

Insult Terms against Women in Nollywood Movies

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Abstract

This descriptive study tries to explore insult terms against women to investigate how these insult terms represent women in the selected Nollywood movies using Sara Mills' Feminist Stylistics (1995) approach. The objective of the study is to investigate the characteristics of insult terms used by the characters, what the components of these insult terms are and their effects on the female characters. It used qualitative methodology to investigate the phenomenon and data were collected by observing and taking note of insult terms in the selected Nollywood movies between the year 2017 and 2020 by purposive sampling technique. The movies are *Intervention*, *Sex and Love*, *Isoken*, *Jenna*, *Sophia's Heart*, *Gold Statue* and *Love You Two*. The findings revealed that insult terms against women are common in Nollywood movies. The study concluded based on the findings that the users of language should be made conscious and aware of the dangers of insult terms which can lead to negative results. It recommended among other things the need to change these representational practices in order to bring about a change in the thinking of the people.

Keywords: Feminist stylistics, insult terms, language, Nollywood, movies,

Introduction

Gender discrimination in language has different manifestations in different historical periods and cultures. Language as a part of culture and society is the main means of learning culture. People use it to express, share and disseminate their thoughts and experiences. Many degrading words for women insult them directly (for instance, slut, bitch, frigid, twat, cunt, prostitutes, etc) by referring to them sexually or in terms of appearance, and there are more of such terms for women than for men (Cameron, 1992) which can be as a result of patriarchal institutions. Patriarchal society gives absolute priority to men and to some extent, limits women's human rights also. It is a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways. This subordination takes various forms, for instance, discrimination, disregard, insult, control, exploitation, oppression, violence, within the family, at the place of work, and in society. Inclusive language is thus

championed in the name of shifting from the gendered nature of language, and the unequal gender relations it is constantly conveying, to a gender-neutral version.

Insults are an interesting linguistic phenomenon, representing the diachronic of language change, especially regarding semantics. An insult can be said to be a disrespectful abusive remark. Insult terms are abusive terms used by males, in particular, to undermine, derogate or marginalize females. They are directed at a particular person, usually to refer to females as less than human. Through verbal abuse, insult terms are oriented “toward frightening, intimidating, and silencing the other” (Megarry 2014:p.50). They have the basic intention of hurting the target emotionally as well as manipulating existing words to add explicit overtones. According to Ivanishcheva, Bolgova, Shadrina, Gushchina and Nikonov’s (2018:p.217), insult term has three features: “focus on humiliating honour and dignity, the indecent form and deliberate nature of the act”. They are of the view that an addressee of insult receives a negative characteristic, which is expressed in an indecent form. In other words, “when insulting someone, a speaker wants to get the addressee’s reaction and wants to confirm or improve his or her status” (*Ivanishcheva et al*, 2018:p.217). Thus, women are more likely to be on the receiving end of insult terms than men.

A word or phrase can be said to be an insult when it is disproportionately applied to a member of a particular gender, and which generally bears some connection to societal expectations or norms placed upon that gender. In other words, it is understood as the humiliation of the honour and dignity of another person, which is expressed in an indecent form. When a speaker uses insult, that speaker invokes not only the lexical meaning of the word, but also the hearer's past experiences of hearing the word. The use of a word constitutes an act of affiliating oneself with the group of people who generally use that word—it follows that if a word is saliently associated with a group of people or a history that is considered to be sexist, then the use of that word may be considered an act of sexism. Certain words are simply deemed to be more insulting when attributed to women than when attributed to men. This is not surprising, particularly when it comes to words that denote sexual promiscuity or aggressiveness. Scholars are of the view that, not only that certain terms are more insulting when applied to a particular gender, but also that insults behave differently depending on the speaker’s gender. Words such as ‘bitch’, ‘prostitute’, ‘slut’, ‘whore’ are used in order to affirm the idea of male domination over women and show their inferior position. These terms consider women as shallow and trivial. Moreover, given the findings of Preston and Stanley (1987), terms denoting promiscuity are almost exclusively used to refer to women. Words like ‘ugly’ and ‘fat’ (which are frequently used in a disparaging manner) depict physical unattractiveness and in insulting contexts, both terms are used primarily for women. A word like ‘frigid’ is used against women to derogate them on the basis of perceived sexual inflexibility. If one is to assume that the ways various groups are derogated reflects cultural norms and expectations pertaining to those groups, then this pattern may be seen as evidence of a larger cultural pattern through which different expectations are placed on the sexual behavior of women. Words such as ‘nag’, ‘bossy’ and ‘clingy’ are not left out. These

words are used against women both in insulting and deprecating contexts. The word 'nag' particularly applies to someone referred to as a wife, mother, or where there is intimate relationship between the speaker and the target of the term.

With insult terms, women are disproportionately targeted. The root causes of this are fundamentally linked to the persistent unequal power relations between women and men. It is a form of violence against women and girls that perpetuates and exacerbates gender inequality. In fact, every woman and girl is a potential target of insult terms. These insult terms often take place when women stand against discriminatory or traditional cultural and religious beliefs or customs. They can harm directly or indirectly, or even both. They may directly offend, denigrate, humiliate or frighten the persons they purport to describe or harm indirectly and with equal or even much greater brutality by motivating others to think and act against the persons in question. Insult terms take place in all forms of social interaction such as at school, in the family, in social circles, in the public space, at work, via emails, websites and media especially movies. This paper examines insult terms against women in seven Nollywood movies since movies are a picture or reflection of everyday human life. The purpose is to identify and analyse insult terms against women as used by the characters in the movies.

Nollywood Movies

Film, as a powerful instrument used for shaping and re-shaping individuals and the society at large, has grown very influential. Krings and Onome (2013: p.75) observe that the term 'Nollywood' describes the "entire Nigerian film industry and the entire video film industry". Marston, Woodward, and Jones (2007: p. 54) equally describe it as the popular title for the Nigerian film industry, noting clearly that its videos are "produced in many of the 250 tribal languages in Nigeria, though Yoruba, Igbo and English are numerically dominant". In the same vein, Haynes and Okome (2000) submit that Nollywood film content draws from popular imaginations that give it popularity among the masses. Being a visual medium, the audience's interest is primarily sustained by what they see in the film and not necessarily the story. Considering the kind of issues treated in these films which permeate the thoughts of its audience, propelling them to reason alongside the filmmakers' views of their environment and behaviour, social change is unarguably catalyzed. Thus, the primary goal of this study is to examine insult terms against women in selected Nollywood movies since movies are reflections of the way society works.

The growth of insult terms against women have inspired serious harm in several ways which are disseminated by many means which include media especially movies. The male dominant language used in movies has made women the target of discrepancy. It is noted that in most of the Nollywood movies, the language used is pervasively gendered, which selects or carries ideological constructs of the community. The language is discriminative and biased.

Women receive no better treatment in the language they are addressed by. In other words, such language is used to mute women when they appear to challenge traditional male roles which are manifested through the language the characters, males in particular, use in the movies since the language pervades patriarchy ideologies and hence continues to subjugate women to continue obeying the male dominant system. Insult terms have received relatively little empirical attention in Nollywood movies. Thus, to address this gap, the researcher undertakes a descriptive approach in examining insult terms used against women in selected Nollywood movies. Therefore, this paper seeks to answer the following questions:

- i. What are the characteristics of insult terms used by the characters?
- ii. What are the components of these insult terms?
- iii. What are their effects on the female characters?

Literature Review

Bruti (2009) explores the frequency of prototypical structures and lexemes for compliments and insults in the Pavia Corpus of Film Dialogue. She concludes that for insults, the picture is more complex as mismatches in translation occur in all classes. The most common ones are especially shifts in register and style, in particular in racial insults, where deviance may alter the picture of the whole social network.

Pardo (2015) analyzes the insults in Quentin Tarantino's films and their translation into Spanish by highlighting the possible problems when translating insults into Spanish, providing specific examples in English of the insults collected from the seven films (*Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Four Rooms*, *Jackie Brown*, *Kill Bill vol i and ii*, *Death Proof* and *Inglorious Basterds*), and concludes that from a linguistic perspective, the defining characteristic of Tarantino's films is the ability to introduce bawdy language in every film bypassing American censorship.

Corrizzato (2015) compares the original version of the screenplay of the film *Bamboozled* (2000) with the Italian dubbed text, offering an analysis of forty-four compliments and forty-four insults. The findings demonstrate that the contrastive analysis demonstrates that the most noteworthy discrepancies between the scripts are due to the transposition of lingua-cultural elements. Moreover, while the illocutionary force of dubbed utterances often coincides with the original, slang expressions and sub-standard linguistic traits are almost always weakened or neutralized.

Pavesi and Formentelli (2019) focus on two major categories of insults and explore contrastively their overall frequency across languages in films, the distinction between genuine and mock impoliteness and the structural complexity of forms. The results substantiate the function dubbing serves in cross-cultural mediation by activating an array of frames of reference

that allow the new receiving audiences to experience foreign communication practices from their native language perspective.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the theoretical framework of Sara Mills' (1995) approach to examine the insult terms and also the effect of the usage of these insult terms toward the female characters. This theory was proposed by Mills to prove how women are often marginalized in social life even in movies. In the modern world, our actions and thinking are greatly influenced by the characters in the media. Among these, the movies hold a prominent position. Feminist stylistic approach deals with the representation of women in a text, but for the sake of this study, movies would be used in place of texts. Mills (1995) believes that the media is not neutral. It is affected by the position of power around it, that is, the text (movie) might represent female as object due to male domination over the text (movie) creation. Mills (1995) asserts that while constructing their characters, the writers (producers) make their linguistic choices in connection with gender stereotypes. She views characters as nothing more than words that are constructed and understood on the basis of different stereotypes that exist about men and women in society. In this way, Mills (1995) finds that characterization, language and gender are interconnected. Feminist stylistics provides us with such tools that could uncover the hidden bias in characterization. Through texts (movies), the writer (producer) can also communicate to the readers (viewers) and introduce a certain ideology without having a direct contact because "texts are invaded by the social cultural norms, by ideologies, by history, by economic forces, by fashion, by gender and racial stereotyping, and so on" (Mills 1995:p.157) . However, this does not mean that the writer (producer or script writer) does not have any power or control over their work rather they are subject to the interaction with those forces. Through analysing the language that is used in the texts (movies), the readers (audience) understand the meaning beyond the lines. Here, the viewers' expectations, their values, political affiliation, belief and norms play an important role in presenting a movie to the audience. Mills (1995) proposes three levels of analysis: word level analysis which focuses on sexist language and its meaning in the movie, sentence level analysis which looks at naming, ready-made phrases, metaphors, transitivity choices, jokes or humour that carry ideology that look down on females, and discourse level analysis which scrutinizes the character or role, fragmentation, focalization and schemata.

Feminist stylistics is mainly concerned with the analysis of how feminist ideology is expressed through the choices of language (Mills 2006). In other words, feminist analysis of representation of women in the selected movies is a perspective much focused on the language aspect. Thus, feminist analysis is concerned with describing sexism in a text (movie). According to Mills (2006:p.221), "rather than assuming that notions of gender are simply a question of discriminatory messages about sex difference embedded in texts, feminist stylistics is concerned with unraveling the complex messages which may be deduced from texts and also with analyzing

the way that readers piece together or resist these messages”. Therefore, the aim of feminist stylistics is to investigate the way text (movie) writers (producers) employ linguistic features which specifically project male or female values, and also to consider the way readers (audience) advertently or inadvertently identify specific gendered meanings in texts (movies). Feminist stylisticians have tended to favour analyses that display an engaged and political standpoint in their linguistic description of certain texts (movies), so they have been particularly successful at pointing out the depiction of female characters as powerless and ineffective, especially when compared to their male counterparts. According to Burton (1982:p.201), “stylistic analysis is not just a question of discussing ‘effects’ in language and text, but a powerful method for understanding the ways in which all sorts of ‘realities’ are constructed through language”. However, using this approach, this study aims to discover whether or not the characterization is gendered, whether or not the characterization is informed by stereotypical knowledge about men and women, whether or not there is any bias involved in the production of male and female characters.

Methodology

This study adopts the descriptive qualitative method to explore insult terms against women in selected Nollywood movies by purposive sampling. The population is the movies while the samples are the insult terms. Data are obtained from the conversations among the characters by watching the movies, analyzing data and classifying data. In order to accomplish this, the researcher gathers the data by observing and taking note of insult terms against women in seven Nollywood movies; “*Intervention*” produced by Remi Ibinola (2017), “*Sex and Love*” produced by Ruth Kadiri (2017), “*Isoken*” produced by Jadesola Osiberu (2017), “*Jenna*” produced by Charles Brian Nnoshiri (2018), “*Sophia’s Heart*” produced by Steph Okolie (2018), “*Gold Statue*” produced by Tade Ogidan (2019) and “*Love You Two*” produced by Susan Oriahi (2020).

Analysis

This study finds out that there are phrases or sentences that contain insult terms based on ideology and stereotypes that are used by the characters based on Mills’ (1995) approach.

Presentation of Data and Analysis

Exchange 1

Tari: Yes, Alex will totally understand. His parents have totally given up on him. They’re just hoping he would, eh, impregnate one girl by mistake.

Alex: Dude, trust me, mehhn. That’s never gonna happen.

Tari: You see and yet they look at him like the stable one when men like me still exist. I'm engaged...

Alex: Com'n shut up. What do you mean you are engaged? You call that thing engagement, that caging that you've caged that girl for how many years? You see that song Lucky Dube sang, "I'm a prisoner", he sang it for her. Release that girl and let her go.

Tari: You don't even know what's up. I don't blame you because of the way you live your life. **Girls live for that title, 'I'm engaged'. They love it because it gives them a sense of, ehmm, you know, belonging, credibility, assurance and ehh, you know, stability.**

(Jenna)

Here, we see the age old belief that women are only good enough for marriage being reinforced by Tari. According to him, women aspire for nothing more than being engaged. Tari's statement that girls live for the title, 'I'm engaged', is a big slap on the face of every woman because it gives the impression that marriage is all women live for. Another example is seen in the exchange below taken from the movie, *Gold Statue*.

Exchange 2

Akitade: Christy, Christy, are you alright?

Christy: Very much alright, Akitade.

Akitade: You abandoned your home and business in Lagos only to end up in Ilesha feasting prisoners?

Christy: (sobbing) Aki, our child is in trouble. How can we abandon him? Adewale is in the hands of criminals of this town. If it's cooking and giving food, drinks, anything that will give him his favour or his freedom, I'll keep doing it until he leaves that place. My son is never a troublesome child and I know there's something wrong, you refuse to say it. Something is going on for him to attempt to steal a car.

Akitade: Well, maybe we don't even know our child.

Christy: Ahh, we know our children. Adewale is never a troublesome child and I know that God will expose whoever it is. We have never had any problem with any of our children, do you realize that?

Akitade: Well, he obviously hid his true character from us. If he had succeeded in stealing the car, Christy, would we have known about it?

Christy: I reject it. My son is not a thief.

Akitade: **Why do women choose to live in a land of perpetual fantasy when they are confronted with stark reality like this?**

(Gold Statue)

The above statement implies that women imagine and reason like children. They always like to fantasize with their heads in the clouds instead of being realistic and practical. Further examples are found in the movie, *Love You Two*, as shown in exchange 3.

Exchange 3

Loretta: We cannot stop talking about it. Your mother keeps blaming me like it's my fault.

Ronald: So whose fault is it?

Loretta: Are you asking me? As far as I'm concerned, I am very very fine.

So maybe you should go to the hospital and get checked.

Ronald: What are you insinuating?

Loretta: All I'm saying is that I'm very very fine, there's nothing wrong with me.

Ronald: Listen, if there's anyone who needs to be checked, that will be you not me.

Loretta: Why should women be blamed all the time for childlessness?

Ronald: **Because women are the ones who do all kinds of nasty things and get their womb ruined. That's why.**

(Love You Two)

In the conversation above, women are presented as those who live a wayward life, that is, they are depicted as prostitutes. They are blamed for everything. Such stereotypical statements are not only derogatory, but degrading as well. Further examples include the following from the movie *Intervention*.

Exchange 4

Arit: (phone conversation) Hello.

Tunde: Yes, hello. May I speak with Arit, please.

Arit: Yes, who is this?

Tunde: This is Tunde Da Silver. I believe you are expecting my call.

Arit: Ahh, yes, hi, good evening.

Tunde: Well, I understand you want a date or some sort.

Arit: No, I never asked for a date. I just asked that we should meet and get to know each other based on ehmm...

Tunde: Quite frankly, **whatever you need to know about me, you can find it in business magazines or whatever gossip blogs or publications you females indulge in.**

(Intervention)

The statement above depicts women as gossips. They are presented as jobless people that only engage in gossip to keep themselves busy. More examples of this view of women are seen in the movie *Sex and Love*.

Exchange 5

Stanley: (Laurel hits him on his face) What's wrong with you? You want to kill your only brother because of a woman?

Laurel: You've had this coming for a long time. You won't be satisfied until you've had everything I wanted.

Stanley: You should be thanking me for saving you from that

money-thirsty-bitch. For your information, I didn't force the ring on her hand, she accepted.

Laurel: Will you just shut up?

Stanley: You shut up and listen to me. **Money controls the heart of a woman.**

You better get a crib of your emotions and stop this game you are playing.

(Sex and Love)

From the statements above, women are presented as people who can do anything whatsoever for the sake of money. Though Stanley forced the ring on Christie's finger, he still claims that she accepted the ring willingly to prove to the brother that with money, he can get any woman he wants; with money, every woman dances to his tune.

Exchange 6

Steve: So what of these ladies, Clara and Ada? Have you heard from them?

Fred: No, I haven't. Why?

Steve: Because this whole scenario seems to me like ehmm, a woman's retaliation.

Fred: You could be right. I mean given the fact that these two women at one point threatened me at the same time. You could be right, but look, Steve, eh, no. I don't want to get them involved in this.

Steve: And why?

Fred: **Look, these are women, Steve, these are women, alright? You bring them into the picture, you know, they begin to dig up old holes and then they complicate matters for me,** no. I just want to concentrate on finding my wife.

Steve: **You should never underestimate the power of any woman, no matter how small you think she is.** Never.

(Sophia's Heart)

From the statement above, women are seen as people who are capable of doing any kind of unimaginable evil, as people who can never be trusted at all. The same thing is applicable in the movie, *Isoken*:

Exchange 7

Friend 1(female): When are you two gonna need a bestman?

Osaze: So guys, I think we should just allow these ladies bond with ...

Friend 2(female): No, that's an escape strategy, no.

Friend 3(male): **Don't you ladies need to compare notes on asoebi or something?**

Isoken: Because we are women automatically we would have to talk about asoebi?

Friend 3: Mmh, we have a feminist here.

(Isoken)

The statement above shows that the only thing women discuss whenever they are together is asoebi; they don't discuss any reasonable issue.

Discussion of Findings

The results of the findings from this study are discussed in line with the research questions that were raised at the beginning of the study.

Research Question 1: What are the Characteristics of Insult Terms Used by the Characters?

As shown in the exchanges above, the characteristics of insult terms used by the characters are: insult terms focus on the humiliation of females' honour and dignity, they come in an indecent form and are done deliberately. For instance, in exchange 5, the phrases '**money-thirsty-bitch**' and '**Money controls the heart of a woman**' are deliberately used by Stanley in an indecent manner to humiliate the honour and dignity of Christie (a female character) who he believes is proving hard-to-get, therefore, he should get her by all means, but fails in the process. Moreover, in exchange 1, we see Tari deliberately insulting females by saying that "**Girls live for that title,**

'I'm engaged'. They love it because it gives them a sense of, ehmm, you know, belonging, credibility, assurance and ehh, you know, stability.'This is also humiliating because invariably he presents females as those who must depend on males to be complete. Here, insult terms are used by males as tools for promoting destructive ways of thinking about their targets which are females.

Research Question 2: What are the Components of These Insult Terms?

Insult terms are usually abusive terms used to undermine, derogate or marginalize others. In the movies used in this paper, males are seen using these insult terms to make females feel less human. Therefore, the components of these insult terms can be said to be that an addressee (females in this case) of insult receives a negative characteristic, and the second one is that this negative characteristic is expressed in an indecent form. In exchange 7, **"Don't you ladies need to compare notes on asoebi or something?"**This means that women do not engage in reasonable conversations; as long as men are concerned, the only thing they (women) talk about is asoebi. Even when Isoken tries to correct the notion, he refers to her as a feminist. This is also seen in exchange 6, where Fred makes a comment like, **"Look, these are women, Steve, these are women, alright? You bring them into the picture, you know, they begin to dig up old holes and then they complicate matters for me"**. He does not even believe that a woman can find a solution to his problem rather he sees women as those that can never be relied on (those that will complicate matters for him). Looking at the examples in exchanges 6 and 7, these components are clearly seen because Isoken and her friends receive the negative characteristic which is presented in an indecent manner. Fred's comment is not left out here as we can see how he characterized women negatively in an indecent form as well.

Research Question 3: What are the Effects of These Insult Terms on the Female Characters?

Words are powerful. While positive words can boost one's self esteem and self-image, negative words can have long-lasting detrimental effects. Insult terms affect women in many different ways and trigger a series of singular emotions and feelings. The way a person reacts to an insult depends on the event, the person, the environment and the stakes involved. Insult terms can have the effect of silencing women, obliging them to adapt their behaviour and limit their movements and participation in diverse human activities since they are expressions that denigrate or stigmatize a person. Since insults strike directly at a person's feelings, self-esteem, pride, identity, and ego, no matter why an insult happens or when it happens, the truth of the matter is it leaves a scar. They can greatly impair psychological development and social interaction.

Conclusion

This study investigates insult terms against women in Nollywood movies. Insult terms play on hidden desires and vulnerabilities and are highly imaginative and ingenious. Like jokes, insult terms depend on timing and must touch a vital nerve. This is to say that they unleash anger. From the findings, the norms and practices that define women as inferior to men and impose controls on them, are present everywhere in our families, social relations, religious, laws, schools, textbooks, factories, offices, and media especially movies. The results of this study show that female characters are represented negatively. On the basis of the findings, this study makes the users of language conscious and aware of the dangers of insult terms which can lead to negative results. It is, therefore, recommended that these representational practices need to change in order to bring about a change in the thinking of the people.

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