, while sex is a universal human condition, gender roles vary across cultures.

According to Debra Meyerson and Deborah Kolb, gender is an axis of power, an organising element that shapes social structure, identities, and knowledge (563). In addition, they argue that gender difference is "perpetuated through formal and informal social processes institutionalised in organisations," including corporate organisations that are predominantly founded by and for men, represent male experience and goals, and reflect men's living conditions (Meyerson and Kolb 563).

In order to determine whether or not LaBute is a feminist, we are going to use the methodology that was suggested by Almaaroof and A'amer to his body of work. In particular, they contend that comprehension of "for" and "against" necessitates the use of reasoning. A woman who is comfortable in her own skin, who is unafraid to speak up for what she believes in, and who does not back down from a confrontation is portrayed by a feminist author as having self-assurance. She recognizes that her decisions have consequences and takes full responsibility for them. Yet, if a book is published that honors women for anything other than the fact that they are powerful and ethical women, the author deems such book to be anti-feminist. In many works of feminist literature, the main characters are women, and they often take a stand against patriarchal norms and expectations. (2017, 1) In writing, a woman's identity is neither based on her romantic or professional standing, nor is it dependent on whether or not she adheres to any one sort of archetype. The roles that people play are a reflection of their particular attributes, such as their intellect, perspectives, and decision-making abilities.

3. Discussion: Gender in Reason to Be Pretty and Reason to Be Happy:

Neil LaBute is renowned for his unvarnished depictions of human behaviour, and his characters "seem to be identical to us, sadly" (Pretty x). Like the majority of us, his characters are superficially motivated. Reasons to Be Pretty, written in 2008, finishes LaBute's trilogy about beauty, which began with The Shape of Things and continued with Fat Pig (Gans). Even though the premise of the play centres on a beauty contest, Reasons to Be Pretty is fundamentally about recognising the human condition. Greg, Kent, Carly, and Steph are a normal American middle-class quartet with regular jobs in ordinary cities.

Greg and Steph's argument about an earlier incident in which Greg referred to Steph as a "regular" marks the beginning of the play, as they discover they are ordinary people. A dispute about aesthetics sets the setting for the play's fundamental conflict: the characters' search for meaning in their lives and their relationships with one another. Reason to be Pretty can be analysed utilising a framework centred on a significant gender analysis theme. The theme of LaBute's composition is the complexity of the gender relationship. Reasons to Be Pretty focuses on physical attractiveness and beauty-related themes and subjects. LaBute describes the play in the preface as "a story about our nation's (and, by extension, the world's) obsession with physical beauty" (xi). In addition, "We want to know how we really look and what others think of us; if we are pretty enough, good enough, the greatest" (xi). Society is enamoured with this concept. The protagonists are four settled working-class individuals who reside in working-class neighbourhoods; they would not be featured in a fashion magazine for their beauty. Greg says to a friend of his girlfriend, "Yeah, Steph doesn't have a face like that girl's; maybe her face is merely average, but I wouldn't swap her for a million dollars" (16).

According to Neil LaBute, Reasons to Be Pretty centres on four people as they contemplate their own decency, beauty, intelligence, and popularity in the mirror. Alternatively, at least sufficiently handsome and intelligent" (LaBute, Reasons x). The title of the play suggests that it is an investigation of "beautiful. Indeed, the choice of the word "beautiful" is noteworthy. LaBute selects a term that, when applied to a person, conveys femininity regardless of gender. Given the title and its obvious relation to feminine beauty, one may assume that the focus of the play is on female characters condemning or defending the significance of physical beauty.

In contrast, this drama's main characters are males who do not look overly concerned with their physical attractiveness. They are more preoccupied with femininity. Beauty and Misogyny by Sheila Jefferys refer to "male aesthetics that caused women to believe their bodies were inadequate and to engage in expensive, time-consuming activities that left them feeling inauthentic and unattractive when barefaced." "Women viewed the phrase 'beautiful' as oppressive" (1). Therefore, a more acceptable title for Reasons to Be Pretty would-be Reasons to Possess Pretty. Based on their

relative attractiveness, the male characters in the play evaluate, manipulate, and subjugate the female characters. Men are the worst examples of masculinity in reality. They are childish, sexist, and cruel, a reoccurring subject in most of LaBute's works.

When evaluating the function of gender in personality formation, it is essential to emphasise that masculinity and femininity are both stage actions involving the display and appraisal of the body. LaBute continues to deepen the male chauvinism apparent in several of his earlier works via Kent. Greg rarely questions Kent's misogyny, which is more specific and virulent. Kent views relationships as a fight between the sexes and finds an eager disciple in Greg. In response to his friend's separation, he swiftly enforces engagement rules. After witnessing Greg have an energy bar immediately following lunch, he tells him, "They are not sweets. That equates to having two meals. Gaining weight will not bring her back " (20). Nor is it a way to help Kent's ideal corporate softball team win the championship. Kent's emphasis on the physical and LaBute's use of sports as a relationship metaphor is fundamental to Kent's fundamental male psychology, which is prominent in Pretty. Through the figure of Kent, LaBute pushes the idea that men and women are separate groups, or maybe different species, eternally engaged in conflict and competition.

In Reason to Be Happy, LaBute in Reason to Happy, Years later and with a different title, LaBute completed the story. He desired to demonstrate that personalities evolve. Greg became an adult and self-aware individual who desired happiness. He chose to become a teacher because he enjoys reading. Reading enhances mental maturity.

Reasons is a sequel to the 2009 Tony Award-nominated play "reasons to be gorgeous." Originally, "reasons" was a trilogy's third and final instalment about four lovers and friends. LaBute has multiple reasons for focusing on failed relationships: they are common, fascinating, and make for great theatre.

The author emphasised that happiness is not the focus of this play. He added that if I had happiness, I would have written about self-help, but I wrote about the search for happiness and how it can be lonely and tough at times. Specifically, Reasons to be Happy is about four people who grew up together in a small American town, fell in and out of love, paired off with their polar opposites, and found and lost their way on the journey to personal fulfilment, empowerment, and growth.

The scope of LaBute's vision permits a comprehensive understanding of the human condition, making his works more accessible to a larger audience. This LaBute play has multiple layers, allowing for multiple interpretations. According to Derrida, in deconstructive reading, the hierarchy elements in the binary opposition are inverted, and the centre is decentered. Consequently, the elements in the binary oppositions of western ideologies, such as male/female, tragedy/comedy, active/passive, and victim/perpetrator, are all concurrently inverted in Neil LaBute's gender-defined plays. Reason to Be Happy undoubtedly drew inspiration from various elements of reason to be Pretty while creating the two plays, as evidenced by the titles and explicit references to Greg, Kent, Steph, and Carly, the four main characters from Reason to be Pretty. This play is a continuation of the events of the preceding play but takes place in a new period.

In both plays, the author described the progression of events. In his first play, the characters sought exterior beauty and good looks; however, in his second, they were more mature and began to seek happiness. His works reflected American culture in general.

Ultimately, LaBute wants to leave his city and go to another (New York) to search for his happiness.

4. Conclusion:

When gender analysis is consistently applied to all elements of life and assumed as a participatory behaviour, it is the most productive method. Additionally, when it is used to lead concepts and advance methods that are updated in response to the needs and advantages of both men and women. Gender analysis highlights the distinctions between women's and men's

activities, conditions, requirements, access to and controls over resources and rewards, and decision-making authority. Thus, it invites individuals to consider the cultural bigotry of men's and women's unequal treatment and how this contributes to individuals' feelings of deprivation. Different gender positions, public duties, and socially acceptable identities and actions contribute to the disparity in controlling relationships between men and women. However, if a gender analysis is not undertaken during the design of a programme, it may unwittingly exacerbate existing gender disparities or lead to the emergence of new ones. In addition, gender analysis assists in identifying the unique challenges, goals, and potentials of men and women. In the first play, Steve is fixated on how men perceive her and American society. While the second piece focuses on women who chase males, such as Carley and Steph, Grege is self-aware. The play examines the connection between men and women concerning gender analysis topics. Despite the fact that the author has shown women in a variety of various ways, the research demonstrates that the archetype of the powerful and moral woman is the one he likes. Every move comes one step closer to the complete elimination of the enemy models. The assertion that LaBute is a feminist author is supported by all of this evidence.

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