LANGUAGE AND GENDER: A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF THE USE OF PROVERBS IN SELECT NIGERIAN DRAMATIC TEXTS

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Introduction

In recent times, the issue of gender language, along with its implications in the feminist discourse, has gained currency. More than ever before, the feminists are now assessing the ideology, gender identification and sexual differentiation at the theoretical level, while, on the political front, they are beginning to object to linguistic expressions that seem to relegate the status of women in all spheres. Spender Dale (1980) argues that men have intentionally

> formulated a semantic rule which posits them central and positive as the norm, and they have classified the world from that standpoint, constructing a symbolic system, which represents patriarchal order (58).

This means that, through their semantic construction, women are positioned as objects and are denied all sense of subjectivity. Black and Coward (see Dale, 1980:101) similarly argue that as an instrument of expression, language is seen to reflect the perceived interest of a given social group, whether men or women. Society is seen as being structured around two dominant classes with conflicting interests, and different relations to language. While women are denied of power, men define the language, and women are incapable of influencing the linguistic process used by men to perpetuate their authority and interests. Expatiating on this, Dale (1980:101) explains that the dominance of the male 'semantic rule' is the effect of the male definition of concepts, and that men, like the ruling class in Marxist arguments, have the power to define reality, just as the rule of language reflects the meanings imposed by men.

For any group of people, language is a significant aspect of their cultural life, which, according to Deborah Cameron (1999:199), encodes a culture's preoccupation and its values, serving as a major avenue through which these are transmitted from generation to generation, and to others who have access to that community. It is in this light that the representation of women's interest in gender

language has become a major issue in feminist discourse. The feminists have come to the conclusion that languages tend to have sexist connotations, and the world is often represented from a masculine perspective, influenced by men's stereotyped notions about women, and the relationship between them (Cameron, 1999:9). Language is, therefore, one of the most basic markers of patriarchy, which is often used as a manipulative tool.

This paper focuses on the use of language in the construction of the female identity, using the medium of proverb. Our interest is in the skill with which African dramatists exploit new aesthetic opportunities by weaving traditional verbal art forms into their plays written in English. This, in itself, is a great stride towards the development of indigenous African literary culture in English. Our focus is not limited to proverbs, but to other forms of verbal expressions like figures of speech, idiomatic expressions, metaphoric expressions, stereotypes, etc. In this regard, the following three Nigerian plays are being used as illustrative texts: *Imaguero* by Evbinma Ogie, *Dance on His Grave* by Barclays Ayakoroma, and *The Queen Sisters* by Irene Salami. There are several other dramatic texts by Nigerian and African playwrights that could have been similarly employed for this purpose.

Language and literature

Language is the main medium of literary expression, without which literature will be merely strings of ideas left to the imagination. Even when ideas are expressed symbolically, their meanings are still expressed via language. It can, therefore, be said that language functions as a basic medium through which meaning is filtered, in addition to signifying a cultural and political system that is inherently meaningful. The use of proverbs acts as a means for the enunciation of such a system, as witnessed in Africa, where it is becoming common in post-colonial literature for traditional home grown images to be embedded in literary texts. Gilbert and Tompkins (1996) rightly observe as follows:

> Many African playwrights resort to indigenous discursive patterns and tons of phrase to communicate in English, and to bring to English something of their own language and oral traditions. Local proverbs, in particular, communicate a resonant, poetic meaning that Standard English expression does not normally allow (182).

Africa is endowed with vast oral culture, which represents a dominant view when it has to do with gender. Along with other forms of orature, proverbs provide a strategy through which society reaffirms its traditional beliefs. The proverb is an important component of speech, particularly in Africa. Among the Igbo, it is 'the palm oil with which words are eaten.' To the Yoruba, it is the 'horse of conversation,' while for the Hausa, it is the 'beginning of words.' The Tiv people would say it is 'the spring from which conversation sprouts, while, in Bini culture, proverbs are used to pass instructions to the well-bred child, as against the plain language employed for the servant. This goes to show the value of proverbs for social communication in Africa.

Although it is difficult to trace the origin of proverbs, scholars have attempted to explain and analyse them. Gilbert & Tompkin (1996:182) define them as 'short, easily-remembered pithy statements that are passed on from generation to generation. They sometimes recall oral forms of history and culture.' In a similar vein, Mineke Schipper (2003:9) defines them as 'short, pithy sayings, indigenously embodying an admitted truth or a cherished belief.' She identifies four basic characteristics of a proverb as: its concise, fixed artistic form, its evaluative and conservative function in society, its authoritative validity, and its anonymous origin. Its main features are that it exaggerates, idealizes or simplifies stereotype jests and jokes. Ruth Finnegan also observes that

> in many African cultures, a feeling for language, for imagery, and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology comes out particularly clearly in proverbs... Indeed, this type of figurative expression is sometimes taken so far as to be almost a whole mode of speech in its own right (Finnegan, in Ojoade:100).

In western cultures, the genre of proverbs is gradually declining, as most people hardly ever pay attention to it. In Africa, however, it remains a significant genre, in spite of being described as the world's smallest literary genre (Schipper, 2003:2). The poetic power of proverbs is most captivating and fascinating, just as they are regarded as containing wisdom, authenticated by such phrases of ascription as 'according to our people', 'our people say', 'our elders

say', and so forth. Who can oppose the collective wisdom of such people? Hence, those who are very versed in, or have a rich repertory of, proverbs are regarded as eloquent speakers, and well respected in the traditional African community.

However, patriarchy has played a major role in the formulation of many African proverbs. They are commonly used to construct negative feminine identities, and perpetuating the subordination of women to men. 'Phallocentric' undertones are evident in these proverbs, and they also attempt to position women as lower in social status than men. The construction of so many of these proverbs is influenced by the erroneous belief that men are naturally superior to women. This obvious marginalisation of women projects the African society as being strictly patriarchal and masculinist in orientation. Many African proverbs (presumably constructed by men to the exclusion of women) present us with a wide array of misconceptions against women, their bodies, status, assigned roles, etc., which, invariably, determine society's perception of their nature and identity. Schipper (2003), who has a collection of close to fourteen thousand proverbs from across the world, has observed this preponderance of male-oriented proverbs, and submits as follows:

> However, the preponderance of proverbs representing male perspectives, promoting male superiority and defending male interests and privileges, is, indeed, striking. If proverbs present a "truth", it is, of course, always a truth hiding underlying interests. "Truths" as seen from women's perspective are hard to come by. As much as they have been under-represented or excluded from the public arena and from public functions in most societies, women's views are significantly under-represented in proverbs I collected from oral sources, as well as from written sources such as collections and dictionaries...(17).

Some of these proverbs smack of misogyny, aimed at perpetuating or legitimizing the patriarchal order. The assumption of the primacy of the male, the objectification of women, their identification with traditional roles, the portrayal of female sexuality as dangerous and destructive (Stratton, 1994:72), are all common features of African proverbs. In African culture women are traditionally positioned as silent and passive in relation to men who wield the rod of authority and knowledge. As Schipper (2003) further observes, proverbs

about women have substantially helped to explain how sexual differences have resulted in the growing gender gap, a gap that has alienated

> men and women from sharing both public roles in life and responsibilities at home. Teaching and preaching the preservation of such a gender gap, on the basis of relatively insignificant body differences, proverbs have reinforced prevailing hierarchies and established rigid images of what it means not to be a man, but a woman, thus legitimating accessory roles of life for both sexes (7).

Analysis of proverbs in select Nigerian plays

The use of proverbs in literature dates far back to the Classical period. For instance, proverbs can be found in the odes of Pindar, the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and in the writings of Terence. Other Greek scholars, like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, also made use of these compressed words of wisdom in their literary works. Similarly, ancient English writers, like Chaucer and Shakespeare, made eloquent use of proverbs in their works. The same trend is observable in Africa, where proverbs have become a source of popular embellishment in the works of nearly all the post-colonial writers, from older writers like Soyinka, Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, to a young writer like Adichie. However, for the purpose of this paper, we shall restrict our illustrations to the three Nigerian plays earlier identified.

Imaguero by Evbinma Ogie

In the 'Introduction' to *Imaguero*, we are confronted with the following excessively masculinist and misogynistic expressions by the author:

> *Imaguero* is a story of romance... It reveals man as a puppet toyed with by woman, making one wonder whether man really lives for himself, or, if he thinks he does, is he caught in a web from which by reason of his very existence, he cannot escape? One would like to believe that monarchs and highly-placed persons are, by virtue of their positions in life, well placed to escape being made play things by women. *Imaguero* tells a story which makes this unlikely, and confirms the historical assertion that woman has been the cause of many wars (p.iii).

It is obvious that the author's strategy in his assault on woman's sexual power is to discredit the female gender and demean womanhood. He builds his play on the assumption that women are 'evil beings' who subvert men's 'ideal' plans. In the opening scene, we see the king, Oba Esigie, hand down this warning to his chiefs:

> ...And I will still warn you not to repose too much confidence in any woman (p.4).

This is an echo of similar statements in traditional African societies, meant to discredit the image of women. For instance, we are told that 'community secrets can never reside in the house of woman', 'a woman can empty her womb for you, but not her heart', or (as in Congo), 'to eat with a woman is to eat with a witch.' The import of all this is that no matter how close a husband is to his wife, he should never trust her fully. Oliha underscores this point in the play when he remarks that

> Women are many, but friends are few (p.12).

A short while later, the king expatiates on his earlier warning thus:

> The man who shares all his secret with a woman he thinks loves him is not a man. Such a man, no matter how much he boasts of his greatness and capabilities, is only a fool and a blind bat, a toy in the hand of a weak, frivolous, feminime creature called woman, whose shifting look that is called beauty, sends him doing her will, like one who, under the influence of wine, obeys a beardless youth. Such a man is not a man, for God made man master of woman, not woman master of man (p.15).

Eson sums up these misogynistic views in the following statement:

> Well, sane husbands should not love their wives (p.15).

The author privileges the male voices in these proverbs and observations, and gives them power and authority, which they are under obligation to protect against women. When Oliha's wife confesses that she is jealous of her co-wife, the husband restates the stereotypical view of women thus:

> You would not be a woman if you were not jealous (p.37).

Lamenting over the plot of Oba Esigie to destablilize his home, Oliha furiously lashes out at womanhood:

> Womanhood is debased in my sight... a mere article of sensual commerce, not fit to be called the image of God. Yet, the Portuguese priests say a woman was the mother of God. Perhaps they mean the God of Portugal, not my *Osalobua*, not my own. A woman couldn't have been the mother of my God. Never! (p.40).

Here, we encounter the stereotype of the woman as an agent of moral corruption. In summoning his harem, he says, 'Where are my bickering wives?'(p.42), *Imaguero* is a misogynistic play, whatever may be its other positive qualities. Through the use of proverbs and other anti-feminine remarks, the author's objective is to legitimize and reinforce patriarchal ideology, thus exposing the sexist bias of men in the African traditional set-up.

Dance on His Grave by Barclays Ayakoroma

This same trend is maintained by Ayakoroma in *Dance on His Grave*, in which the women's struggle for power, space and authority, are examined. Chief Olotu, the paramount ruler of Toru-Ama, worried about the all-women's meeting spear-headed by his wife, remarks contemptuously:

> And what are they talking in the gathering of the hens? (p.15)

An all-women meeting summoned by the Queen to plan a protest against the intended war with a neighbouring village is seen as a waste of energy and time that should have been more usefully spent doing domestic chores. They are likened to hens, which are known for egg laying, and expending their energy scratching the ground with their toes. In this same mood of masculinity, Chief Olotu remarks:

> Women want to put on the thinking cap too, eh?
> Well, they will all grow bald-headed, too (p.15).

In the play, the women try to possess public space from which they would challenge the patriarchal ideological stance. Spaces in public affairs are believed to be meant for men and men alone; so men

regard women's attempt here as trespassing and an act of abomination. Bald-headedness is seen as the consequence of managing public life. He goes further to say:

> They want to act like men. The baby cobra is never free of venom (p.15).

He substantiates his point further with the following proverb:

> They say if you play with a puppy, it shows your nakedness to the world (p.18)

As he expresses his fear of female insurgency, he declares:

> My people, women are taking over the world (p.19).

He speaks in that tone, because he has been brought up to believe that it is a man's world, anyway, in which women have no space. He goes on to declare emphatically:

> No! No! It cannot be! Two rams cannot drink from one pot at the same time (p.19).

By her action, Alearo, the Queen, is perceived as flouting patriarchal authority. Out of apprehension at what the women might do, the king says:

> I know it is no bravery to fight with a woman (p.19).

This perpetuates the notion that women are the weaker sex, a common trope that pervades African proverbs. The real intention is to instil fear in his wife who has already mobilised the women in the village against the men in order to make them change their minds about going to war, which, the women claim, would make them lose their sons. He lashes out at her:

> You are my wife, that is why I paid bride price on your head.
> Once you have sold your fish at the market, you can't expect to have them back and keep the money (p.23).

The idea of paying 'bride price on a woman's head' is a patriarchal notion, which connotes buying over completely. By the use of the proverb, King Olotu reminds his wife that she is now entirely his

possession over which he, the buyer, has absolute rights, in clear assertion of his masculinity. As his wife tries to challenge him, he reinforces his earlier statement, to re-establish his authority:

> You are not here to reason, woman! I didn't pay all that bride price on your head for you to come here and reason for me! I do all the reasoning for you and every other person in this house! No more of that rubbish in my palace! (p.25).

The above statement shows how women are usually excluded from the decision-making system, even in their homes, supporting the notion that women are meant to be seen, not heard. As the men meet to reassess the threat of the women, they invoke the power of the ancestors to support themselves, regarding the confrontation of the women as an attempt to trespass the male threshold. Apodi, one of the chiefs, expresses his surprise at this turn of events:

> This is unheard of! Women wanting to put on thinking caps (p.36).

Osima, another chief, reacts spontaneously in support:

> They think taking care of the affairs of this land is the same
> As haggling in Zarama market (p.36).

In Africa, women are normally associated with trading in the market; hence, the term 'market women', and hardly 'market men', even though many male traders can be found in the market.

The Queen, having mobilized the women to boycott all domestic duties, reassembles them to assess the effect of their boycott. She uses a proverb to describe the import of their action:

> Our elders say, those who eat eggs forget that the hen labours to lay them (p.40).

The inference here is that men do not appreciate the input of women in the domestic front. Chief Olotu, in continuation of his attack on womanhood, says

> ...this tongue is good as far it does not belong to a woman.
> The day Tamara added women to our fold, our trouble began (p.47).

In the same patriarchal spirit, Apodi reacts violently to the women's request that their traditional physical position in sexual relationship be swapped with that of men:

> That small crab says if we start sleeping again, that I, Chief Apodi, will lie down, then she will lie on top of me...(p.49).

The king, Olotu, ultimately hands down this warning to the warring women:

> These hens have to be told that it is the foolish woman who goes under the rain when she is tying only one wrapper. Yes! Only the elders of the land know the boundaries of the land (p.51).

A wrapper is a loose, unsown cotton fabric tied by a woman, and with a blouse on top of it. It is assumed that, when it rains, this fabric sticks to the woman's body and shows all her contours, or may even fall off altogether. For a married woman, any form of indecent exposure amounts to an act of abomination, as none, other than the husband, is supposed to view that much. Hence, the insistence on a decent woman tying two wrappers. However, the proverb above is meant to warn the women not to overreach themselves to avoid being put to shame.

In the same vein, the king charges the men of the town to use their authority as husbands in their homes to subdue their wives. He tells them:

> Husbands must be husbands, and wives must be wives
> For many market days now, the women of Toru-Ama
> have been trying to dictate to us how we should run the
> affairs of this land. Do we leave them to rule us? (p.52).

The men reply to the loaded question in one loud voice:

> Never!

He encourages them further in the following words:

> A man must be a man. Yes! And a man must have
> Some pride. When a man ceases to be a man, he develops
> hunch back. We are going to tell our wives that we are men (p.54).

The intention is to appeal to their masculine pride and force them to assert their power and authority as heads of their respective families. But when his own wife, in a heated argument, denies his paternity of their only child, he becomes despondent, and comments as follows:

> When a man ceases to be a man, he pays homage to a Woman! (p.60).

As a typical male chauvinist, the king regards it a thing of shame for a man to give in to a woman, who is regarded as being of a lower social status to men. This notion pervades the play in question.

The Queen Sisters by Irene Salami

The third and final illustrative text is the present writer's own play, in which proverbs, figures of speech, and idiomatic expressions have been used, largely from the male perspective to reaffirm their negative notions of women. Sometimes, some of these proverbs are used by women to articulate their feelings, and protest against the way they are perceived by men. In this play, an effort has been made to undermine patriarchy and express some of the issues surrounding it. The characters are used to project the patriarchal tradition of the author's society.This objective is clearly stated in preface to the play.

In *The Queen Sisters*, an attempt is made to expose the subtleties of patriarchy, while condemning the institutional forms of exclusion. In the opening scene, as Princess Edeleyo is being given in marriage to Chief Iyase, the prime minister of Benin Kingdom, Chief Oshodin, the palace chief in charge of the king's harem, prays for her, in a tone which alludes to the subordinate place of the woman in her husband's home. He says as follows:

> She shall bear every child in her womb for you…She will submit to you in joy and in anger. Like a pigeon, you will be the only husband she will ever marry. Her heart shall continually long after you (p.6).

The king gives his daughter to Chief Iyase to cement his relationship with him, as the chief is his greatest contender. The words of this prayer speak volumes. Princess Edeleyo, the latest addition to the harem, is expected to be absolutely faithful to her polygamous husband, without a similar demand being made of the husband. The

king employs a similar patriarchal language in his message to Chief Ogieka, seeking the hand of his daughter in marriage. He says:

> Tell Ogieka that the Leopard wishes to dance with the Peacock (p.8).

While the king refers to himself as the leopard, the symbol of African male strength, he equates Ubi, Ogieka's daughter, to a peacock, which is known for parading its beauty and pride before onlookers. As Chief Ihama cautions that they should not be too hasty in choosing Ubi as the new bride, Chief Osima cuts in with a contemptuous remark thus:

> Women are women. None of them is good. They are either gossips or quarrelsome, jealous or envious, malicious or aggressive. However, no matter how strong a stone is, it is sure to break when appropriate pressure is applied (p.9).

Chief Ero also speaks in support of this observation, saying

> There is no woman that the least man cannot tame. Wild or calm, by the time she gets into the harem...and she visits His Royal Highness' bedchamber, her body will tell the remaining story. This will control and make her calm. (p.9)

Sexual seduction and the consequent pregnancy are the ways by which a difficult or assertive woman can be subdued by the weakest of men. Ezomo reaffirms this with the following appropriate proverb:

> That is why our people say that no matter how strong A log of wood is, it gives way to the axe (p.9).

In the conversation that ensues, more masculinist views reinforced with proverbs are freely expressed by the men. One such comment is that passed by Iyase, in response to Chief Ero's account of a woman who is said to have had the effrontery of using her husband's bathing facilities:

> It is because the wall has fallen flat on the ground that the goat can climb on it anyhow (p.10).

He concludes on a strong masculinist note as follows:

> Whoever says a man's manhood is not poisonous
> should look at what it has done to a pregnant woman (p.10).

Here, Iyase uses a proverb to valorise men's sexual prowess, celebrating masculinity in all its glory. In a subtle warning to all assertive women, Esogban says:

> A dog that compares itself with a tiger will surely get lost in the bush (p.10).

Chief Oliha concurs, reiterating the view that women are men's property and, as such, must be subject to the authority of their husbands, whether they like it or not. When, in Scene 3, Enahen, the king's senior wife, brings to the notice of the king the unhappiness of the other queens about his desire to marry another wife, the King replies:

> Why do you pity the mouse on account of smoke?
> Was it not at the roof top that the mother and father had it? (p.15).

By this, he implies that women do not deserve to be pitied, as they are already used to polygamy and other ramifications of patriarchy. He shuns Enahen's plea and comments with masculine pride that

> Whistling is not a difficult task in the mouth of the parrot (p.16).

At the exit of Enahen, he drops a parting shot:

> A man's children are his assurance of a greater tomorrow.
> His wives provide these children. That is their use (p.16).

By this, a woman's importance revolves round her child-bearing role. In the African tradition, only motherhood confirms the gender identity of a woman, granting her cultural legitimacy. These are parameters defined by patriarchal ideology, which women have learnt to live with for their personal survival.

Realising that Ubi is not a woman to be so easily subdued, Chief Oliha proverbially reassures his chiefs as follows:

> Anyway, there is nothing difficult in a groundnut. you
> knock it on both ends and the job is done. When a load is

heavy, the ground receives it (p.25).

Chief Oliha's final comment summarises these proverbs: 'Ubi may be tough, but she will meet her match in the harem.' Harem life is believed to be capable of subduing the toughest of women. Chief Oliha allays the fears of the men by reminding them of how the lives of women revolve around their men:

> The entire life of women is centred round us, anyway. When she fights her mates, it is because she desires the attention of a man, when she dresses, it is because she wants to attract a man or please a man. When she laughs, it is because her man has made her happy. When she trades, it is to assist a man. When she bears and raises children, it is for a man. When she marries, her name changes to that of a man. What else? They have no lives of their own, their lives rotate around us (p.26).

This naturally sparks off general laughter among the chiefs who feel proud to belong to the superior male gender.

When the queens complain of their lack of access to the King's bedchamber, Queen Evbu says:

> Unless the barren woman gives birth the oracle will know no peace (p.30)

This expresses the extent to which women can go to perpetuate themselves in their matrimonial homes in a patriarchal society, while the men sit idly around, waiting to be sought after by the women. Ubi's arrival in the harem results in a series of changes, one of which is that the women no longer take turns to sleep in the king's bedchamber as is the usual practice. Ubi simply refuses to share her husband (the king) with any other woman. Her mission within the harem is to embark on a radical dismantling of the patriarchal social structures in Bini tradition. She is infuriated by the way the other wives idle away their time, doing nothing, and she decides to restrict their access to the king, hoping, by this, to spur them into action. However, while Ubi actively resists patriarchy, the other wives passively submit to it. In response to Ubi's 'insolence' Itohan employs the use of an apt proverb commonly used in the harem to caution 'overzealous' younger wives:

> A woman who finds a snail declares that the
> Hunter of elephant cannot rival her (p.33).

The complacency of women in a polygamous set-up and the acceptance of their gender role within it is seen in Tirosa's own comment as follows:

> We came here to warm Omo's (king's) bosom and
> bear him children (p.37).

Supporting this, Itohan laments:

> We have become more of men than women (p.38).

This trend takes a new dimension as Enahen encourages the women to be patient, assuring them that

> ...Charms may fail, but patience never fails. After all,
> the water that God has destined for one to drink in the river
> never flows away from one (p.38).

As the other queens threaten to leave, Enahen resolves to remain and be patient, saying

> The snail will rather die in its shell than exhibit its poverty (p.39).

Under the Bini polygamous set-up, women are silent in the face of oppression, complaining without offering any resistance. Concluding, she says:

> The tree that the home leopard has climbed, who
> will dare climb it? (p.39).

This proverb enunciates a very pathetic aspect of the plight of the wives in the harem. The king is metaphorically referred to as the home leopard. When he rejects or divorces a wife, as a mark of respect, no citizen dare marry or have an affair with the woman. She is doomed to a life of loneliness. With this knowledge, the women are forced to conform as this becomes a strategy for survival.

Ubi's refusal to be pregnant and bear children as part of her revolutionary strategy leads to suspicion of barrenness, and Tirosa accordingly remarks:

If urine is not easy to pass, why do chicken not urinate?
She must be barren (p.41).

Ubi is conscious of the fact that becoming a mother would compromise her mission in the harem, and so she denies herself the traditional joy of motherhood. Itohan, in support of Enahen's plea for patience, says:

Let's be patient, my queens. The noise in the market
does not disrupt its activities (p.42).

In most African marriages, whether monogamy or polygamy, plea for patience is the tool society uses to subjugate women. While the women are to display the virtue of patience, the men are meant to display valour. In the following scene, Chief Oliha proverbially alludes to this virtue when she says:

The young palm is never tired in its squatting position (p.43).

As the chiefs reason together on how to tame Ubi, Chief Osuma warns against returning her to her father, employing an appropriate proverb to drive home his point as follows:

...Can you complain to the one from whom you bought yams
that the beetle has eaten them up? (p.44).

Similarly, Chief Iyase uses a proverb to confront Chief Osuma, responsible for bringing Ubi to the harem, asking him to tame her.

It is only the mother of the cripple child that knows
how to carry her child (p.45).

Frustrated by their being denied access to their husband, the women plan to harm Ubi, but their plans are thwarted, and we hear Evbu say:

A nightwatchman never narrates his dreams (p.47).

This proverb is often used to refer to women and their matrimonial experiences, because a good wife is not supposed to express her ordeal in her matrimony to any one, not even to her parents, thus perpetuating the culture of suffering in silence, a common trope in patriarchal ideology. The nightwatchman is not expected to sleep, let

alone dream. The voicelessness of the African woman has become a topical issue in feminist discourse.

Following the advice of Chiefs Osuma and Oshodin, a new wife is brought into the harem. She is Ewere, the sister of Ubi, and she is expected to come in to torment Ubi. Contrary to their expectation, Ewere is the 'ideal' African wife, passive and docile, and is no match to Ubi. Irese cautions, nevertheless:

> Well, let us be careful, for the smooth body of a thorn
> has a sharp tip (p.53).

The implication is that the king may yet find Ewere a thorn in his flesh in spite of her beauty. But Ewere is a foil for Ubi, and her gentleness gains her robust moral advantage, and the support of the men. On the other hand, Ubi is a non-conformist, cast in the role of a change agent, thus causing the men to gang up against her.

Traditionally, no woman sits in the palace with the chiefs and king, unless when specifically invited for questioning, which she goes through on her knees. But Ubi contravenes this tradition, and she is seen seated with the chiefs, in Act 2 Scene 4, as they deliberate on important state affairs, thus openly challenging patriarchy. To make matters worse, she asks that state tribute be paid to her. Alarmed by this demand, the king says:

> A drum is being sounded for the palm wine tapper,
> yet his eyes are on top of the palm tree (p.58).

This applies to a wife whose husband plans to divorce, but who, nonetheless, persists in her old ways. In a similar vein, Ihama cautions that

> ...getting married to a native doctor is not the
> problem, but divorcing him is where the problem lies (p.60).

This can be interpreted to mean that getting married to a pretty but 'stubborn' woman is not an issue, but terminating the marriage is where the problem lies.

Referring to Ubi's beauty and lack of feminine 'virtues', Chief Oliha says:

> It is the red anal feather of the parrot that takes
> it to ceremonies (p.66).

Chief Iyase, desperate to send Ubi out of the harem, remarks:

> The tree that harbours the monkey overnight
> knows no sleep (p.61).

This implies that Ubi has put all of them to task. Although Ubi's mission in the harem is to transform the status quo, employing all sorts of tactics, she fails to enlighten the other wives and initiate them into her plan. This results in mistrust and frequent clashes, which work against her scheme. The other queens, satisfied with the way things are, see no reason for a change. But the fight against entrenched patriarchy cannot succeed as a solo effort. The last scene in Act 3 finds the king, Oba Ewuare, in a soliloquy, where he dismisses emotional display as an exclusive feminine trait:

> Well, love is not an experience for wise men. It is
> meant only for women (p.85).

Conclusion

From the foregoing analysis, it is clear that sexism has always found expression in the use of language, especially in the construction of proverbs. The authors of the three texts discussed above have portrayed the ethnic realities of their different communities, through the judicious selection of proverbs, idioms, metaphors, stereotypes and other verbal expressions. While proverbs and other linguistic features are used in the over-valuation of masculine attributes, they are used to put down the women and devalue their inherent virtues. Proverbs are used to perpetuate the exclusion of women from decision making processes, and discriminate against them in several other ways. It is strongly recommended that writers – both male and female – should engage in a radical dismantling of these male-oriented proverbs and idiomatic expressions, replacing them with those that promote societal well-being and a positive identity for womanhood.

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