Language and Gender: A Feminist Critique of the Use of Proverbs in Selected African Dramatic Texts

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Abstract

In African communities gender stereotypes are commonplace. These are evident in conversations, riddles, proverbs, idioms, witty sayings, etc. These language markers often are used to give credence, and add glamour and beauty to spoken words in any given circumstance. They have become embedded so firmly in our various languages that they have become accepted as normal. Language plays a major role in the social construction of gender, especially through the usage of proverbs. Because of this, writers have endowed their creative works with proverbial sayings, using them to enhance the expositions of the themes in of their plays. In this way, they have invested their works with a truly African sensibility and flavor. However, most proverbs are not gender blind. Indeed, they are gender specific; and in effect, they construct the societal relationship between male and female. In this paper I use a gender lens and attempt a feminist critique of these proverbs and other expressions used in selected texts by some African writers.

Introduction

In recent times the issue of language and gender, and its implication in the feminist discourse, have gained currency. According to Simone de Beavoir, women are made and not born. In this view, being made is a process of social construction where language, especially proverbs, takes front seat. Chinua Achebe, a famous Nigerian novelist has said that proverbs are the oil with which words are eaten. Proverbs are said to accelerate its 'smooth sail' through the 'throat.' By examining the usage of proverbs by several prominent African playwrights, I will demonstrate the ways in which African writers construct and reinforce gender stereotypes within broader African society today.

Feminists are beginning to assess ideology and its relationship to gender identification and sexual difference at the theoretical level. At the political level, they are beginning to object to linguistic expressions that relegate women in all spheres. For example, Dale Spender argues that men have intentionally:

> Formulated a semantic rule which posits them central and positive as the norm, and they have classified the world from that standpoint, constructing a symbolic system which represents patriarchal order (Spender 1980: 58).

This means that through their semantic construction, women are positioned as objects and are denied all sense of subjectivity.

As an instrument of expression, language is seen to reflect the interests of a given social group: man and woman

(Spender 1980). Society is seen as structured around two dominant classes with conflicting interest. These differences in classes are reflected in their different relations to language. Men define language, rendering women incapable of influencing the linguistic process as men use it to perpetuate their authority and interests, thus denying women of power, Expatiating on this, Spender explains that the dominance of the male 'semantic rule' is an effect of the male definitions of meaning. He further argues that men, like the ruling class in Marxist arguments, have the power to define reality, and hence, the usage of language reflects men's interests (*ibid*).

For any group of people language is an integral aspect of their cultural life. According to Deborah Cameron, it encodes a culture's preoccupation and its values. It is also a major avenue through which culture is transmitted from generation to generation and to others who have access to the community (Cameron 1999). It is in this vein that the representation of women and gender in language has become a major issue in the feminist discourse. Feminists have come to the conclusion that languages can themselves be sexist. They argue that the world is represented from a masculine point of view and in accordance with stereotyped notions about women, men and the relationship between them (*ibid*). Thus, in feminist discourse, language itself is one of the most basic markers of patriarchy and often is used as a manipulative tool.

In this paper my focus is on the use of language in the construction of the female identity through the usage of proverbs. I am particularly interested in the skill with which African dramatist exploit new aesthetic opportunities by weaving traditional verbal art forms into their dramas in English. This, in itself, is a great stride towards the development of indigenous African literary culture in

English. I do not limit my focus to proverbs alone, but to other forms of verbal expressions like figures of speech, idiomatic expressions, metaphoric expressions, stereotypes, etc. I will refer to two plays, *Imaguero* by Evbinma Ogie and *Dance on his Grave* by Barclays Ayakoroma. I also assess critically my own works, specifically *The Queen Sisters*, to point to ways of subverting the dominant paradigm by using the same proverbs to undermine African patriarchy.

In literature, language is the main medium of expression. Language functions as a basic medium through which meaning is filtered, and also acts as a cultural and political system that has meaning in itself. The use of proverbs acts as a means for the enunciation of this system. In Africa, it is becoming common in post-colonial literature for traditional, home-grown images to be embellished in literary texts. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins have rightly observed that:

> Many African playwrights resort to indigenous discursive patterns and tons of phrases to communicate in English, and to bring to English something of their own language and oral traditions. Local proverbs, in particular, communicate a resonant, poetic meaning that standard English expression does not normally allow (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996: 182).

Africa is endowed with vast oral culture that represents the dominant view about gender. Along with other forms of orature, the proverbs provide a strategy through which society reaffirms its traditional beliefs. Proverbs are an important component of speech, particularly in Africa. For

example, among the Ibos they are considered "the palm oil with which words are eaten." To the Yorubas, they are "the horse of conversation," and for the Hausas, they are "the beginning of words." For the Tiv, proverbs are "the spring from which conversation sprouts." And for the Binis, it is said that when instructions are to be passed for a well-bred child, it should be given in proverb, but for a servant, plain words are sufficient. This illustrates the value of proverbs in African societies.

Although it is impossible to trace the origins of proverbs, Gilbert and Tompkins have defined it as "short, easily-remembered pithy statements that are passed on from generation to generation. They sometimes recall oral forms of history and culture" (1996: 182). In a similar vein, Mineke Schipper defines it as "short pithy sayings, indigenously embodying an admitted truth or a cherished belief" (2003: 9). She identifies four basic characteristics of a proverb: (1) a concise fixed artistic form, (2) evaluative and conservative function in society, (3) authoritative validity, and (4) anonymous origin. Its main features are that it exaggerates, idealizes, simplifies, stereotypes, jests and jokes. Ruth Finnegan observes that:

> In many African cultures a feeling for language, for imagery, and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology comes out particularly clearly in proverbs... Indeed, this type of figurative expression is sometimes taken so far as to be almost a whole mode of speech in its own right (Finnegan 1970).

In Western cultures, it is arguable that the genre of proverbs itself is gradually declining as most people hardly ever pay attention to it. However, in Africa, they remain in common usage (Schipper 2003). Their poetic power is most captivating and fascinating, and proverbs are regarded as being endowed with wisdom. Their strength and impact are authenticated by the use of such strong references as: "according to our people," "our people say," "our ancestors say" or "our elders say." When the elders, people or ancestors "say" something, who can oppose the collective wisdom of the people? In societies, people who are very versed in or have a rich repertory of proverbs are well respected and regarded as eloquent speakers.

Patriarchy has played a major role in the formulation of many African proverbs. They are commonly used in Africa to construct feminine identities, perpetuating the subordination of women to men. Phallocentric undertones are evident in these proverbs and they also attempt to position women as lower than men. The African belief that men are superior to women influences the construction of these proverbs. The obvious marginality of women is reflected in the projection of African society as strictly patriarchal and obviously masculinist. There are many proverbs in Africa that present us with rich collections of society's attitude towards women—their bodies, status, assigned roles, etc.—that invariably exhibit the way in which society perceives them, thus constructing their identities. Many proverbs are presumably developed by men, and women's voices remain excluded. Schipper, who has examined nearly 14,000 proverbs from across the world, has observed that:

> (T)he preponderance of proverbs representing male perspectives, promoting male superiority and defending male interests and privileges, is indeed striking. If proverbs present a 'truth,' it is of course always a truth hiding underlying interests. 'Truths' as seen from women's perspective are hard to come by... As much as they have been under-represented or excluded from the public arena and from public functions in most societies, women's views are significantly under-represented in proverbs I collected from oral sources, as well as from written sources such as collections and dictionaries ... (Schipper 2003: 17)

Some of these proverbs portray misogyny, with an aim of perpetuating and legitimizing the patriarchal order. These assumptions include the primacy of the male subject; the objectification of women; their identification with traditional roles; and the portrayal of female sexuality as dangerous and destructive are all common features of African proverbs (Stratton 1994). In African culture, women are traditionally positioned as silent and passive, as contrasted to men who wield the rod of authority and knowledge. Proverbs about women have substantially contributed to sexual differences, resulting in a growing gender gap. As Schipper argues, this gap has alienated both "men and women from sharing both public roles in life and responsibilities at home." Schipper continues by explaining that "Teaching and preaching the preservation of such a gendered gap on the basis of relatively insignificant body differences, proverbs, have reinforced prevailing hierarchies and established rigid images of what

it means not to be a man but a woman, thus legitimating accessory roles of life for both sexes" (Schipper 2003: 7).

Proverbs and literature

The use of proverbs in literature dates back many generations. For instance, proverbs are found in the odes of Pindar, the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and in the writings of Terence. Other Greek scholars like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle also made use of these compressed words of wisdom in their literary works. Similarly, English writers like Chaucer and Shakespeare also employed the use of proverbs.

In Africa, proverbs have become a popular embellishment in the works of nearly all the post-colonial writers, from Soyinka, Achebe, and Ngugi'w Thiongo to younger writers such as Adichie. However, for the purpose of this paper, I will restrict my analysis to texts by two Nigerian dramatists: Barclays Ayakoroma and Evbinma Ogie. In the opening page of *Imaguero* by Evbinma Ogie, we are confronted with excessively masculinist and misogynistic expressions by the author as he introduces the play:

> Imaguero is a story of romance,... It reveals man as a puppet toyed with by woman, making one wonder whether man really ever lives for himself, or if he thinks he does, is he caught in a web from which by reason of his very existence he cannot escape? One would like to believe that monarchs and highly placed persons are, by virtue of their positions in life well placed to escape being

> made play things by women. Imaguero tells a story which makes this unlikely, confirms the historical assertion that woman has been the cause of many wars (Ogie 1999: iii).

Discrediting the female object is Ogie's strategy in his assault on 'sexual power,' a strategy he uses to demean womanhood. With the impression of women as "evil beings" who subvert men's "ideal" plans, he builds his play.

In scene one, we see Oba (king) Esigie warn his chiefs not to trust women, "And I will still warn you not to repose too much confidence in any woman" (*ibid*: 4). The above expression is commonly used to discredit women. This is also expressed in similar proverbs such as "community secrets can never reside in the house of a woman," "a women can empty her womb for you, but not her heart." This means that no matter how close a husband is to a wife, he should not trust her. The equivalent in Congo is "to eat with a woman is to eat with a witch."

In the same play, Oliha again stresses this point further in a proverb that says, "Women are many but friends are few" (*ibid*:12). This trend is carried further when the King says again:

> The man who shares all his secrets with a woman he thinks loves him is not a man. Such a man, no matter how much he boasts of his greatness, and capabilities is only a fool and a blind bat, a toy in the hand of a weak, frivolous, feminine creature called woman, whose shifting look that is called beauty, sends him doing her will, like one under the influence of wine obeys a

> beardless youth. Such a man is not a man, for God made man master of woman, not woman master of man (Ogie 1999: 15).

Eson in support of these misogynistic views also says, "Well, sane husbands should not love their wives" (*ibid*: 15). Ogie privileges the male voices in these proverbs and gives them power and authority. Oliha also restates another common stereotype when his wife confesses of being jealous of her co-wife, "You would not be a woman if you were not jealous" (*ibid*: 37).

In his lament over the plot of Oba Esigie to destabilize his home, he says of women:

> Womanhood is debase in my sight ... a mere article of sensual commence not fit to be called the image of God. Yet the Portuguese priests say a woman was the mother of God. Perhaps they mean the God of Portugal, not my Osalobua; not my own. A woman couldn't have been the mother of my God. Never! (*ibid:* 40).

Here we see a stereotype that encodes women as agents of moral corruption.

As he summons his wives, he says, "Where are my bickering wives?" (*ibid*: 42). This demonstrates traditional African stereotypes about women, specifically by implying that women are quarrelsome and talkative. There is little doubt that *Imaguero* is a misogynistic play. Its ideological function can be discerned through its usage of proverbs that are aimed at legitimizing and reinforcing patriarchal

ideology. The verbal expressions in this play expose the sexist bias of men in African tradition.

This same trend is maintained in Barclays Ayakoroma's *Dance on his Grave,* in which the author examines women's struggle for power, space and authority. In the play, Chief Olotu, the paramount ruler of Toru-Ama, worries about the all-women meeting spear-headed by his wife. He says, "And what are they talking in the gathering of the hen" (Ayakoroma 1997: 15). An all-women meeting summoned by the Queen to plan a protest against the intended war with a neighbouring village is seen as a waste of energy and time that should have been spent doing domestic chores. They are likened to hens which are known for egg laying and expending energy, scratching the ground with their toes. In this same mood of masculinity, he says, "Women want to put on the thinking cap too, eh? Well, they will all grow bald-headed too" (*ibid*: 15). In the play, the women try to take possession of the public space from which they would challenge the patriarchal ideological stance. Public affairs are believed to be the domain of men and men alone; so the men in the play regard women's attempts at trespassing as an abomination. Patriarchal men see bald-headedness as a consequence of managing public life.

Chief Olotu goes on to say, "They want to act like men. The baby cobra is never free of venom" (*ibid*: 15). He further substantiates his point with a proverb by saying, "They say if you play with a puppy it shows your nakedness to the world" (Ogie 1999: 18). As he expresses his fear of the female insurgence he says, "My people, women are taking over the world" (*ibid*: 19). This is because he has been socialized to think that it is a man's world anyway. The women have no space in it. He goes on to say, "No! No! It cannot be! Two rams cannot drink from one pot at the same

time..." (Ayakoroma 1997: 19). Alearo, the Queen by her action is perceived as flouting patriarchal authority. Out of fear for what the women might do, the king says, "I know it is no bravery to fight with a woman" (*ibid*: 19). This perpetuates the notion that women are the weaker sex, a common trope that pervades African proverbs. This is an attempt to instill fear in his wife who has already mobilized the women in the village against the men in order to make them change their mind about waging war, which the women claim would make them lose their sons.

Paying 'bride price on the head' is very significant in patriarchal ideology—it means bought over completely. For example, in exasperation of his wife's behavior, the chief says, "You are my wife; that is why I paid bride price on your head. Once you have sold your fish at the market you can't expect to have them back and keep the money" (*ibid*: 23). By the use of the proverb King Olotu reminds his wife that she has been completely sold, and has no rights to question her 'buyer.' By this expression, Olotu articulates a patriarchal ideology and celebrates masculinity. As the wife tries to challenge him, he reinforces his earlier statement, re-asserting his authority as the one in control:

> You are not here to reason woman! I didn't pay all that bride price on your head for you to come here and reason for me! I do all the reasoning for you and every other person in this house! No more of that rubbish in my palace! (*ibid*: 25).

The above statement shows how women are excluded from the decision- making system, even in their own homes. It supports the notion that women are to be seen but never

heard. They are perpetually excluded form the male domain of community power. As the men meet to reassess the threat of the women, they invoke the power of the ancestors to support themselves. They see the threat as a trespass into the male threshold. Responding to this, Apodi, one of the chiefs, says, "This is unheard of! Women wanting to put on thinking caps" (Ayakoroma 1997: 36). Osima, another chief, immediately reacts in support, "They think taking care of the affairs of this land is the same as haggling in Zarama market" (*ibid*: 36). In Africa, women are often associated with trading in the market, which is why we have the term 'market women' and never 'market men' even though many men often trade in the market too.

Queen Alaere, who initially mobilized the women for the protest and the boycott of domestic duties, later reassembles the women to assess the effect of the boycott. She draws their attention to the impacts created by their refusal to perform domestic duties in a proverb, "Our elders say, those who eat eggs forget that the hen labours to lay it" (*ibid*: 40). They infer that men do not appreciate their input in terms of domestic services. However, this proverb is never heeded, as Chief Olotu, in continuation of his 'malignant' misogyny says, "...this tongue is good as far as it does not belong to a woman. The day Tamarua added women to our fold our trouble began" (*ibid*: 47).

In his attempt to continue to position men as active and women as passive, Apodi reacts violently to the women's request that their physical position in sexual relationships be altered. He says, "That small crab says if we start sleeping again, that I, Chief Apodi, will lie down, then she will lie on top of me..."(*ibid*: 49) As a warning to the women the King (Olotu) says, "These hens have to be told that it is the foolish woman who goes under the rain when she is tying only one

wrapper. Yes! Only the elders of the land know the boundaries of the land" (Ayakoroma 1997: 51). A wrapper is a loose unsown cotton fabric tied by woman and with a blouse on top of it. It is assumed that when it rains this fabric sticks to the woman's body and shows all her contours. It may even fall off. For a married woman either of these is an abomination as no one apart from a husband is supposed to view that much of her body. Here the women are warned not to be too zealous as they may be put to shame.

In his address to the men of the town to use their authority as husbands in their homes to subdue their wives, the King says:

> Husbands must be husbands; and wives must be wives. For many market days now, the women of Toru-Ama have been trying to dictate to us how we should run the affairs of this land. Do we leave them to rule us? (*ibid*: 52)

The men reply in unison, "Never!" As he continues to address the men urging them to use their authority as men, he says:

> A man must be a man. Yes! And a man must have some pride. When a man ceases to be a man, he develops hunch back. We are going to tell our wives that we are men (*ibid*: 54).

In this proverb, he implies that when a man refuses to assert his position as the head of the family, he becomes a 'disabled' man. Later, heart broken because his wife in a

heated argument denies his paternity of their only child he says, "When a man ceases to be a man, he pays homage to a woman" (Ayakoroma 1997: 60). For King Olotu, it is a great shame for a man to give in to a woman. This is because of the status they have carved out for women in their community.

In my play *The Queen Sisters,* I also have used some of these proverbs, figures of speech and metaphoric expressions. In doing this I use these expressions from a male perspective to demonstrate their notions of women. Women use some of these proverbs to voice their feelings about the way men perceive them. In my play, I seek to undermine patriarchy by expressing the issues surrounding it. I preoccupy myself in *The Queen Sisters* with the task of exposing the subtleties of patriarchy and undermining the institutional forms of exclusion.

For example, consider the proverb, "That is why our people say that no matter how strong a log of wood is, it gives way to the axe" (Salami 2002: 9). I use it to show how pregnancy and robbing a woman of her virginity are seen as antidotes for subduing an assertive woman and making her submit to a man no matter how undeserving he is. A similar example I use is, "Whoever says a man's manhood is not poisonous should look at what it has done to a pregnant woman" (*ibid*: 10). The proverb is used as an allegory to valorise men's sexual prowess. It celebrates masculinity in all its glory.

I also used proverbs to reiterate the fact that women are viewed as men's property and as such must be subject to their authority whether they like or not. For example, I use the following proverb to demonstrate that a woman's identity is to be constructed around her child-bearing role, "A man's children are his assurance of a greater tomorrow. His wives provide these children. That is their use." This indicates that

in African tradition only motherhood can confirm your identity as a woman. Motherhood gives cultural legitimacy to female power. These are parameters defined by patriarchal ideology and women have learnt to live with these male-defined parameters for their survival.

Women are silent in the face of their oppression under traditional polygamous arrangements, still common in many parts of Africa. They may complain but do not resist sexual oppression in the harem. For example, another proverb that I use demonstrates the difficulty a woman has in getting out of a polygamous marital arrangement, "The tree that the home leopard has climbed, who will dare climb it?" (Salami 2002: 39). This proverb enunciates a very pathetic aspect of the women or wives in a harem. The husband is metaphorically referred to as the home leopard. When he rejects or divorces a wife, as a mark of respect, no other citizen will dare marry or have an affair with the woman. She is doomed to a life of loneliness. With the knowledge that this is their destiny if they rebel, women are forced to conform as a strategy for survival.

In most African marriages, patience is a tool that society uses to subjugate women in either monogamous or polygamous marriages. While the women are to be virtuous, the men are to display valor. This can be seen in a binary of the woman of virtue/man of valor, common in much African literature. Proverbs are useful to express the matrimonial experiences of most women, because a good wife is not supposed to express her ordeals in her matrimony to anyone, not even her parents, thus perpetuating the culture of silence. Silence is a common trope in patriarchal ideology. Hence, the voicelessness of the African woman has become a topical issue in feminist discourse and deserves further analysis.

Conclusion

From the preceding it is clear that sexism has been integrated into contemporary African literature through the usage of proverbs by contemporary playwrights. The authors cited above have been able to convey the ethnic realities of their various communities through judicious selections of proverbs, idioms, metaphors, stereotypes and other verbal expressions. While it is obvious that there is an over valuation of masculine values, proverbs facilitate critical devaluation of women. In this way, proverbs are used in perpetuating the exclusion of women from the decision-making process in traditional African societies. Both male and female writers therefore should engage in a radical dismantling of these male constructed proverbs, replacing them with proverbs that promote societal well-being and construct positive identities for women.

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