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IMAGES OF WOMEN UNDER THE SHADOW OF CULTURAL PREJUDICE IN MALE COMMUNICATION



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INTRODUCTION

Heaven and earth are opposites, but their action is concerted. Man and woman are opposites, but they strive for union. All beings stand in opposition to one another: what they do takes on order thereby. Great indeed is the effect of the time of opposition.

(Wilhelm: 1979, 35)

This paper is the study of a gender-based discrimination through proverbs, and it demonstrates how language is deployed as an instrument of power/gender relations in Nigeria. It analyses the notion of

subjectivity – a concept stamped as a male ideology. But the new ground to explore here is framed in what Carole Dely calls the “Coming of the Otherwoman,” (2017, 1), which means, the focus must be on women as objects of socio-cultural abuse, but who resist patriarchy, the very system that abuses them in the Idoma culture, but which is rarely talked about in Gender Studies elsewhere. Jacques Derrida foregrounds the notion of abuse as something “full of proverbs, pieces of words, suspended outcries, echoes to inflect or let float. Made full like a pregnant woman or the cargo of a ship about to sail” (Derrida: 2004, 13). Derrida’s view shows how topical and relevant the issues of women’s subjectivity are to us because these issues are not peculiar to Africa alone, but universal. Framing the male domination in the context of linguistic construct, Spender Dale adds to the debate by saying that, “Language helps form the limits of our reality. It is our means of ordering, classifying and manipulating the world” (Dale: 1980, 3). In most cases, men manipulate language to suit their interests while dominating women. How men use language is always perceived differently from how women use it. How language is used affects the way women are being talked to, as well as being talked about by men. Language, on the one hand, depends on culture and, culture, on the other hand, depends on language. Both language and culture mould our thinking, our behaviour, our thought processes, and our world-views. They regulate the workings of the human mind

along with social conventions. But, sometimes, our inability to communicate effectively – or perhaps, to understand one another could lead to the making of snide remarks on other people's opinions and cultures. Therefore, this paper also concentrates on the verbal communication styles, variant/cultural meanings, and the adaptive functions of language that pose the prejudice in male communication against women. Verbal and non-verbal cues of communication are combined to analyse gender-based discrimination in the Idoma cultural context.

Therefore, our understanding of culture varies from society to society, and from context to context. However, language, which is at the centre of human communication, offers itself as a unifying bridge across cultures, races and societies throughout the world. Culture then becomes the first border we cross by entering into the understanding of a people's way of life – which consists of their tradition and civilisation. It embodies the total existence of a people. While, language as the chief instrument of human communication, presents itself as a paradox of understanding and confusion, of conflict and resolution in human affairs. So, this paper hopes to reveal how women's suppression has been carefully and neatly tucked under the bed-sheet of patriarchal power in the guise of tradition and culture, particularly in Nigeria, and in Africa as a whole.

To begin, volumes of literature have been chronicled on non-verbal communication. However, communication scholars have treated male and female communications in binary oppositions, and in this case, the female communication is that of subservience, more polite and civil, while the male communication is seen as a reflection of supremacy and domination. This tradition has a long-standing deposit of patriarchal hegemony. Male communication, more often than not, has always deployed the rhetoric of force rather than of reason. Consequently, it robs the women of the willingness, the desire and the courage to communicate effectively in some cultural domains. This occurrence, owing to the worldviews of the people, in turn, is a function of their culture, as it relates to their social perception. This tradition is anchored on a man-centered view, built by men themselves in line with their wishes, and also in an attempt to control nature as much as they can, but when they are displeased, they tear the whole processes down and start all over again. The people's world-views, no doubt, give them a perspective from which they shape and form their attitudes and behaviour.

For example, in cultural communication, what we use as effective communication symbols in our cultures could be regarded as obscene gestures in other cultures. That is, the communication symbols or techniques that make a man successful in his cultural domain could

as well kill him in another cultural recess. This is so because, according to Samovar and Porter, "Culture is a communication problem because it is not constant, and it is a variable. And, as cultural variance increases, so do the problems of communication" (Samovar and Porter: 1967, 35). Culture, however, varies along different dimensions, and this leads us to the aspect of non-verbal communication patterns.

AFRICAN KINESICS IN NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION:

Much research has been done on verbal communication patterns of the Nigerian people; but little research has been devoted to their non-verbal communication patterns. Men use some form of kinesics to discriminate against women in Nigeria, Africa, as well as other parts of the world. This discriminatory tendency by men against women is born out of stereotype. Larry and Richard have this to say of prejudice against the Black Negro, which is in direct tandem with women's experience in Nigeria. They argue that:

A prejudiced person perceives selectively certain aspects of the Negro; those that fit in with his preconceived ideas concerning the Negro. This he observes and notes behavior incidents that demonstrate stupidity, laziness, irresponsibility, or superstition; he overlooks other incidents that might contradict his prevailing ideas. The behavior of the Negro as he observes it thus supports his prejudicial beliefs (Larry and Richard: 1967, 67).

This strong worded-notion of prejudice works in various ways and forms that affect human communication. The typical Nigerian men, like most African men, hold a very strong cultural prejudice against their women. We see this sentiment popping up in the use of metaphors, proverbs and cultural idioms to run down women on daily basis. Some of these non-verbal patterns, labelled as kinesics by Richard L. Birdwhistell, refer to how people send messages with their bodies through movements, expressions, gestures, etc. Birdwhistell Larry avers that, “these non-verbal patterns are a learned form of communication which is patterned within a culture, and that they convey a particular message” (Birdwhistell: 1952, 68). With a clear reference to how men view women through non-verbal communication patterns in Nigeria, some examples of the non-verbal cues are as follows:

Rolling the eyes: this act of rolling the eyes exhibited more by women is considered insolent; a hostile disapproval of the man who is traditionally in the authority role. It is impudent. Larry and Richard dwell more on the rolling of the eyes in a vivid and descriptive manner such that:

Rolling the eyes is a non-verbal way of expressing impudence and disapproval of the person who is in authority role and of communicating every negative label that can be applied to the dominant person. The movement of the eyes communicates all or parts of the message. The message is hostility (Larry and Richard: 1967, 69).

We could further describe the movement of the eyes-rolling as performed thus: first, the eyes could move from one location of the eyelid to the other side, slowly and deliberately in a way and manner, which, again, to Larry and Richard, “usually, the gliding of the eyes is preceded by a look at the other person, but not an eye-to-eye sort of look” (Larry and Richard: 1967, 69). The eyelids could be slowly reduced when the eye sockets move in the small curvature. The eyeballs are always shifted away from the other person. Henslin James argues that the “Gestures are movements of the body to communicate with the activity of others” (James: 2010, 4). Within a theoretical framework, Ngai Bo-Yuen argues that “Each culture uses nonverbal gestures which may differ from those of other cultures” (Bo-Yuen: 2000, 5). In a similar way, Lustig and Koester, in their opinions, hone the idea of non-verbal behaviour as obviously a part of the human communication processes in a way that: “When someone intentionally tries to convey a message or when someone attributes meaning to the nonverbal behaviour of another, whether or not the person intended to communicate a particular meaning” (Lustig and Koester: 2003, 176). Conversely, however, Burgoon, Buller, and Woodall make a valid argument that “Nonverbal communication can lead to misunderstanding as well as understanding” (Burgoon, Buller, and Woodall: 1996, 5).

The misunderstanding that emerges from nonverbal communication could be because of cultural differences. Anderson, Hecht, Hoobler & Smallwood, therefore contend that “Cultural differences are not random events; they occur because cultures develop with different geographies, climates, religions and histories, each exerting unique influence” (Anderson et al: 2002, 90). It is on the basis of similarities and differences that people understand and misunderstand the use of gestures in non-verbal communication. Both the understanding and misunderstanding of gestures play an important role in forming people’s opinions and judgements in non-verbal communication. Next is the maintenance of eye contact.

Maintenance of eye contact: women are either overtly or covertly not to look at men in the eye because the act communicates impudence and in some cases or contexts, it means equality with men. What is expected of women here is avoidance of eye contact, which is interpreted to mean that human beings, especially the female ones are in a subordinate role, and they have to respect the authority of men over them. Avoidance of eye contact communicates respect and acknowledgement of their being in a subordinate role in the Idoma culture. Another instance of non-verbal cues is the idea of the woman walking out on the man, as explained below.

Walking away: this is one act that is highly intolerant of the Idoma men, and in general, the Nigerian men. For example, when women walk away from them in conflict situations, their behaviour is described by dirty adjectives such as disrespectful, hostile, nasty, and uncultured. Women in this case are perceived as culturally unpolished. It is a cultural taboo for women to put up such a behaviour. Nevertheless, the woman conveys a message that the man normally fails to understand. The woman is a weak being, who possesses all the qualities of femininity (or weakness), and she deserves to be handled with care and respect.

Genuflection (knee-bending): knee-bending is a sign of respect that is associated with women. If a woman does not genuflect before a man, who is older than she is, such a woman is said to be disrespectful. It means that she lacks good up-bringing, and the insult is thrown back to her parents. Men are only expected to bow and not to genuflect like women. A man who genuflects is said to be inefficient and not smart at all. These kinesics and many more are used in communication as derogatory and offensive in non-verbal communication patterns.

THE CULTURAL DIMENSION OF MALE COMMUNICATION:

Communication takes place in many forms. The words or the non-verbal cues people use may either give a clear or an unclear message to others. The use of certain terms to discriminate against people, either on the basis of sex, race, tribe, class, or gender, and whether designedly or undesignedly, could refer to the psychological disturbances in the life of an individual, which could as well encourage alienation, especially women. Prejudice may affect different groups based on some socio-political factors. Such factors may include age, disability, gender, race, colour, nationality, religion, and sexual orientation. This savage form of behaviour creates a very hostile, low, and shameful environment, which, in turn, constitutes unlawful discrimination, and harassment of deprived, and vulnerable human beings.

Broadly speaking, every natural language has discriminatory terms used against women in male communication. The paper surveys some proverbs, metaphors and idioms as an integral part of the Idoma language, which are embodied in their culture. Discriminatory terms against women are captured in the use of some select proverbs as cultural and social codes of conduct – a deep-seated credo of male-oriented ego, found in

almost all of African cultures. Placed side by side with social conventions, Wang Shifeng posits that, “Social views and attitudes of people can be seen in language, and social phenomena as reflected in language. So language reflects different attitudes toward women” (Shifeng: 2012, 150). Male communication shows how much women seem to be abused, and subjected to male supremacy with the use of proverbs. It sums up the total inventory of their values, norms, and beliefs. Again, Wang argues that:

Proverbs are representatives to be used to make a research on sex discrimination. They are short, well-known phrases or sentences, which are usually the reflection of life. They are also a part of language and a kind of idiom, which spread among folks with popular image and rich significance (Shifeng: 2012, 150).

The representation of womanhood in most Nigerian languages is largely jaundiced and absurd. Women are often depicted as either unwise, evil, or fickle. They are perceived as the foundation of all disasters, elements of inferiority, as well as the worthlessness of a childish or weak human being. This is hugely so because of the male-oriented, chauvinistic rhetoric towards women in social, political, and cultural discourses. The derogation of women through the male-cultural orientation affects both the use of language in the Nigerian cultures and men-women relations as a whole. Yusuf Yisa Kehinde, for example, makes a comparison be-

tween the semantic interpretation of the English language and the Yoruba language, and finds out that:

The English language ignores women by allowing masculine terms to be used specifically to refer to males and generically to refer to human beings in general. Yoruba is like English sexist in some respects, and sexism in English has been imposed on some otherwise non-sexist aspects of Yoruba language, and that contact between the languages may have prevented the transfer of some sexist features of Standard English into Nigerian Pidgin English (Kehinde: 2012, 2).

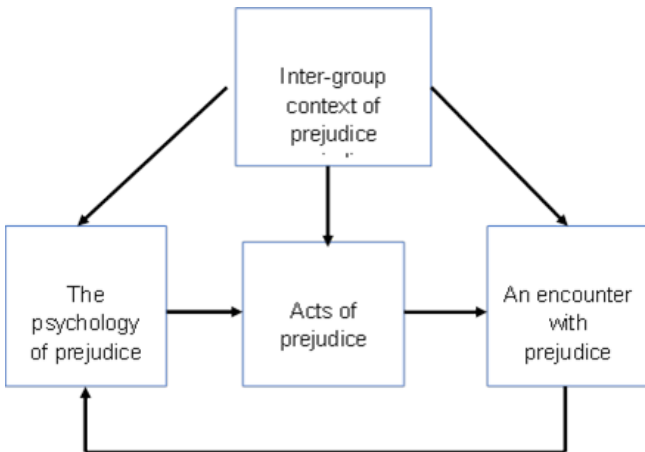
In a similar vein, Oladele Abiodun Balogun also argues that “there are elements of semantic derogation in some Yoruba proverbs which refer to women and violate their rights and that these proverbs are indicator[s] of discrimination against women in Yoruba culture” (Balogun: 2010, 3). For example, most of the elements in Yoruba proverbs obviously portray women, as oppressed subjects in society. This portrayal of women in a derogatory picture is very abusive, suppressive, and more. The women, perceived as the abusive referents, feel debauched by their male oppressors. This assertion is evident even in the ideographical and non-gender language such as Chinese. Shen Dan however states that:

This language expresses gender-related messages linguistically. Through analysis, one can see that many Chinese metaphors bear negative sexual and moral overtones to

describe women. It is noted that women are called (bird) or (chick) when they are young and attractive, but when they are old, they are referred as (pig) or (dog). In contrast, male counterparts don't have such referring terms. It is obvious that linguistic discrimination still prevails in the current Chinese society (Dan: 2013, 2).

There is no doubt that male communication is overtly prejudicial and below is a diagram used to illustrate how prejudice works as a psychological, and cultural thing than anything else in human society. It is borne out of the workings of the human mind and manifests openly in context that is cultural, social, and political.

UNDERSTANDING THE FRAMEWORK OF PREJUDICE



There is no human society that exists without one form of prejudice or the other. Prejudice can as well distort

human social relations, self-worth, motivation and the very trust an individual maintains with the larger community of fellow human beings. The context may not necessarily be inter-group, but let us assume a general context that may be given for the existence of prejudice, and how its embodiment takes place in human society. Within the psychological context, different scholars have attempted to define prejudice. Crandall and Eshelman, for example, note that “prejudice cannot always be described as irrational or unjustified,” and that it is better to define it as “a negative evaluation of a social group or an individual that is significantly based on the individual’s group membership” (Crandall and Eshelman: 2013, 414). This however makes many of us shift lightly in a way that does not clearly rebuff prejudice as a notion that involves negative evaluation of others. The term prejudice is quite often defined, as the negativity of the other person, which is an anomaly that originates in the inter-group community of people. According to the “social identity theory,” Tajfel & Turner categorise people into social groups, and show how they locate themselves within a category of other people. To them:

The basic premise of social identity theory is that we are motivated to maintain a positively valued social identity and we may do so by creating or taking advantage of favourable comparisons with other groups. The need to maintain a positive distinction between our own group and others can lead to behaviour and attitudes that are

biased in favour of our group and against other groups
(Tajfel & Turner: 1986, 177).

Based on their opinion, prejudice framed in the context of inter-group conflict of interest and stereotype, can cause existential crisis to spring up from the struggle to either achieve or maintain a superior or positive social identity. Therefore, prejudice in this context is viewed as a sort of *parti pris*, which could be political, psychological, social, economic or even environmental and as a factor, which denies a group of people their perceived membership, either in the communal or kinship sense of it. Language is therefore deployed in the service of prejudice to act as the thief of honour, the shaper and conductor of lies. Cameron further contends that:

Sexist language [for example,] cannot be regarded as simply naming of one world from another, masculinist perspective; it is better conceptualized as a multifaceted phenomenon occurring in a number of quite complex systems of representation, all with their places in historical traditions (Cameron: 1985, 14).

Cameron simply tries to explain that language is quite a complex system, a system of representation with reference to historical traditions – which means that the sexist character of human language is deeply rooted in the historical traditions of a group of people. This historical tradition of women's oppression by men sparked off the idea of subalternity in the twentieth century.

FRAMING WOMEN'S RESISTANCE IN THE SUBALTERN CULTURE:

The term “subaltern” was first used by the Italian Marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*. Today, it is widely applied in post-colonial studies, cultural history, literature, anthropology and so on to invent a radical re-thinking of knowledge production in resistance struggle. To Giorgio Baratta, a devoted student of Gramsci refers to the subalterns as the “more marginal elements and peripheral of these classes, who haven't attained class consciousness for themselves” (2007, 120-2). It is chiefly a case of subordination, with reference to class, gender, language, caste, and culture. This is well argued by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, as she writes in her influential essay called, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

The Subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with woman as a pious. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual has a circumscribe task which she must not disown with a flourish (Spivak: 1994, 308).

The “subaltern,” in this case, refers to the woman as the oppressed subject, who is confronted with the uphill task of resistance. Spivak suggests that women “must not disown [the idea of their oppression] with a flourish” (Ibid). However, they are encouraged to stand up to the slaughter of hope and fear. The coming of age

of the Subaltern Studies in the 20th century established a defiant tradition of resistance, the recovery of lost voices of women, who wanted to build a different way of existence. The resistance of the Idoma women manifests in their use of proverbs in a way to embattle their men. The analysis of those proverbs in this paper shows how women portray men as perverts and absolutists. Talking back in proverbs or in words is their own form of resistance against men, not a violent approach. Women question and challenge male domination through their acquisition of education, and civil rights awareness campaigns.

ANALYSIS OF SEXIST PROVERBS:

These proverbs are drawn from the collective resource materials belonging to the Idoma community, not to a single author. The study takes into cognizance the experience of gender/cultural inequality by interpreting the semantics of proverbs, metaphors and idioms. Conceptually, Obododimma OHA defines “proverbs as forms of figurative communication with didactic-functions in studied conversations, which were found to possess evidence of male attempt at maintaining control over discourse in society” (Obododimma: 1998, 4). This suggests that the degree of rhetoric in society has been masculinised. Though women, too, have their own language, which they use in discriminating against men because most African languages are gender-based languages.

As already established, there is a clear distinction between those proverbs that discriminate against women and those that spite men, as well. The distinction is not only established linguistically, but it is culturally and ideologically established in their community. It is the belief of the people that in fixed utterances such proverbs are surely those expressions that embody the collective belief-systems, customs, thoughts, norms, and stereotypes in their community. It remains a well-known fact that men are culturally considered as important; women are only imagined as subordinate to men. Culture and society may have a direct impact on the use of sexist language. Language is seen as an organically sexist instrument used in favour of men to denigrate women. It fosters gender inequality, and conveys bias at the same time. For example, men who cheat on their women usually deploy the key-and-padlock metaphor to justify their act of promiscuity. They believe that if a key can open many padlocks, it is called “master key,” which must be kept, honoured and valued (in the case of those men who flirt around). But, if a padlock (which is a representative of women in this case) can be opened by many keys (i.e., by men), it is regarded as useless – and so it must either be destroyed or rejected or thrown away. This is another way of men subjecting their women to the tyranny of culture. While men’s promiscuity is encouraged and valorised, women’s act of infidelity is highly condemned as a cultural taboo.