

Expressive Aspect of Phallia-autocracy in an Indigenous African Society: The Case of Yoruba Proverbs

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The patriarchal leaning of most traditional African communities is sign-posted by certain behavioural models which place the woman at the receiving end of certain prejudices in our cultural milieu. Such prejudices manifest in diverse behavioural and relational manners that either peripheralize the woman or out-rightly remove every vestige of human dignity from her being. Language, being a significant carrier of our emotions, biases, beliefs, preference and prejudices, provides a crucial platform for the interrogation of the nature of gender relations and their consequences in any society, such consideration has forced a preponderance of scholarly interest in gender studies in arts and humanities. This study carries out a scholarly investigation into such gender inspired biases through the prism of Yoruba proverbs as a reflection of our cultural practices and beliefs about the position of the woman in a typical traditional Yoruba setting.

Keywords: patriarchal, phallia-autocracy, language, prejudices, proverbs

Introduction

Most African societies are unapologetically patriarchal in outlook. In this context, social relationships are anchored on gender-fostered considerations which arrogate certain assumed superiority and privileges to the masculine side of our sexist divide. This consideration has remained the breeding ground for all kinds of negative prejudices which insidiously subvert the status and social placement of the woman person. Gender relation is such a ubiquitous sociological phenomenon whose footprints are felt in every aspect of social relations in virtually every human community. In arts, professions, religions, language, and rituals etc., echoes of gender biases are recorded in varied resonations, especially in the African world.

Sex-determined roles and relationships in many African indigenous societies have attracted considerable scholarly attention across diverse disciplines. This accounts for the shifting paradigms in the field of gender study. Some of these are reviewed below.

Literature Review

Owonibi (1998) examines the university matriculation examination's use of English tests in Nigeria to reveal the presence or absence of sexist features in the structure of the texts. This is with the aim of evaluating

how well the tests have yielded to the feminist aspirations of non-sexist language reform. The results of the study reveal that the UME use of English tests exhibits features of linguistic sexism tilted in favour of the masculine gender.

Rase Letscholo's (2000) study investigates and reports the interaction of language and gender in the Ikalanga language of the Bakalanga of Botswana. The purpose here is to determine how language use, "particularly the lexicon, reflects cultural roles assigned to males and females among the Ikalanga and specifically how such roles result in unequal power relations between the sexes" (Letsholo, 2009, p. 151). Adopting dominance framework, Letsholo (opcit) observes that "most positive words used to describe women are praise names and there are hardly any word that describe women in terms of characteristics such as bravery, strength, wisdom, intelligence or leadership skills". In her conclusion, Letsholo (2009) observed that, "there are more positive labels ascribed to males than females" and that Ikalanga is more favourable to men than women.

In a study titled "Gender and Proverbs in Setswana", Nhlelosama (2009) acknowledges proverbs as an important reflector of the society's wisdom lore in the society" (p. 50). She enumerates the functional application of proverbs which include language embellishment, acclamation or condemnation of social conducts, and settlement of conflicts and disputes. She then anchors the study on how proverbs are used to reflect the perception of men and women in the Setswana society.

Akporobaro (2006) attests to the social and educative functions of proverbs among the Yorubas. He observes:

In Yoruba cultural life, the proverb has continued to function as a living vigorous, and current rhetorical device for transmission of the moral wisdom, for the teaching of the young and for advice and criticism.

The brief review above reveals that language and proverbs provide the platform for cultural expression. It is within the purview of the study that elements of biases can be glimpsed. This study adds to the growing literature of gender concerns by examining the aspect of Yoruba proverbs that express suppression of women.

Theoretical Framework

Gender studies have thrown up various theoretical frameworks and concepts for analyzing diversity of issues in the subject. For instance, womanism interrogates issues that specifically foreground the humanness of the woman person and insists that the fact of gender differences relates only to the reproductive functions between man and woman. Feminism could be perceived from African and western perspectives. The western approach to feminism grows out of bourgeois individualism as experienced in western capitalist societies (Engels, 1972). Its concerns are related to issues like female body, essentialism, and radical feminism (Kingdom, 1991). African feminism, on the other hand, is heterosexual, pro-natal (Vallenga, 1983), and has something to do with "bread and butter, culture and power". One major area of difference between the two views on feminism is "the sensitive issue of clitoridectomy" (Hoskin, 1982). The main issue of contention here, according to Oluyemi-Kusa (2009) is that, while "western women were emphasizing individual female autonomy. African women have been more concerned with culturally linked forms of public participation".

The authors are therefore adopting gender theory—a socio-cultural construct that is culture-specific. It has much to do with social roles, age, and status. In an attempt to clarify the concept of gender, the United Nation

Development Programme (UNDP) submits that:

The term gender denotes the qualities associated with men and women that are socially and culturally, than biologically determined. Gender includes the way in which society differentiates appropriate behavior and access to power for women and men. Although the details vary from society to society and change over time, gender relations tend to include a strong element of inequality between women and men and are strongly influenced by ideology. (Emphasis ours) (UNDP Report, 1986)

This thus reveals the variable precepts that are used to show the relational differences between men and women in a particular or given socio-cultural context.

Meena (1992), quoted in Nhlekisama (2009) sees gender as structural relationship of inequality between men and women as manifested in labour markets and in political structures, as well as in the household. These aptly capture what the author intend to explore as reflected in the Yoruba proverbs. Since language is regarded as “bearer of the matrix of privilege and domination” (Hussein, 2005), an insight into Yoruba proverbs will give us the privilege of seeing the “phallofronts” in the Yoruba worldview.

In similar vein, Nhlekisama (2009) believes that: “language discriminates against women. It relegates them to positions of servitude and subordination”.

The question here is how true this assertion is in Yorubaland. An exploration of Yoruba proverbs will suffice to answer the question as the authors intend to do in this study. This study analysis will also help to expose the cultural beliefs of the Yorubas on this social construct.

Content Analysis of Reflection of Women in Yoruba Proverbs

In this study, samples are taken from Yoruba proverbs and are subjected to content analysis to reflect how women are trampled upon and denigrated within the patriarchal structure of the Yoruba culture. In doing so, the authors are going to concern ourselves with broad areas bordering on marital/sexual relations, power relations, social relations, and General Yoruba ontology. Most of the proverbs for analysis are sourced from Shebais (2006) book which is a seminal text having a collection of Yoruba proverbs with sexist bias.

Power Relation

At the domestic level, there is a clear manifestation of unfair distribution or sharing of power equation which is titled in favour of the man, while at same time degrading the position of woman. This situation is succinctly. It is within this power equilibrium that the following proverbs derive their relevance:

(i) Ile ti Obirin ti n ke atoto –arere, igi arere
ni i hu nibe gbehin.

Translation: Any household where a woman’s voice is uppermost,
the house ends up being, overgrow by giant “arere” trees

This proverb provides the platform for both discrimination against and domination of the female gender both at the home front and in other social establishments without any consideration for matriarchal essence and mental capabilities of the woman. This proverb simply implies that women are not worthy of any leadership

position where men exists. “Ile” (house) in this context is conceived as a masculine enclave where women are not supposed to be heard. The question here is even when the man is not around, should the women not control her household. The central essence of the proverb above runs counter to the historical and legendary roles of women like Olurombi, Oya, Oluorogbo, and even Efunsetan Aniwura who emerged not only as influential figures but also as legendary heroes of their societies in crisis period.

Another proverb laden with discriminatory import is:

Mo n lo ile wa ni ojo kan Ilare ko je

ki obinrin mo pe eru ni oun

Translation: *I am going to my father's house to spend*

a day or two does not make a woman realize

that she is a slave (in the husband's household). (Sheba, 2006, p. 54)

Here, the women is clearly equated with a slave who has no right to do anything outside the wish of the “owner”. This is a clear instance of commodification of the female gender. She can be pawned, purchased, or even dashed out as the whim and caprices of the “owner” dictates.

As this proverb indicates, the only allowances given her by the husband to occasionally visit her parents are to make her live in the fool's paradise of thinking that she has some rights. It is within this belief system that the levirate system that is practiced among the Yorubas derives its justification. Here, at the demise of the husband, she is just handed over to any of the deceased younger siblings without consideration for her opinion, emotion and the right as a human being.

This social imbalance is also reflected in proverbs pertaining to the naming culture among the Yorubas:

“Bi ko ba nidi, Obinrin ki I je kumolu”

Translation: There must be a reason for naming of female

child ‘Kumolu’ (Death-has-taken-the-hero)

This proverb asserts the total supremacy of man in acts of heroism. No woman in our cultural estimation is worthy of being conferred with the quality of an hero. The culture however grudgingly concedes such being conferred on a woman when there is no male person to claim the honour. Simply a woman cannot don the cap of a hero (olu)except there is a happenstance of tragic dimension. In essence it is a tragic irony a woman to be so named in our culture.

The Phallia overatedness or arrogance of men is reflected in:

Obinrin to ba n wa abuku nii gbounje fun oko re

looro.

Translation: *A woman that is demanding for insult will present food*

to her husband while she is standing up. (Sheba, 2006, p. 89)

This proverb prescribes a total, almost slavish submission to the male authority even in an ordinary situation of table etiquette which requires that a woman must assume some postural of respect to massage the ego of the husband while placing the food before him. It is considered a sacrilege for the woman to serve the husband while standing. This puts a stamp of subservience on the woman while relating to man.

In the larger society, the administrative competence of the woman is subverted and trampled upon as reflected in a proverb like:

“Obo ko Joba, ilu ko daru, ni jo obo ba joba
nilu yoo daru”

Translation: The vagina is not on the throne, the town is peaceful; on the day the vagina ascends the throne, the town becomes chaotic. (Sheba, 2006, p. 100)

Here, vagina is a synecdochal representation of women and she is associated with chaos when placed in position of authority. There is a silent binarity between the two sexes here; the male, i.e., the Phallus equates peace, tranquility, and appropriately placed symbol of authority while the vaginal symbolizes chaos, misrule, and inappropriately placed symbol of authority. This clearly foregrounds the concept of “othernesses where the woman is placed on the flip side of our social reality in relation to man”.

Sexual/Marital Relation

At the domestic level, the woman is the quintessential necessary evil that is just being tolerated inspite of her overwhelming shortcomings. She is made to carry the tag of infidelity, unreliability, treachery, and back-stabbing. Consider the following proverbs, for example:

“Awo buruku lobinrin le se, obinrin ni ale
mefa , mefeefa o mo ara won”.

Translation: “*Women are capable of only vicious secrecy,*
a woman has six concubines, and the six do
not know each other”(sic). (Sheba, 2006, p. 84)

In this proverb, double negatives of adultery and treachery are yoked together to foreground the unreliability and promiscuous nature of women. The question that comes to mind is: Who is to be blamed for the offence of adultery-man or woman? This paints the picture of an unfair social order dominated by men who make scapegoats out of women for everything that goes wrong in the society. Silently what’s implied here is that the man can engage in secret sexual escapades but the woman has no such rights, and note a replay of Delilah complex in “*Obinrin bi mo fun ni ko pe ko ma pani*” (*That woman has a child for one does not stop her from killing one*). She is the Biblical Delilah who is both devilishly cunning and murderously treacherous and therefore totally unreliable. This is why in most African traditional cultures, Yoruba inclusive, the prime suspect in the sudden death of a man is the wife. The theme of adultery is further expressed in:

“Atijotijo n ko? Obinrin dagba tan o ni
oun ko ni ale kan” “What about the past relationship?”

Translation: A woman on becoming aged Pretends she
never had a Concubine. (Sheba, 2006, p. 8)

The proverb above is a demonstration of desperate attempt to criminalize the woman. No matter how good she behaves and comports herself, her past provides a good point of reference to negativize her present positive qualities. To men, it does not matter that such a past is even a matter of speculation. This is done without giving allowance for the fact that she must have committed such “sin” with a man who eventually jilted her in the past.

The General Yoruba Ontology

Generally speaking, the socio-cultural outlook of Yoruba views the woman as a second fiddle in all respect

of human relation. Our proverbs and wise cracks also reflect this.

For example, a woman's honour or worth is equated with her physiological make-up and not mental ability as shown in this proverb:

“Didan ni iyi ide, eje ni iyi oogun, omu sikisiki
ni iyi obinrin”

Translation: “*The value of brass is in its shining, the value of ‘Oogun’ is its efficiency, full breasts are the value of a lady.* (Sheba, 2006, p. 76)

This represents an unfair definition of a woman which has unfortunately come to be accepted as a criteria of assessing how valuable she is. What happens during the course of child bearing, her physiology is altered. Does she become valueless? What is the physical value of a man?

In matter of maternal health/child mortality, the woman is not spared as she is responsible for all the untoward eventualities. This view is given credence by a proverb like:

Ajitoni to n bimo abiku, ere ise owo re lo n je

Translation: ‘*Ajitoni that begets abiku children is only reaping what she had earlier sown.* (Sheba, 2006, p. 79)

This proverb clearly ignores the problems of genetic incompatibility or wrong neonatal or inadequate neonatal facilities which are implicated in most infant mortalities which give birth to the Yoruba concept of “abiku” for which the woman is being vilified. This means that the woman who continually suffers infant mortality is not to be pitied, she is only getting the consequences of her past sins. After all, she is named Ajitoni (At-least-I-awake well-for-today).

Women are at times portrayed as bare-faced-liars who are wont to blame every deliberate act of their misdeeds on the devil. By extension, she is cast as the devil incarnate. Let us consider the proverb:

‘Bi obinrin ba se eemo tan, a ni eemo se oun’.

Translation: ‘*When a woman commits evil, She says evil has befallen her*’. (Sheba, 2006, p. 86)

The general human tendency to blame all misadventure on the devil is here being portrayed as behavioural peculiarity associated with women alone—a case of giving the dog a bad name in order to hang it.

At times, some Yoruba proverbs negate the martial essence of life-time companionship whose central creed is “*togetherness through thick and thin*”. She is seen as a mere fair weather friend who is only partakers in the sharing of sweet nectar of living rather than sour grapes of existential realities. For example, the Yoruba believe that:

‘Fila ni obinrin, won ki i ba ode wo iti.

Translation: “*Women are caps; they never accompany the hunters into the dense forest*”. (Sheba, 2006, p. 89)

This is a creative use of imageries from the activities in the hunting expedition where during the course of running through thick bushes and climbers, in pursuit of games, the hunter might lose his cap which is supposed to provide cover for his head. If the woman behaves in such a way she is both treacherous and unreliable. This is

a deliberate subversion of one of the central qualities of women who have been recorded both in history and Yoruba tradition to have been the backbone and sustainers of their husbands even in the face of the most daunting adversities.

The examples like Oya, the legendary loyal wife to Alaafin Sango and readily come to mind here.

Oya, in Yoruba legend was so loyal to her husband, Sango, that on the latter's suicidal death, she rather than continued living on and possibly marrying another man, decided to through her magical powers, and became a river known among the Yoruba as Oya river.

Conclusion

From the fore-going discussion, the fact emerges clearly that the traditional Yoruba culture is acutely macho-centric and gender relation therein is fostered on an unbalanced creed which automatically subjugates the female to her male counterparts wherever the two co-exist. Proverbs play significant role in the unfair politics of portrayal through the instrumentality of negative stereotyping of her as adulterious, foolish, cunning, and unreliable. This paper agrees that proverbs are fixed cultural essence of a people and therefore in-valuable cultural asset, which cannot be wished away, however we propose a deliberate de-emphasizing of those one that derogate the woman person. This crusade can benefit from the creative use of language which contemporary Yoruba wise-cracks tagged "playful blasphemy" of the Yoruba past proverbial expressions (Raji, 1999). These can be used to deliberately subvert proverbs which denigrate the woman person.

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