

Proverbial Oppression of Women in African Culture: The Case of Female Devaluation in Igbo Proverbs

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Abstract: *Gender discourse has occupied an important position in African scholarship. The question is no longer whether women are being marginalized and abused, the question is how and why women are abused and relegated. Men in various cultures and societies have taken the responsibility for the construction of female identity based on some gender stereotype through cultural vehicles such as proverb. Proverbs in Igbo African culture have perpetuated the mainstream oppression and subjugation of women in Igbo society of Nigeria. Like in many other African cultures, proverbs help in defining moral consciousness, thought and belief. They are at the core of African oral literature and are believed to be a reflection of wisdom and truth preserved and passed from one generation to the other. Nonetheless, the beauty presented by this integral aspect of African folklore has been partial and paints a derogatory image about women. This stereotypical depiction of women in Igbo African proverbs has continued to limit and deny the notable contributions of women in the enhancement of humanity in the society. Through the use of the theory of social constructivism and the methodological paradigm of content analysis, the chapter discusses overt sexism in Igbo African proverbs in the face of patriarchy. The study makes use of 16 proverbs collected from written texts and unwritten narratives accessed from Nigerian movie industry (Nollywood) and other visual sources.*

Key Words: *Proverbs, femininity, sexism, language, culture and patriarchy.*

I. Introduction

Proverbs play important role in Africa thought process. Finnegan avows that "in many African cultures, a feeling for language, for imagery, and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology comes out particularly in proverbs" (1970:390). Proverbs in African cultures help in defining of moral consciousness, thought and belief. The significance of this assertion is evident in Igbo proverb-about-proverb which infers that '*Ilu bummanu e jieriokwu*', meaning that Proverbs are palm-oil with which words are eaten. The beauty and importance of proverbs is evident in all languages and cultures: 'A speech without proverb is food without salt' according to Amharic, Ethiopia; 'Proverbs are the horses of speech' for Yoruba, Nigeria. 'Without proverbs, the language would be but skeleton without a flesh, a body without a soul' Zulu, South Africa. Proverbs are highly regarded not just in the communication process but thinking process "In oral cultures, people are impressed by those who have many proverbs at their disposal and know how to use them at the right moment" (Schipper 1991:3).

Sequel to the much importance attached to proverbs, opinions, attitudes and beliefs are believed to be clearly communicated in Igbo African culture by the use of proverbs. Among the indigenous Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria, the use and understanding of proverbs is taken to be a common knowledge. This supports the sociological perspective that common knowledge is a set of ideology and knowledge taken for granted in the society. Given the meaning and values attached to proverbs, it is of importance to note the overt sexism it condones and how it serves a mainstream of gender stereotype particularly against women in Igbo Eastern Nigeria. Balogun (2010:22) supports that "the oppression of women is fostered in Africa, in fact globally, through cultural vehicles such as proverbs." Proverbs have served and continue to serve as a platform for the perpetuation of gender discrimination among the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria.

There has been a massive documentation on the importance of proverbs in African literature and orature. But there is a dearth of literature dealing with social misrepresentations especially in the area of gender. The use of proverbs among the Igbos semantically reveals a cultural tapestry in which the female identity is devalued, while men are positioned through these proverbs at the echelon of wisdom, which women are deemed incapable of attaining. This research reveals that the use of proverb among the Igbo people of Nigeria has constituted an avenue for the abuse and relegation of women by men. According to Oha (1998:87) proverbs, "as forms of figurative communication with didactic functions in studied conversations were found to possess evidences of

male attempt at maintaining control over discourse in society". Women, through Igbo proverbs have negatively been portrayed as senseless, devilish, childish, weak and morally debased. Balogun (2010:21) equally supports that "the most fundamental but neglected aspect in gender discourse lies in the proverbial resources of the community". This chapter therefore, aims to critically analyse overt sexism that is embedded in the use of proverbs by the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria. There is a need to contest the marginality and persistent underrepresentation of women's status in Igbo African proverbs which has led to their oppression.

II. Methodology

Data consisting of sixteen (16) Igbo proverbs that relates to women are collected from the rural and urban discourse. The choice of these sexist proverbs has been prompted by the overt nature of sexism and the cultural devaluation of women. The choice of data in this study is restricted to sexist and obscene proverbs. These proverbs make use of sexual symbols and images derogatory to women. These carefully selected Igbo proverbs are collected from written texts such as the Compilation of Igbo proverbs and their meanings (CIP), other academic sources that make reference to Igbo proverbs especially the ones referring to women and also from unwritten stories and narratives of Igbo proverbs which can be accessed from Nigeria Movie Industry (Nollywood) and other visual sources.

These data will be analysed using content analysis. Qualitative content analysis is also understood as textual analysis, and according to McKee (2001:140), is an educated guess of the most likely interpretations of a text. This method is most appropriate for this study because it involves analysis of textual content such as stories, written and spoken words as well as visualised narratives. Qualitative content analysis is implored to unpack and uncover different themes present in a particular text. Zhang and Wildemuth (2009:319) equally support that "qualitative content analysis pays attention to unique themes that illustrate the range of the meanings of phenomenon rather than the statistical significance of the occurrence of particular texts or concepts." Texts which constitute the discursive practice of a research make much meaning when they are framed within the chain of cultural intertextuality. This point to the fact that a given text in relation to the other texts portrays evidence of cultural and social realities and experiences that is typically interwoven to form a whole discursive unit.

Far from just being the beauty of Igbo's oratory, proverbs have constituted a smooth avenue for cultural depreciation of women. Findings from these sample proverbs reveal that women are portrayed based on some stereotypical depictions as sex objects, irrational, unreliable, weak, wicked, foolish and morally debased. The society, under the direction of men, has invented degrading meaning on women in order to relegate them to secondary citizen position in the society. These themes equally support the critical discussion of the literature review of this research. Each of the proverbs in this sample is given a literally translation and semantic connotation based on the meaning of the wording. This indicates that the contextual and conceptual interpretation of these proverbs is critically provided in this study. "The literal level of translation of the proverb helps to frame or conceptualise the picture or image ascribed to women in the society" (Mmadike 2014:99). This also entails a proper visualisation of the actual meaning of the words used in the proverbs. For the purpose of analysis, the sample proverbs would be classified into themes and key idea as (a) patriarchy and male domination, (b) ridicule on women's sex organ and gender role (d) women as unreliable and unfaithful. These themes equally draw from the review of previous literature and the concern of social constructionism.

III. Representation of female identity through the use of proverbs

Far from being words with deep and thick meaning, most Igbo proverbs are sexually derogatory and are used in Igbo patriarchal society by men to invigorate and sustain themselves as superiors over women. A critical investigation into the semantics of female devaluation in Igbo African proverbs has it that the use of sexist proverbs in Igbo African culture not only misrepresents women but typically oppresses and abuses them. The reason for this radical approach to this socio-cultural phenomenon is equally prompted by Balogun (2010:30), who asserts that "the perception of women's personality, their strengths and weaknesses, their dignity, by the society and by themselves, is, among other things, the result of the way they are portrayed in proverbs". This thought process which is a product of patriarchal social system generates meaning that denigrates women. Igbo sexist proverbs give the impression of women as necessary evil. This has brought about radical discrimination against women in Igbo, as one attempts to question the dignity, happiness and well-being of these women.

Sexist proverbs have helped to reinforce the patriarchal social system in Igboland as women have continued to face objectification in the sexual environment. According to Balogun (2010:21), “the most fundamental but neglected aspect in gender discourse lies in the proverbial resources of the community.” This equally infers that little or no attention has been directed to the relationship between sexist proverbs and women’s oppression on African continent. Specifically, no attention has been paid on how proverbs, as a discourse in which females are portrayed based on some stereotype continue to hinder the current efforts of MDGs towards gender-sensitization and women empowerment in Igbo society. The oppression of women in Igbo African proverbs has some malevolent effects on the identity, dignity, rights, freedom and empowerment of women in this 21st century cultural milieu. This has continued to frustrate the current undertakings of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in its effort in eradicating the oppression of women in Nigeria.

The few studies that have investigated the oppression of women by proverbs in African culture (in the likes of Udobata 1992; Oha 1998 and Balogun 2010) have failed to acknowledge that in Igbo culture like in many other African cultures, women are not given the opportunity to speak in the public, especially where men are gathered, not to talk of using proverbs. Consequently, abusive proverbs are made and imposed on women while giving them no opportunity of defending themselves. This in a way has compromised women’s agency to negotiate sex, since proverbs are taken to be gospel truth. Most women now see themselves as what they are portrayed in these proverbs. It is of utmost importance to note that men use sexist proverbs on women to remind them of their place whenever they (women) seek to liberate themselves from the captivity imposed on them by patriarchy.

If Adandé’s assertion quoted in Roscoe (1971:124) that proverbs are “indispensable for those who wish to understand the souls of African people” is true, then, a logical implication of this is that a misconceived and derogatory image of African women are being carried across the borders. There is more to what has been covered about sexist proverbs in Africa following Monye (1990:17) assertion that, “when people use proverbs there is always some relationship between two situations being compared: the proverb statement and its referent in the social context.” Therefore, except that the meaning attached to Igbo proverbs as words of wisdom and morality are taken not to be the case, or there is a radical eradication of sexist Igbo proverbs, women will continue to fall prey to the obnoxious schemes of men through the use of proverbs in the patriarchal Igbo society.

IV. Theoretical Orientation

This study employs social constructionism theory to unpack the cultural placement and understanding of women in Igbo African proverbs. Social constructionism deals with the nature of reality. For a social constructionist, there is no universality of what constitutes true or false knowledge. What is right or wrong is seen from the perspective of what is observed in particular cultural or social environment. Social constructionism typically opposes the view that the human mind has the capability to mirror reality. Galbin (2014:33) supports that the “social constructionist is not interested to create maps; it surprises the processes that maps form and our maps are formed from our experience and how we perceive them”. It focuses on how meaning is created and challenges the notion of objectivity as understood by positivism. Lock & Strong (2010:7) understand social constructionism as “the view that meaning and understanding have their beginnings in social interaction, in shared agreements as to what these symbolic forms are to be taken to be”. A proverb like ‘women are evil’ does not point to the reality that women are actually evil but a social construct meaning formulated by men to relegate women. Social constructionism can equally be understood “as a perspective which believes that a great deal of human life exists as it does due to social and interpersonal influences (Gergen 1985:265).

Constructionists view knowledge as constructed as opposed to being created. According to this theory, knowledge and many aspect of the world are not real; they exist because we give them reality through agreement. “The ways in which we commonly understand the world, the categories and concepts we use, are historically and culturally specific” (Burr 1995:3). This entails that human beings are the creators of knowledge and it can never be objective. Social constructionism can be linked to the interpretivist paradigm that nurtures the “goal of understanding the world of lived experience from the perspective of those who live in it” (Andrews 2012:14). In common with interpretivist philosophical view, constructionism pays attention on the process by which meanings are created, negotiated, sustained and modified (Schwandt 2003:12). Social constructionism maintains some distinct idea from interpretivism in its assertion that “taken-for-granted realities are cultivated from interactions between and among social agents; furthermore, reality is not some objective truth waiting to

be uncovered through positivist scientific inquiry; rather, there can be multiple realities that compete for truth and legitimacy” (Berger & Luckmann 1966:8).

At the heart of knowledge is language and this has equally occupied a notable position in social constructionism. Social constructionism will aid in understanding the multiple ways in which realities that typically demean women have been created through language medium such as proverbs and have been taken for granted among the Eastern people of Nigeria. Language plays a vital role on how people come to terms with reality and in turn, how people create reality. Social constructionism says that language does not mirror reality but constitutes it (Hibberd 2005). The social world is not given, natural or real but made by people. For Schwandt (2003:19) “Social constructionism understands the fundamental role of language and communication and this understanding has contributed to the linguistic turn and more recently the turn to discourse theory.” The constructionism theory has been used to interrogate sexist proverbs as social constructs enacted to demean women in Igbo African culture. The idea is to challenge some patriarchal structures in language use that devalue the identity of African women and promote gender inequality.

1.1 Patriarchy and Male Domination

The following proverbs serve as cultural vehicles through which men maintain their dominance over women.

- 1) *Oburunanwanyiasinayanawoke ha, yanyulieamirielu.* (If a woman claims equality with a man, let her urinate upwards) (Mmadike 2014:99).

This proverb draws attention to women that if they claim equality with men, they must be able to do as men do. Here, the fact that man stands erect while urinating is used to pose a challenge for a woman who could not do so because she is biologically constrained to a particular posture while urinating. The conceptualization of an open challenge is noted here. Mmadike notes that “the Igbo derisively refer to a woman as *nwaànyìnā-ehuèhūànyumamīrī* ‘woman who stoops while urinating’” (2014:99). This biological component of womanhood has been understood as an impediment by men in Igbo society. The bodily make up of women predisposes them to some form of identity that presents them as weaker and ‘helpless’ vessels.

- 2) *Ugwunwanyibu di ya.* (The beauty/prestige of a woman is her man (husband). “The proverb is visualized as a means of admonishing any adult female who appears to be more concerned about her career than getting married” (Oha 1998:96).

A typical Igbo woman would remain in perpetual agony if no suitor asks for her hand in marriage. Thus, it is a common knowledge among the Igbos of Nigeria that it is only when a woman enters a man’s house under the union of marriage would she be accorded respect by the society. Another interpretation and understanding of this proverb is that no matter how educated, exposed and rich a woman might be, without a man she is nothing.

- 3) *Nwatanwanyizachaaonyemuru, a zawaonyenaalu.* (A lady after answering whose child, will later answers whose wife.)

This proverb equally follows from the previous one discussed above that keeps emphasizing the pitiable state of a lady without a man. The proverb specifically serves as admonition. Mmadike clarifies that “the proverb shows that at a point in the life of a woman, she is expected to marry because her identity is usually derived from that of her husband” (99). It is expected that at the right age, a girl is expected to marry, leave her parent’s home and join her husband. The extreme version of this proverb thus says that if a lady overstays in her father’s house, she turns to a witch.

- 4) *Nwaagboghobiamejuru o tinyeiken’usekwu.* (A lady after flirting around will later rest her buttock in the kitchen)

Men equally use this proverb to reprimand ladies that they should not be carried away by youthful exuberance but should be mindful of the future. The emphasis here is that after a lady would have finished enjoying her life as a youth, she would eventually retire in the kitchen and face her marital chores.

- 5) *Etuosoronwatanwanyiyadiri, o bun woke new ya.* (No matter how a woman appears to be, she belongs to a man.)

This proverb portrays women as dependent on men for their survival. They are incapable of self-actualization and independency but needs a man for guidance. The understanding portrayed by this proverb is thus, a woman without her man is nothing.

6) *So akwukwonrikanwanyiga-ere, o ma nrensiegbe* (A woman can only sell vegetables, she cannot sell gun powder.)

This proverb reminds women and further admonishes them of their place in Igbo society. Traditional Igbo society expects a woman to occupy herself with domestic duties that are symbolized by garden eggs and not in acts of bravery as symbolized by the gun powder. A man can engage himself in any sort of trade or activity but a woman is expected to know her limit and what she is expected to do and not do in Igbo society. "Liberal feminists also point to the way cultural homogeneity unfairly limits women's options" (Cudd 2006: 234).

Theme 1.1 presents proverbs that maintain women suppression in Igbo society. These sample proverbs serve as evident of gender and stratification in Igbo society. In sociological perspective, gender and stratification questions how well we can understand gender division and roles in modern society. The answer to this question indicates that inequality of gender in the society is rooted in patriarchy. This supports the assertion that in Igbo African society, also similar to many other African societies, men have the ultimate control over the activities and lives of women. In other words, it is a man-made society. No wonder why the president of Nigeria in a recent interview says that his wife belongs to his kitchen and the other room. Just like any other property that could be in a home, men believes that paying a bride price is equal to acquiring a woman who is one of his properties at his disposals. The message also conveyed by these sexist proverbs supports that "patriarchy actually aims at destroying "women's consciousness about their potential power, which it derives from the necessity of society to reproduce itself" (Eisenstein 1981:14). They typically depict a picture that a woman is nothing on her own, sequel to this, she is in a constant need for a man to guide and direct her for her own good. There is a need to question and interrogate cultural settings and arrangements that have relegated women to non-rational beings.

Why would a woman be seen as incomplete without a man? Baehr (2003:13) writing on feminism clarifies that "patriarchal paternalistic laws restrict women's options on the grounds that such limits are in women's interest." The mode of socialization for men and women rooted in patriarchal system has equally given rise to the oppression of women. The gender norms and stereotypes obtainable in most societies are strongly rooted not just in capitalist market relations but cultural domination of man over woman (patriarchy). These sexist proverbs have brought about sex roles and sex-role stereotyping. The possible practical implications of these proverbs under this theme have equally contributed to complicity of women. Complicity of women in oppressive society infers that women do not only accept their oppressive immediate condition as the status quo, but also compel their fellow women into accepting it as the norm. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) painted a picture of women who believe and accept that they constantly need to be beaten and corrected by their husbands whom they also refer to as 'My lord', meaning the one who owns me.

This is further stretched to situations when women feel unloved and uncared for by their husbands because they refuse to scold and beat them. To be beaten for corrective purposes by a man, when a woman does something wrong is seen as a sign of love. In Igbo society, as portrayed by these proverbs, men believe that women are irrational. This gives rise to the situation whereby women and children are ranked the same not just in the level of physical capabilities but also with rational reasoning, with male children even occupying a higher echelon of importance more than women because they would grow one day to become a proper man.

The proverb, '*nwanyikaliaonyemuru, a-juba onyega-aru*' (at a certain age, a woman would out-grow the question of whom the parents are and faces that question of who the husband is), pushes women never to relax in the comfort of their parent's house (or more still their own house) but to strive and get her own husband. From an Igbo cultural perspective, it is only when a woman enters a man's house under the union of marriage would she be accorded respect by the society. This has also provided some situation where women go extra mile, even against their wish to throw themselves on men, who would always oppress them. On this, liberal feminists hold that "the social arrangements of personal life should not only be freely chosen, but should be characterized by fairness or justice" (Baehr 2003:13). Even without a man, a woman is and supposed to be herself and happy. Biological distinction between men and women should not lead to inequality and stereotypes but a mutual adaptation of both. This is so because if gender roles still bring about gender inequalities, it is so because the society is still on the social order where men are dominant. There is a need to combat this form of oppression on women and advocate for equal opportunities and rights for all.

1.2 Ridicule on Women's Sex Organ and Gender Discrimination

The following proverbs (7-11) identify the perception of female physiognomy by Igbo men. These proverbs typically ridicule the female sex organ. At this juncture, I draw the attention of the reader to some overt reference to the genital organ.

- 7) *“Anaghiatuikpuukwuegwumakana o bughiyagaaraonweya.* (There is no need to be scared of wide vagina because it cannot sex itself.)

Here, the vagina is portrayed as a vulnerable organ. This also infers that the vagina (woman) is not just vulnerable but also depends on penis (man). The understanding of this dependence also suggests her ownership by the man.

- 8) *Otu ma umaegbuamuma, ogaghiemekammiri zoo.* (The vagina is feigning in vain as lightning, it will not bring rain) (Mmadike 2014:100).

Proverb 8 indicates a disregard on someone who issues a threat but never carries it out. Here also, a consideration is given to the image of the vagina and lightening, which naturally entails rainfall. “Thus, lightning is compared to the reddish part of the vagina which never signals rainfall” (Mmadike 2014:100). Vagina is used here as a metaphor to someone who would issue an empty threat and never carries it out.

- 9) *“Nwanyiburuohu, o sirabaya, naohubuohuya, ma mgbe o putaokwu, achobaonyenweohu,* (A woman would ask to be sexed, that the vagina is her own, but when it causes trouble, the (real) owner (of the vagina) would be looked for)

In proverb 9, a woman, the sexual object is disempowered. Women, according to this proverb are believed to lack the capacity to think and care for themselves, because of this, someone, a man, has to direct and save her from destroying herself. The proverb also links to the stereotype of women being irresponsible and careless about her welfare. This proverb equally portrays infidelity on the part of woman.

- 10) *“Nwa-agboghọUgwutasinneyanaotunwokekayana-agaraonweya, oweetuburuyaraa. Nneya wee siyagaarakwuru. O gaa, a rachieyaozo.*(An Ugwuta girl told her mother that as she was going on her way, a man came and threw her down and sexed (raped) her. Her mother told her to go and retaliate. She went, and was sexed (raped) again) (Oha 1998:93).

This proverb depicts the sexual vulnerability of a woman which she fails to note to her own detriment because of her incapacitated rationality. The difference in the biological component of a woman is seen as inferiority by men in a patriarchal Igbo society. From all indications, in Igbo patriarchal society, sex entails women’s defeat.

- 11) *Nwanyichooka o huchaaebe e siaraya, isi a akpoyan’ala.*(When a woman strives to see the entire aperture through which she is sexed, her head will hit the ground) (Mmadike 2014:101).

This proverb admonishes women from being curious about knowing everything that goes on during sexual intercourse with men. The proverb infers that such curiosity would land them into trouble. The expectation from this proverb is that women should not seek to know much if not, a bizarre consequence would accompany such striving.

In the sexual vulnerability depiction of women in these proverbs 1.2, this study finds out that sex, which is referred to as the anatomy and physiognomy of male and female body has thus acquired sex role and stereotype. Some demeaning attributes on women by men is based on their biological sex difference. The social construction of sex leaves women at the mercy of men since the possession of a penis signifies a higher position in Igbo society. In Igbo patriarchal society, sex entails women’s defeat. From the proverb #10, what is the rationale behind the action of young lady that was raped and was advised to revenge by her mother and consequently was raped again? This depicts a picture of irrationality of women and also the vulnerability of the vagina. The advice from her mother as depicted in the proverb is not an accident; it showed shared foolishness both on the side of mother and the daughter. The construction surrounding this stereotype on women sexual organ has equally led to gender discrimination.

Sex has moved from a biological property to gender which is socially constructed product. Women have been suppressed to a secondary position in Igbo society and consequently, they are victims of men’s construction and use of language. Leith (1987:42) argues that, “Groups who occupy a subordinate or oppressed position in society invariably suffer from linguistic disparagement in the hands of other groups that possess power.” Arguing from the functionalism theories of the society, the understanding of a particular aspect of the society must not be in isolation of the entire system. As a result, the oppressive nature of these sexist proverbs must be understood in the wider range of patriarchal Igbo society.

The application and understanding of gender in relation to these proverbs is crucial sequel to the fact that in social analysis it reveals the suppression of women. This supports the review on the literature that the socio-cultural institutions that define gender role and expectation thus brought about gender inequality that typically frustrates one gender (women especially), in the hands of the other. These sexist proverbs constitute the precarious livelihood of women that liberal feminists oppose. In their advocacy of women emancipation, liberal feminists do not suggest that men and women are the same; rather, for them gender equality presupposes an equal representation of both men and women in all spheres of life in the society without giving preference to any. Although the vagina and the penis are biologically different, this does not suggest supremacy on the side of one against the other. Equality of both genders would ensure that men would not see the women's biological make-up as weakness but rather as a reality of its own.

Bryson says that "there is certainly no inherent or inevitable conflict of interest between men and women" (1999:196). The disparity existing between men and women is a product of socialization in the society and subsequently call for change. The process of socialization in a given culture paves way for the language acquisition because culture provides the norms of the use of language. Most cultures have taken a biased approach and understanding of women because they were enacted by men. Women have the right to a choice and must not be forced to embrace any decision contrary to their wish because of sex.

1.3 Women as Unreliable and Unfaithful

The following proverbs present women as unfaithful beings. It is paramount to understand that men subjugate women to this life of unfaithfulness in order to have a perpetual control over them and save them from themselves. The proverbs under this category admonish men never to trust a woman if not, they would be ruined.

12) *Umunwanyina-cho so uru ha gaeritenaiheobula*(women like to enjoy themselves but not ready to pay for the indulgence.)

This proverb paints a picture of women as cheats. For the fact that women are presented as always in search and in demand of what would only be beneficial to them without them returning similar favors showcases them as ingrate and greedy ones.

13) *E nyegoduonyeohiuloukwu, o ma nkwsiyazu-ohi, enyegodunwanyina-agban'eziiheniile, o gaghjegbochiigban'ezi.* (Give a mansion to a thief, that does not deter 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) (Balogun 2010:26).

This proverb presents women as unpredictable and non-trustworthy with regards to staying faithful in marriage and sexual issues. It equally paints a picture of women as insatiable. In Igbo cultural setting, polygamy is allowed but polyandry is treated with disdain. A woman is expected, according to Igbo culture, to stick to one man no matter what the man does to her. The issue of unfaithfulness in marriage and relation never apply to men; reason being that men are polygamous in nature while women are expected to be faithful and loyal to their men. Balogun (2010:26) writing on this proverb supports that "the proverb is an expression of distrust and a deterministic conception of the woman."

14) *Nwanyibuosisiobogwunaewekoroohereniile.* (Women are climber plant that overrun any available space) (Balogun 2010:27).

A figurative expression is invoked here. It puts the nature of a woman to that of a plant with a fixed root but has it branches in other places. This proverb equally indicates that women are not trustworthy; the implication of this is that women hook up with the best suitor in connubial relationship. Balogun asserts that this proverb "exclusively ascribes a psychological trait to women without compelling evidence for it" (2010:27).

15) *Ma nwanjiejumuaka ma ojighi, obochighiyaigbu di ya.* (Whether a woman has a child or not for her husband, it does not prevent her from killing him)

This is used as a warning to men that they should not gain false security from the fact that their wives have borne children for them, that bond may not be as strong as the husbands might think. This proverb which is based on distrust for women encourages men to always be on the alert against the tricks of women.

16) *Nwanyigwadiyaonyejuru, ogaghiagwayaonyeokwetalu* (A woman would only tell her husband of the man she reproached and not the one she accepts.)

Women through this proverb are portrayed as schemers and cheats. Men are entreated in this proverb to always bear in mind that their woman is seeing another man no matter how faithful she pretends to be. The extreme version of this proverb is that he who has a beautiful wife is in a similar situation with a farmer that grows corn by the road side, because every passerby will have a taste of it.

Proverbs in section 1.3 do not just serve to remind men of the danger that women pose but also to conscientize women that they are evil. It is crucial to understand that sexist proverbs serve dual purpose, one is to put men on the alert against the schemes and plots of women and the second is to remind women of whom they are. Through this, a woman needs not to be reminded of her devilishness should she seek to exonerate herself from any situation against her wish. These proverbs were constructed with strong language to keep women at the perpetual corner of perplexity. "The proverbs picture women as people of unpredictable character, with a natural propensity to be involved in multiple affairs at the same time" (Daramola 2007:127). The reality surrounding the use of these sexist proverbs is that women use them often on themselves since they have internalized it as the reality of who they are. With the acceptance of this reality, proverbs like; (*anyibuumunwanyị di njo*; meaning that; we, women are evil) are subsequently used by women in admonishing each other. This is in support of Monye's (1990:17) assertion that, "when people use proverbs there is always some relationship between two situations being compared: the proverb statement and its referent in the social context." The implications of a sexist proverb is not limited to the world of semantics, it has a correlation to the practical lives of women in the society. When a woman is aware of proverb #15 that whether or not she has a child for her husband, it does not stop her from killing him; she would never confront her husband in whatsoever situation in the family, if not it would be seen as evidence or plot to murder her man.

Notably, the practical implications of these proverbs play crucial role in the burial/mourning process of a deceased man. The tough widowhood ritual imposed on Igbo women is a consequence of most proverbs that state that women are constantly plotting to kill their husbands. Thus, the relationship between a man and a woman is affected in Igbo society sequel to the understanding of women provided by these proverbs. Oha states that "the inferiorization of women in Igbo proverbs affects both the use of proverbs in the culture and male-female relationship in Igboland" (1998:96). Love in a family is then replaced by suspicion and agitation leaving women always in fears. This equally support the findings of the feminist which says that women have been marginalized and devalued through different media and full social participation and public life have been denied them.

Okin (1989:89) supports this view by stating that "that autonomy deficits like these are due to the 'gender system' or the patriarchal nature of inherited traditions and institutions, and that the women's movement should work to identify and remedy them." When there is a change in mentality of how men perceive women, it would equally grant them freedom of in mind starting from the family setting.

V. Conclusion

In the light of qualitative research approach, this chapter highlights that proverbs among the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria are not just an embodiment of cultural and moral values, through which meaning is expressed but also an avenue for gender stereotype. Considering the much importance and value attached to proverbs, the chapter has critically interrogated the semantic devaluation of African women by the use of this mainstream African folklore. The findings of this study strongly align with the sparse literature on proverbs expressing the devaluation of women, and the need to address this social-cultural epidemic. In a patriarchal society that privileges men, the use of certain proverbs in Igboland has systematically subjugated women to a position where they are unable to negotiate their identity and assert their rights as women. In the context of this study, how then does the popular reflection of proverbs as words of wisdom help us understand the overt subjugation of women it condones? Or should it be the case that women are what they are labeled to be in sexist proverbs? Without mincing words, sexist Igbo proverbs are products of patriarchal Igbo culture that demeans women. The effort and awareness of Igbo women to liberate themselves from the oppressions of sexist proverbs has been pulled to the mud by men's persistent use of such proverbs to maintain and uphold their chauvinism. The views and perceptions of women in Igbo society, their strength and weakness, dignity and prowess, have been mirrored through bias sexist proverbs.

Based on social construct theory of the study, relying on abusive proverbs is '*argumentum ad verecundiam*', because it is an appeal to unwarranted authority. Sexist proverbs are fallacious and do not mirror the true reality of women. One of the key difficulties that might hinder women's effort towards their liberation and reconstruction of sexist Igbo proverbs would be the fact that Igbo proverbs are viewed as sacred words of

wisdom or texts that must remain unchanged. To this Balogun says that “this fact has dire ramifications for the struggle against the proverbial oppression of women” (2010:32). A notable effort towards the deconstruction of sexist Igbo proverbs understands that proverbs are products of human convention; men’s convention to be precise. Being critical of this reality would foster the reconstruction of these proverbs through proper channels geared towards women’s emancipation.

Finally, this recommendation does not entail the rejection or renunciation of Igbo proverbs but a proper scrutiny of proverbs so as to depict the reality of women. The study understands that there are certain proverbs that convey positive reality of women but it is paramount to understand that the meaning in those few ones will always be questionable in comparison to these sexist ones. The data of our study emphasizes that women are unreliable and evil and any proverb stating otherwise will be suspiciously considered. We share the view of Dwight Bolinger (1987), in the introduction to this paper which states that “sexism in language may be a rusty gun but it is loaded and therefore dangerous.” It is even more dangerous when we forget that it persists in our discourses such as proverbs.

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