

THE SEMANTICS OF FEMALE REPRESENTATION AND GENDER CONSTRUCTION IN YORUBA PROVERBS AND IDIOMS

Jide Ajidahun

Abstract

This paper interrogates female representation and gender construction in selected Yoruba proverbs and idioms, which serve as influential vehicles of oral tradition and cultural transmission. Drawing on Yoruba belief systems, social institutions, and customary practices that shape gendered identities, the study examines how proverbs function as repositories of communal values while simultaneously reproducing patriarchal ideologies. Anchored in African feminist theory, which advocates the liberation of women from culturally sanctioned subjugation, the study analyses thirty Yoruba proverbs on women using semantic field theory. The findings reveal that the sampled proverbs are overwhelmingly sexist in orientation, construing women as morally suspect, socially subordinate, and culturally expendable. These proverbial constructions reinforce patriarchal and phallogocentric norms that normalise women's oppression, discrimination and social injustice. The paper concludes by recommending culturally grounded yet transformative strategies for re-evaluating proverbial wisdom to enhance the dignity, agency, and status of women in Yoruba society.

Keywords: Women, Feminism, Gender Discrimination, Yoruba, Semantics.

Introduction

Traditional Yoruba society is predominantly patriarchal and phallogocentric, with social, political, and domestic institutions historically structured around male authority. In marriage, the husband is culturally constructed as the head of the household whose decisions

are final and whose authority must be acknowledged by the wife (Akinwale, 2010; Asiyanbola, 2005). This ideology is reinforced in panegyrics and praise poetry where wives refer to their husbands as *olówó orí mi, alè olómíràn* (the owner of my life and concubine to other women), an expression that simultaneously affirms male ownership and normalises male sexual privilege.

Polygyny and concubinage are culturally legitimised within the Yoruba tradition, and the accumulation of wives is often interpreted as a marker of masculine success and social prestige (Adeniran, 2015). Consequently, extramarital affairs by men are frequently normalised, while women are expected to acquiesce in silence. Such asymmetrical sexual ethics empower men to exercise unchecked authority over women, reinforcing the expectation that wives should be seen but not heard. Ritualised practices—such as kneeling while serving food—symbolise submission and entrench domestic hierarchies. As scholars note, these symbolic acts are not innocuous but function as mechanisms of social conditioning (Oyěwùmí, 1997).

Furthermore, women are culturally constructed as property—belonging to the husband and, by extension, his lineage—both in life and in death. This perception underpins practices such as spousal abuse, dispossession, and, in extreme cases, feminicide, which African feminists identify as outcomes of deeply entrenched patriarchal values (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994; Amadiume, 1987).

Naming taboos further illustrate women's subordinate status. A wife is forbidden from calling her husband's relatives by their given names, regardless of age, thereby elevating even the youngest male in-law above her. While Yoruba culture generally mandates respect for elders, this exception underscores gender, rather than age, as the decisive criterion of hierarchy (Oyěwùmí, 2002). The wife bears the burden of domestic labour without reciprocal obligations from her in-laws, who may issue commands with impunity. Failure to satisfy extended family demands often justifies the husband's decision to marry additional wives.

Male child preference is another critical axis of gender discrimination. The male child (*arọlẹ*) is regarded as the heir and custodian of lineage continuity. Women who give birth only to daughters are stigmatised, while men are encouraged to remarry in pursuit of male offspring (Aina, 1998). Barrenness is similarly feminised: infertility is presumed to be the woman's fault, whereas male infertility is culturally silenced. This asymmetry reflects what Bourdieu (2001) terms symbolic violence—the normalisation of domination through cultural meanings.

Educational discrimination against female children persists in some Yoruba communities, despite sustained advocacy for gender equality. Girls' education is often perceived as economically unrewarding because women are expected to marry into other families. Ironically, this logic overlooks the fact that educated women significantly contribute to familial and societal development (UNESCO, 2015).

Widowhood rites constitute one of the most severe manifestations of gendered injustice. Widows may be compelled to undergo humiliating rituals, including head shaving, confinement, and accusations of culpability in their husbands' deaths. Property rights are routinely denied, and male children may be taken from them. Men who lose their wives are exempt from comparable treatment, revealing a stark gender asymmetry (Adebowale, 1998; Ogbomo, 2014). Literary interventions such as Bayo Adebowale's *Lonely Days* poignantly critique these injustices.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines how Yoruba proverbs—often regarded as incontestable truths—encode and perpetuate these gendered ideologies.

Significance of Proverbs in Yoruba Oral Tradition

In African societies, proverbs function as condensed repositories of communal wisdom and moral authority. They regulate behaviour, sanction deviance, and socialise younger generations into accepted norms (Finnegan, 2012). Among the Yoruba, proverbs are deployed as rhetorical instruments for admonition, counselling, and persuasion, thereby acquiring near-sacrosanct status.

Proverbs embellish discourse, lending eloquence and gravitas to speech. As the Yoruba axiom states, *Òwe l'ẹṣin ọ̀rọ̀, ọ̀rọ̀ l'ẹṣin òwe* (Proverbs are the horse of words, and words are the horse of proverbs). Achebe's oft-cited metaphor of proverbs as "the palm oil with which words are eaten" underscores their indispensability in African rhetoric (Achebe, 1958; Johnson & Ekpenyong, 2013).

Access to proverbial speech is age-graded. Elders are regarded as custodians of tradition, while younger speakers require permission to employ proverbs, reflecting the belief that proverbial competence derives from experiential wisdom. Proverbs thus encode history, mythology, and collective memory, operating as semiotic capsules of cultural knowledge (Yankah, 1989).

However, the authority of proverbs also renders them powerful vehicles for ideological reproduction. When proverbs encode gender bias, they legitimise inequality by cloaking prejudice in the guise of ancestral wisdom. This paradox necessitates critical interrogation rather than uncritical reverence.

Theoretical Framework: African Feminism

African feminism provides the analytical lens for this study. Unlike Western feminism, African feminism foregrounds cultural specificity while challenging oppressive traditions (Ogunyemi, 1985; Ogunديpe-Leslie, 1994). It seeks transformation without cultural erasure, advocating gender justice through contextual critique.

Proverbs, as reflections of socio-cultural values, often function as signifiers of gender ideology. Comparative studies across African

cultures reveal similar patterns of patriarchal bias. Ncube and Moyo (2011) demonstrate that Ndebele proverbs construct women as objects of male control, while Oha (1998) shows that Igbo proverbs encode hostility and suspicion toward women. Dickson and Mbosowo (2014) further confirm that patriarchal structures underpin most African proverbial representations of women.

These findings resonate with Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) seminal assertion that woman is constructed as "the Other," defined in relation to man rather than as an autonomous subject. Asiyanbola's (2005) sociological analysis of patriarchy further elucidates how gender hierarchies regulate access to resources, labour, and reproductive autonomy.

African feminist scholars such as Ogundipe-Leslie, Acholonu, and Chukwuma emphasise the need to dismantle internalised patriarchy. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) identifies psychological self-negation as a major impediment to women's emancipation, while Chukwuma (1994) defines feminism as the rejection of inferiority and the pursuit of self-worth. Importantly, African feminism advocates reconstruction rather than antagonism, calling for dialogue that reconfigures gender relations without vilifying men (Davies & Graves, 1986).

Semantic Analysis of Yoruba Proverbs on Women

Language mediates social reality, and semantics provides tools for unpacking embedded meanings. Semantic field theory examines how clusters of lexical items generate shared connotations and ideological effects (Finch, 2000; Lyons, 1995). Applying this framework, the study categorises the sampled proverbs into thematic fields.

A. Proverbs on Women's Spiritual/Psychic Powers

1. Kàkà kó' sàń lára ìyá' àjẹ́, ó fí gbogbo ọ̀mọ́ rẹ́ bí' ọ̀bínrín, èyẹ́ wá' nǹí' lú èyẹ́ Yorùbá.

Rather than abating her viciousness, a witch gave birth to all female children and thus proliferated witches- English Translation.

2. Ito pe lenu o di warapa, egbo pe lese o di jakute, bi obinrin ba pe nile oko, aje nii da. - Yoruba.

When saliva lingers in the mouth, it becomes epilepsy; when a sore lingers on the leg, it becomes putrid. If a woman stays long in her husband's house, she becomes a witch - English Translation.

3. Awo egungun lobinrin le se, awo gelede lobinrin le mo, bobirin foju kan oro, oro a gbe - Yoruba.

Women can belong to the egungun (masquerade) cult; they can participate in the cult of gelede, but if a woman sees the cult of oro, she will be consumed.

The proverbs in this category associate women with witchcraft, danger, and moral corruption. Lexical items such as *witch*, *viciousness*, *epilepsy*, and *putrid* populate the semantic field, constructing femininity as inherently threatening. Notably, while Yoruba cosmology acknowledges male wizardry, proverbial discourse disproportionately targets women, revealing gendered scapegoating. Feminist critics argue that such representations legitimise social exclusion and violence against women under the guise of spiritual fear (Federici, 2004).

B. Proverbs on Women's Personhood and Personality

1. Obinrin l'eke, obinrin l'odale - Yoruba.

The woman is a deceiver; the woman is a traitor- English Translation.

2. E ma finu han f'obinrin - Yoruba.

Never confide in a woman- English Translation.

3. E ma je ka finu han f'obinrin, ibi ti oju re o to, enu re debe - Yoruba.

We should not reveal our secrets to a woman; her mouth will speak more than her eyes can see -.English Translation.

4. Obinrin to bimo funmi ti oko re tun n kun wipe ko fi inu han oun, se ki o tu ifun re jade ni? - Yoruba.
A woman has a child by you, and you still say you do not know her mind; do you want her to expose her intestines? -English Translation.
5. Eniyan ti ko gbon nii bobinrin mule, ijo obinrin ba mawo lo baje - Yoruba.
Only a stupid man makes a covenant with a woman. On the day the woman learns the cult's secret, the cult is destroyed- English Translation.
6. B'obinrinB'obinrin ba gbon lagbon ju, penpe laso oko re mo - Yoruba.
A husband's undersized clothes indicate that his wife is excessively cunning - English Translation.
7. Obinrin r'ikur'iku tiran mo; o ni ojo ti oko oun to ku oun ko we - Yoruba.
The filthy woman saw the husband's death as an excuse; she said that since her husband died, she has not taken her bath - English Translation.
8. K'obinrin tatorin k'okurin tatorin, enikan ni lati lomi leyin ese ju ara won lo - Yoruba.
Let a woman urinate as she walks, and let a man do the same; one of them will have messy feet much more than the other - English Translation.

Here, women are depicted as deceitful, talkative, filthy, and untrustworthy. These attributes—*traitor*, *cunning*, *irresponsible*—are generalised to all women, despite being human, not gender-specific traits. Such constructions foster mistrust within marital relationships and rationalise surveillance and control of women's lives. As Oyěwùmí (1997) observes, these discourses naturalise inequality by presenting gendered stereotypes as cultural common sense.

C. Proverbs on Marriage and Sexuality

1. Obe ti baale o ki nje, iyale ile o ki n se -Yoruba
The food that the husband does not eat, his wife should not prepare it-
2. Orisa je n pe meji obinrin ko denu - Yoruba.
When a woman prays to have a second woman in her home, it is a woman's false wish-English Translation.
3. Eni to fe arewa fe iyonu, eni gbogbo nii ba won tan - Yoruba.
He who marries a beautiful woman marries trouble; everybody claims a relationship with her- English Translation.
4. Gbogbo obinrin lo ngbese; eyi to ba se tire lase ju laraye n pe lasewo - Yoruba.
All women are sexually voracious, but it is the one who does hers in excess that is called a prostitute - English Translation.
5. Obinrin bimo fun ni ko pe koma pa ni. Obinrin ko bimo fun ni ko pe ko ma pa ni - Yoruba.
Whether a woman bears a man a child or not doesn't stop her from killing him - English Translation
6. Obinrin ani àlè mèfà, won ko ni mo ara won- Yoruba.
A woman will have six concubines, yet they will not know one another-English Translation.
7. Bi obinrin yoo ba yan ale, a ni 'oju nii roju saanu' ti mobinrin gba funni leekan - Yoruba.
If a woman has a concubine, she will give an excuse for her concupiscence - English Translation.
8. Okunrin ti ko ku, obinrin re ni ko tii pa - Yoruba.
If a man is not dead yet, it is because his wife is yet to kill him - English Translation.
9. Ti obinrin o ba gbe ile oko meji, ko ni mo eyi ti yoo san - Yoruba.
Until a woman lives with two husbands, she will not know which is better.
10. Bi obinrin ba ro ejo oko fun ale, ko le ro ejo ale fun oko - Yoruba.

- A woman reports her husband to her concubine; she cannot report her concubine to her husband- English Translation.
11. Obinrin so iwa nu, o ni oun ko mori oko waye - Yoruba.
A woman lacks decorum and virtue, and she says she is not destined to marry a good husband~ English Translation.
12. Oko ti o ti ku ni aya re n yin - Yoruba.
A wife appreciates the value of her husband only after his death- English Translation.
13. Obinrin ti ko ni ade ori dabi papa ti ko ni irugbin tabi eso - Yoruba.
A woman without a man is like a barren field- English Translation.
14. Owu ti iya gbon lomo n ran - Yoruba.
The child takes after the mother's behaviour- - English Translation.
15. Olobe lo loko - Yoruba.
She who prepares the tasty soup owns the husband~ English Translation.
16. Iyawo ti a fe loju ijo, iran ni yoo wo lo - Yoruba.
A woman whom one meets at a dance party and marries will slip away at the glimpse of a better suitor - English Translation.
17. Obinrin to ko dara nile oko re, ko lee dara nile omo re. iyawo omo re ni yoo ma ba s'orogun - Yoruba.
A woman who is bad in her husband's house cannot be good in her son's house: she will become a rival to her son's wife - English Translation.
18. Pasan ta fi na iyale, o n be laja fun 'yawo - Yoruba.
The whip that was used to beat the first wife is kept for the beating of the second wife - English Translation.
19. Baa fi gbogbo ile nla jin kolekole, ko pe o ma jale die kun; bi a si fi gbogbo odede jin iyawo agbere, kop e o ma tara re fale - Yoruba.
Give a mansion to a thief-that does not prevent him from stealing; give a promiscuous wife all you have in a beautiful

house- that does not preclude her from selling herself cheaply to a paramour - English Translation.

Proverbs in this category situate women as sexually voracious, morally weak, and deserving of discipline. The semantic field includes *whip*, *beating*, *kill*, and *promiscuous*, normalising violence and blame. While male sexual excess is normalised or ignored, women's sexuality is pathologised. This double standard exemplifies what feminist linguists describe as patriarchal asymmetry in moral evaluation (Lakoff, 2004).

Conclusion

The Yoruba proverbs examined in this study reveal the long-standing institutionalisation of women's subjugation, oppression and dehumanisation within Yoruba society. These sexist constructions are deeply rooted in cultural belief systems expressed through traditional marriage practices, patriarchy, bride price, myth and folklore, religious narratives such as the Biblical account of Eve's creation from Adam's rib, and harmful practices including female genital mutilation. As Ogundipe-Leslie (1994:211) rightly observes, the traditional bride price system promotes the commodification of women," reinforcing perceptions of female inferiority and male ownership.

Consequently, many African women have internalised negative self-concepts and developed low self-esteem, manifesting in pervasive feelings of inferiority. This psychological condition is debilitating, as it undermines women's self-assertiveness, self-worth, identity and overall personality development. While this study does not advocate antagonistic competition between women and men, it strongly contends that society must be guided by principles of fairness, justice and equity. Women deserve recognition, dignity and a rightful place in social, cultural, and intellectual spaces.

A society that perpetuates the subjugation of women under the guise of tradition risks moral decay and social dysfunction. Such a society ultimately produces generations of women who are psychologically, emotionally, socially and educationally impaired,

thereby impoverishing the collective human potential of the community.

Creative writers, scholars, and cultural custodians must therefore adopt more courageous, balanced, and progressive approaches in their representations of women. The continued portrayal of women as slaves, appendages, or mere objects of male authority—often justified as reflections of Yoruba culture—should be recognised as archaic and unsustainable considering contemporary realities and the remarkable achievements of modern women. The deliberate cultivation of new literary and cultural narratives that challenge gender prejudice and affirm women's agency is not only desirable but imperative for meaningful social transformation.

Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Heinemann, 1958.
- Adebowale, Bayo. *Lonely Days*. Spectrum Books, 1998.
- Adeniran, Adebusi. "Marriage, Masculinity and Polygyny in Yoruba Culture." *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2015, pp. 145–158.
- Aina, Olayinka. "Women, Culture and Society." *Gender and Development in Nigeria*, edited by A. Sesay and A. Odebiyi, Dokun Publishing House, 1998, pp. 3–33.
- Amadiume, Ifi. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. Zed Books, 1987.
- Asiyanbola, R. A. "Patriarchy, Male Dominance, the Role of Women and Women Empowerment in Nigeria." *Proceedings of the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP) Conference*, 2005, pp. 1–17.
- Bassey, Etim Okon, Joseph Ekpennyong, and Emmanuel Essien. "Gender and Occupation in an African Setting." *Developing Country Studies*, vol. 2, no. 6, 2012, pp. 231–240.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley, Vintage Books, 1949.

- Birame, Gueye. "The Function of Proverbs in African Societies." *Présence Africaine*, no. 5, 1952, pp. 300–312.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Masculine Domination*. Translated by Richard Nice, Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Chukwuma, Helen, editor. *Feminism in African Literature: Essays on Criticism*. New Generation Books, 1994.
- Danesi, Marcel. *Messages, Signs, and Meanings: A Basic Textbook in Semiotics and Communication*. Canadian Scholars' Press, 2004.
- Davies, Carole Boyce, and Anne Adams Graves, editors. *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*. Africa World Press, 1986.
- Dickson, Sunday, and Dominic Mbosowo. "African Proverbs on Women and the Status of Women." *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 4, no. 17, 2014, pp. 635–642.
- Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. Autonomedia, 2004.
- Finch, Geoffrey. *Linguistic Terms and Concepts*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.
- Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Literature in Africa*. Open Book Publishers, 2012.
- Johnson, Samuel, and Joseph Ekpenyong. "Proverbs as Discourse Strategies in African Literature." *Journal of Language and Culture*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2013, pp. 70–80.
- Lakoff, Robin. *Language and Woman's Place*. Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Lyons, John. *Linguistic Semantics: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Maduka, Chidi. *Feminism and African Literary Discourse*. University of Nigeria Press, 2009.
- Ncube, Sibonokuhle, and Thabani Moyo. "Gender and Language: The Construction of Women in Ndebele Proverbs." *African Study Monographs*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2011, pp. 125–138.

- Ogunyemi, Chikwenye Okonjo. "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English." *Signs*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1985, pp. 63–80.
- Ogundipe-Leslie, Molar. *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*. Africa World Press, 1994.
- Oha, Obododimma. "The Semantics of Female Devaluation in Igbo Proverbs." *African Study Monographs*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1998, pp. 87–102.
- Ogbomo, O. W. "Widowhood Practices and Women's Rights in Nigeria." *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2014, pp. 45–58.
- Oyěwùmí, Oyèrónkẹ́. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. University of Minnesota Press, 1997.