

SEXISM IN LANGUAGE: A STUDY OF ADIMORA-EZEIGBO'S *THE LAST OF THE STRONG ONES* AND EMECHETA'S *SECOND CLASS CITIZEN*

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Abstract

Language does not only serve as a means of constructing and maintaining the society; it also reflects all the sides of human society naturally. Sexism is the linguistic disparity in the language of a people based on sex. Working within the tenets of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, this paper investigates sexism in English language using two works of two female writers in order to analyse how English is replete with patriarchal imposed limitations. The data for analysis were obtained from Adimora-Ezigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* and Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*. The purposes are to identify and study some sexist expressions as contained in the two books under study and how such expressions can be made gender sensitive. The study reveals that sexism in language is a reflection of cultural, social and psychological dominance of men over women; and recommends, that these cultural, social and psychological factors should be engaged and adjusted in such a way that women should be given due recognition. It is only when this is done that sexism will be eradicated.

Keywords: Sexism, English language, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, gender disparity, and dominance

Introduction

For thousands of years, according to Mey (2001), the social formation in which most of our species has lived has been dominated by males (p.313). This dominance does not only manifest in material respects but also in other less tangible matters such as the use of language. This has led to sexism in language. A sexist language is a language that excludes either women or men when discussing a topic that covers both sexes instead of a gender-neutral one. Abrams (2005) explains that English speaking feminists have drawn attention to demonstrable evidences that a male bias is encoded in the English language linguistic conventions. Instances of these are the use of "men" or "mankind" for human being in general, of "chairman" and "spokesman" for a person of either sex, and of the pronoun "he" and "his" to refer to ostensibly gender-neutral nouns such as "God," "human being," "child," and "inventor" (P.97). Goddard and Patterson in Umera-Okeke (2015) refer to English Language as a gendered language based on the following three facts:

- i. It is a language that is made up of sex exclusive vocabulary (hunk for man, chick for women).
- ii. The language contains linguistic items that remain the same but change in meaning when referring to a man or a woman.

- iii. It is a language that carries within it a shared understanding about how men and women are meant to behave and the characteristics they are meant to possess (P.563).

Sexist expressions or sexism in language can be found at different levels of linguistics and in different forms. The task in this work is to do a critical analysis of sexist language in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* and Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Feminist CDA) is the theoretical orientation of this study. Feminist CDA is a strand of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA, on its own, is an approach that investigates the way social meanings manifest through language use. It is an approach to discourse analysis that betrays how unequal social arrangements are enacted and sustained through language use. According to Van Dijk (2001) CDA "is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" (P.374). Feminist CDA, therefore, intermediates between CDA and feminist linguistics to reveal how unequal social arrangements against women are enacted and sustained through the use of language.

From the foregoing, Feminist CDA can be explained as a theory or a strand of CDA that expresses concern about gender inequalities. Feminist CDA, as a practice is all the more necessary and relevant in these times, in order to combat critical inertia and take to task contemporary forms of discursively enacted gender asymmetries. Feminist CDA is a strand of CDA that, according to Lazar (2007), is concerned with the operation of gender ideology and institutionalized power asymmetries between (and among) groups of women and men (P.141). The aim of Feminist CDA, therefore, is to show up the complex, subtle and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken for granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relation are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated and challenged in different contexts and communities.

Lazar (2007) further explains that the interest of Feminist CDA is not merely an academic deconstruction of texts and talk for its sake, but an acknowledgement that the social issues dealt with (in view of effecting social change) have consequences for groups of women and men in specific communities (P.142). A feminist CDA perspective is obviously interdisciplinary in nature. On the one hand, it contributes to critical language and discourse studies -- a perspective informed by feminist studies; and at the other hand, it suggests the usefulness of language and discourse studies for the investigation of feminist issues in gender and women studies. Feminist CDA is a concerted move towards explicitly concentrating on female and male inequalities. It is a narrowed-research from the wider CDA with its focus on social justice and transformation of gender and language. It is a timely contribution to the growing body of feminist discourse literature, particularly in the field of gender and language where CDA has occupied a surprisingly marginal position.

This theoretical framework is quite appropriate to this study because it recognizes both the formal and informal (Subtle) ways the resources of language have been ideologically structured and patterned in the presentation of male and female gender in the texts of supposedly two Nigeria feminists – Buchi Emecheta and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo.

Empirical Review of Related Literature

There are many scholarly works on sexist language and sexism in general, as well as on Buchi Emecheta's and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's works. This section of analysis is dedicated to reviewing the observations and findings of such scholars.

Lei (2006) defines sexist language as a language that expresses bias in favour of one sex and thus treats the other sex in a discriminating manner. In most cases, the bias is in favour of men and against women (P.87). Lei's paper discusses sexist language from two typical aspects: sexism in words and sexism in proverbs. In sexism in words, Lei (2006) observes that in society, "men are considered the norm for the human species: their characteristics, thoughts, beliefs and actions are viewed as fully representing those of all human - male and female alike" (P.87). She further explains that practices like this can make women invisible in language or altogether excludes them thereby making language sexist. This also causes women linguistic status to often be dependent on or derives from that of men which is always represented as autonomous.

Another aspect of sexism that Lei (2006) also discusses is the aspect of proverbs which also portray women as appendage to men. Some of the proverbs by Lei (2006) are given below.

1. He who follows his wife's advice will never see the face of God.
2. A woman is like a lemon, squeeze her and throw her away.
3. Seven women in their right senses are surpassed by a mad man.
4. Women have got long hair and short sense.
5. If you see an old man, sit down and take a lesson; if you see an old woman, throw a stone.

Lei's research (2006) concludes that sexism in language is a social problem since it is the reflection of human beings' thoughts. Therefore, to eliminate the sexist language, Lei recommends that we should above all eliminate the concept of prejudice in human beings' thoughts. Only by this way we can be free of sexism both in language and the society forever. This means that there can be no solution to the problem of sexism in society on the level of language alone (p.94).

Ochieng (2012) argues that discrimination stems from speakers' mind and hence performing gender neutral language alone does not confirm gender neutrality of the performer. The reliable way of judging gender neutrality would then be studying the speakers' minds. Ochieng's study applies psychoanalytic literary criticism as a gateway to the unconscious minds of American authors towards finding out how gender neutral they are at cognitive level. Through this psychoanalytic approach, authors' suppressed desires would find their way out on their works in a distorted form. The researcher, therefore, concludes that social stereotype in the unconscious minds of the members of the society is the cause of sexism in language.

Similarly, Umera-Okeke (2012) establishes that sexism "is generally conceived as anything that conveys that one sex is superior to the other which in most societies is commonly shown in behaviour that depicts males as superiors to female" (p.3). She asserts that a look at linguistic sexism is a way of finding out the relationship between language and gender. Her research establishes that English language is a sexist language that excludes women and trivializes what women do (p.1).

Guimei (2010), in his work on sexism in English also looks at the linguistic levels where sexism can be found in English. According to him, one of the most obvious evidence of the sexism is the affixes which lead to a view of women as a derivation from a male term (p.332). At the syntactic level, he observes that the masculine term "man" and some other words are always used in their generic sense. Man and women as two equal components of human race are actually not equal in English lexicon. Man, besides its reference to male human being can also refer to the whole race.

Methodology

The research design adopted for this work is a case study research design. This design enabled the researcher to do a qualitative analysis of sexist expressions as contained in Buchi Emechata's *Second Class Citizen* and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*. The sexist

expressions in the texts were also analyzed using the tools of feminist CDA to unravel the gender disparity in such expressions. The novel *Second Class Citizen* shall be abbreviated to “SCC” and *The Last of the Strong Ones* to “LSO” just for convenience. Sexist language in the two books will be analysed simultaneously at morphological, word, syntactic, semantic, proverb, and discourse levels.

Discussion and Findings

Sexism at Morphological Level

Sexism or sexist language can be found at different levels of language analysis. At morphological level, sexism is engraved in English language to mark gender practice in human agent nouns which treat women and men differently to show asymmetry. The base structure of nouns in English always seems to be the male form. The female form is always derivative of male form which is suggestive that female is dependent on men. There are many English pairs of words which make it possible to argue that women are but appendage to men. Some of the pairs in English include: male and **female**, god and **goddess**, prince and **princess**, man and **woman** etc.

The bold part of the female nouns shows the presence of the male nouns as the base of the female nouns and derives their meanings as the opposite or female version of the male nouns. This type of sexism at morphological level causes women linguistic status to often be dependent on or derived from that of men which is always represented as autonomous.

These pairs of words show that most woman agent nouns project women as mere appendage. As can be seen from the above pairs, female nouns have their male counterparts as their roots; they are just extensions so to say. The female nouns listed above are not just only extensions of the male nouns; they also portray weakness and inequality. In Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*, the word ‘goddess’ is used in a reduced manner and assigned with trivial matters.

Excerpt 1

Well, Pa and his friends toastest the goddess of River Oboshi for no allowing lawyer Nweze to go astray. That Oboshi was strong enough to guide the thoughts of Nweze demonstrated her power. They toasted again. (SCC, p.17)

The passage above shows the demining function assign to the female noun ‘goddess’ - the function of protecting sons and daughters of Ibuza from marrying wrongly and inflicting defaulters with leprosy. This role is very inferior and in direct contrast with the role or the projection of its male counterpart ‘god’. The male noun is presented as being in charge of everything including the goddesses. It is believed that he assigns goddesses their functions and makes them redundant at will. The male ‘god’ commands and oversees, while the female goddess derives her power and reports back to the god.

Excerpt 2,

Later, Ada did not know what came over that River Oboshi, though oil was discovered very near her, and she allowed the oilmen to dig into her without cursing them with leprosy. The oil men were mainly white, which was a surprise. Or perhaps she had long been declared redundant by the greater gods. That would not have surprised Ada, for everybody could be declared redundant these days, even goddesses. If not redundant, then she must have been in a Rip Van Winkle sleep, for she also allowed the Hausa soldiers to come and massacre her sons, and Ibuza men had married white women without getting leprosy. (SCC, p.17)

Again, the above passages betrays the fact that English does not only have gender marking practice in human agent nouns which treat men and women differently, but also shows that women are inferior and dependent. The base word ‘god’ from the above passage is portrayed as

greater. Linguistically speaking, the word ‘goddess’ is derived from the male counterpart noun ‘god’, and her power functions, culturally speaking, are also derived from the male noun ‘god’. Oboshi goddess is presented as being slightly above human and can be made quiet by strong human forces like white men and Hausa soldiers, or can be declared redundant by greater gods. Women are not only dependent to men culturally; they are but also presented linguistically as being dependent through the use of human agent nouns that are derived from male agent nouns. This shows that sexism is also engraved in English at morphological level. Not only with the word ‘goddess’, the female agent nouns in the pairs of words listed above show that female agent nouns are derived from their male agent counterparts, and they (female agent nouns) are portrayed also as being weak and dependent just as they are linguistically. By relegating women to a dependant, subordinate position, sexist language prevents the portrayal of women and men as being equal. This is what Umera Okeke (2015) means when she says that the English language is arranged so that men are identified with gloried and exalted positions or words, and women with more service-oriented positions in which they are being dominated and instructed by men (p.562). The derivation of female agent nouns from male agent nouns reflects and conveys male supremacy and his honoured position and subservience of the female.

Sexism at Word and Phrase Level

Sexism in English is also found at word and phrase level. This is another level with demonstrable evidences that a male bias is encoded in the English linguistic conventions. The use of words such as chairman, spokesman, man or mankind, for a person of either sex or for human being in general is an act of sexism. In society and in language by extension, men are considered the norm for the human species, their characteristics, thoughts, beliefs and actions are viewed as fully representing those of all human – male and female alike. Practice like this make women invisible in English and altogether excludes them thereby making English a sexist language. In the two books under study, the use of male oriented words for both male and female abounds. Some of those words include oilmen, Whiteman, mailman, congressman, newsman policemen, Forman, and milkman.

Excerpt 3

They are accused of not attending regularly native court at Awka where the white man sits in judgement of the black man, applying his own senseless and strange laws. (LSO, p.10)

Excerpt 4

What medicine did Kosiri use to cause these **sons** of Umuga to become traitors to their fatherland? (LSO, p.16)

The use of the words ‘whiteman’ and ‘sons’ in the above excerpts is once again used generically to mean all – female and male alike. Another instance of sexism at word level is the use of gender-neutral words for men and the addition of ‘women’ to it when referring to women. Some of those words are relative, doctor, solicitor, lawyer, professor and teacher. These are words that are gender neutral, yet they are easily related to and interpreted to be for men only, thereby resulting to compound words for women such as female relative, female doctor, female solicitor, woman lawyer, lady professor and female teacher. In another instance the adjective “women” is used in place of “female” such as women lawyer, women professor and women doctor. The reason for attaching the adjectives ‘female’ or ‘woman’ or ‘lady’ is because the bare forms have, over the years, been associated to men. It is not common to see the noun adjective “male” or “man” attached to the neutral nouns given above such as ‘man doctor’ or ‘male professor’.

Excerpt 5

Francis would say she had invented the pregnancy to avoid work. Had he not taken her to see a female gynaecologist the very next day because, as he said, no marriage succeeds without a good sex life? (SCC, p.45)

Excerpt 6

A relative of theirs came to make special prayer to the river Oboshi. (SCC, p.31)

The two excerpts immediately above reveal that gender neutral words as mostly interpreted to be male, thus the need to add the adjective “female” or “women” before using it for women. In excerpt 7, the writer used the adjective “female” to modify the neutral gender word “gynecologist”. A gynecologist is someone (female or male) who specialises in the treatment of medical conditions and illness that affect only women, and usually relating to a woman’s ability to have babies. The term encompasses both male and female. The use of the adjective “female” suggest that English is a sexist language and has come to regard those gender-neutral words to be for male and the inclusion of the adjective “female” or “woman” when referring to women. In the excerpt 8, the gender-neutral word “relative” does not need the attachment of any adjective because it is for a man. And because, English language sees gender neutral words as representing male, the writer sees no need of making it “male relative” as she did in “female gynecologist”.

Again, there are many other words that have the morpheme ‘men’ in them and they are used to mean things which do not have any association with gender. Some examples of such words are manhunt, manslaughter, man-made man-eater, Man Booker Prize, man-hour, mankind, and manpower. These words do not have meanings associated with gender or sex. The English language does not permit as synonyms or antonyms words such as ‘woman hunt’ and ‘woman slaughter’.

Excerpt 7

In fact, to most of her Nigerian neighbours, she was having her cake and eating it. She was in a whiteman’s job, despite the fact that everybody had warned her against it, and it looked as if she meant to keep it (SCC, p.75)

In the extract above, the use of whiteman’s job does not necessary mean that the job is for men alone. The phrase ‘whiteman’s job’ is used in the generic sense to mean job for white people. The English language does not permit anything like ‘whitewoman’s job’. Even if it does it will never be used to cover female and male. Man and woman as two equal components of human race are naturally not equal in English lexicon. Man, besides its reference to male human being can also refer to the whole race in English.

Another area that sexism is manifest in English is in the ordering of plural subjects that contain female and male. Plural subjects that contain female and male always start with male and then female. It is very unnatural in English to start such plural subjects with female subjects before male subjects. Some examples of this kind of sexism can be found in the sentences below.

- (1) **Male and female children** are God’s gifts.
- (2) The game is for **men and women**.
- (3) **Sons and daughters** of Zion have gathered.
- (4) It is for **his or her** good.
- (5) **Adam and Eve** sinned.

This is the common ordering of plural subjects or objects in English sentences. The ordering style of English places the male subject or objects first before the female subjects or objects. This, by implication, means that the English language places more importance to men than women. It is very unnatural and uncommon to see a reversed order of this style in English. Even female

writers still find it unnatural to start plural subjects containing female and male words with female subject first. It is not common to see the below ordering in English.

- (6) The game is for **women and men**.
- (7) **Daughters and sons** of Zion have gathered.
- (8) Let **her or him** be punished for doing that.

The only common exception to this ordering style in English is the phrase 'ladies and gentlemen'. In the two books under study instances of sexism of this such abound even though they are works of female writers.

Excerpt 8

She called on her **male and female** ancestors, one after the other and implored them to bless maidens (LSO, p.87).

Excerpt 9

Oboshi was faster than most of her **sons and daughters** in catching up with the times. (SCC, p.17)
The above excerpts illustrate this bias nature of English against women; it also shows that English places men in first position before women. One begins to wonder if there is any syntactic rule that stipulates that male nouns must be mentioned first before female nouns.

Sexism at Syntactic Level

There are some expressions that are sexist in their construction. The preference of male pronouns at the negligence of female pronouns is sexist. The sexism in English neglects women by adopting masculine terms to be generically used for human being. Copious instances abound in the two books under study where masculine pronouns are used in generic sense. This gender bias nature of some English constructions betrays the fact that English is a sexist language. The excerpts below capture the nature of sexism at syntactic level.

Excerpt 10

That was the problem with Jesus. He never answered you, he never really gave you sign of what to do in such tempting situation. Anybody could twist what he said to suit **his** own interpretation. (SCC, p.22)

The use of 'He' for Jesus Christ can be understood and pardoned because Jesus Christ came as a male during 'His' earthy ministry according to Christian doctrine. The second pronoun 'his' is used in the generic sense to mean anybody.

Sexism at Semantic Level

Another area of visible discrimination against women in the use of English words is in the aspect of meaning. There are many words in the English language which when used to refer to men have positive meanings while their female counterparts denote negativity or are presented with less favourable meaning. In other words, the English language has more derogatory words for women than men. Umera Okeke (2012) further explains this when she says that "A word may have different connotations when it is collocated with a male or female term. When applied to women, the same words are likely to narrow and assume sexual connotations or very derogatory in meaning" (p.9).

Pairs of words such as 'spinster and bachelor', and 'mistress and master' are good examples of words with this semantic shift in relation to men and women. The word 'bachelor' means a man who has never been married. It is, however, not used as a derogatory word. A man can even boldly declare that he is still a bachelor. It does not connote anything negative but rather a moment a man enjoys before he gets married. This is not the case with the word 'spinster' which

is the female counterpart of the word 'bachelor'. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (9th Edition) defines the word spinster as "a woman who is not married, especially an older woman who is not likely to marry". This definition rather projects spinsterhood as a stage in woman's life that breeds depression, rejection and frustration.

Sexism at Proverbs and Idioms

Gender disparity created from the cradle by the society makes equal opportunities among men and women impossible to attain. The particular nature of our society and the subjugation experience of women are demonstrated in the use of proverb where the men are adored and celebrated whereas the women are despised, mocked and represented as trash. Many cultures of the world especially Africa, hold the use of proverb in a high esteem. Proverbs are used mostly during conversation so as to convey some underlined messages that are meaningful in a particular context of usage. Though proverbs are so many, they are not used at random but certain situations call for their use. The proverbs are true reflections of the image of women in the society. The English proverbs are filled with linguistic sexism that ridicules women and trivializes what women do. In what follows we shall see how female subjugation is expressed linguistically through the pejorative and diminutive portrayal of women in English proverbs generally, and in the two books under study.

1. Seven women in their right senses are surpassed by a mad man.
2. If the husband is not at home, there is nobody.
3. A woman's advice is never to be sought.
4. A woman is like a lemon, squeeze her and throw her away.
5. Women have got long hair but short sense.

Many proverbs, idioms or sayings in English portray the accessory position, inferiority wisdom, the lower position, and the fragile nature of women. The above proverbs contain sexism and male chauvinism. They reflect the fact that women are oppressed and insulted. They expound an obvious fact that women are always ignored while the men are regarded as the only important persons. And in many situations, women are in the secondary position; they do not have the equal place with men but are always in the accessory position.

Excerpt 11

The women practiced their songs several times and showed off their uniform, to which they had given the name *Ezidi Jide OgoliOme Oba*, meaning: "When a good man holds a woman she becomes a queen". (SCC, p.15)

The saying "when a good man holds a woman, she becomes a queen" portrays the women as dependent beings. The development of society and history has made it possible to think of women as being frail, subordinate, dependent and inability to stand alone. This assertion is further proven by the fact that a woman can only be a queen on the ground of her being married to a man. A man is a king if he is a ruler of an independent state, while a woman can only be a queen if she is married to the king. The semantic implication of the two words "queen" and "king", shows the women to be dependant always to men. A man can be a king without a woman but the reverse is not common. It means that a woman depends on her good man to be a queen. She needs the 'holding' of a man to become a queen. This shows that linguistic disparagement is everywhere in the use of proverbs.

Sexism at Discourse Level

Sexism can also be found at discourse level when the image of the man is painted superior to that of a woman. At this level, features analyzed include how female and male characters are depicted. Just like we see in other levels of sexism, this level portrays women as being stereotypically

connected with motherhood and relationship. The frequency of women being referred to as wives and mothers indicates that they are only good at sexual gratification of men and child bearing. This particular method of describing female characters is an act of sexism. Men are not depicted in like manner; they are often described as individuals and not by their relationship to others.

Excerpt 12

All Ada had to do was to go to the American Library, work till two-thirty, come home and be waited on hand and foot, and in the evening **be made love to**. (SCC, p.28)

Excerpt 13

But even if she had nothing to thank Francis for, she could still thank him for making it possible for her to come to England, for giving her **her own children** because she had never really had anything of her own before. (SCC, p.43)

The extracts above portray women as being stereotypically connected with relationships. They are depicted to only achieve satisfactory success in marriage and child raising. Ada, despite being the bread winner of her extended family, is still described as always being ready to be made love to. She congratulates herself at her marriage because she sees it as her biggest achievement in life. Throughout the two books under study, women are presented not based on their success or achievement in other areas but just in relationships. The frequency of women being referred to mothers also indicates that parenthood is more often assigned to women than men. Still at the discourse level, women are generally depicted as weak beings, mentally inferior to men, miserable and low thinking beings.

Conclusion

Language is just but a reflection of social realities. Sexism in language is a reflection of cultural, social and psychological sexism. The English language is a sexist language because it reflects the dominance of men over women. It is language that excludes women when discussing topics that cover both sexes. As a language, English betrays the values, beliefs, and norms of its users and serves as a carrier of culture. It does not only reflect the actual world that surrounds a people but also the structure and power relations of a society based on sex. The presence of sexism in the language choices of the two female writers shows that conscious efforts should be geared toward adjusting the social, cultural and psychological formations of our society and not just our language. From the research findings, it has been established that sexism in language doesn't just happen – there are factors responsible for it

Recommendations

In view of the challenges of sexism in language, the following are recommended.

- (1) The cultural, social and psychological formations of our society should be consciously engaged and adjusted in such a way that women should be given due recognition. When there is positive recognition of women in our society, the issue of sexism in language will be eliminated. Language is just a reflection of the society – the reflection of social status of men and women.
- (2) There should be alternative words that are gender encompassing instead of sexist words. Words such as *spokesman* and *chairman* should be dropped in place of *spokesperson* and *chairperson*.
- (3) There should be conscious efforts to alternate the ordering of English phrases that contain female and male terms. The use of *girls and boys* and *women and men*, for example, should be encouraged and not always in the order that favours men.
- (4) The use of the pronoun “they” and “them” for an unknown gender should be encouraged in place of the pronoun “he” and “him” which are always used in generic sense. Instead

of saying “The teacher asked the student to turn in his assignment”, we should rather say, “The teacher asked the student to turn in their assignment”. This and many others should be adopted always to eliminate sexism in language.

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