

CHINESE AND IGBO PROVERBS: ANALYSIS OF SEXISM

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ABSTRACT

Proverbs exist in every nation's language and it is one of the vehicles carrying her culture. Proverbs do not only reflect people's ideas and thoughts but also preserve their world view and values in traditional society. This paper analyzes sexism found in Chinese and Igbo proverbs. Prejudice or discrimination against women exists in both Chinese and Igbo proverbs, mainly on female social status, marriage, cultural responsibility, behavior, and personality. Some of these proverbs intend to portray women as weak, chattering, gossipers, nosy, and of low social status. Others emphasize that women have bad-temperament and are acrimonious, which are not easy to cope with, and if women are in charge, things will be out of order. In marriage, the husband dominates and dictates the fate of the wife. The reasons for gender discrimination in Igbo and Chinese are due to cultural/traditional values, socio-economic development, gender identity, and physiological factors. However, due to globalization and awareness creation, there are trends in female gender consciousness and awakening in China and Nigeria.

Keywords: Proverbs, Sexism, Gender discrimination, Igbo, Chinese

1. INTRODUCTION

Every community or tribe makes use of a particular language code because language is an indispensable means of communication. As such, the community or tribe codifies its values in its language. Through their systems of myths, anecdotes, stories, and proverbs, cultural values are defined and proverbs are one of those invaluable elements of communication or communicating these values. Thus, Alger (1970: 51) averred that culture passes along its values systems, and continuity in the values of the culture is thereby maintained. A proverb is one of those many tools for cultural interaction with enriched meanings. More so, a proverb as a means of communicating intentions has been used differently by language speakers. Sometimes, proverbs are used to communicate values, morals, etiquettes, insults, wisdom, oppression, abuse, and so on. Proverbs were created by people and are passed from generation to generation. They reflect the nation's ideological culture and ethnic emotions. As a part of the world language picture, proverbs are the prism reflecting human thought and culture.

Chinese is a family of East Asian analytic languages that form the Sinitic branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family (Norman, 1988). The Chinese language also called Han language (汉语 Hànyǔ) are spoken by the ethnic Han Chinese majority and variations

of Chinese are spoken by many minority ethnic groups in China. Over 1.2 billion people speak some form of Chinese as their first language. Igbo belongs to the Niger-Congo family with over 45 million speakers and is made up of over 20 dialects (Eberhard, et al 2020). Igbo is recognized as a major language in Nigeria, a minority in Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon. There are few similarities between the two languages in some areas of phonology, word formation, morphology, and syntax, and the social customs of the two nations are also quite different. However, Igbo and Chinese proverbs in many cases, reflect the same phenomenon of sexism in that men are superior to women. Next, we will reveal the situation of sexism in Igbo and Chinese proverbs. Hornsby, (2005), defines sexism as “thought or practice which may permeate language and which assumes a woman's inferiority to men”. Masequesmay (2008) notes that sexism usually refers to prejudice or discrimination based on sex or gender, especially against women and girls. Cudd & Jones (2005), notes that Sexism refers to a historically and globally pervasive form of oppression against women. Wortman, et al. (1999), Foster (2011), agree that both men and women can experience sexism, but sexism against women is more pervasive and women are primary victims of sexism. From the above definitions, it can be deduced that Sexism is prejudice against someone's gender, which can actually affect anyone, however, it affects women the most.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A proverb is an important aspect of indigenous Nigerian languages and it relates appropriately as one aspect of the sociolinguistic study. They are used to emphasize and embellish the words or saying of the wise and are mostly used by old people, who use them to communicate moral lessons and give advice to the young for its penetrating effect. Apart from its stylistic effect on the language use of users and proverbial wisdom, it also has its figurative and at the same time poetic relevance that it adds to the everyday discourse in any society. As such, proverbs are regarded very culturally in the social practice of African cultures and constitute a dominant device through which intentions are communicated for serious effects and cultural implications. In the Igbo society, the Igbo word for proverb is “Ilu” or “Inu” which means bitter. According to Chinonye (2010), the compulsory use of Igbo proverbs (ilu), parables (ukabilu), and idioms (akpaalokwu), in every traditional setting have elevated the language to the status of the living art of popular communication. Achebe (1958), proverbs are described as the "palm oil with which words are eaten." Achebe, as one of the most prominent writers, has used proverbs as a discourse strategy in most of his novels such as *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, and *Anthills of the Savanna* to express or inform the communicative, social and cultural importance of proverb in the Igbo society. Proverbs can therefore be considered a medium through which men and women communicate their differences in the Igbo society. Oha (1998) analyzed Igbo proverbs from the critical discourse perspective. Oha's “Semantics of Female Devaluation in Igbo Proverbs” focuses on the semantics of female devaluation and derogation in Igbo proverbs. His approach is based on some modern theories of some feminist poets like Julia Kristeva (1981, 1992), Irigaray (1985, 1992), Spender (1992) amongst others. Based on this approach, he observed that language, as used in Igbo proverbs, promotes sexual politics played by the male to the disadvantage of the female. The study underscores the female subjugation and male dominance prevalent

in Igbo society. Mmadike (2014) had in-depth research into “*The Igbo Perception of Womanhood: Evidence from Sexiest Proverbs*”. Where he used sexist proverbs to sustain the notion of male domination over the female. Mmadike explored the derogatory aspects of Igbo sexist proverbs against women. This work in a way relates to our study but it is only limited to female body parts and how the male counterpart and the society disrespect and demean women with Igbo proverbs. Proverbs have also been discussed extensively in narrative fiction from the literary perspective. Onyejekwe (2001) examined the portrayal of women in Igbo proverbs by collecting and analyzing varieties of Igbo proverbs relating to women subjugation attitude of Igbo people towards women.

Chinese proverbs are an important part of Chinese vocabulary and lexicology, it reflects the social concepts, cultural system, and value orientation of the Chinese people. Ren Jingsheng (2002), Rong Nannan (2010), Shen Daojuan (2010), Yuan Fang (2012), Zhao Li (2014), and others made a comparative analysis of Chinese and English female proverbs. Among them, Rong Nannan divided female proverbs into social status, marriage, mental intelligence, beauty disaster, and so on, and believed that gender discrimination existed in both English and Chinese proverbs. Yuan Fang analyzed the current situation of gender discrimination in language from the perspective of proverbs research and expected its future development. Zhao Li introduced the feminist theory to analyze female proverbs. It is believed that different social division of labor, cultural factors, and gender role factors lead to different social expectations of the roles of both sexes, which leads to the cultural characteristics of fettering and oppressing women in proverbs. Zhang Yi (2011) shows the existence of discrimination against women in Uyghur and Chinese proverbs from the aspects of social status, psychology, and marriage. Jiang Jing (2013) and Li Yinlan (2014) compared the female proverbs between China and Japan. They divided the female proverbs into a multilingual, ignorant, husband-wife relationship, mother-daughter relationship, mother-in-law, and daughter-in-law relationship. They believed that the common Confucianism and political oppression between China and Japan were the main causes of gender discrimination in female proverbs. Zhao Ling (2012) and Zhang Lu (2018) compared the gender stereotypes in Russian and Chinese proverbs, analyzed the stereotype of women in proverbs from the aspects of appearance, family role, and wisdom by using the theory of language and culture, and believed that economy, religious etiquette, and social system are the reasons why women are stereotyped as weak and lowly. Sun Zhenmin and Zhao Ling (2012) cited male-related proverbs as a reference to analyze the phenomenon and reasons for men being superior to women from a comparative perspective.

3. CHINESE AND IGBO SEXIST AND DEROGATORY PROVERBS

a) On Marriage 在婚姻嫁娶上

Chinese Proverbs 汉语谚语

- i. 嫁出去的女，泼出去的水。(Married woman is a spilled water).
- ii. 嫁鸡随鸡。嫁狗随狗。(Woman married to chicken behaves as chicken;

- Married to a dog behaves like a dog).
- iii. 嫁出去的女, 卖出去的地。 (A married woman is a sold piece of land).
 - iv. 女人无夫身无主。 (A woman without a husband is without a master).
 - v. 妻跟夫走, 水随沟流。 (When a wife goes with her husband, the water flows with the ditch).
 - vi. 女大不中留。 留了结冤仇。 (A grown-up girl can't be kept at home. They are used to settle a feud).
 - vii. 夫贵妻荣, 母凭子贵。 (Wife's glory is the husband, mothers must depend on the son).
 - viii. 出嫁从夫, 夫死从子。 (Obey your husband. When the husband dies, obey the son).
 - ix. 娶到的媳妇买到的马, 任人骑来任人打。 (Marrying a woman is like a buying horse that can be ridden and beaten by others).

These proverbs point out that girls cannot marry on their own, and if they look for a husband, they will be regarded as vile and be despised. A married woman is like a sold land and water poured out, and she is no longer a member of her parent's family. Giving birth to a girl is regarded as a burden on the family, which will make the family poor. The husband dominates and dictates the fate of the wife, and the wife must be completely submissive to her husband, promptly responding to her husband. A husband is a crown on the wife's heads. The wife must obey her husband in everything and act according to his will without delay. According to Huang (2015), books like "Women's Admonitions", "The Analects of Women", "The Book of Filial Piety for Women", "Women's Instructions" and "Women Studies", have instilled the moral principles of "three obedience and four virtues" in women's education. This requires them to be obedient, knowledgeable, and reasonable, understand cultural etiquette, be a good wife, and mother to the husband's family. Nevertheless, only by giving birth to a son can a mother gain some status in the family.

Igbo Proverbs:

- i. Nwa agboghọ nọkarịa na be nne ya, oghoro amosu. (If a lady stays too long in her parent's home without getting married, she turns to a witch)
- ii. A tọra gi ilu kowaara gi ya, ego e jiri luo nne gi lara n'iyi. (The bride price paid on your mother's head is a loss if a proverb, (after) being addressed to you, is explained to you).
- iii. Nwanyi di ya chorọ ikpo asi adighi esite ya n'ofe uto. (A woman whose husband has decided to hate cannot solve the problem by mere cooking of delicious soup)."
- iv. Mma nwanji bu di. (Husband is the beauty of a woman)
- v. Nwaagadi nwanji laba nka o di ka o bu na e jighi ego luo ya. (When a woman is getting old, it would seem as if her bride price was not paid).
- vi. Mma nwanji bu di. (Husband is the beauty of a woman).
- vii. Nwaagadi nwanji laba nka o di ka o bu na e jighi ego luo ya. (When a woman is getting old, it would seem as if her bride price was not paid).

These proverbs force ladies to get married at a certain age and make them feel the oppression or challenge of not being married at that age. The culture dares them to abdicate sisterhood and be responsible. A man is hardly reminded as much as women. Failure of these ladies to get married makes them "a witch; that is, they become a social and cultural disturbance. It portrays a deep sense of haste, rejection, and challenges faced by unmarried ladies. In marriage, it is assumed that "the bride price paid" covers the responsibility of the woman to teach her children cultural values, societal moral practice, and standards. Humiliation and denigration are leveled against mothers for the failure of their children to comprehend cultural values. A woman who disrespects her husband or any male member of her community may be hated with no forgiveness.

b) On Societal status 在社会地位上

Chinese Proverbs汉语谚语:

- i. 男当家，女插花。(Men run the show, women arrange the flowers).
- ii. 男人不作主，扫帚颠倒竖。(When a man is not in charge, the broom is upside down).
- iii. 女人好比身上衣，旧的去换新的 (A woman is like a coat. The old one is replaced by a new one).
- iv. 打老婆，骂老婆，手内无钱卖老婆。(Beat your wife, scold your wife, but have no money to sell her).
- v. 一代姑娘三代的魔害。(One generation of girls is three generations of evil spirits).
- vi. 兄弟如手足。妻子如衣服。(Brothers are like hands and feet. Wives are like clothes).
- x. 养儿防老，养女赔钱。(To raise a son is to guard against old age, to raise a daughter is to lose money).

These sexist proverbs focus on the social status of women oppressed and bullied. They reveal the extremely unequal status of men and females in society. A woman is just a piece of clothes that can wear and throw away; the animal that a man can beat and scold at will; even if the man is poor, he is better than the female. Women are men's subordinates when women are in charge, things will be out of order. Chinese Confucian doctrine is also a kind of patriarchal philosophy. The "Three obedience and four virtues" required of a woman, conform to the requirements of male domination, and firmly embed the concept of male superiority and female inferiority into the social value system. Women themselves have no fixed status, their nobility or inferiority depend on their husbands or sons.

Igbo Proverbs:

- i. Nwaanyi kpochie nti ruo nnukwu ulo sara mbara, e buru ozu ya donye n' ite ofe. (If a woman stubbornly builds herself a spacious compound, her corpse

- will be dumped in her pot of soup).
- ii. Oke nwaanyị bụ ụsekwu. (A woman's share is in the kitchen).
 - iii. Nwaanyị sị na ya na nwoke ha, ya nyulie mamiri elu. (If a woman claims equality with a man, let her urinate upwards).
 - viii. Na nzuko, o ka mma ilu okwu nwantakiri karija ilu okwu nwanyi. (In a meeting, it is preferable to heed the words of a little boy than that of a woman).
 - ix. Lolo agaghị arigo n'ochē eze. (a reverend women cannot aspire after the king's throne).

In the Igbo society, these proverbs emphatically stress the fact that the oppression against women in socio-cultural setting stems from the competition for equality. Men are meant to dominate and control influential positions within the society by restricting the women to domestic spheres where they serve mainly as wives and mothers. Men and women assume different roles and positions in the Igbo cultural setting, hence the issue of inequality. Women are overtly a lesser human than men. The proverb shows that women are not permitted to own a landed property in Igbo land; the men have control over lands and inherit them or buy as well. As such, women are oppressed by them. Whenever a woman, attempts to buy land without a backup from a man she will face a lot of challenges and oppression.

c) Behavior 行为上

Chinese Proverbs 汉语谚语:

- i. 女人舌头上没骨头。 (Women have no bones on their tongues).
- ii. 三姑六婆。 嫌少争多。 (Three aunts and six wives, less resentment, too many arguments).
- iii. 两个婆娘一面锣, 三个婆娘一台戏。 (Where there are two women there's a gong, where there are three women is a drama).
- iv. 妯娌多了是非多, 小姑多了麻烦多。 (More sisters in law (wife's side), more nuisance; more sisters in law (husband's side), more trouble).

Women are described as chattering, gossipers, nosy. Women are seen as people who use nagging to vent their discontent. However, both men and women have the behavior of talking, gossiping, and making things out of nothing, so it is unreasonable for men to blame only women for being wordy and troublesome.

Igbo Proverbs:

- i. Umụ nwanyị na-esi nri di mma ma o bughị okwu di mma. (Women make good dishes but not good speech)
- ii. Nwanyị ekwurekwu bụ ekwensu. (A talkative woman is devil)
- iii. Nwanyị abuo na-aga ije, asiri emee ha ato. (When two women are taking a walk, gossip becomes the third companion)
- iv. Asiri guba nwanyị o banye o maluchaa o juba. (When a woman is hungry of gossip, she starts asking questions about what she already know)

These proverbs above portray the talkative attitude of women. It goes further to show women as gossips and talkative. It x-rays the irresponsible character of a woman who talks a lot. Some of the proverbs above try to show the pretentious nature of women and how they can have a negative opinion while asking questions that she already knows. For the sake of gaining more information about the topic for more gossips. Talkativeness can relatively be viewed as devilish because it can make a woman expose a piece of vital information or even a top secret that is not meant for another ear. Talkativeness in women can bring envy, jealousy, greed, and even wanton destruction if care is not taken in society.

d) Cultural Responsibility 品德养

Chinese Proverbs 汉语谚语:

- i. 妻贤夫祸少。 (A good wife are seldom in trouble with her husband).
- ii. 头发长， 见识短。 (Women's hair is long but their knowledge is short).
- iii. 寡妇门前是非多。 (Widows have many troubles in front of their doors).
- iv. 忠臣不事二君， 烈女不更二夫。 (A loyal minister does not serve two princes, and a heroic woman does not change her husband).

In the male-dominated society, male-centered ethics and women's morality standard are formed. For single girls, married or widows, it is required that they be gentle and virtuous, peaceful, culturally responsible and follow the rules and regulations, otherwise, the outcome will be very miserable. Their traditional ethics not only requires married women to have children but also requires them to educate their children well. Although women play a peculiar role in the birth and education of children, it still does not change the low social status of women.

Igbo Proverbs:

- i. Ewu nwaanyi nwe zuru onwe ya. (A goat own by a woman, fend for itself).
- ii. Ajo nwa na-aza aha nne ya. (A bad child takes his/her mother's name)
- iii. Nkita nwanji zuru na-atagbu mmadu. (A dog trained by a woman (always) bites people to death).
- iv. Nwanji mara dobe onwe ya o zaa Oriaku. (A woman who conducts/keeps herself well will get married).

These proverbs imply that for a woman to get married she must be of good behavior and virtue. However, it is a general assumption that portrays the incompetence of a woman in a child's upbringing and as such, a bad child is attributed to the mother. These proverbs intend to justify that the primary responsibility of every mother in the Igbo socio-cultural setting is to raise children uprightly, but the society still view mothers as irresponsible that they can't rear a goat. A good child bears the father's name, but where the mother fails to instill appropriate morals, the child bears the mother's name. The proverb is not only oppressive; it is also derogatory such that women have been associated with the upbringing of goat (domestic animal) but also portrayed as being irresponsible.

e) Personality 性格上

Chinese Proverbs汉语谚语:

- i. 女人是水做的。 (Women are made of water).
- ii. 女人心, 海底针。 (A woman's heart is a needle in the sea).
- iii. 少女的心, 秋天的云, 说变就变。 (A girl's heart is like an autumn cloud that can change very quickly).
- iv. 妇人之言不足信 (women's words are not believed).
- v. 女子无才便是德。 (Mediocrity is the virtue of women).

The above proverbs use tears, water, needle in referring to women's personality, and weather to describe women's unpredictable characteristics. Women's words are misleading and cannot be believed easily. It also emphasizes that women have a bad temperament and sharp words. These proverbs also show that women are weak, not knowledgeable, not powerful, hard to deal with, and rude. Women are seen as weaklings, not stable, and their emotions are easily affected by special physiological conditions.

Igbo Proverbs:

- i. Sọ akwụkwọ nri ka nwanyị ga-ere, ọ gaghị ere nsi egbe (A woman can only sell vegetables, she cannot sell gunpowder.)
- ii. Dịka ọkụkọ, ụmụ nwaanyị na-eche ka ọkụkọ kwaa ka o wee mara na chi efoola. (Like hens, women wait for cocks to crow before they know that it's day break).
- iii. A na-echere ogeri, Ọ na-eche okwa uri ya. (One would be thinking of a woman's good but she would be thinking of her make-up platter (kit)).
- iv. Ọ naghị adi mma a gbachaa ọsọ ka nwoke e bie ya ka nwanyị. (It is not good to end a race like a woman after running it like a man).
- v. Nwanyị amaghị ife mana ọ na-amụta nwa maara ife. (A woman does not know anything, but she gives birth to a knowledgeable child).

Igbo society prefers good character from women to mere or ordinary physical appearance. Society believes more in good character and expects women to value it beyond their "make-up platter (kit)". In proverbs, there is a feeling of mockery, which portrays women as weak, not knowledgeable, foolish and unintelligent, who are only concerned about appearance and do not care much about the character. Man is believed to be culturally strong and agile; women are culturally considered weak, fragile, and dependent beings. They are reserved for domestic activities such as cooking, washing, upbringing, etc., they cannot do brave things that are meant for men such as going to war and dealing with gunpowder.

CONCLUSION

Language is the product of society and reflects social phenomena. Sexism in proverbs is the real reflection of the objective existence of sexism in real life. Throughout history, women's status has always been low. In traditional Chinese and Igbo society,

there are different requirements of men and women's gender roles. To eliminate sexism in language, we must eradicate the prejudice existing in people's ideology and advocate equality between men and women. By so doing, the sexism in language will disappear completely, and the sexism content in proverbs will be eliminated and gradually replaced by the new words which respect and praise women. With globalization and the advancement of society, there have been many transformations. Most of these female derogatory proverbs in Chinese and Igbo language are rarely ever used since they are considered very offensive. However, they still exist in books, which are often analyzed and discussed for a deeper understanding of the traditional Chinese and Igbo view of females in proverbs.

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