

## SEXIST LANGUAGE IN NOLLYWOOD MOVIES

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### **Abstract**

Sexism is a stereotype of differentiating people based on their gender which causes discrimination and unequal treatment by one gender against another. It can be displayed in every aspect of life especially in language. Sexist language has been portrayed in our everyday activity which includes media such as film. This paper examines sexist language in three Nollywood movies using Sara Mills' (2008) model as its theoretical framework. The findings reveal that the characters in these movies use the following types of sexist language: overt sexism in generic noun, compound words, naming and non-parallel terms, and insult terms. This study has also found out that in these movies, overt sexism was used mainly by male characters.

**Keywords:** Sexist language, gender, sexism, overt sexism, Nollywood

### **1 Introduction**

Language is an essential tool of communication that is central to all human existence and social process. It is also an important means of establishing relationships with other members of the society, and reducing friction in human interaction. Language for communication is not only about giving information. It is also a tool for the expression of feelings and emotions. With the development of feminism and feminist movement all over the world, the attention of scholars have been drawn to the ways women are treated in the society and the way this unfair treatment is reflected in language use. Sexism is a recurring issue in various societies around the world. It does not only materialize through people's actions and behaviours, it is also built into the way the language is structured and the concepts that humans use to describe ideas about language. Although protests by women's groups and movements have challenged sexism in all its ramifications, language discrimination is still a fact of life and very much evident in society.

The term 'sexism' is used in literature to refer to the idea of male superiority by referring to women as inferior to males intellectually and psychologically. Language is said to be sexist when it expresses bias in favour of one sex and treats the other sex in a discriminatory manner. Sexist language encodes attitude to men and women. In most cases, it is a bias in favour of men against women. Henley cited in Weather all (2002: 13) defines sexist language as "a language that ignores women; language that defines women narrowly; and language that depreciates women" while Mills (2008: 83) states that a statement is sexist when "its use constitutes, promotes or exploits an unfair or irrelevant or impertinent distinction between the sexes". According to Mills (2008: 89), a language can be sexist when it "presents male-oriented experience as the norm in society" while Umera-Okeke (2012: 2), defines sexist language as "any language that is supposed to include all people, but intentionally (or not) excludes a

gender – this can be males or females”. Sexist language is “the notion that the English Language contains sex bias, particularly in usages such as ‘he’ and ‘man’ to refer to everyone” (Hyde, 1984: 697).

Rybacki and Rybacki, (1991) identify five types of sexist language. The first type is generic words that place men on a high pedestal to be looked upon as the standard by which people are to be assessed. This includes words like “businessman”, “middleman”, “salesman”, “chairman”, “fireman”, “manpower” and expressions like “man up”, “the best man for the job”. It also includes the use of words like ‘man’, ‘men’, ‘he’ and ‘his’ to refer to both sexes. The second type is words that indicate that women and men are different from each other. This is seen in the use of words like ‘usher versus usherette’, ‘prince versus princess’, ‘waiter versus waitress’. The third type is words that describe women in non-human terms such as “chick”, “sweetie pie” and “plum”. The fourth type is negative words which are used to describe women. Such words include “whore”, “slut” and “bitch”. The fifth type is sex role descriptors like ‘woman doctor’, ‘male driver’, ‘female nurse’.

Nollywood films are part of Nigerian movies called video films or home videos because they are “shot directly on video for home viewing” (Larkin, 2002:2). These movies are labeled as Nollywood movies and marketed all over the world. Haynes (2000:1) describes them as “one of the greatest explosions of popular culture the continent has ever seen”. Nollywood, which is an analogy for “Hollywood” in the Nigerian context, has been churning out movies in the most prolific manner. This study examines sexist language in three Nollywood movies since movies are influential devices in our society and behaviours and opinions seen in movies can reflect the way our society work. The purpose is to identify and analyze sexist expressions used by the characters in the movies.

## **2 Movies Synopses:**

***Moth to a Flame:*** Joan’s family struggled financially. They were behind on their rent and it was hard to make both ends meet on her father’s income as a taxi driver. When her father took ill, Joan took over the taxi business in order to pay his hospital fees. One night she picked up a passenger, Ford. He was a successful businessman and he offered her a lucrative contract to drive him around for ten days. As the two became acquainted, Joan became attracted to him, but he was engaged to someone else.

***Melissa:*** Melissa is a story of a physically tough lady who is always quick to defend herself wherever she is. She hates to see people being bullied and sees herself as one who stands up for the bullied and oppressed and never hesitates to let her anger loose, till she was almost killed.

***Intrapersonal:*** This is a story of betrayal. It mirrors the lives of a couple whose husband (Eric) is cheating on the wife (Bella). She decides to play a blind game unknowingly with her husband to find out if he is actually cheating on her.

## **3 Statement of the Problem**

Sexism in language is one of the major issues in sociolinguistics and almost all languages are guilty of gender bias especially the English Language. The main underlying problem is rooted in the ways sexism has been weaved into the language

system so subtly that people end up submitting to the sexist views without even realizing it. This status quo has filtered into the Nollywood films. There appears to be no middle way in Nollywood's negative representation of women because the image of women in video films is a fictional construct borne out of repressed desires and imaginations of patriarchy. This study therefore deems it worthwhile to investigate sexism in Nollywood movies with the aim of drawing attention to the extent of sexism prevalent in languages. The choice of Nollywood movies is informed by the fact that movies are a reflection of Nigerian culture and society. Also, the fact that there is a dearth of studies on sexist language in Nollywood movies leaves a gap which this present study attempts to fill. Therefore, this paper seeks to answer the following questions:

- i. Why do people use sexist language?
- ii. How are sexist views expressed through language?
- iii. What types of overt sexism do the characters in Nollywood movies use?

#### **4 Literature Review**

Narista and Suharsono, (2013) examine sexist language used by the characters in *The Duchess Movie* using Mills' (2008) framework. The findings show that six types of sexist language were used in the movie: the use of generic nouns, derivational, non parallel terms which show semantic degeneration, sexism in proverbs, sexism in swear words and indirect sexism in the use of metaphors and irony.

Similarly, Fi'aunillah, (2015), examines sexist language in the film trilogy *Lord of the Rings* using Mills' sexism theory. The study aimed at investigating the linguistic features of sexist language in the film and the effects of sexist language usage among the characters. The results show that the male generic pronoun 'he' and the generic noun 'man' and 'men' are used as reference to replace humans in general, both women and men. The author is of the view that the generic pronoun is a display of social inequality between men and women where men are considered as superior, more important and more noticeable. The findings also show further examples of overt sexism in the use of family naming systems which the author considers as man-made as it excludes women. Other examples of overt sexism are found in the use of compound words such as craftsman, waterman, she-elf and Entwives.

In another study, Nayef, (2016) investigates the way language is manipulated and used to disparage women in the Egyptian Sitcom *Al-Kabeer Awi*. The study reveals that women's representation and linguistic sexism in television can actually encourage ideologies of gender inequality and masculine hegemony.

Utami et al, (2019) analyze denotative and connotative meaning of Indonesian metaphors collected from various sources such as online sources, the Indonesian Dictionary (KBBI), song lyrics, poems, movies and newspapers. The findings show the use of thirty two different metaphors from the various sources. Out of these, sixteen belonged to females. The authors consider the metaphors as sexist because they excluded one sex.

Muhammed, M.B, (2020), examines the concept and aspects of sexism in literature using Wilde's 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' and concludes that sexism is a part of the

culture of the people who are the users of the language which cannot be separated from their history and organization. These studies show that sexism in language is a fact of life and is discriminatory and this present study contributes to the discourse by investigating sexism in Nollywood movies.

### **5 Theoretical Framework**

Mills (2008) proposes a model for the examination of sexism in language. In her model, she asserts that sexism in language may occur at different levels: the individual, the institutional and public levels. According to her, sexism is manifested through the asymmetrical ways of talking about men and women, for example, by describing women by their appearance more often than men (Mills, 1995: 162). In her model, Mills specifies two types of sexism: overt and indirect sexism. Overt sexism, according to her, is the “type of usage which can be straightforwardly identified through the use of linguistic markers or through the analysis of presupposition, which has historically been associated with the expression of discriminatory opinions about women, which signals to hearers that women are seen as an inferior group in relation to males” (Mills, 2008: 11). Overt sexism is made up of hate speech, words and meaning, insult terms for women, as well as first name, surnames and titles. This, she says, gives priority to male dominance over women explicitly. Indirect sexism, on the other hand, is the type of sexism used to “categorize a set of stereotypical beliefs about women which cannot be directly related to a certain linguistic usage or features” (Mills, 2008: 10). She is of the view that while overt sexism is seen as anachronistic, indirect sexism is one which in “some ways attempts to deny responsibility for an utterance, mediating the utterance through irony or disguising the force of the sexism of the utterance through humour, innuendo, embedding sexism at the level of presupposition, or prefacing sexist statements with disclaimers or hesitation” (Mills, 2008: 135). This type of sexism causes more harm in a subtle way because it is more difficult to deal with, since it is difficult to unravel and respond to. Put in another way, overt sexism is clear and unambiguous whereas indirect sexism can only be understood contextually in relation to the interpretation of surrounding utterances; it expresses sexism and at the same time, denies the responsibility for it. It is extremely common and therefore, needs new ways to be challenged and analyzed. It is for this reason that this paper examines overt sexism in Nollywood movies.

### **6 Methodology**

This research method is descriptive qualitative research. The data consists of three Nollywood movies: “*Moth to a Flame*” produced by Ideh Chukwuma Innocent (2016); “*Melissa*” produced by Brivalix (2018) and “*Intrapersonal*” produced by Melvin Adie (2017). The data is obtained from the conversations between the characters. The main instrument of this observation is the researcher herself. The choice of these movies is based on the fact that they contain sexist expressions. The steps taken by the researcher in carrying out the research procedure are: (1) Collecting the movies through Xender. (2) Watching the movies which have been sent through Xender. (3) Identifying and classifying the data. (4) Analyzing the data.

## 7 Data Analysis

This study found that there are four types of overt sexism that are used by the characters based on Sara Mills' theory. Those are compound words, generic nouns, naming and non-parallel terms and insult terms.

### Compound words

In morphology, compounding is a way of word-building by combining roots. Examples of overt sexism in the use of compound words are seen in the following conversation taken from *Moth to a Flame*.

#### Excerpt 1

**Roseline:** I don't know why you like that wine, it tastes horrible.

**Ford:** You can mix it up if you don't like it.

**Roseline:** Even when I mix it, it still tastes horrible.

**Ford:** Hmm

**Roseline:** Babe, who's she?

**Ford:** Who? Joan?

**Roseline:** Yes

**Ford:** But I told you before. She's my employee.

**Roseline:** That drives you? Your driver?

**Ford:** Yes

**Roseline:** (chuckles) Wow! Ford! Are you Gaddafi? Next you tell me you are hiring **female-bodyguards**, eh.

**Ford:** Roseline, don't start.

**Roseline:** I shouldn't start? Tell me, Ford, how did this happen? Did you send out a memo or advert placement that you wanted a **female-driver**? And she doesn't drive the company car, she drives you, the boss, and she follows you around like a lost puppy because of her job and you are telling me that I shouldn't start. Listen very carefully Ford, listen good, I know you seem like you are in control of everything around you and you are, but I know someone that is in control of you and everything around you and I'm sure she would not be pleased to hear and to meet this so called **female-driver**.

**Ford:** (chuckles) I'm sorry, but she already hears.

From the conversations above, 'female-bodyguards' and 'female-driver' are examples of compound words that are portrayed in overt sexism.

### Generic nouns

Generic nouns are nouns that refer to all members of a class or group. They are often used when making generalizations or talking about universal truths. The word 'man' is the main generic masculine term. It is used to refer to male human beings and the whole race. Mills (2008: 89) states that "the most common examples are when 'he' and 'man' are used for referring to both men and women, and it is more common to visualize a male person when interpreting a word that includes 'man' and this might lead to stereotypes of certain occupations". An example of the use of overt sexism in the use of generic nouns is seen in the movie *Melissa*:

#### Excerpt 2

**Richard:** Ehmm, Melissa, I'm sorry about my repulsive and disagreeable attitude

and question at the dining table. I love you, Melissa and this is your house. Well, this is your house and you can come here anytime you wish and stay for as long as you want, even forever.

**Melissa:** Oh, my beloved brother. I love you so much.

**Richard:** Alright then, good night. One thing, whenever you come here and stay for as long as you wish, endeavour to get a crib on your temper and try your best to be at peace with **all men**. Did I hear you say you'll try your best?

**Melissa:** No, you didn't hear me say that, but I'm saying it now, I'll try as much as possible to be at peace with **all men**.

**Richard:** Good. Thank you.

In the dialogue above, there is a masculine generic noun 'men' which is used to refer to all human in general, men and women. In society, men are considered the norm of the human species. Men and women are supposed to be treated equally, but it is not the same in the English lexicon where the word 'man' is referred to both male human being and the whole race as well (He, 2010). Another example where this generic noun 'men' appears in the same movie is:

### **Excerpt 3**

**Kenny:** Anger lies in the bosom of fools. Anger will destroy you.

**Melissa:** I don't want to be destroyed.

**Kenny:** Simple. What you need to do is follow the path of peace with **all men** and then ask God to help you with this decision.

### **Naming**

Another example of overt sexism used in the movies is the marital title 'Mrs' as seen in Excerpt 4. The English language permits three titles for women: 'Mrs', 'Miss', and 'Ms'. Traditionally, 'Mrs' is used for married women while the title 'Miss' is used for unmarried women. The alternative form 'Ms' was intended as a neutral form at the same level as 'Mr', which meant that women would not have to reveal their marital status with their title, but the term also adopted "negative connotations, and is sometimes used for describing divorced women or what some would label as extreme feminists" (Mills, 2008: 64). Udofot (2009), states that marital renaming is a form of linguistic domination in which a lady becomes 'a property' transferred from parents to a husband. The fact that the corresponding 'Mr' usually used for men does not indicate the man's marital status makes it sexist to address women in a manner that would put any form of pressure on them (Omenugha, 2007). Examples of sexism in naming is seen in the conversation below:

### **Excerpt 4**

**Alex:** So **Mrs Okeke**, how are you today?

**Bella:** I thought I told you not to call me that?

**Alex:** But that is who you are right now, that is who you are.

**Bella:** I know, but just that coming from you, doesn't sound nice.

So by the way, who are you painting this time?

In this conversation, 'Mrs Okeke' is an example of overt sexism in naming. Even though Bella insists that Alex should not refer to her as 'Mrs Okeke', Alex still refuses to address her by her first name. This practice of using 'family names' is considered man-made due to the fact that women are excluded. Therefore, this kind of practice cause advantages to males (Mills, 2008). More so, Alex calling Bella 'Mrs

Okeke' shows that she is married, but this is not the same with Eric. He is never referred to as 'Master Okeke' throughout the movie. This is where the non-parallel terms come in because the title 'Mr' identifies Eric as a male whether adult or not, married or still single. Thorne and Henley (1975: 29) observe that to call people 'Mrs' or 'Miss' is "to help relegate and trivialize women". On the other hand, Alex doesn't refer to Bella's husband (Eric) as 'Mr Okeke'. This can be seen from their conversation below:

**Excerpt 5**

**Alex:** Hei!

**Eric:** Oh Alex, what's up?

**Alex:** It's all good.

**Eric:** Look man, I'm getting fed up with this case. Like I'm tired and the so called client is not doing anything to help matters at all.

**Alex:** Man, you need to calm down. It's not as bad as you sound. I mean, you need to give him another chance... and we knew this case was a tough one before we accepted it and that's why he's paying big too.

A similar situation is found in the movie, *Moth to a Flame* where Joan's mother is engaged in a phone conversation:

**Excerpt 6**

**Joan's mother:** (phone rings and she picks) Hello. Yes, this is Mrs Segun. Who? Segun? My husband, eh? Ahhh, no. (she drops the phone)

**Excerpt 7**

**Joan's mother:** (phone rings and she picks) Hello, good afternoon. Mrs Clinton? Ehh, which Clinton is this one, the America? Mrs Clinton, okay, good afternoon. Ehh, wait na, haaa. Your son? My daughter? Driver, ehh, police? Mrs Clin... hmm. Hello, Mrs Clinton.

In the excerpts above, the title 'Mrs' is used to refer to Segun's wife and Clinton's wife instead of their first names. These women, being referred to as 'Mrs', indicates their marital status, but this is not the same with men where the title 'Mr' is used for both single and married.

**Insult terms**

Insult terms are abusive terms used by males, in particular, to undermine, derogate or marginalize females. Examples of these insult terms can be seen in the movie, *Melissa*, as shown in the excerpts 8, 9, and 10 below:

**Excerpt 8**

**Melissa:** I could have killed him, that **woman-man that runs his tongue like a woman.**

**Ireti:** You should stop fighting.

**Melissa:** No, they should stop getting on my nerves.

The expression above is purely sexist and implies that women are loud, talkative and do not have control over their tongues. Surprisingly, one may say 'after all, it is coming from a female'. Yes, but it is not totally strange because it is simply a projection of the society's views which were mostly formulated by men, and also it is a kind of character which is created by one of Nollywood's male filmmakers. Here is also another example of insult terms;

**Excerpt 9**

**Richard:** It's okay. Sorry about the embarrassment. You guys are doing a great job at the gate. I'm sorry about this, it will not happen again.

**John:** Oga, warn am oo. She dey behave as if say na she put me for office. She come my office come dey molest me. Which kind nonsense be that one? You woman ehh, **woman wey dey pass nyash pee.** (This means – Sir, warn her. She is behaving as if she was the one that gave me this job. She just came to my office to molest me. What kind of nonsense is that, a woman that squats to urinate.)

In the extract above, John lashes insults at Melissa. To him, women are not supposed to be heard; they worth nothing since they don't urinate the same way as men do. That is to say that women belong to the lower class since they squat to urinate while men stand. In other words, women are not supposed to challenge men in any way, whatever is the case. This reflects the prevailing attitude the society has towards women. There is also another example of this 'insult terms' in the same movie;

**Excerpt 10**

**Richard:** You see what I was saying? What do we expect next?

**Ireti:** That lady is in pains, Richard.

**Richard:** I don't care.

**Ireti:** Then please lower your voice. Don't let her over-hear you saying all sorts of things about her. So we should throw her out because of that reason?

**Richard:** We should tell Melissa to her face **to be a woman at least for once.**

In the conversation above, Richard is complaining that Melissa is not being humble and submissive; she does not behave like an ideal woman and for this reason, she should be called to order before she is being thrown out of his house. A similar situation is found in the movie, *Moth to a Flame* where Ford addresses Joan using insult terms:

**Excerpt 11**

**Joan:** Sir, see, it's ehmm, it's weird enough that I drive a cab, but now you want me to drive you around. I refuse, not because I can't drive you, but because I returned your wallet to you with all the money in it intact and I don't even get so much as 'thank you' rather you ask me condescendingly if you should reward me. So, no Sir, I refuse. You have a good time.

**Ford:** Suit yourself. Look, I kind of thought about it, I was wondering



what, you know, **a beautiful girl like you, intelligent girl like you, would be doing driving a cab**, but I figured it must be financial, but suit yourself.

From the excerpt above, Ford feels it is awkward to see a woman driving a cab and tries to offer her money so that, may be, she would not drive the cab again, but when Joan refuses the offer, he uses insult terms towards her to express his disappointment.

People use sexist language due to a variety of reasons. The first is attributable to tradition because it is a norm in written and spoken language. A second reason why people use sexist language is because they have no understanding of what sexism is and what it entails. Sexist language is learnt at an early age and can be considered a linguistic habit. Tannen (1994) explains that gender differences in communication can be linked to the ways boys and girls are taught to socialize when growing up. According to her, while girls are taught to be polite, subservient, less assertive, dependent and subordinate to men, boys, on the other hand, are brought up to be active, independent, assertive and domineering. Sexism in language can be found in different aspects of life and people are exposed to sexist language in everyday life, at home, at school, in the street and through the media such as television, cinema and magazines or newspapers and in the movies.

The language used in Nollywood movies discriminate against women in the sense that it presents women as people who should not have the same right, position and responsibility as men. This is in line with Fi'aunillah's, (2015:148) views that sexist language leaves women "yearning for equal treatment for females and a freedom from the domination of men". It keeps women at a disadvantaged position in the language as it is in the case of using male terms, like generic noun 'man', to include a human being, human beings as a group or race, and a male human being. The language ignores women by allowing masculine terms to be used to refer to both males and females. It defines them as less significant than men and depreciates them (Romaine, 1999). Udofot, (2009) shares this view as she is of the opinion that males are often described as the stronger, dominant and worthier sex. This position is portrayed in Nollywood movies.

## **8 Discussion**

The paper has examined overt sexism in Nollywood movies. The findings indicate that out of the five types of sexist language identified by Rybacki and Rybacki (1991), three types were used by the characters in the movies: the use of generic nouns, the use of sex-role descriptors revolving around professions and the use of insult terms that describe women in negative light. The biggest problem areas regarding sexist language are those words that indicate that men are better than women and that women are lesser beings even when they are doing the same job as men. Examples of words that belong to this category are words like 'ladydriver', 'female-bodyguards' and 'woman-man'.

Language can reflect sexism in society. Language, itself, may not be sexist, but it can connote sexist attitudes. Words of a language are not intrinsically good or bad, but

reflect individual or societal values. Women are often marginalized basically because it is believed that the world is seen, interpreted and reconstructed by men. This belief is reinforced by the nature of the Nigerian society where men are believed to be superior to women and confirms the notion that men are the owners of the world including language and women. Attitudes towards women and gender equality in Nigeria have always been influenced by deep historical and cultural underpinnings, bordering mainly on the social structure and expectations of traditional society. Nollywood is implicated as one branch of the media that is most responsible for perpetuating the unfavourable stereotypes of women as inferior and subordinate to men (Endong and Obonganwan, 2015; Kangiwa, 2015). This is why this study aims at raising awareness about sexism in Nollywood movies and drawing attention to the fact that the use of sexist expressions is an act of discrimination against women and diminishes them. The most significant manifestation of sexism used in the movies under study is the use of compound words, generic nouns, naming and non-parallel terms and insult terms. For example, the expressions ‘female-bodyguards’ and ‘female-driver’ are examples of compound words that are portrayed in the movies. The words ‘bodyguards’ and ‘driver’ are used as general terms for the professions, but adding the word ‘female’ to those words when referring to women is a way of discriminating against women. This means that the male is allowed to be titled as only ‘bodyguard’ and ‘driver’ while the female is not. This creates the impression that women are inferior and dependent on men in every aspect of life. Similarly, the use of the generic noun “men” to refer to all humans assumes that all human beings are males and this shows that the English language treats man as the center of the society and rarely notices the existence of woman. They are viewed as the ones representing all the human beings. This practice contributes to women’s invisibility in language and reflects a male dominated society. It shows that women are not included to this race, that is, they are inferior to men. In other words, the word ‘man’ makes males linguistically visible and females linguistically invisible.

### **Conclusion**

This study has examined overt sexism in three Nollywood movies: *Moth to a Flame*, *Intrapersonal* and *Melissa*. The analysis has attested to the fact that women have been treated unfairly even in language. Sexism is one of the multifaceted aspects of language. The awareness that sexism exist in language is a product of feminist movement whose major objective is closing the imbalance between men and women. Despite the attempts by feminist organizations, educational institutions and publishers who have developed guidelines and gender free policies, sexism still exists in the language. Therefore, all hands must be on deck to eradicate it.

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