

**A SEMANTIC IMPORTS OF WOMEN STEREOTYPES IN YORUBA
PROVERBS: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE**

BY

ODONMO, E. G.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, AFUED, ONDO
erioluwageorge18@gmail.com

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ASOWATA, L. L.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, AFUED, ONDO
asowatall@aceondo.edu.ng

Abstract

Proverbs are used to advise, admonish, eulogize, chastise, warn, encourage and to resent social injustice. This important role of proverbs in the Yoruba society has caught the interest of scholars, thereby resulting in series of studies on the values of proverbs. However, as far as it is known to this study, previous works on proverbs have not paid attention to how proverbs have been used to address the excesses of women in social life in Yoruba land. It, therefore, behoves on this research work to examine how some Yoruba proverbs portray women in relation to social vices or tendencies in Yorubaland. This paper analyses ten proverbs in Yoruba language and transcribes them into the English language. The research examines the commonly used proverbs associated with women to show societal ills and give reasons for their usage. In order to realize the above stated objectives, the study makes use of feminist theory. This theory focuses on the issues related to oppression, marginalization and social stereotyping of women, with a view to understanding the imports of the proverbs associated with the women folk. The work addresses the stereotyping of women in relation to prostitution, dishonesty, divorce, haughtiness, inferiority, adultery, promiscuity among others which are blamed solely on women. The findings of this study reveal that proverbs in Yorubaland are more attached to the image of women than that of men especially the ones meant to correct the social vices in Yoruba culture. It is equally reveals that these proverbs are not only correcting the female folks but also the male counterparts as well. It also reveals the importance Yoruba people accrue to the use of proverbs. Therefore, it is apt to conclude that proverbs in Yorubaland are means through which the elders correct the younger ones in the society which needs to be studied which is the focus of this paper.

Keywords: socio-linguistics, culture, Yoruba proverbs, women stereotypes and feminism

Introduction

The role of proverbs in African society cannot be overemphasized. In the Yoruba society in particular, the people find it difficult to do without them. In essence, it is what accentuates most adult discourses. The importance attached to the use of proverbs among the people of West Africa makes Chinua Achebe (1958) to say in *Things Fall Apart* that “proverbs are palm oil with which words are eaten as yam”. Proverbs which are condensed memorable saying embodying some facts of experience are true to its nature. By definition, a proverb is a simple, concrete, traditional saying that expresses a perceived truth based on common sense or experience (Odonmo, 2019). Proverbs are often metaphorical and use formulaic language.

The use of proverbs in our society to x-ray the feministic issues such as oppression, marginalization, widowhood, divorce, barrenness, adultery, mannerlessness is a common phenomenon among Yoruba. most especially, when the naughty issues are to be trashed out and to avoid being offensive. For instance, an adulterous woman can be rebuked for waywardness through this proverb:

Obinrin sọ iwà nù,	A woman is ill-mannered and claimed
ó ní òun ò lórí ọkọ	not to be lucky having a husband

The above proverb is always rendered when a woman is ill-mannered and/or when is losing thighs around. This kind of proverb is said either to warn or to correct her. In Africa, the issue of sexism received an appreciable emphasis in considerable length and breadth today. Women in our societies are treated with disdain, contempt, aloofness and condescension which is reflected in their ways of life. The people, both men and women, hardly see anything wrong in the praxis just because their traditions in which they are born and which they operate are in support of the imbalances. Women in some African societies are regarded as mere domestic objects, agricultural production and economic factors (Ogunwale, 2016). There are millions of stories when women in Africa are made to face hardship when their husbands die. Apart from the usefulness of the proverbs in our society, some proverbs are fabricated to subject women under the control of men. Some are even used to render women useless as if they are not part of the society. Such negative use of proverbs in Yoruba culture has eventually make women to play second fiddle roles. This will become evident in our analysis and discussion at a later stage.

In some cases, they are oppressed, marginalized and denied their claims to their fathers’ heritage just because they are not men. It is through this untoward culture

that proverbs are fabricated to support the imbalances, injustices and unfounded praxis. This study aims to present socio-linguistic import of proverbs relating to woman's image.

Statement of the Problem

In Nigeria, especially in the Yorubaland, it is difficult to see an average Yoruba speak without making use of proverbs. It is through the use of proverbs that messages which are embedded with meanings are communicated to the listeners. In Yoruba culture, Proverbs could be used for educative, informative, instructional, pedagogical, corrective, reprehensible, laudatory, cautionary, disparaging and encouraging purposes (Odonmo, 2020). The abysmal and debase use of woman's image in many Yoruba proverbs has revealed the fact that the woman in Yoruba land plays a second fiddle. This is seen in the use of woman's image in many of the proverbs to show that the woman is just an object and equally typifies something unwanted, ridiculous and meaningless. Women are often referred to as a necessary evil, a species good only as an object of sex and proration. This is clearly seen in the sampled Yoruba proverbs for analysis in this study.

Many studies have been carried out by some scholars on Yoruba proverbs. These include Ogunwale (2016), Ehondor (2017) and Meider (1993). Ogunwale (2016) works on women oppression and disparagement in African culture. That is, how women are being oppressed and disparaged in the African society through proverbs. However, the study fails to account for the semantic imports of the proverbs to the society. It is on this premise the researcher wants to study the socio-linguistic import of proverbs where woman's image is being disparaged.

The significance of this study cannot be emphasized to academics. It provides a novel area for an academic to carry out research on African culture, particularly, how language is used in the social interaction. The researches in this area will enrich the knowledge of an individual and widen the horizon of sociolinguistic study.

Sociolinguistics

Oisanwo (2012) says sociolinguistics is the study of the relationship between language and society. It is the study of patterns and variations in language within a society or community. Mainly, sociolinguistics is interested in the study of language in its social and cultural context. It involves the study of language in a society or speech community. Sociolinguistics relates the disparities noticed in the use of language to the fundamental issues that emerge from those societal praxis. It focuses on how the use of language bring about different realizations as separated

by certain social variables such as status, gender, religion, education or ethnicity. It also examines how they make choices about the form of language they use, and how the variables are used in allocating individuals to different social classes or socio-economic classes. Sociolinguistics also examines the way people use language to negotiate their role in society and to achieve positions and power (Osisanwo, 2012). Trudgill (1983) sees language as a social and cultural phenomenon. The import of this is that any study of language therefore must take cognizance of its social as well as cultural context. The term Sociology of Language was first used by Dell Hymes (1964) while attempting to establish a relationship between language and society (Farinde and Ojo, 2005).

Culture

Culture is often defined as the total way of life of people. It can also be said to be a learned pattern of behaviour shared among a particular people and is transmitted from one generation to another. Culture helps to identify people when people of different cultural backgrounds come together. The definition of culture is succinctly captured by Adeola and Laden (2009: 59) as: appreciation and understanding of the arts and skills of a given period; the entire range of customs, beliefs, social forms and materials trait of a religious, social or racial group; the scientific cultivation of plants to improve them and find new species; improvement of the mind, manner etc. It is often agreed that language is rooted in culture. It is the culture that stores the language one speaks. Oke (2002:19) aligns with this perspective in defining culture as: usage encompasses language, means of making a living, arrangement of family life, the focus of group loyalties and ways of perceiving the world, both the physical world and the world beyond. Culture controls man's drives

Ayenbi (1979:4) defines culture as "experience, level of education (moral and scientific etc.) ethnicity, geographical location, climate, greeting, colour, language, season and religion".

The import of all these quotations is that culture is deeply rooted in the language of people. This is not an exemption in Yoruba where every utterance can be expressed in proverb. The way Yoruba women is portrayed is also reflected in their language which is a component of Yoruba culture.

Proverb

The proper use and effective understanding of proverbs are based on the indigenous intelligence of the people. The indigenous intelligence in this context means the ability of people to use numbers of vocabulary, religion, cultural-

breadwinners and decision makers. In fact, in some society, women are not expected to talk and sit with their male counterparts. Women can also be stereotyped in their physical appearance. Women are often expected to be thin, beautiful and youthful always. Career and intelligence wise, women are always seen as being less important, inferior and competent in some courses and less committed to their careers than men. Also, in personal traits, women are expected to be passive, dependent and cooperative, while men are seen as assertive, independent and competitive. It is worth to note that women stereotypes have become an issue in academics as it places limit on women's opportunities and perpetuate gender inequalities (Akinwande and Lanre-Atoyebi, 2022). It is the view of this paper that there should be gender equality and that individual strengths and differences should be respected.

Feminism

In our society today, men fail to consider the view of female and the society itself discriminates against women. These discriminatory practices are reflected in the socio-linguistic cum cultural life of a typical African man. In the light of the above, the theory of feminism will suffice for this study.

Feminism deals with all movement related to women's oppression and marginalization in the society. It is a social product which encapsulates all efforts to understand and elevate women who now feel dejected and disillusioned in a male dominated society (Olatuwoye, 2008).

According to Katherine Frank, in Davies and Graves (1986:13) feminism is 'a profoundly individualistic philosophy; it values personal growth and individual fulfillment over any other larger communal needs or good'. The view of Ojo-Ade takes another dimension as far as feminism is concerned. In his article titled 'Female Writers, Male critics (African Literature Today, 1983, No 13, 158) regards to feminism as 'western import'. Bell Hooks (1984:24) observes that 'feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression'. This term simply looks at how women in the society are being portrayed negatively and the reaction of women towards this subjugation and oppression. It is literary term that places men above the women in the society.

Judging from the above authorities, feminism can be seen as an ideology that encourages people whether male or female to see themselves as human. It looks at gender theory. Feminism looks at women in the society in term of what society say about the women and how it is said. It is a theory that deals with subjugation, oppression, suppression and other ill-treatment meted out for women. This theory

encompasses work in a variety of disciplines which include sociology, anthropology, history, economics, psychoanalysis, philosophy, woman studies and many other disciplines numerous to mention.

The principle underlining feminism is gender inequality in the society. It seeks to focus on gender politics, power relation, and power sharing and distribution and sexuality. While providing a critique of this social and political relation, many of these feminist writers focus on the promotion of women's right and interest. In feminism, the dominant themes include but are not limited to gender discrimination, gender stereotyping, gender objectification, gender oppression and patriarchy. The themes of gender stereotyping and objectification are what the researchers are out to x-ray in Yoruba proverbs. This boils down the fact that some Yoruba proverbs are gender bias as women are used in many Yoruba proverbs to denote dishonest, prostitute, unwanted being, mannerlessness, perseverance, wickedness, unrepentant behaviour and a lot more.

Proverbs and their Analysis

Proverbs

1. Obìnrin kò sè é finú hàn

Gender Stereotype Proverbs

Transcriptions

One should not be open

(honest) to a women

The import of the first proverb is that women are very dishonesty and as such one should not be open to them in all things especially in matters that are sensitive and secretive. This means that women cannot keep secret unlike their men counterparts who can harbour secret till the end of the world. This proverb teaches that women divulge sensitive information so easily. It is a proverb that talks about women personal trait of talkative.

2. Obinrín búrukú, kò se gbé ní iyàwó / An evil woman is not worthy to

be a wife

Proverb two is pointing to a woman whose characters and behaviour are abysmally bad. The Yoruba people believe that a woman with bad character cannot have a permanent matrimonial home because her ill-manner will not allow her to tolerate what a well nurtured woman will tolerate. It teaches that a woman should be tolerant

and well behaved. One of the ways of chastising woman who is fomenting trouble is to say that ‘an evil woman is not worthy to be a wife’. This is always said when a man is fed up of a woman who causes him a lot of troubles. The social significance is to caution such a woman to desist from fomenting troubles which may plug the entire family into jeopardy.

3. Kàkà kó sà̀n làra iyá àjé, o n fi ojoojúmó bí obinrín / Rather than turn a
new leaf, a witch always
carries out her evil acts.

Metaphorically, proverb three equates an evil woman with a witch who always does evil. So also, is a woman who refuses to change from all forms of wickedness. It is used to warn a woman to desist from wrongdoings. This proverb is used to call for repentance.

4. Bí àlè iyá eni bá ju bàbá eni lo, bàbá là á pè é / If the concubinator of one’s
mother is older than one’s
father, one should
accord him respects

Proverb four talks about respect. It states that whosoever is older than one in terms of age, position, privilege and wealth should be accorded a due respect. Hence, in Yoruba, respect for an elder is not negotiable for a person who is well brought up. It is a proverb used to talk about respect and intelligence but used the image of a woman in a debase form.

5. Obinrín làkò, okùnrin làdá / Woman is the scabbard or sheath while man
is the sword

Proverb five is a metaphor of man and woman. It states the status of each of the sexes. The proverb likens a man to a sword because he is the head of the family whose responsibilities are more than that of the woman. It believes that every responsible man should be brave, fearless and valiant. On the other hand, woman is seen as an object whose responsibilities are to shield the man just as scabbard is a shelter

to sword. It is a patriarchal proverb which believes that the role of men is more than that of women and that subjects women under the control of men.

Gender Objectification

6. A dàgbà má kùró láròbó, ojoojúmó ní relé oko / An elderly woman who
still sees herself as a bride
is always planning to get
married.

The sixth proverb is used to chastise a prostitute in the society. It is used to warn and rebuke an adulterous woman to desist from thinking that she is free for all. It is a wise saying of warning, chastising and rebuking somebody who is into fornication and adultery, and sees herself as object of sex. The import of this in our society is to correct societal ill of cheating on one's partner and the sex workers.

7. Obìnrín sòwà nù, o wípé oun ko lóri oko/ A woman is ill-mannered
claiming to be unlucky having
a husband

This proverb is just like proverb two above that talks about a woman whose characters and behaviour is terribly bad. The Yoruba people believe that a woman with bad character cannot have a permanent matrimonial home because her ill-manner will not allow her to tolerate what a well nurtured woman will tolerate. In short, this proverb is trying to debunk the claim of a prostitute that not having a husband is her providence. It teaches that a woman should be tolerant and well behaved. One of the ways of chastising woman who is fomenting trouble is to say that 'an evil woman is not worthy to be a wife.

8. Tí kò baá si tomo, ki la n wá lákàtà obìnrín? If not for procreation, what
would be the reason for
having a woman?

The eight proverb is the one used to talk down on women. The import of the proverb is that men marry significantly because of children and not because a woman is desirable to have. This is saying that a woman is not worthy to have if not for the reason of procreation probably because of their wicked nature. It is a witty saying that sees woman as an object of procreation.

9. Bí olókó òlá bá ò dóni, gbígbin ni a máà ò gbin / If one is engaging in a
sexual act with a man
with an enlarged
manhood, one cannot
but endure

In Yoruba, perseverance is one of the virtues that is admired which is the import of proverb ten. The proverb teaches that one should inculcate the spirit of perseverance in term of difficulty especially, when one is cheated or deprived of his or her right. It is a proverb used to teach moral.

10. Obinrín kin sunkàka lófo / A woman does not sleep naked without a
reason

Finally, the last proverb tells us about the give and take phenomenon. That is, individuals need to pay for their needs before it can be achieved. The proverb also talks about the reward women get for their promiscuity especially those who are into sex businesses and as an object of sex gratification.

If careful consideration is given to the analyzed proverbs, it is apt to say that the proverbs are used to warn, encourage, sensitized, admonish, rebuke and praise individuals in the society. However, the image of women in these proverbs is portrayed in a bad light. The reason why Yoruba people decide to use derogatory words in portraying women in their proverbs may be probably because women are weaker sex.

Conclusion

This paper examines how Yoruba people portray women in their proverbs. It is discovered that proverbs in Africa especially, in Yoruba are vehicles through which words with deeper meanings are conveyed. It is on this note the study examines the imports of Yoruba proverbs where the image of women is used and brings out the didactic significance of the proverbs. The study also provides information on the feminist theory which looks at women in the society in terms of what society say about the women and how it is said. It helps to deconstruct the patriarchal ideology constructed and maintained through these age-honoured but women denigrating and oppressive proverbs. The study equally makes us to understand that some of these proverbs are not solely addressing women but both genders.

This study recommends that proverbs should be included in curriculum in the Nigerian education system in order to enhance the use and function of proverbs in schools. This will ensure that their sociolinguistic values are made known to the students. The government should also encourage language teachers to author different texts on proverbs by providing grants for the writers or by subsidizing the cost of production of such texts. It is equally recommended that the society should see proverbs as a medium of communication and not the witty saying and exclusive prerogative of the elders. Finally, those proverbs in which the image of women are derogatorily portrayed should be recast by the proverb writers since those proverbs are of linguistic value to both sexes.

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