

A FEMINIST CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF GENDER PREJUDICE IN SELECTED IGBO PROVERBS

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Abstract

This article investigates the representation of women as espoused in selected Igbo proverbs. The aim is to analyze the traditional views on the perception and roles of women in Igbo society. Using a (feminist) Critical Discourse Approach, 28 Igbo proverbs about women randomly selected from oral sources, were examined. The study finds out that specific instances of language use can show how language is used to mark distinctions between men and women. Igbo proverbs tend to present women in particular stereotypical ways. Through the use of gendered proverbs, most of which can be interpreted as derogatory, negative or subservient, the women are made to appear inferior to their male counterparts. We argue that although socio-culturally it is seen as virtue, (on the side of the women), such a representation often lure them into accepting and playing their traditional stereotyped roles of submissiveness, not attempting to equate or even compete with men, conducing into the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity. The findings reveal that Igbo culture has some elements that motivate their men to maltreat, even “man handle” women. It also brings to the limelight the inequality that exists between an Igbo man and an Igbo woman in concrete and clearer terms.

Keywords: Feminist, Critical, Discourse, Analysis, Gender, prejudice, Igbo, proverbs.

Introduction

This paper seeks to investigate the nexus of language, gender and culture within the Nigeria sociocultural context especially within the Igbo discourse community. It particularly examines the culture and traditional representations of the female through these supposedly witty communal expressions known as proverbs.

In Nigeria, there have been some fairly extensive works done on proverbs, especially in Igbo society (Anthonia and Mary 2014, Cohen 1996, Oghalu 1965, Oha 1998). These studies have examined the use of proverbs in the expression

and construction of female identities. Oha (1998) posit that the representation of womanhood in Igbo proverbs is mainly negative: women are typically portrayed as being senseless, morally debased, devilish and weak. This is consequent upon male-oriented rhetoric in Igbo proverbs that signifies prejudice and hostility towards women in social discourse. The discrimination of women in Igbo proverbs affects both the use of proverbs in the culture and male- female relationship in Igbo land. Oha's findings reveal that 'the use of proverbs has become the tool through which men control positions of social and economic influence by limiting women's participation to domestic spheres'. The consequence of this is that women become non- productive dependents on men, which then weakens their bargaining power both at home and within the larger society. Oha then demonstrates that women, through these proverbs, are constructed as objects of men's pleasure. Consequently, they are denied the right to their own sexuality and sexual pleasure (1998).

Additionally, women are considered as difficult to manage or understand. In spite of the weak representation that is often ascribed to women, they are, ironically, expected to be hard-working. Since 'language', argues Chukwukere (2000,p.255) 'can be an instrument of freedom and liberation as well as oppression and dominance', the male gender shapes language to portray themselves as powerful and independent and warrant them to form and direct their stand and reality of life against the female gender. The same Igbo proverbs were formed to depreciate women, render them less significant than their male counterparts.

Deeply entrenched in patriarchal societies are notions of hegemonic masculinity and femininity. According to Connel (1995), hegemonic masculinity is: the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (p. 77).

Schippers (2007) also defines hegemonic masculinity as 'the qualities defined as manly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to femininity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (p. 94). As shown in these definitions, hegemonic masculinity legitimates the domination of men over women - but it

also operates through the subordination or marginalization of other masculinities of which 'gay masculinity is the most conspicuous' (Connell, 1995, p. 79; see also Connell, 1987; Edley and Wetherell, 1995; Wetherell and Edley, 1999). On the other hand, hegemonic femininity is defined to "consists of the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. (Schippers, 2007, p.94)"

Connell (1987) calls this 'emphasized femininity' and defines it as 'compliance with' and 'subordination (to men, which) ... is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men' (p. 184). Hegemonic femininity therefore complements hegemonic masculinity by guaranteeing the dominant position of men and the subordination of women, that is, an acceptance of, and compliance with, a traditional understanding that men are superior to women.

Corresponding to the wider understanding of hegemony, both hegemonic masculinity and femininity operate and establish themselves through consensus (e.g. persuading or 'luring' women to accept that certain types of femininities are positively valued) and not through force. Thus, as a number of these proverbs suggest (see our Discussion section), by being positively valued for certain (usually) domestic roles, women are subtly made to accept and even enjoy their subordinate roles in society.

Our focus in this article is to undertake a linguistic analysis of selected gendered proverbs, specifically those that include the explicit mention of women, examine how women are represented in the proverbs themselves, while noting some of the linguistic strategies employed in the construction of such proverbs. Our objective is to provoke a deeper understanding of the intersection between the use of proverbs in a traditional Igbo society and gender representation.

The rest of this article is organized as follows: a brief socio-cultural and linguistic overview of the Igbo people is followed by a definition of the proverbs and consideration of why it is such a pervasive tool for the communication of cultural truisms. The section also examines certain linguistic structures that we find in these proverbs. Next, the theoretical framework for the analysis of the selected proverbs, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (hereafter FCDA), is presented.

We then look at the data and the methods used, before discussing the representations of women in Igbo proverbs based on the various identified categories. We finish with a discussion of the findings, and then the conclusion.

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA)

Society is saddled with many social problems including dominance and power abuse. These are enacted and reproduced in discourse in ways that may not always be obvious (see Fairclough, 1992; Van Dijk, 2001). Lazar (2007, p.141), for instance, argues from a Feminist Critical Discourse Analytical (FCDA) perspective that 'issues of gender, power, and ideology have become increasingly more complex and subtle' in present times. It can be argued that proverbs by their nature, present more complex and subtle understandings; that is, by their opaque and sometimes ambiguous meanings, proverbs often hide their intended meanings, thereby making their ideological underpinnings subtle, but quite pervasive. Proverbs can therefore serve to sustain (hierarchically) gendered social arrangements, in which the woman is disadvantaged, and these may be presented in very subtle ways. The work of FCDA is to critique such unequal gender relations. It is in this light that we find it a useful analytical approach for this study. The central concern of FCDA, therefore, is critiquing discourses which sustain a patriarchal social order: that is, relations of power that systematically privilege men as a social group and disadvantage, empower women as a social group' (Lazar, 2005: p. 5). Accordingly, the overriding aim of FCDA is to develop an analytical resistance to these unequal gender practices. In the same vein, FCDA seeks to do two concepts that are useful for consideration in patriarchal societies, which include hegemonic masculinity and femininity. Patriarchal societies are noted for promoting male rule and female subordination, i.e. the domination of men over women. Men are seen as authority figures who hold the power, and this is seen as legitimate or largely inherent (Connell, 1987, 1995).

The Data

The discussions in this article are based on proverbs that relate to women (or "Nwanyi, agboghọ, ogeri" the Igbo words for female, which in many instances is aptly translated as 'woman/girl'). The data were analysed by looking for recurring patterns or themes in the selected proverbs. The proverbs were then put into identified categories and tables by the researcher based on the researcher's understanding of the proverbs, formed as a result of their native

speaker competences and prolonged contact with the language community. Subsequently, each category and the meaning of each proverb were through oral interviews. The interviews were done through two sets of interviews, each lasting for approximately one hour, on different days with a four-week interval. Interaction with our language experts and other native speakers, whom we encountered during presentations of aspects of this article, as well as our extensive reading on the literature on proverbs in Igbo, resulted in a reorganization of the categories.

Women as Dependents

One traditional stereotype is the representation of women as dependent on men for provisions and survival. These include financial, emotional and material support. For instance, in the typical Igbo family setting, women are considered to be the caretaker of the home. They are primarily absorbed in domestic activities as a result; they become dependent on men for their material needs. It is therefore not surprising that the man takes credit for his wife's beauty and achievements. In Igbo language the dependence of women on men is represented in the following proverbs.

Table 1: Women as Dependents

S/N	Igbo Proverbs	English Gloss
1.	Anu kwuru n' oku, nwanyi ejebe Ozi ezighi ezi over a fire, the woman	When meat is roasting Suddenly becomes over agreeable and eager to Serve and please
2.	Umu nwanyi bu oriaku, Nwoke bu okpa-aku	Women are consumer of wealth producer of wealth.
3.	Mekara nwanyi aga bu si choro ya di woman is to find a	Being so caring for a baring husband for her.
4.	Mma nwanyi bu di	The beauty of a woman is husband.
5.	Egojuoro nwanyi ngiga, amu ana-ada n with	When one fills a woman's basket

- elu na-ala. purchases, laughter would rend the
 air.
6. Anaghi atu Ikpu ukwu egwu maka na o One cannot be afraid of the wide
 viginna because
 gaghi ara onwe ya. it cannot sex itself.

As mentioned earlier, a woman's progress (physically, financially) is attributed to the husband. On her own, she is considered incapable of personal achievement. For instance, example 1 implies that women depend on men for total provision, thereby giving the men the impetus to enslave the women that; when "common" meat is roasting over a fire, a woman suddenly becomes over agreeable and eager to serve and please. Examples 2 and 3 suggest that without men women are worthless as they (women) are 'consumer of wealth' produced by men and that 'being so caring for a barren woman is to find a husband (man) for her'. Example 4 also noted that the beauty of a woman is her husband. The question is: are there not single mothers who are up and doing in virtually all aspects of life in our society today? If there are, why these kind of proverbs?

Other messages beneath women's dependence on men in some of the proverbs are the impression that women cannot provide for themselves. This is captured in 'when one fills a woman's basket with purchases, laughter would rend the air' 5.

Further expressions of women's subordination to men are also reflected in examples 6 'even though a woman's viginna may be as wide as anything, it is the man that will sex it', (emotionally handicapped) even when gay marriage and lesbianism has become the talk of the day. All these show the power of the man over the woman as well as women's dependence on men in virtually everything.

Women as Gullible/Vulnerable

Women are rarely represented positively, as in the previous sub section. They are also represented as gullible or vulnerable. Below are proverbs to buttress this assertion.

Table 2: Women as Gullible/Vulnerable

S/N	Igbo Proverbs	English Gloss
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|----|---|---|
| 7. | Nwanyi di ka ọkụkọ, a n' eji ọka
aghogbu ya | A woman is like a fowl, we use corn to
lure her |
| 8. | Nwoke chọọ idina agboghọ, ọ
gwa ya okwu ọlulu | When a man wants to have sex with a
girl/woman he will propose to her. |
| 9. | Nwanyi bu akwukwọ ndu di
n'ubi, di ya bu mgbodo ya | A woman is a flower in the garden;
her husband is the fence/shield. |

The gullibility of women is foregrounded in example 7 through the use of a simile, namely, comparing the woman with a fowl. The addressees of the proverb are not left to their own imagination as to which characteristic the fowl has in common with the woman: the second part of the proverb mention these. The fowl is generally considered as a weak and timid domestic animal. However, the specific attribute of the fowl that is brought to bare in the comparison is its susceptibility: it can be easily lured... all one needs is some inexpensive corn. Such is the woman... she can easily be lured or deceived. This is also captured in example 8 which presented the women as people that can easily be lured or deceived by mere proposal or promise. Perhaps then, she cannot be entrusted with valuables. This representation denigrates or belittles women since they are represented as though they have no agency or mind of their own.

In example 9, (a metaphor) (a woman is a flower) is used to reinforce the vulnerability and weakness of women. By including the second part the vulnerability and weakness of the flower (women) are highlighted, as it needs the fence (man) to shield or protect it – thereby accentuating the strength and power of man.

Women as Sex Objects

There are a number of Igbo proverbs that describe women as sex objects. (Ezeife, Aboh and Akpa, 2015, Bolaji, 2010). Below are examples.

Table 3: Women as Sex Objects

S/N	Igbo Proverbs	English Gloss
10.	Uto nwanyi di n`ukwu ya, uto nwoke di n`ego di na-akpa ya.	No matter how beautiful a woman is, any man can buy her provided he has the money to `buy`-symbolised by the content of the pocket.
11.	Agboghọ mara mma anaghi alu	The more beautiful a woman, the

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|---|--|
| out di | more promiscuous a woman is considered to be. |
| 12. Nwanyi obi oma ragburu onwe ya na di | The kind-hearted women sexed herself to death. |
| 13. Agadi nwanyi anaghi echefu egwu o muru na-agboghò | An elderly woman never forgets the dance she learnt in her youth (Promiscuity). Meaning that, no matter how old the woman is, she still plays. |
| 14. Otù nwanyi ajadi bu otù mmadu nile. | A widow's vagina is for all men. |

These proverbs objectify the female body in ways that not only serve as source of pleasure for men, but also as a representation of their vulnerability, promiscuity and weakness. Example 10 attests to it. Example 11 represents the female gender as people who commercialize their womanhood for money making courtesy of their beauty.

This proverb is used to paint beautiful women black before men. On the other hand, society expects men to be flirtations in order to woo and win many women as wives. Promiscuity could also be found in example 12 and 13. In 12 a woman's kindness is represented with promiscuity that she could sex herself to death thereby making her woman hood a public toilet for men while 13 is saying that a woman will never leave promiscuity even at old age. In example 14 however, a woman is represented as a public sex object in that a widow's vagina is for all men. In example 15 Agboghò Mgbowo is a representation of promiscuity. This is based on the understanding that among the Igbo, Mgbowo women are mostly found in hotels as commercial sex workers. Using the pubic hair of such a woman to mark a boundary means reducing her to nothing. In other words, no matter whatever a woman may consider herself to be, she is just a sex object for men.

Women and Physical Appearance

One feminine stereotype is the perception that women pay particular attention to their physical appearance (Liu et al, 2012). This is in fulfillment of the expectation that women should be physically attractive (perhaps in fulfillment of their role as "sex objects" being the focus of attention for men's sexual desire). This stereotype is reproduced in the following proverbs.

Table 4: Women and Physical Appearance

S/N	Igbo Proverbs	English Gloss
16.	Ogeri gbuo oge n'isa-ahu, mara na o na-akwado onwe ya.	If a woman spends much time in the bathroom, she is making up.
17.	Ana-echere ogeri, Ona-echere okwa uri ya.	One would be thinking of a woman's good but she would be thinking of her make-up platter (kit).
18.	Ogeri gbadawa, O tewe etemete	When a woman gets old, she begins to apply make-up.

As indicated in the above proverbs, women are represented as people who are too conscious of their physical appearance in order to be attractive, that if a woman delays in the bathroom she is making up 16, while one would be thinking of a woman's good she will be thinking of her make-up kit 17 and when a woman gets old she begins to apply make ups 18 all indicating that women are Conscious of their physical appearance in order to seduce and please men.

Women as Weaker Beings

One major stereotype is the representation of women as weaker beings. This is in accordance with the biblical injunction that women are the weaker vessel", this is exemplified in the following proverbs:

Table 5: Women as Weaker Beings

S/N	Igbo Proverbs	English Gloss
19.	Anu hu nwanyi, o na-aru okpa.	When an animal sees a woman, it starts limping.
20.	O naghi adi mma agbachaa osọ ka nwoke, ebie ya ka nwanyi.	It is not good to end a race like a woman, after running like a man.

As shown in the proverbs, women are represented as weaker beings. Example 19 showcased the women as being so weak that they cannot kill or catch an animal. This is because men are stereotypically strong; they consider the women to be very weak. The stereotypical weakness of the women is also expressed in example 20 that they cannot do anything strong even when we have women who are military officers among others.

Women as Garrulous

Another definition of women is the representation of women as being garrulous. Below are proverbs defining women in this status.

Table 6: Women as Garrulous

S/N	Igbo Proverbs	English Gloss
21.	Asiri guba nwanyi, Obanye amarachaa ajuba.	When a woman is hungry of gossiping, she starts asking questions about what she already know.
22.	Asiri guba nwanyi, Obulie ekwo oku ya.	When a woman wants to gossip, she carries her heart along with her.

Below this representation is understanding that women are talkative. For instance, example 21 presents women as entities that cannot afford doing something reasonable rather than gossiping, it further represents them as irresponsible and nonchallant. This same representation is also exemplified in Example 22 that when a woman is in hunger of gossip she carries her heart along with her, thereby representing the feminine gender as frivolous, gossips and irrational.

Women as Sweet Talkers

Another traditional stereotype is the representation of women as sweet talkers. Below are proverbs to buttress this assertion.

Table 7: Women as Sweet Talkers

S/N	Igbo Proverbs	English Gloss
23.	Okorobia nwanyi na-afuru oja aghaghi inwu.	The young man whose praise flute is blown by a woman jumps over the mud fence of the spirit.
24.	Ogeri na-aja nwoke mma, Obi ya di n'ego din a-akpa ya.	While a woman is admiring a man she is looking at the content of the man's pocket.

Beneath this representation is the understanding that women are good at flattery, that is luring men into doing what they would ordinarily not do; the end result is often not pleasant. For instance, their 'victim's may end up with death resulting from jumping into the mud fence of the spirit 23 in expenditure thereby

emptying his pocket 24. It must, however, be noted that the ulterior motive behind such flattery is not necessarily to look for the downfall of the man, rather, it is about what they can get from the man, which will eventually be unpleasant for him (e.g. resulting to death, debt/bankruptcy).

Women as Stupid Beings

Another classic stereotype which is in the heart of feminist research is the treatment or representation of women as being stupid. This stereotypical definition is represented in the following proverbs.

Table 8: Women as Stupid Beings

S/N	Igbo Proverbs	English Gloss
25.	Nkita nwanyi zuru na-atagbu mmadu.	A dog trained by a woman bites people to death.
26.	Okorobia n'eché-echiche ka nwanyi anaghi a bu nwoke.	A man who reasons like a woman can never be a man.

These proverbs objectify the feminine gender as being stupid, irrational and illogical that a dog trained by a woman bites people to death 25. This is to say that the woman does not have the capacity (mental) to train children not even the knowledge of parenthood even when we have female teachers and counselors. Example 26 represented the women as stupid, irrational and even mentally weak that a man who reasons like a woman can never be a man.

Women as Subservient

Another characteristic stereotype which is at the apex of feminist research is the treatment or representation of women as subservient or subordinate to men. In Igbo culture, a woman's 'appropriate' position is below or second to man. A woman is therefore expected not to rise above the husband (financially, professionally, educationally, etc) or take a leading role. Rather she is to play a supporting role. The following proverbs tend to remind the women of their 'appropriate' subordinate position in Igbo society:

Table 9: Women as Subservient

S/N	Igbo Proverbs	English Gloss
27.	Nwanyi nọ n'okpuru nwoke	A woman is under a man

28. Nwanyi sin a-ahu nwoke puta Woman was made out of man.

In example 27 for instance, a woman's position (which is under that of the man) is clearly stated. In example 28 the position of a woman is presented subtly as "that which came out of a man". This is to say that, no matter whatever a woman is, (financially, socially, academically), she is under the control of the man since the woman was made out of the man.

Discussion

From the analysis of the data, nine categories of the representation of women can be identified: these representations all in conformity to the traditional gender stereotypes and ideals, and are socio-culturally acceptable as they reproduce or reinforce traditional gender stereotypes and ideals. In our interpretation of how the proverbs reinforce traditional gender stereotype and ideals, we make reference to two notions which are the focus of our analytical approach (FCDA): hegemonic masculinity (which legitimize the traditional authority, power or control of men over women) and hegemonic femininity (which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women, i.e an acceptance of, and compliance with traditional understanding that men are superior to women). We argue that these gendered proverbs tend to be hegemonic because the power and authority of men, as prescribed by the society, are often made to appear unquestionable, that is, by reproducing a lot of these traditional stereotypes and providing sanctions for women who desire to rub shoulder with men. These proverbs tend to persuade women into believing and accepting that hegemonic masculinity and femininity are positively value because they constitute the socio-culturally accepted norms of gender practices.

This is in line with how hegemony establishes itself through consensus rather than force. For instance; it is considered a virtue to:

1. Be submissive to one's husband (a man) as the beauty of a woman is husband (example 3&4).
2. Accept and value the power of men over women (example 6)

These examples similar to Liv et al's (2012) findings on Romanian women immigrants in Italy, that there is a traditional gender discourse which described an ideal woman as 'selfless' caring, submissive and faithfully enduring.

By seeing most of the traditional gender stereotypes positively (e.g as a virtue) it becomes difficult for women to challenge them. This is in line with FCDA's claim that gendered discourses have hidden agendas (Lazar, 2005), we argue that most of these proverbs tend to serve the interest of men by safeguarding hegemonic masculinity. For instance, women are often not portrayed in complimentary terms (but as sex objects, weak, vulnerable, subservient etc). They are expected to do the 'right' things, which include 'submissiveness' not rubbing shoulder with men there by given men the privilege to continue to enjoy what Connell refers to as 'patriarchal dividends' (1995, p.79) i.e the benefit of patriarchy.

Conclusion

This paper has endeavoured to spotlight on the age long predicament of women in Nigeria using Igbo land as a case study. It maintains that patriarchy and gender prejudice are inhuman practices that lead to social and economic backwardness on the side of women and moral poverty on the side of men and the society. This research therefore suggests equal treatment and mutual co-existence between the two sexes. It suggests that prestige and honour are cultivatable qualities which anybody, no matter the gender can strive to achieve. No gender inherently depends on the other to survive as one of the proverbs cited here suggests. Since language and culture are dynamic, the men-folk should allow the dynamism to have effect on those archaic linguistic expressions that promote women inferiority and their total dependence on men. Culture, norms and values of a people is not, and cannot be so rigid. Culture is dynamic as such it could be constantly amended and repositioned as the need arises. Therefore, there should be a u-turn towards cultural re-orientation in order to correct the wrong impressions about the feminine gender as well as redefine their place and role in the society.

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