

An Analysis of Some English Proverbs as Elements of Sexism: A Psychoanalytical Approach

Umera-Okeke, Nneka, Ph.D.

Department of English Studies

University of Port Harcourt

East-West Road, Choba, Port Harcourt

E-mail: nneka.umer-okeke@uniport.edu.ng

Tel: +2348095292884

Abstract

This is a descriptive paper aimed at finding abusive and sexist proverbs inherent in the English language and the psychological effects of these on women. Against the framework of psychoanalytic theory, the paper examined the corpus of the language to fish out proverbs and stereotypes that smack of inequity and that undermine the roles women play in the society. The paper discovered women resort to defence mechanism in dealing/coping with sexism meted out to them in their patriarchal world. While some resort to repression, regression and sublimation, others resort to denial, projection and displacement. The paper recommended disuse of these sayings and entrenchment of equity and increased women's participation in policy making in Nigeria and starting early to develop the conscious and subconscious minds of children at various homes irrespective of their gender.

Key Words: Gender equity/inequality, stereotypes, psychoanalysis, Heart Rate Variability, defence mechanism

Introduction

In the traditional African society in general and Nigeria in particular, women's place is said to be in the kitchen and to bear children for the man. Everything is done to keep them in those roles – they are not allowed to sit together with men in certain decision-making meetings, cannot perform certain duties, do not eat certain parts of meat that are exclusively reserved for men, are still in some communities circumcised to reduce their libido and of course a husband can have concubines but a wife dares not think of that. Political meetings are held at ungodly hours to reduce women's participation and one that dares meet up with that is deemed wayward.

In the 21st century, however, women's participation and empowerment in development are part of Millennium Development goals and constitute important ideal in a lot of development policies and theories, yet the English language we use has proverbs, and sayings that still undermine what women do. The society still undermine women and the things they do and can do. Two instances in the present-day Nigeria prompted this study. Sometime in 2018, the wife of the Nigerian President – Aisha Buhari criticised the husband's policies and the way Nigeria was been governed. When the husband was confronted with this criticism, his response was that Aisha's place is 'in the kitchen and the other room.' Another instance that has set social media agog for the first half of 2019, is the marriage of Ned Nwoko (59years old) to a popular teenage Nollywood actress, Regina Daniels as his 6th wife. No sooner than that was done, she was allegedly initiated into the society of married women which entails she can never cheat on her husband or she stands the risk of losing both the husband and the children. The husband can have as many concubines as he wishes and marry as many as he wants. These two incidences describe the role women have been subjugated to. This paper would want to state that this has psychological implications on women and may be the result of the stereotypes attributable to women such as chatter box, ideal, rumour mongers, weak, naggers, etc. These will be illustrated looking at some

English proverbs and sayings and the effects of these abusive and sexist words on hear rate variability of the victims. This is a matter of action and reaction.

Abusive/Sexist language excludes, trivializes or diminishes either gender. It could be defined as: "Words, phrases, and expressions that unnecessarily differentiate between females and males or exclude, trivialize, or diminish either gender" (Parks & Roberton, 1998, p. 455). Sexist language can also be seen as a form of verbal abuse. Holly (2012 defined verbal abuse as "verbal abuse to be any language or behaviour that seeks to coerce its victim to doubt their perceptions or their abilities and subjugate themselves to the abuser". It includes the use of non-parallel structures (e.g., "man and wife",) instead of "husband and wife", lexical asymmetries (e.g., "governor" and "governess") and generic use of masculine forms (e.g., "he" or "man") as in the use of "chairman" instead of "chairperson." This kind of language frustrates women.

Theoretical Underpinning: Psychoanalytic Theory

Psychoanalysis is an invention of Sigmund Freud in the late 19th century. It is the branch of psychology that focuses on treating mental disorders by recognizing the relationships between the conscious mind and the unconscious mind. The **Psychoanalytic Theory** is therefore a personality theory, which is based on the notion that an individual gets motivated more by unseen forces that are controlled by the conscious and the rational thought. Freud in his initial postulation of this theory described the models of human mind to comprise of the conscious, preconscious and the unconscious. While the conscious describes a person's current state of mind, the preconscious also called subconscious is like a data base from where one recalls or retrieves from memory. The unconscious is something deeper that drives our behaviour. Our actions and inactions are governed by these. Our choice of being sexist or not can be as a result of a long-

internalised effects of happenings around us so also the reactions of victims of sexism.

Freud later developed a more sophisticated model of human mind he called the id, ego and superego (McLeod, 2013 cited in Ackerman, 2018). For him, the id operates at the unconscious level promoted by a person's desire/drive to survive which makes a person to engage in life-sustaining activities or the death instinct that drives destructive, aggressive, and violent behaviour. He referred to these two instincts as Eros and Thanatos respectively. The ego on the other hand checks the id. It is based on reality and works to make sure that the needs of the id are met in a socially appropriate way(s). According to McLeod cited in Ackerman, (2018) the superego is the portion of the mind in which morality and higher principles reside, encouraging us to act in socially and morally acceptable ways. As an individual grows in the society, he or she learns the cultural values and the norms of the society which help him to differentiate between right and wrong. Sexism should be approached in the realm of the superego, that is, in terms of what is right and what is wrong.

It was Freud's believe that these models of human mind are in constant conflict and when the conflict is too much, the ego goes for a defence mechanism which can be in forms listed below:

- **Repression:** an unconscious mechanism in which the ego pushes disturbing or threatening thoughts out of consciousness.
- **Denial:** the ego blocks upsetting or overwhelming experiences from awareness, causing the individual to refuse to acknowledge or believe what is happening.
- **Projection:** the ego's attempt to solve discomfort by attributing the individual's unacceptable thoughts, feelings, and motives to another person.
- **Displacement:** a mechanism by which the individual can satisfy an impulse by acting on a substitute object or person in a socially

unacceptable way (e.g., releasing frustration directed toward your boss on your spouse instead).

- **Regression:** a defense mechanism in which the individual moves backward in development in order to cope with stress (e.g., an overwhelmed adult acting like a child).
- **Sublimation:** similar to displacement, this defense mechanism involves satisfying an impulse by acting on a substitute, but in a socially acceptable way (e.g., channelling energy into work or a constructive hobby; McLeod, 2013 Cited in Ackerman, 2018).

One can therefore say that the goal of psychoanalysis is to bring that which is at the unconscious or subconscious level up to consciousness. Sexism often times is a subconscious thing mostly against women. The use of psychoanalysis for this study is to fulfil one of its goals which is accomplished through talking to another person about the big questions, the things that matter, and diving into the complexities that lie beneath the simple-seeming surface. Everyone needs to know the implications of the sexist sayings, proverbs and stereotypes we use and effect on the victim. We believe that the knowledge will eliminate the abuse. Psychoanalytic theory with specific recourse to defence mechanism was used to explain women's attitudes towards sexism.

The English Language, Gender Inequality and Women's Role in Socio-economic Development

The English language we use as an official language in Nigeria is a reflection of the norms and values of our society. Nigeria is a patriarchal world. Inequality and bias are replicated everywhere – in songs, dances, food, use of language, etc, in Nigeria society. Of course, this is detrimental to sustainable development. Omega (2014) opined that

Nigeria is, today, saddled with many development problems and one of them is the issue of gender inequality. Gender inequality manifests in our use of language (as in taboo expressions such as are found in proverbs/ idioms, songs, greetings, etc.) in spite of all efforts aimed at eliminating all forms of discrimination on the basis of sex. The issue of gender equity has been the concern of many countries of the world including Nigeria (p. 148).

Achieving gender equity is critical to sustainable development which can only be achieved when both men and women have the opportunities to achieve the life they choose. Opportunities for life are underpinned by supportive environment and social systems and sustainability development can only come about when we balance our social, economic and environmental objectives. The issue of gender equality cannot be over-emphasised. The Director of Gender in COMESA region Secretariat, Mrs Emiliana Tembo, speaking during the official opening of USAID funded workshop on Gender responsive budgeting and monitoring and evaluation held 05 July 2012 at the Protea Hotel in Livingstone, Zambia said that “gender equality and women empowerment are core development objectives; fundamental for the realization of human rights and are key to effective and sustainable development”. She opined that no society can develop successfully without providing equitable opportunities, resources, and life prospects for males and females so that they can shape their own lives and contribute to their families and communities. In her words,

Many problems also exist with regard to the efforts to integrate women into trade, industry, agriculture, information and communications, science and technology and peace and security interventions. In order to address gender gaps in these development areas, gender mainstreaming has been internationally recognized as being the appropriate tool. Mainstreaming a gender perspective is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels.

A lot of studies have shown that gender inequalities are extracting high economic costs and leading to social inequities and environmental degradation around the world. Engelman and Sheffield (2012) reviewing UNICEF, International Planned Parenthood Federation and UN's policies on gender and women's contributions opined are of that:

- Education and economic empowerment of women have significant potential to reduce poverty. The benefits of education passes to the next generation—mothers who have had an education are more than twice as likely to send their own children to school as mothers with no education.
- on the average, women invest up to 90 percent of their incomes back into their households, compared to 30-40 percent by men and that
- women produce 50 percent of agricultural output in Asia, and represent nearly 80 percent of the agricultural labor force in parts of Africa. If women had the same access as men to agricultural resources, production would increase by 20-30 percent, and has the potential to reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 12-17 percent

According to Engelman, (2010),

Women manage a broad range of consumption and production decisions that reduce greenhouse gas emissions. As farmers and foresters, they pull carbon out of the atmosphere and sequester it in soils and vegetation. Through cooperative and future-oriented approaches to leadership, as well as a tendency to manage risk more conservatively than men do, they contribute powerfully to social resilience and can help societies adapt to climate change. Increasingly, women also are acting directly on climate change as policymakers and negotiators (para. 3).

How do we then increase the lot of women for them to be able to achieve the above functions? How can we be talking about the role of women in sustainable development when Women's representation in government is tokenistic in Nigeria? After Nigeria's 2015 elections, it is a known fact that only 14 females were elected into the House of Representatives of 360 members and 8 female senators in the 8th Senate of 109 members. From where then are women expected to contribute to the change that matters? In the comfort of their homes? This non-presence in governance impedes the real change and progress that women can make assuming they are in power. Economic sustainability can only be possible "as women approach legal, economic, and behavioural equality—including sexually and reproductively—with men" (Engelman, 2010) He suggested three strategies to bring this about and they are:

- Eliminating institutional, social, and cultural barriers to women's full legal, civic, and political equality with men;
- Improving schooling for all children and youth, and especially increasing educational attainment among girls and women; and
- Assuring that all women and their partners have access to, and full freedom to use, reproductive health and family planning services so

that the highest proportion possible of births results from parents' intentions to raise a child to adulthood.

The multi-lingual and multi-ethnic Nigeria adopted English as its official language but the language is highly sexist in nature. English is indeed sexist. Sociolinguistic researches, over the years have shown that our adopted, precious and revered language favours the masculine gender as opposed to the feminine (e.g. Goddard & Patterson 2001). In Nigeria and many other places, there are hidden differences in the representation and treatment of women and men in language, and these differences are so prevalent within the society that they appear to be normal and common sense to people (Freud's subconscious mind). On-job sexual discrimination such as low-level work experience caused by traditional sexist viewpoints has hindered a lot of female job promotion. A woman with the same qualifications as a man that applied for a job would be turned down based on the simple fact that she is a woman. Prior to the Women's Movement (defence mechanism), women were constantly discriminated against in this manner. It is therefore the purpose of this paper to assess the implication of the English proverbs and stereotypes in undermining the potentials of women and heightening the gender gap already culturally imposed on them. The paper also examined the psychological effect on the victims

Abusive/Sexist Proverbs in English – Meaning and Psychological Implications

(A) Sexism in English Proverbs

A proverb is a special form of language, which came from real life and also reflects the life of each period of time. Proverbs and set phrases are regarded as the cream of the language since they enrich its usage. Proverbs expresses a truth based on common sense or the practical experience of humanity. They are also said to be often metaphorical and reflections of the culture from where they emanate. It is important to note that proverbs are part of

life. Since proverb is also a part of language, sexism can also be found in proverbs. Following are examples to illustrate it from different perspectives:

(i) Talkative/Nagging/Furious Women

Women are criticised for talking much. They are often put in the same castigatory stance with the animals, such as goose, when commenting on their talkative characters. It should however be noted that talking is one biological feature of women, and it is a good way to relax themselves and keep healthy. Men do not understand that and always complain of women.

- One tongue is enough for a woman
- Women will have the last word in an argument. Anything said after that is the beginning of a new argument.
- Many women, many words; many geese, many turds.
- Words are women, deeds are men.
- A woman's tongue is the last thing about her that dies.
- A woman's tongue warts like a lamb's tail.
- He fasts enough whose wife scolds all dinner time.
- Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned

(ii) Women as One of a Man's Possessions with a Place Only at Home

The proverbs below reflect the fact that women's status is very low, meant to be at home and take care of her husband and home; they are treated as goods cloth, as cattle, and even cannot be looked at as human beings. A woman is compared to inanimate things that are often of no value:

- He who marries a young woman gets welfare and a treasure.
- A woman and melon are hard to choose.

- The way to a man's heart is his stomach
- A wife gives beauty to a house.
- Men make houses, women make homes.
- A pretty girl is the kind of goods that is always in demand.
- Daughters and dead fish are not keeping wares.
- Three women and a goose make a market.

(iii) Fickle Minded and Weak – Beauty Without Brains

At sometimes, a woman is seen as a necessity in a man's life and at other times she is frail, weak and a beauty with brains. We can however state that such paradox embodies that men need the foolishness of women to serve as a foil to their erudition and pride as men. In the male-centred society, there is a set of norms for measuring the virtue of women, which is set by men. Women are expected to be gentle and also to be beautiful, otherwise they will not win men's appreciation and protection. Below are proverbs to illustrate this:

- A girl is like a shadow; Follow her, she runs; Flee from her, she follows you
- Girls are wont to say 'no' with their lips, but with their lips, they say 'yes'.
- Long hair, short wit.
- Women have no soul.
- When an ass climbs a ladder, we may find wisdom in women.
- All women are hood.
- Beauty without virtue is a rose without fragrance.
- If the husband be not at home, there is nobody.

- A woman, a dog and a walnut tree, the more you beat them, the better they will be.
- A man of straw is worth of a woman of gold.
- A man is a man though he has but a hose on his head.
- Man, woman and devil are three degrees of comparison.
- Women's counsel is cold.
- A fair woman without virtue is like palled wine.
- In the husband wisdom, in the wife gentleness.
- A good wife and health are a man's best wealth.
- Frailty, thy name is woman.

(iv) Women as Devilish, Disrespectful, Untrustworthy and Mischievous

The following proverbs describe women's sentimentality; and compared women's temperaments to the wavering wind and changeable weather. They show women as the roots of everything bad that happens to a man. All of them show that in men's eyes women are weak and troublesome.

- Woman is the root of both good and evil
- A bad wife takes advice from everyone but her own husband.
- It is a sad house when the hen crows far louder than the cock.
- The husband is always the last to know
- Old men, when they marry young women, make much of death.
- There was never a conflict without a woman.
- Women in mischief are wiser than men.
- No mischief but a woman or a priest is at the bottom of it.

- Heaven hath no rage like love to hatred turned, Nor Hell a fury like a woman scorned.
- Who has a woman has an eel by the tail.
- Man, woman, and devil are the three degrees of comparison.
- It is harder to marry a daughter well than to bring her up well.
- Women are as wavering, changeable as the wind.

Proverbs are also a source of stereotyping: they portray women as idle chatterboxes, as weak, jealous, stupid, possessive and as concerned with physical beauty or trivial things. There is, nowadays, recognition that language, as code, reflects cultural preoccupations and constrains the way people think. English is not helping our patriarchal African society. The aforementioned proverbs are reflections of an already held view in our societies and enforces sexism via language. Such discriminatory attitudes can take many forms and are generally rooted in culturally based prescriptions of acceptable gender behaviour. This practice reinforces the view that women's status is dependent on, or derived from that of men.

Sex-labelled job titles reinforce the assumption that the job can be, and is only, done by persons of one sex. A man should be a doctor, engineer and a woman a nurse or a teacher. This can inhibit members of the other sex from applying for these posts or enrolling to read them in schools. No wonder our universities' Faculty of Engineering is dominated by males while the faculty of education is dominated by females. This is societal imposed limitations on a particular gender. Generic terms, for example "doctor", "lawyer" and "nurse", should be assumed to apply equally to a man and a woman. Expressions such as "male nurse", "woman doctor", "lady lawyer", "and woman reporter" should therefore be avoided in contexts where the reference to a person's sex is irrelevant. If you do not say Dr (Mr)... why say Dr (Mrs) ...?

Women Coping with Abusive/Sexist Language: Psychoanalytic Approach

Abusive language has been found to be detrimental of the mental wellbeing of the receiver. According to Holly (2012) "Verbal abuse is the most common way to attempt to control the behaviour, thoughts, and feelings of another human being. Controlling behaviours are designed to manipulate people into doing what the abuser wants them to do under the guise of love or respect or abject fear." This is exactly what many women feel when the language discriminates against them. Women have resorted to defense mechanism which has come in different ways, according to Freud's suggestions.

A lot of women have resorted to regression, repression and sublimation. They tend to have accepted the roles the society has already mapped out for them. They sit at home, nag, chatter, gossip, cook for the husband, bear children and answer the 'good wives.' They are physically and mentally affected. According to Kim, Cheon, Bai, Lee and Koo (2018), "Physical or mental imbalance caused by harmful stimuli can induce stress to maintain homeostasis. During chronic stress, the sympathetic nervous system is hyperactivated, causing physical, psychological, and behavioural abnormalities" (para. 1).

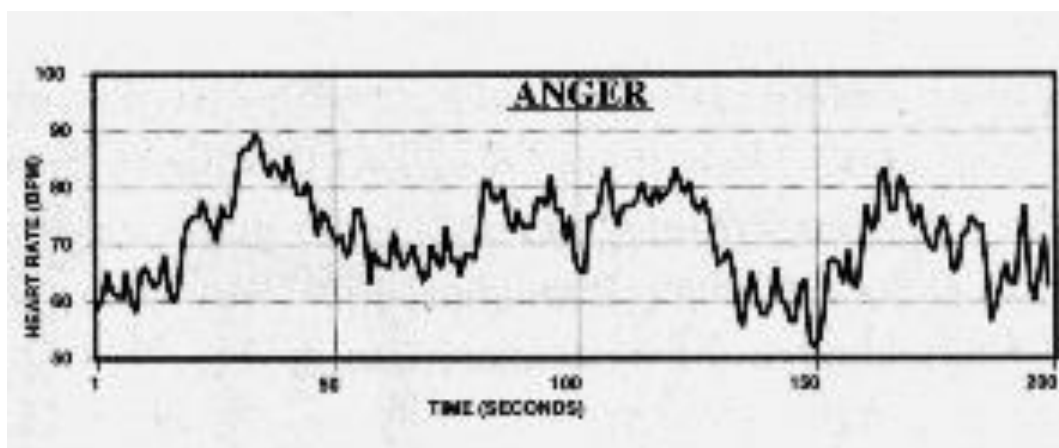
A woman who is at peace cannot chatter, nag or be aggressive. The behaviour of women, if all negative could be in response to the patriarchal world, they find themselves. McCraty and Chidre (2002) speaking about the relationship between positive emotions and optimal functioning noted:

You feel a deep sense of peace and internal balance — you are at harmony with yourself, with others, and with your larger environment. You experience increased buoyancy and vitality. Your senses are enlivened—every aspect of your perceptual experience seems richer, more textured. Surprisingly, you feel invigorated even when you would usually have felt tired and

drained. Things that usually would have irked you just don't "get to you" as much. Your body feels regenerated—your mind clear. At least for a period of time, decisions become obvious as priorities clarify and inner conflict dissolves. Intuitive insight suddenly provides convenient solutions to problems that had previously consumed weeks of restless thought. Your creativity flows freely. You may experience a sense of greater connectedness with others and feelings of deep fulfilment (p.2).

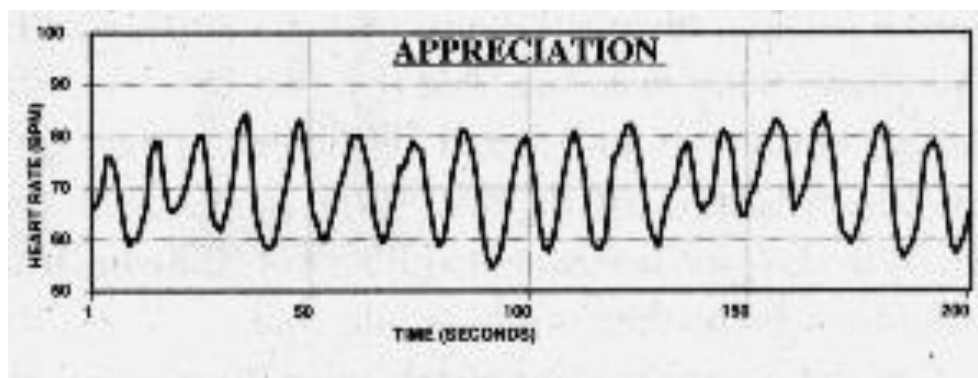
Another study has also shown that abusive and exclusive language has negative effects on humans. That by HeartMath Research Centre (1998) looked at the relationship between emotion and heart rate variability. Their findings were as represented in the figures below:

Figure 1: Negative Emotions and Heart Rate Variability (HRV)



It was discovered that in negative emotional states such as anger and frustration, the HRV pattern is incoherent, random, jerky. This indicates disharmony in the autonomic nervous system, which carries information from the brain to the heart and throughout the body (Institute of HeartMath Research Centre, 1998).

Figure 2: Positive Emotions and Heart Rate Variability



But when the emotional state is positive such as when people are appreciated, loved, cared for, the HRV pattern is coherent and ordered. Such a pattern is generally associated with autonomic nervous system and cardiovascular efficiency (Institute of HeartMath Research Centre, 1998).

Sexist language is demeaning; it is abusive and it undermines what women do. Let us remember the out-cry of women in anger and frustration when President Buhari was asked his reaction to his wife, Aisha's criticism of his administration, he said her role is 'in the other room'. For what that means, your guess is as good as mine. The question is does that mean women cannot participate in politics? This reaction collaborates other studies that have looked at emotion and heart rate variability (HRV) (Tiller, McCraty & Atkinson, 1996; McCraty, Barrios-Choplin, Rozman, Atkinson, & Watkins, 1998; McCarty & Chidre 2002) established a link between emotions and changes in the heart rhythm patterns. These researches discovered that during the experience of emotions such as anger, frustration, or anxiety, heart rhythms become more erratic and disordered, indicating less synchronization in the reciprocal action that ensues between the parasympathetic and sympathetic branches of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) while positive emotions, such as appreciation, love, or compassion, are associated with highly ordered, smooth, coherent and sine wave-like patterns in the heart rhythms (Tiller et al, 1996; McCraty et al, 1995; McCraty & Childre 2002.).

Some other women's defence mechanism is that of denial, projection and displacement. These are women that had the bull by the horn. They fight back by speaking out. They go all out to achieve their goals rejecting the stereotypes set by the society for them. The venture into professions predominantly regarded as the terrain of men and are great politicians, engineers, doctors, pilots, etc. These are women who have championed the cause of women through feminism, different women groups and advocate gender equality.

Conclusion

In this paper, it has been indicated that there is more to gender equity and development than mere saying those words. There is also the need to stop reinforcing or entrenching some of the sexist words and perceptions in the society while assuming that people will suddenly come to understand, in later life. Part of entrenching equality is by expunging sexist elements from the repertoire of language. Language is powerful! We must always try to make informed choices. Making significant progress in all sexist language described will require educating the public and policymakers about the real psychological effects on the victims. Concerted action needs to be taken to improve women's status. There is need to increase women's participation in decision making for sustainable development and economic growth. Let us start early, even in our families. Our children must be treated equally no matter their sex. That is the only way our society can change.

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