

ASSERTIVE RATHER THAN AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF GENDERED LANGUAGE ABOUT WOMEN IN IGBOLAND

Anyanwu, Edith Ada, PhD** & Eze, Adaora Maudline PhD**

Abstract

The age-long gendered language about women in Igboland can be deconstructed using assertive rather than affirmative action. This study seeks to show that misogyny is the base of the gendered language about women in Igboland across ages. It argues that rather remaining affirmative to misogyny, and gendered language and ills against the women, assertive action is the panacea. Oral interview and questionnaire are used to gather primary data from randomly selected women in Ehugbo and Mbaise of Ebonyi and Abia States respectively. Print materials from the internet and the library constitute the secondary data sources. Qualitative and quantitative methods and techniques are deployed for the data analysis. The analysis reveals that gendered language has been used overtime to profile and misrepresent women in Igboland as ‘weaker vessels’, who can never be considered equal with men. The study concludes that gendered language about women in the land thrives because of affirmative action by women and men alike. The study charges women to deconstruct gendered labels about them, and be assertive rather than affirmative in their actions concerning gendered language, role and matters in order to attain a new world order, as they prove to men that neither females nor males are inferior or superior to the other. The study is rooted in Walker’s Womanist Theory, which upholds gender complementarity rather than bigotry.

Keywords: Assertive, affirmative, action, deconstruction, gendered language

Introduction

Structural imbalance, socio-cultural inequalities, gendered interactions, gendered language and considering feminine traits as weaknesses leading to chauvinism, among others, are gender components that have to be deconstructed (Danjuma, 2023; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Deutsch, 2007).the term ‘deconstruction’ is used here to refer to the process of reversing the negative mentally and linguistically constructed labels and views about females (women), which are the opposites of those about males (men). Ordinarily, to construct means to creatively and tactically form or create something; as in constructing a sentence, a house, a bridge, a road and so on. In other words, it means to put up something, or frame, craft or bring something into existence. Gender deconstruction, as Danjuma (2023) notes, involves getting rid of or changing “what had or has been constructed earlier, which includes demolishing, erasing, deleting, uprooting, wiping out, etc. what (e.g. structures) had been constructed and built in our minds about women (females)” (p. 79). Language plays a crucial role in the construction.

Constructions that are gendered typify gendered language use constructing them. Language is gendered among many cultures. Igbo culture is one among the many. Just as theorists of modernisation and liberal feminisms “call for a change from the old traditional values that are patriarchal and negative to women development to modern values that are favourable to women and development” (Idyorough, 2005, p. 31), this study calls for the change of gender perspectives and practices made manifest in gendered language through assertive action and deconstruction of gendered language in Igboland and beyond. This study rises to argue for the deconstruction of gendered language in Igboland and beyond. It proposes the use of assertive rather than affirmative action to deconstruct gendered language. The study seeks to show that misogyny is the base of the gendered language about women in Igboland across ages. Beyond showing the base of misogyny, the study seeks to it takes assertive actions and language use to make a sporadic shift from the age-long negative constructs about women among cultures to positive ones. argues that rather

remaining affirmative to misogyny, and gendered language and ills against the women, assertive action is the panacea.

Related Studies

Danjuma (2023) is of the view that the humanism of women is perpetually made insignificant by patriarchy, culture and religion, which ought not be so. These factors account for the age-long negative constructs about the Igbo women as being weak(er) human beings, who are incapable of this and that and do not deserve this or that because of their feminine nature. Merely because of their feminine traits, they are considered to be unfit any significant socio-cultural, economic, political and otherwise roles in society. Danjuma (2023) further notes, “On the same grounds, they are denied various meaningful opportunities and their fundamental human rights are continuously trampled upon” (p. 77). For a new world order, such systems have to be reformed and modernized in order to attain changes in society.

Anyanwu (2023) argues that the human traits constituting the base of gendered language and gendered roles in society begin with the physiological and biological or natural ones. The natural traits are first considered, after which other traits are viewed from the former. The other traits include psychological and behavioural features. Linguistically, gendered roles, the focus includes categorisation, image scheming and analogical mapping on the basis of patriarchy and matriarchy respectively. It also includes ascertaining or adjudging proficiency, competency, profit and loss accounts or narrations (Anyanwu, 2023). Linguistic profiling of gender roles involves formulating, framing, expressing, producing, crafting, writing, marking out, composing or describing women and men within the confine of patriarchy or matriarchy in relation to their considered psychological and behavioural characteristics. These characteristics are used to categorise men and women of a given culture and their behaviour as well as other personality traits are predicted by the profilers of both ancient and present times (Anyanwu, 2023).

Similarly, Besong (2021) avers that it is logically provable to consider males and females as equal human beings, basically because of their humanness as well as humanity. That is, both males and females are humans in equal regards and need equal considerations, fairness, right treatments, etc. He argues ‘regardless of the physical differences between males and females, it is illogical to exploit such differences to promote gender stereotype (Besong, 2021, p. 87).’ It follows that it is discriminatory to use negative language about women, merely because of their feminine traits and do not do same to or about men on the basis of masculine traits. He goes on to clarify that since men and women are humans, they are logically and naturally equal, and capable of doing anything a human being can do except for the distinct reproductive responsibilities that are to males and females respectively.

Reflecting on the specific case of African women, Chimakonam (2018) argues that women are marginalized in the academic world. It is quite obvious that the marginalization is as a result of gender ills against women in Africa as a whole and Igboland in particular. In contrast, Uduma (201) and Balogun (2018) argue otherwise that African women were/are not marginalized. Balogun (2018) claims that Yoruba women were not marginalized in pre-colonial Africa, making references to different positions and responsibilities held by Yoruba women in pre-colonial Yorubaland.

Afella (2016) laments over the negative constructs about women among Muslims based on Islamic teachings, such as the following:

One out of 99 women is in heaven, while the rest 98 are in hell fire;
Men perish when they obey women
Woman is a vile beast, and I think that women were created for nothing but evil'
Bad omen is in three things: horses, woman and the home
The woman has two things to cover her: the grave and marriage, and grave is better
Women are unclean creatures
Three things corrupt prayers: women, dogs and donkeys
A man's prayer is interrupted if a donkey, black dogs and women pass by nearby
Woman is all evil, the most evil thing about her is that she is indispensable
God does not regard a woman who does not thank her husband, since she cannot do without him (Afella, 2016, pp. 159-163).

The thrust of this paper is given credence by Robert (2016), who argues that “gender roles and all that concerns gender are culturally determined and so they could be reformed to do away with the aspects that are unfavourable to women, men or both” (p. 10). His words highlight the fact that gendered language anywhere in the world is a cultural thing made so by the people of a given culture. Interestingly, as he affirms, any gendered constructs can be deconstructed by reforming them to become worthwhile and favourable to both males and females.

Grimshaw and Fricker (2002) argue that because of gender exclusivity in the West, the history of Western philosophy has no place for women, as no great female philosophers are recorded among the ancients of Western philosophy. From their observation, it could be understood that negative gender constructs and gendered language obtained and still obtains in the West. Nevertheless, the extent to which obtain in present-day West differs considerably from that which obtains in Africa. Oha (1998) discusses male domination in Igbo proverbs, stressing that this domination is usually neglected and so proverbs are made to be the products of men alone to the exclusion of women. The implication is that male domination (misogyny) has been unchangingly pronounced in Igboland.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the African feminist theory of Womanism, which engages with gender discourse and examines the inherent issues in the discourse from African perspective. The womanist is defined by Walker (1983, p. xi) as ‘a Black feminist or feminist of colour,’ who expresses motherhood to children; ‘appreciates and prefers women’s culture;’ ‘loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually;’ and is committed to the survival and wholeness of both male and female people of her society. Kolawole (1997) has noted that the inadequacies and uncovered experiences of Black women and children in US, UK and Europe propelled the emergence of Womanism, which has its root in womanist theology. Additional to excluding the African woman from feminist agenda, Western feminism does not consider the pride of womanhood in contrast to manhood (Ogonnaya & Besong, 2018).

Womanism is actively engaged in theorizing and narrating the gender-based tragic experiences of the African woman and the man-tailored woes she is made to suffer perpetually as a result of

negative linguistic constructions, sexist gender constructions, the profiling of gender along with gendered roles, sexist history of women, myths and tales about women, and so on. The womanist also narrates and appraises African women's glorious deeds in historical times, which are stereotyped on gender lane and thus neglected or left ever untold, their proven capabilities and their displayed innovations to gendered roles (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996). The womanists reject the partial consideration of what affect women alone in society. Rather, they advocate a two-side consideration of all that affects women and men in society on the basis of gender. Unlike (Western as well as other) feminists, Womanists consider 'relations and interconnections as central to life and the science of living' (Wambui, 2018).

As such, for them, rather than having gendered roles hierarchy and separatist and stereotypical gender relations and roles, gender complementarity and equity should be made to replace them across generations. By considering as well as emphasizing 'relations and interconnections', womanist theorists postulate that complementary gender relations and roles would do away with the gender gap (or gender imbalance) between men and women in society, while the otherwise would rather widen it or create an unresolved mighty problem that has various aspects and multifaceted phases. One of the areas in which the womanist differs from her Western fellow is that she admits the reality of natural differences between men and women and does not kick against traditional or (normative) sexuality and sexual ethics.

More so, the Womanism advocates gender complementarity, which teaches that males and females are complementary opposite beings of inevitable necessity to each other in all they do. Men and women are meant to complement each other in all they do. Their complementary relations are to be the manifestations of 'two good heads are better than ones'; 'a tree cannot make a forest'; 'what a man can do, a woman can do, even better'; 'united, we stand; divided, we fall'; 'there is unity in diversity'; 'right hand washes the left, just as the left washes the right hand'; and so on. Therefore, sexism, whether from men to women or vice versa, is a negation of the realities of complementary gender relations between men and women. Womanists do not use language radically to create space for themselves in the male preponderance African society. Also, Womanism is not characterized by gender streaming that is turn-around gender-based fight, war or violence against men, as done by several strands of Western feminism like radical feminism.

Methodology

Oral interview and questionnaire are used to gather primary data from randomly selected women in Ehugbo and Mbaise of Ebonyi and Abia States respectively. Print materials from the internet and the library constitute the secondary data sources. Qualitative and quantitative methods and techniques are deployed for the data analysis.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Here, questionnaire data on gender construction in Mbaise and Afikpo are presented and analyzed. Other data are left out here.

Table 1: Do you agree that some socio-cultural roles had been made the exclusive preserved of women in Mbaise and Afikpo?

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agreed	1150	95.8
Agreed	50	4.2
Strongly Disagreed	_____	_____
Disagreed	_____	_____
Total	1200	100%

Source: Anyanwu (2022)

As shown above, all the respondents confirmed that women in Mbaise and Afikpo have certain roles that had been gendered for them. The confirmation was given by 1150 (95.8%) respondents and 50 (4.2%) respondents respectively. The former indicated ‘Strongly Agreed’, while the latter indicated ‘Agreed’. The fact that no single response was received for ‘Strongly Disagreed’ (SD) and Disagreed (D) implies that it is an indisputable fact that there are certain socio-cultural roles that had been gendered for females alone in Mbaise and Afikpo. Responses from questionnaire, focus group discussion, and oral and telephone interviews indicated the following roles, as those commonly gendered among women in Mbaise and Afikpo.

The differences in the distinct gendered roles in the two study areas shall be presented and analysed later. The commonly obtained ones, applicable to the two areas are the following:

- (i) Child bearing;
- (ii) Omugwo;
- (iii) Domestic chores, e.g. cooking, washing and sweeping;
- (iv) Initiating and ensuring baby-sitting;
- (iv) Dancing feminised traditional dances like the Egwu omurunwa, singing, and telling of folkloric stories;
- (v) Iti oro (making chants when a woman delivers or any good news is broken);
- (vi) Farming of cassava, cocoyam, pepper, okra, vegetable and such other crops classified as feminine or low class crops, which exclude yam;
- (vii) Adjudication and arbitration of cases involving women, including wading into cases considered as taboos that affect the females;
- (viii) First daughters take share of the pelvic part (ukwu) of any animal killed for consumption in the family.

Table 2: Gendering roles between males and females, as in Mbaise and Afikpo, relegates women and limits their ideal contributions to society. Do you agree?

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agreed	1080	90
Agreed	60	5
Strongly Disagreed	_____	_____
Disagreed	60	5

Total	1200	100
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Source: Field Survey, 2022

The data contained in the table above confirm the assertion that gendering roles between males and females, as in Mbaise and Afikpo, relegates women and limits their ideal contributions to society. 1080 respondents, representing 90% of the total, strongly agreed that one of the grave implications of gendering roles is the relegation of persons of the sex folk that the gendering does not favour. Next, 60 (5%) respondents agreed but not strongly to the assertion. Only the remaining 60 (5%) indicated otherwise. As evidenced above, the gendering of roles in the areas under study does not favour the females. It is the base of their relegation. Besides, their ideal contributions to their societies are limited by the gendering of roles.

Oral Interviews

Here, only highlights of the responders are given. All the interviewees testified that land sharing excludes female children, as culture had conditioned them to be deprived of the share of their (late) fathers' belongings. Females are not heirs per se. In Afikpo, females are heirs of their mothers, while males (sons) are heirs to their fathers. Female children do not own land and valuable property in both Mbaise and Afikpo, because they get married and move out of their paternal families into their marital families. However, these days, female children buy and own land and such other landed property, provided they have their money to acquire them. Till date, female children do not have any share of community land shared among male children.

The birth of male child is more celebrated than that of the female child in both Mbaise and Afikpo. This is a case of unfavourable cultural conditioning of the female child. This implies that the conditioning starts right from the birth of the females. In Mbaise and Afikpo, women are not given opportunities to make decisions concerning families, clans, villages and communities. The exclusion of women from traditional stools in Mbaise and Afikpo shows how culture and patriarchy have conditioned women politically, as they are excluded from significant traditional leadership. Obviously, religion, patriarchy, etc. have conditioned women unfavourably over the ages. For example, men are not punished for offences such as adultery, unlike women who are punished severely. There are no equivalent practices of widowhood for widowers in Afikpo and Mbaise as well as across the globe.

These days, unlike in those days, women buy land and build houses on their own in their fatherland; and do a lot of what were not permissible for them in those days. Women are now given equal education opportunities with men. The change of the mentality and myths about female education in modern and post-modern times has made it possible for many women in the study areas and beyond to be educated in large numbers. In fact, the number of educated women in these areas as well as beyond now competes considerably with that of educated men. Educating both male and female children is now competing. Nevertheless, that change is still amidst the practical disposition of the notion of 'woman's education ends in the kitchen' by a good number of men in Mbaise and Afikpo and beyond. Widowhood practices have changed significantly amidst continuities. While some negative aspects of widowhood have been changed, others remain the same or have been sustained as continuities in the practice. The subjection of widows to various

tough and hard conditions has become obsolete in Mbaise and Afikpo. The changes and continuities vary considerably between Mbaise and Afikpo in terms of what obtained therein then and now.

The eating of gizzard, liver and the anus-joined bottom parts of a chicken by men alone in both Mbaise and Afikpo is a continuity that has remained an aspect of gender constructed continuity culture across all ages. Women in Afikpo still retain subservient status or role in the traditional setting – nothing has changed to end. The situation is still the same. That is, gendered roles still remain the same. They currently occupy no position. Till date, Afikpo and Mbaise women are perceived and treated as weaker vessels in terms of all that benefit men alone. In those days, Mbaise and Afikpo women were not largely educated. These days, they are. The major reasons for many of them not being educated then were: the people were suspicious of Western education; spending time on schooling would delay them from getting married when they were supposed to and that would also affect the number of children they might intend to have; some girls/ladies were not interested in Western education; some parents were not interested and thereby saw no need to send their female children for that matter to school; lack of finance for sponsorship; they believed that Western education would make them wild– too wild for the kind of wives their men wanted then. That has changed significantly these days.

On equality between men and women, all the participants screamed out ‘No’, stressing that they have never been equal and they are bound to remain unequal on cultural ground. The answer highlights the fact that the use of gendered language about women in Mbaise and Afikpo had got profiled linguistically profiled as unequal to men on the basis of gender. In fact, a respondent wrote in his social media delivered answer to one of the questions thus: ‘In Mbaise, ‘a family or compound (*Ezi* or *Obi*) without a man is incomplete and lacks recognition and respect.’ This implies that the male is the ultimate child in Mbaiseland. This point tallies with that given by many of the Afikpo respondents viz: ‘Male child preference is prevalent in Afikpo, because the male replaces his father, while the female child gets married out.’ Nevertheless, a few of them stressed that these days, some men now believe that female children take more care of their aged parents than the male ones do. It follows that such men have seen the need take assertive action and deconstruct gender in their land.

Conclusion

The study concludes that gendered language about women in the land thrives because of affirmative action by women and men alike. The study charges women to deconstruct gendered labels about them, and be assertive rather than affirmative in their actions concerning gendered language, role and matters in order to attain a new world order, as they prove to men that neither females nor males are inferior or superior to the other. The study is rooted in Walker’s Womanist Theory, which upholds gender complementarity rather than bigotry.

Gendered roles have changed in Afikpo and Mbaise in several regards. In the first place, females are given equal education opportunities. Females are now allowed to go to school. These days, they are called upon in social and public gatherings to talk or carry out tasks which used to be the exclusive preserved of the males in the past. Women are now allowed to occupy public offices and

carry out public functions that involve leading both males and females. The changes are gradual. Although they can buy and own any portions of land they want, the practice of excluding women from free communal ownership of land remains unchanged misogynistic practice of land ownership and use. In conclusion, the obtained changes in gendered practices showcase their reconstructions in present-day Mbaise and Afikpo societies of Igbo.

Recommendations

For a new world order, the study recommends the following as the panacea:

- (i) Women, like men, should be given free share of land portions in their parents' places of origin;
- (ii) Putting up as well as ensuring a sustained change through cultural reformation;
- (iii) Attitudinal change, which can be realised consistent sensitisation and reorientation;
- (iv) Enactment of legislations outlawing all forms of gender exclusiveness.

***Anyanwu, Edith Ada, PhD**

Department of Languages and Linguistics,
Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki
eanyanwu44@gmail.com

****Eze, Adaora Maudline (Ph.D)**

Department of Languages and Linguistics
Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki
mezeadaora@gmail.com

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