

Conceptualization of ‘the Woman’: A Critical Analysis of Selected Yoruba Proverbs

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Abstract

Gender representation is evident in the Yoruba proverbs and this has partly formed the basis on which males and females are evaluated in the Nigerian society. A large concentration of the studies on the representation of women in Yoruba proverbs come from cultural and sociological perspectives. Little attempts have been made to explore the images of the woman in Yoruba proverbs and their ideological implications. The study, therefore, attempts to identify and analyze metaphors in the representation of women in selected Yoruba proverbs and their ideological implications. This study adopts Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Lazer’s (2005) approach to Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA). The sources of the proverbs for this study are oral medium, internet, Yoruba movies, radio and television broadcasts and programs in the Yoruba language, and Yoruba texts on proverbs. The corpus consists of forty-three proverbs illuminating the Yoruba notion of the woman. The study reveals that quite some Yoruba proverbs contain negative metaphors that can unconsciously shape speakers’ perceptions and actions towards women, particularly sustaining masculine hegemony. Significantly, this paper argues for positive gender post-proverbial to replace the negative ones.

Keywords: Gender representation, Yoruba proverbs, Conceptual metaphor, Patriarchal hegemony, Representation of women

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1. Introduction

Gender discourse is an important subject in African scholarship. It is no longer new in gender studies that women are abused and relegated. However, what is important is the exposure of the different ways and reasons they are abused and marginalized. This study argues that cultural tools, such as proverb, have become means through which mainstream oppression and suppression of women are perpetuated in Nigeria. Proverbs are part of everyday language that mirror the worldview of a people. It is the embodiment of a certain group’s values and worldview. They are used to maintain gender relations, and to remind each gender of his or her responsibilities and expectations. The socio-cultural roles of women and what the society expects from them are expressed through these sayings. Mills (2003:185) notes gender ideology in society, or the shared beliefs about who men and women are, are often authorized in some sense through being mediated by the media, which tend to influence the way individuals may perceive and construct a sense of self in relation to other.

The role of the proverb as a metaphorical use of language cannot be overemphasized in any gender discourse. With the understanding that the social force of metaphor in our understanding of the world and ourselves (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; 1999), as well as the important role language plays as a channel through which ideas and beliefs are transmitted and perpetuated, the present study attempts to explore how negative images of women are transmitted and perpetuated through linguistic metaphors in Yoruba proverbs. As Cameron (2003) affirms, ‘challenging established ideologies of language has been among the aims of many social and political

movements, including feminism'. The study particularly examines the ideologies of language in the representations of the woman in these supposedly witty Yoruba communal expressions.

1.1. The Woman in the Yoruba Culture

Gender is shaped by culture. Gender identities and gender relations are critical aspects of culture because they not only shape the way daily life is lived in the family, but also the wider community and the workplace. This is evident in the way duties are distributed to each gender, such that, there are clear patterns of 'women's work' and 'men's work,' both in the household and in the wider community in most societies and cultural explanations of why this should be so. The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria is one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria, predominantly belonging to the Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Ekiti and Lagos States. Yoruba proverbs show the differences that exist between the masculine and the feminine genders.

On gender roles in the Yoruba society, some scholars have argued that the traditional Yoruba society was a genderless one before colonialism, which introduced gender roles for both the masculine and feminine genders (Oyewumi, 1997; 2005; Oluwole & Sofoluwe, 2014). However, other scholars have argued otherwise, saying that 'sex role divisions are highly formalized and exclusive in the Yoruba practice of everyday life...' (Kolawole, 1997; Balogun, 2010). These gender roles are reproduced and legitimized through media such as folklores and proverbs. Akintunde (1999:74) believes that the African culture has a long history of discrimination and injustice against women as there has not been equity in the opportunity, dignity and power between men and women due to various restrictive aspects of the culture restraining women from attaining equal status with men. For instance, women are not expected to lead in any sphere of the society because they are perceived as lacking leadership skills. They are not expected to share in their fathers properties, among other restrictions. Oduyoye (2001:3) notes that African culture is replete with language that enables the community to diminish the humanity of women. The investigation of such discriminatory language is the focus of this study. Through proverbs, prevailing dominant gender ideologies can be reproduced, sustained, and contested.

1.2. Defining proverbs

The proverb has been defined differently by different scholars. As representations of distilled thoughts and pearls of wisdom of a people or a race, Adedimeji (2009) regards proverbs as wise sayings that address the hearts of the discourse in any given context truthfully and objectively. Stone (2006: xiii) also defines proverbs as 'bits of ancient wisdom', that is, a proverb represents words of critical wisdom based on the tested experience of ancestors. Therefore, proverbs are held in high regard among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria and some other African peoples. It is also believed that only the intelligent can make good use of proverbs. This notion perhaps is justified by the following proverb: 'Lówe lówe là á lùlù àgídìgbo, ológbón ní í jó o, òmòrán ní í mò' (The àgídìgbo drum is sounded in proverbs; only the wise dance to it, only the knowledgeable understand it).

Furthermore, proverbs are carriers of culture; they convey the nuances of culture and ensure the continued relevance of such nuances by their transmission from one generation to another. For Akporobaro (2001:105), 'Proverb is the form which has proved itself of continuing relevance to modern man. It has been and remains a most powerful transmission of culture'. According to Coker and Coker (2008:49), 'Yoruba proverbs are replete in philosophy and cultural ethics'. Proverbs give road markings that should be followed by participants in discourse and society.

Proverbs are treasures in speech-giving and making illuminating the grey aspects of any discourse. According to Finnegan (1970: 390), ‘in many African cultures, a feeling for language, for imagery, and the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology comes out particularly clearly in proverbs’, ‘without them (proverbs), language would be but a skeleton without flesh, a body without a soul’. They are used to illuminate seemingly difficult concepts or ideas. People use proverbs in Africa and elsewhere to increase the clarity as well as the semantic effect of what they intend to say. For the Yoruba, *owe lesin oro bi oroba sonù owe lafiu wa* means proverbs are horses that words use; and when words are lost, proverbs are used to search and find them. In other words, proverbs go beyond the form and surface meaning to provide clarifications for statements. Proverbs tend to be carefully couched utterances, which exhibit various linguistic strategies that serve to reinforce the underlying messages communicated by the proverbs.

I infer from the above definitions, that a proverb is any wise saying or epigram that addresses the heart of the matter in a given context, truthfully and objectively, and is ascertained by world knowledge. Though due to the universality of human experience, proverbs exist in all languages with similarities in terms of their reliance on vivid images, domestic allusions, and wordplay, yet they are scantily encountered in many European languages (Crystal, 1997:53). Authors on the subject of proverbs generally agree on most of its common characteristics including brevity, wisdom, criticality, abstract nature, and succinctness in addition to being a reservoir of experience. We argue that although the contexts within which these proverbs are used may not always be gendered, they have significant rhetoric and pragmatic functions which make them manipulative.

1.3. Statement of the problem

Gender-related Yoruba proverbs have also been considered from the sociological perspective (Olasupo et. al., 2012) and the linguistic perspective (Yusuf, 1994, 1998; Asiyanbola, 2007). Yusuf (1994) presents gender bias and cumulative misogyny in English and Yoruba proverbs. Asiyanbola, (2007) also carried out a syntactic and semiotic analysis on female-related proverbs, highlighting the different functions of the proverbs and how they are structurally represented. Central issues in the gender/female related proverbs are the representation of women as being oppressed and the functions of female related proverbs. A few of these studies have examined the linguistic constructions of female identities in Yoruba proverbs. However, the metaphors in the representations of women in female-related Yoruba proverbs have not received particular attention. This study, therefore, explores the conceptualisation of the woman in Yoruba proverbs. This would reveal whether there are elements of fairness and equality or otherwise in the way the woman is metaphorically portrayed. This linguistic investigation of the gender-related Yoruba proverbs because it would expose images that are verbally abusive and promote the maltreatment of women.

2. Studies on Gender-related Yoruba Proverbs

Several scholars have examined gender-related Yoruba proverbs from different perspectives. From the philosophical perspective, Balogun (2010) explores the issue of oppression in some of the Yoruba proverbs that relate to women. The paper argues that these proverbs violate the rights and dignity of women and that the most fundamental but neglected aspect in gender discourse lies in the proverbial resources of the community. The paper contends that there is an urgent need to review the assumptions underlying these proverbs. Yakubu (2012)

selected a number of proverbs that specifically depicts the image Yoruba women, their nature, lifestyle, world view, temperament, to mention a few. It argues that many of these proverbs that revolve around gender are mostly created by men who have been conditioned to see themselves as being 'superior' to the female sex.

From the linguistic perspective, Asiyanbola (2007) identifies and explicates eighteen English-translated Yoruba proverbs associated with women and brings out their inadequacies concerning gender prejudice against the female race, using systemic, structural, and contrastive linguistic theories as bases of analysis. The paper proves that the gender-biased proverbs can be used to reprimand both sexes. Yusuf (1994, 1998) also present the gender bias and cumulative misogyny in English and Yoruba proverbs, revealing that Yoruba is like English sexist in some respects, and is unlike English non-sexist in others. The studies also show that sexism from both languages is in some respects mutually reinforcing.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Lazar's (2005) approach to Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA). Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) theory of conceptual metaphor adopts the position that language influences human thought and behavior. These authors posit that metaphors are 'pervasive in our ordinary everyday way of thinking, speaking, and acting' (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a:453), which speakers are normally unaware of (Boas, 1966). People simply think and act more or less automatically along certain lines. As Whorf (2003:252) affirms, 'the forms of a person's thoughts are controlled by inexorable laws of pattern of which he is unconscious' and 'these patterns are the unperceived intricate systematizations of his language'. These metaphorical representations can therefore unconsciously determine societal behavior.

The conceptual metaphor theory describes the mapping of two domains known as source domain (SD) and target domain (TD). This means in each metaphor, there are two mental representations. The former is a more concrete or physical concept, while the latter is a more abstract concept. Lakoff and Johnson (1980:5) argue that 'the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another'. Concepts are systematically understood in terms of other concepts. Through metaphors, people express a picture of reality or a world view. Most metaphors are not neutral in their evaluative stance. Metaphors offer a window on the construction of social identities. Being channels of folk beliefs, many metaphors convey biases in favor of particular social groups that are considered as the normative in detriment to those individuals who do not conform to this group. Community views about the inferiority of social groups are verbally rendered using metaphor. Metaphors are considered beyond literary devices and linguistic ornaments, but as a matter of thought (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff & Turner, 1989) allowing for the interpretation and conceptualization of one sort of thing in terms of another.

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 (Fairclough, 1992). According to Litosseliti (2006:55-56), CDA 'has an explicit interest in making transparent the 'hidden agenda' of discourse – which, for instance, may be responsible for creating and sustaining gender inequalities'. Wodak (2002: 11), however, describes it as fundamentally 'interested in not only analyzing opaque but also transparent structural

relationships of dominance, discrimination, power, and control as manifested in language'. As socially constructed systems, gender, power, and opportunity are products of representations and social constructions of individuals are interwoven with processes of cultural and historical reproduction where tradition plays a fundamental role. FCDA is an approach that focuses on critiquing discourses which sustain a patriarchal social order: that is, relations of power that systematically privilege men and disempower women (Lazar, 2005). Lazar's approach foreground the 'complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities' (Lazar, 2007:142). This makes this approach suitable for this study

3. Methodology

The sources of the proverbs for this study are oral medium, internet, and Yoruba texts on proverbs, such as Owomoyela (2005) and Sheba (2006). As Sanauddin (2015) notes, most previous research on the construction of gender relations in proverbs draws upon second-hand selection of proverbs from published sources due to time and resource constraints. The present study shares in the methodological similarity of previous research on gender aspects in proverbs in that, the author draws on sample proverbs previously collected by others. The data consists of forty-three proverbs illuminating the Yoruba notion of the woman, purposively selected and classified under different metaphoric themes and subjected to linguistic analysis. Most of these proverbs explicitly mention *obinrin*, *iya*, the Yoruba words for *female* and *mother*. The data were analyzed by looking for recurring metaphors in the selected proverbs.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

Metaphor is a force that has been used to reinforce gender inequality and inequity in Yoruba proverbs. They are deployed in the representation of women as death, animals, plants, sex objects, homemakers, supernatural beings, among others, mostly negatively and sometimes positively, restricting the role of the woman to the home front. The source domains of these proverbs are death, animal, plant, among others and the target domains are women and mothers. Examples of such representations and how metaphors are used in portraying certain characteristics in women are considered.

4.1. Women as death/evil

Women are often represented as death and being wicked in some Yoruba proverbs. It is believed that a woman has the potential to kill, especially her husband, irrespective of whether they have children or not. A glimpse at the examples below reveals this.

1. *Obinrin bimo fun ni kope koma pa ni* (That a woman bears a man a child doesn't stop her from killing him)
2. *Obinrin ko bimo fun ni, ko pe ko ma pa ni* (That a woman is yet to a man bear a child doesn't stop her from killing him)
3. *Okunrin ti koku, obinrin re ni ko tii paa* (If a man is not yet dead, it is because his woman is yet to kill him)

4. *Koto ayé, koto obinrin, àti koto ikú, okan oyàto. (The pit dug by the world, the one dug by a woman, and the one dug by death: they are all the same. The world, women, and death are equal)*
5. *Eni ti o fe arewa fe iyonu, eni gbogbo nii ba won tan. (He who marries beauty marries trouble; everybody claims a relationship with her).*

Looking at the examples above, one notices the repeated reference to the woman as a killer. 'Pa', the death metaphor in examples 1, 2, and 3, shows that the woman is very wicked as to not consider even the children before carrying out her evil act. These examples emphasize that a woman is capable of killing irrespective of her position and situation in the home, that is, under any circumstance. The third example particularly emphasizes that a man is not dead when his wife has not decided to kill him. This is a form of warning for men to be careful when dealing with women. Such representation could spur men to treat women especially their wives with disdain. In example 4, a woman is compared with 'aye' – world, which connotes witches and wizards in the African context and 'iku' - death, capable of wreaking havoc on anyone irrespective of their positions. 'Aye' can kill, while 'iku' is death itself. Therefore, putting 'obinrin' – the woman in this category means that women are equally inconsiderate, dangerous and wicked as 'iku and aye'. They are conceptualized as the death of the menfolk. Still in example 4, 'koto' – pit' is also a metaphor for danger/death. When one falls inside a pit, it means the person is entrapped or in serious trouble, and if the person manages to escape, s/he would have been injured. This is the kind of picture that is painted in that proverb. The use of this metaphor for the representation of a woman is a negative one. It means when a man falls into the trap of a woman, he is in serious trouble, the kind that 'koto aye' and 'koto iku' can give. The proverb concludes that the three concepts 'koto aye', 'koto iku' and 'koto obinrin' are the same. In example 5, a beautiful woman is equated with trouble, 'iyonu'. These proverbs encourage further marginalization of women because they are considered evil.

4.2. Women as animals

Some Yoruba proverbs also draw behavioral equivalences between women and animals. Consequently, they automatically humiliate and dehumanize women. In a number of these proverbs, it will be noted that there is a vital trend in the animals chosen to describe women. Some of them are domestic animals that are known to be at the mercy of humans. Examples are *esin* (horse), goat and chicken. Other animals are predators considered to be dangerous or destructive. Examples are *awodi* (hawk) and *ofon-on* (mouse). These proverbs place women and animals in the same metaphorical category and by so doing, function as a discursive strategy that sustains the power of the dominant group over the dominated group. Examples of such representations are found below.

6. *Esin obinrin soro gùn, o le gbénisubù. It is not good for a man to climb on a woman's horse because he can fall to his death*
7. *Eni ti o ba gun esin obinrin yoo subu (whoever climbs a woman's horse will fall)*
8. *Bí iṣù bá tán lóko, obinrin a di àwodi; a ní rírà loún tún ñrà jẹ kiri o (when there are no more yams on the farm, one's woman becomes a hawk; she says she is now reduced to going around to buy food).*
9. *Afatiiri ni tiyawo, bi a ba fa a ti ko tiiri, o ni ohun to n se e. (diffidently pulling back is what becomes the new bride; if she is pulled and she does not resist, there is something wrong with her*
10. *Ta nii soosa loju ofon-on, ta lo fee foju obinrin mawo. (who dares initiate mice; who dares initiate women into the cult?)*

11. *Tobirin ba fowo soko, to fi suku se epon, ekun ni yoo pa a je. (if a woman makes her hand a penis and makes the maize-cob her testicle, she is doomed to be killed and eaten by a lion).*

Animal metaphors used in the representation of women in examples 6,7 and 8 represent them as unreliable or unpredictable. The horse metaphor in example 6 and 7 represents her as one to be bridled and controlled by the man who rides on the horse. The horse is used for carrying or pulling loads, riding, and racing. It provides transport, labor as well as leather tools, milk, and meat. Horses are controlled with a bit. Therefore, the representation of a woman as a horse reaffirms patriarchal control. The proverbs are a warning to the menfolk, advising them not to even ride on the horse of their wives because women are unpredictable. This can lead to their downfall. Men are not expected to rely on women's help, promises, and suggestions as it is believed in the Yoruba culture that a woman could disappoint at any time. Example 8 shows the comparison of the woman with 'Awodi' – hawk. The hawk has a fierce reputation for killing its prey with its claws. It flies away after getting prey only to return after some time to get more. It is never satisfied. These features are transferred to women, showing that a woman can never be satisfied and easily forgets whatever goodness has been done for her in the past. She would complain when her needs are no longer met by the man. Such proverbs have led to the neglect of whatever the woman has to say even when it is genuine and important. Example 9 shows the representation of a woman as an animal that can be dragged or pulled- 'Afatiri'. Examples of animals that can be pulled are 'goat', 'dog', 'horse', among others. This leaves the animal (woman) at the mercy of the person pulling. An analogy is drawn from the features of the mouse 'ofon-on' in the representation of the woman. The mouse is a pest that people try to do away with within their homes because they are destructive. This conceptualization shows that the woman cannot be trusted with important details. Example 11 portrays the woman as being subordinate to the man, in that, no matter what she does to become like a man, she remains a woman. This connotes that it is not everything a man can do, a woman do. 'Ekun' in that example could mean the man who would always dominate the woman. Here, the woman is presented as an animal that is hunted by the lion (man) and eaten as food. Food, here, could connote sex. By implication, the hierarchy of man as the dominant species is maintained as livestock animals exist to be exploited and eaten. Most animals with which women are identified can be hunted (wild animals), eaten (livestock), worked with, or played with (pets). Through the image of 'women as animals' metaphors, these proverbs legitimize and license the treatment of women as second grade, subservient beings. Animals need to be whipped and controlled to ensure they are put to the uses their owners require of them.

4.3. Women as plants

Another metaphorical conceptualization of women common in the corpus is that of plant metaphor, infused with various types of plants, its attributes as well as the uses or benefits that could be derived from it. Women are likened to instability and unpredictability through metaphorical equivalence to plants like 'itakun'(vines).

Examples below reveal this.

12. *Itakun l'obinrin yoo maa fa kaani (Women are climber plants(vines) that overrun any available space)*
13. *Itakun nii se iku pa okere, obinrin nii se iku pa okunrin. (vines cause the death of squirrels; women cause the death of men)*
14. *Ope obinrin ki i pon boroboro. (women's palm nuts do not ripe easily)*

15. **Ope lobinrin**, *eni to ba mu igba de ibe lo n gun un.* (women are palm trees; whoever goes with climbing rope can climb them)
16. **Agbon ni obinrin**, *eni to ba leyin lo n je e* (women are coconut; only those who have teeth eat them)
17. **Ogede o to nnkan a a lo ada be, oro obirin o see ka legba dan-in-dan-in** (the plantain tree is not hard to warrant sharpening the cutlass before cutting it, women's actions should not be taken seriously)
18. **Ododo lobinrin ki I gbee re danu.** (women are flowers; they quickly wither off)
19. **Eni ti o da aso obinrin bora, werepe lo da bora.** (the person who covers himself with a woman's cloth covers himself with the tormentingly itching werepe (*Mucuna papilionaceae*) leaves)

In examples 12 and 13, the woman is represented with the metaphor of a climber plant 'itakun', that spreads. The plant has its roots in one place and its branches in other places. This represents the woman as insatiable. Irrespective of the attempt to please her by the husband, she would prefer to move around. This form of representation is demeaning. This is a form of advice the men never to rely on women as they are unstable. In fact, in example 13, the woman is likened to *Itakun* that causes the death of *Ókere*'. The proverb specifically says the woman is the death of the man, as alluded to in the conceptual metaphor women are death. Again, the concept of the palm fruit/tree is used in the construction of women as being difficult, subordinate to men, and materialistic in examples 14 and 15. In example 14, the woman as a palm fruit takes more time than normal to get ripe, which could mean that men do not have to wait for women before taking important decisions or they should simply tolerate or be patient with women. In example 15, the woman is portrayed as a palm tree that can be climbed by any man, especially with the tool for climbing which could connote money or material things. This represents women as being materialistic as they would only go for whoever has what they want. Also, being climbed emphasizes the dominated position of the woman. Example 15 is similar to how the woman is conceptualized in example 16. The woman is conceptualized as coconut. While we may think that this has a positive connotation of representing the woman as being strong just as in the case of the palm tree, it represents the woman as food to be eaten by whoever has strong teeth. 'teeth' in this instance could connote money, strength or material things. 'To be eaten' is also demeaning. Women are also represented as entities to be tolerated by comparing them with the plantain tree (*ogede*) which does not require so much strength to cut in example 17. This means women can be easily tamed and should not be taken seriously. The conceptualization of women as flowers in example 18 alludes to the depreciating value of women as they become old. It means women are only beautiful or productive for a short period. This is the construction of the woman as someone who needs support. Again in example 19, a woman's cloth is compared with 'werepe', a plant that causes intense itching when it touches any part of the body. This serves as a form of warning to men never to rely on women as such reliance would bring nothing but pains and torments. In all, looking at the plant metaphors used in the representation of women in Yoruba proverbs, one notices that some of them are capable of inflicting pains and even death on men, showing that women are dangerous. Some portray women as being at the mercy of men who have the means to climb and eat them, affirming the masculine hegemony and some, emphasizing that women should not be taken seriously.

4.4. Women as sex objects

In some gender-related Yoruba proverbs, women are represented as sex objects for the men folks. They are essentially stripped of their existential value as independent human beings who are equal to men. They are also considered valuable in terms of their sexual organs. Examples of such representation can be found below:

20. *Bí ki sí **tomú tí mbẹ láyà obinrin**, tí ki sí **ileke tí mbẹ nídíí àgbèrè**, ore-e mí dára díe ju obinrin lọ (If not for the breasts on the chest of a woman, and the beads around the waist of the woman who sleeps around, my friend is somewhat more attractive than a woman. But for feminine sexual organs, a male friend is preferable to a female)*
21. *Obo ni ko je kobinrin kuta (The vagina prevents a woman from being unsellable)*
22. *Didan ni iyi ide, eje ni iyi oogun, **omu sikisiki** ni iyi obinrin (the value of brass is in its shining, the value of oogun is in the vow, full breasts are the value of a lady.*
23. ***Gbogbo obinrin lo ngbese**; eyi to ba se tire lase ju laraye n pe lasewo (All women engage in infidelity; but it is the one that does hers in excess is that is called a prostitute)*
24. ***Epo** ló şeé jẹṣu; **àkàso** ló şeé gun àká; **obinrin** dùn-ún bá sùn ju òkúnrin lọ (It is palm oil that goes best with yams; it is a ladder that is best for climbing granaries; a woman is more pleasant to make love to than a man)*

In examples 20, 21, and 22, body parts metaphors, especially the sexual organs of a woman are used to restrict the value of women to their sexuality. This means that the woman is of no good and has nothing good to offer other than sex. '**tomu ti mbe laya obinrin**' (the breasts on the chest of a woman), '**ileke ti mbe nidii agbere**' (the beads around the waist of the woman), *obo* (vagina), '**omu sikisiki**' (full breast) are images that objectify the female body in ways that not only represent them as a source of pleasure for men but also show their vulnerability. Women are also conceptualized as '**agbere**' (prostitutes) in the second conditional clause of example 20, alluding to the proverb in example 23, that all women are sexually uncontrollable. The conceptualization of the woman as sexually insatiable is essentially biased. The contrast is that the man is often painted as blameless and innocent, someone who falls to the manipulative arms of the woman. This is different from reality; Yoruba men practice polygamy and keep many concubines. The proverbs, no doubt, constitute a major basis and cover for men's sexual excesses and infidelity. With this image of women's promiscuity in the subconscious of an average Nigerian/man, women are perceived to be of no good except when it comes to sex. They are preferable to men when it comes to sexual matters. In example 24, there is the analogy of how yam is best taken with palm oil, and the suitability of a ladder in climbing before the representation of women as sex objects, which is the main message the proverb intends to pass. These analogies are drawn to show the suitability of the woman as a sex object. A comparison is also made between the pleasure one derives while sleeping with a man and sleeping with a woman. '**dun-un ba sun**' in the example represents the woman as a passive object for sex and the man as the dominant person who derives pleasure from sleeping with her. The proverbs emphasize that certain things are fit for certain purposes; not just anything will do anytime, this is the case of a woman as a sex object. These examples emphasize the usefulness of a woman only in sexual matters.

4.5. Women as objects owned by men

The portrayal of women as objects owned by men is another semantic device frequently seen in Yoruba proverbs. Women are essentially stripped of their existential value as independent human beings who are equal to men and are rather presented as slaves and pleasure tools of their 'owners'.

25. *Aya lo nile, oko lo lase, ailaya nile dabi eni o ni **nkan irori**. A wife is the custodian of the home, a husband is the custodian of commands, one without a wife at home is like one sleeping without a pillow*
26. *Mo n lo si ile wa ni ojo kan ilare ko je ki obinrin mope **eru** ni oun. (I am going to my father's house to spend a day or two does not make a woman realise that she is a slave (in the husband's household))*
27. ***Fila** ni obinrin, won ki i ba ode wo iti. (women are caps; they never accompany the hunters into the dense forest)*
28. *Ko see **ni**, ko see **maa ni** in obinrin. (women are necessary evil).*

In the examples above, object metaphors are deployed in the representation of women. They are presented as 'pillow' in example 25, 'slave' in example 26, 'cap' in example 27, calabash in example 28, and property to own in example 29. As a pillow, the woman is portrayed as an object of pleasure for the man and an object of servitude as a slave. The woman is presented as a cap in example 27 to emphasize the inability of a woman to support one when things are rough as they are only meant for fashion and convenience. These proverbs portray domination by the masculine gender. They endorse the belief that women are not sufficiently competent and thus need to be

controlled by men. The metaphorical image of women as objects may fuel the ill-treatment of women in society.

4.6. Women as supernatural beings

Women are also represented as supernatural beings in Yoruba proverbs. They are represented as deities watching over man's life and as diabolical beings. Witches, gods, and goddesses intervene in human affairs. Sometimes, they use their powers to help men and on many occasions, the witches use their powers against them. The repertoire of metaphors designating supernatural women in Yoruba proverbs reveals an extreme dichotomy of praise and abuse. At one extreme, one encounters terms belonging to the language of worship (e.g. orisa (deity, goddess) whereas on the other hand is the devilish association (*aje*-witch). In the African context, deities are considered to be powerful and are to be adored, which accounts for their figurative usage only when referring to mothers and not women generally. Also, in the African setting, witches are considered to be evil and feared. However, the witch metaphor has been used in the representation of women in Yoruba proverbs. Examples of these different classifications and usage are shown below.

29. *Obinrin bimọ fun ararẹ, ó ní òun bimọ f'ókọ; tani ò şàimò pé **òrisà** bì yá kòsì. A woman gives birth for her sake, but proclaims to have had a child for the husband; who does not know that there is no idol like the mother*
30. ***Oosa** bi iya ko si, ta ni je se bi eni to bini lojo to ba nira? A woman gives birth for her sake, but proclaims to have had a child for the husband; who does not know that there is no idol like the mother*

31. *Baba eni leegun ile eni; iya eni loosa oja; aisi iya laye, bi eni filekun muni ni One's father is one's masquerade while one's mother is one's market idol; the absence of a mother is like imprisoning someone*

The above proverbs allude to the power, strength, and importance of women when compared to what men do. The first and second examples are indirect ways of acknowledging the power and significance of the woman. The mother is represented as an idol that cannot be compared with anything else, through the use of the metaphor 'orisa', 'oosa' and 'óosa oja' in examples 29, 30, and 31 respectively. 'Orisa' in the Yoruba context means a deity, a god, or an idol that should be worshipped. An idol is believed to be wise, powerful, and respected by all. Therefore, a representation of mothers using this metaphor means that they are powerful and have to be respected.

At the other extreme of the scale is the representation of all women as witches. Witches in the Nigerian context are considered to possess supernatural powers often used to perpetrate evil, though there are arguments that some do good. Generally, the representation of women as witches portrays women in a negative light. Examples of such proverbs are below.

32. *Gbogbo obinrin laje (Every woman is a witch)*
33. *Ito pe lenu o di warapa, egbo pe lese o di jakute, bi obinrin ba pe nile oko, aje nii da. (saliva stays long in the mouth and becomes epilepsy, a sore stays long on the leg and becomes putrid; if a woman stays too long in a husband's home, she becomes a witch)*
34. *O o ni obinrin, o ni o ko fe aje, tani o maa n fe were (you have no wife, but you do not want to marry a witch, who could have married a lunatic?)*

Women are believed to have or possess cosmic powers. The powers women possess are inherent and they can be put to good or bad use. In example 32, all women are metaphorically referred to as 'witch', indicating that they are powerful and have the potential to put their power to use mostly negatively. For example 33, it is also believed that staying long in a husband's house makes a woman a witch. In this instance, the woman is equated with saliva, and sour, and 'witch' is equated with epilepsy and being putrid. These are negative metaphors used in representing women. Such metaphoric representation could make the woman to be treated with so much disdain.

It is important to note at this point that not all Yoruba proverbs are abusive to women. It is then wrongly believed that the Yoruba's place for the woman is negative, oppressive, and placatory in all the sense of it. Some proverbs reflect women positively; they are hierarchy attenuating forces, which try to mitigate gender hierarchies. For instance, women are represented as being supportive and powerful, and different linguistic strategies are used to foreground these themes.

4.7. Mothers as valuable

35. *Agboràndùn bí iyá osí; ẹ̀ni tó ní baba ló tó ara-á ré. There is no commiserator like one's mother; only those who have fathers dare to be impudent.*
36. *Iya nii deni lade adeisi, baba nii deni ni gbangbalt is the mother who gives one a permanent crown, it is the father who crowns one in the open*

37. *Iya ni wura Baba ni jigi; ojo iyá kú ni wúrà-á bàje; ojo tí babá kú ni jíjí lọ. Mother is gold, father is glass; the day the mother dies is the day the gold is ruined; the day the father dies is the day the glass is gone*
38. *Baba ni alabaaro; iya loniranlowo, Father is a counsellor; mother is a helper*
39. *Iya lalabaro omo lojo to ba buru. Mother is a comforter to the child on difficult days*
40. *Iya ni ore omo. Mother is the friend of the child*

Metaphors used to represent the mother as valuable, powerful, and important in the examples above include ‘agborandun’ – commiserator, ‘wura’ – gold, ‘ore omo’ – a child’s friend, ‘alabaro’- comforter, ‘adenilade adeisi’- one who gives permanent crown. The description of mother as gold means she is every good thing one can think of (symbol of a precious possession) while father is described as a mirror that is considered to be lower in value than gold. Moreover, when the mother dies the most precious possession is lost. This perhaps goes a long way in bringing to the open the highly revered, positive, and idolized position of the woman in Yoruba culture. It is noticed from the examples that the woman is represented as being more valuable than the man, hence, enhancing hierarchy at the same time. These proverbs show resistance to gender inequality. It can also be noticed that these good qualities are only attached to mothers, not women in general. With certain proverbs, women are seen to have positive traits if they conform to the traditional views which assign them with traditional gender roles (e.g., wife, mother), complementary to those of traditional men. For women to be valued positively, they are obliged to comply with this stereotype which helps to reinforce their secondary role to men by acquiescing to male monopoly. In other examples under this category, the repercussions of not having women in any gathering are identified. This representation is showing the indispensability of women. These proverbs also perform the role of mitigating gender hierarchies.

4.8. Women as homemakers

This conceptualization is reflected in the way some expressions are used to locate the gender role of women within and around the activities at home. With these proverbs, women are seen to have positive traits if they conform to the traditional views which assign them with traditional gender roles (e.g., wife, mother), complementary to those of traditional men. For women to be valued positively, they are obliged to comply with this stereotype which helps to reinforce their secondary role to men by complying with male domination. Women are represented as men-pleasers. They are at the mercy of men’s appetite for delicacies. Mills (2003: 187) for instance, observes that ‘femininity has often been associated with the private sphere and the values associated with that sphere’, which tends to limit the gender role of the woman. These proverbs are hierarchy attenuating and different metaphors have been used to achieve this. A glimpse at the examples below reveals this.

41. *Bi obinrin ko si lodede, ile k ii kun the absence of a woman makes a home incomplete*
42. *Obinrin o si nile, ile kan Without women, the home is not habitable*
43. *Won ni ka te, ka ba a, e lobinrin ko mole i to, bi e ba ti wa fe ki o to, eyin o mo bobinrin nii tole to fi i tuba, to fi i tuse You all complain that the woman is not a good builder, don’t you know that it is the woman that makes a home.*

The examples above show that any gathering without women is incomplete. The woman also makes the home complete as seen in example 41. The repercussion of not having a woman/wife is that the home becomes uninviting 'ile kan'. The woman is also represented as a home builder in example 43. These proverbs resonate with the "domestic/ private sphere for women. one-way women gain redemption from these straight-jacket denunciations is when they comply with what society believes to be the prototypical image of the good woman: chaste, sexually inhibited, loyal, subservient, and motherly.

5. Conclusion

Considering the negative representations of women in some proverbs shown above, women will only be considered to be of no good. Women in these proverbs are constructed as death, objects of men's pleasure, among other negative representations. Consequently, the use of these proverbs has become the tool through which men control positions of social, political, and economic influence, limiting women's participation in the domestic sphere. The representation of women in the proverbs has effects on the identity, dignity, rights, freedom, and empowerment of women in this cultural milieu. The perception of women's personality, their strengths, and weaknesses, their dignity, by the society and by themselves, is, among other things, the result of the way they are portrayed in proverbs and vice versa.

When the feminine gender is judged based on the understanding of the negative representations of the women in proverbs, which are essential parts of a culture, then, there is no way the feminine gender will not be marginalized. This fosters women's dependence on men and frustrates the efforts of empowering women, having a demoralizing effect on the complementary role of women in general. Since metaphors shape individuals' perceptions and actions once they are registered in the subconscious of speakers who make mental maps of the metaphorical schemas captured in them, they become forces that endorse and reinforce a system of gender discrimination. However, as Cameron asserts, 'if enough people can be induced to doubt that the status quo is natural or legitimate, a climate is created in which demands for change are much harder for their opponents to resist' (Cameron, 2003:453).

This study, therefore, suggests the need for post-proverbials in contemporary African/gender discourse, paying particular attention to the feminine cause. This involves a reconstructive engagement with some of the sexist African proverbs considered to be out of date. Raji-Oyelade (1999:75) refers to this exercise as 'a normative rupture in the production [and interpretation] of this traditional verbal genre', which would result in the emergence of 'new' proverbs with new forms, new meanings, and new values. The sexist proverbs analyzed in this paper serve as ideological weapons used to reflect the assumed weaknesses, fragility, and powerlessness of women, and to legitimize their unequal status with men, and also to resist such representations.

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