

Discursive Construction on Effects of Masculinities in Gikuyu Proverbs

Gitu Pamela Mukami, James Onyango Ogola, Nicholas Kamau-Goro

Department of Literary and Communication Studies, Laikipia University, Kenya

***Corresponding Author:**

Pamela Mukami Gitu

Email: gitupamela@yahoo.com

Abstract: For a holistic understanding of social, economic, political, and historical understanding of issues affecting Africa, the struggles of social equality between both men and women must be addressed. This article focused on semantics of female derogation and subjugation in Gikuyu proverbs. Stereotypes have been encoded in proverbs; which are highly respected and valued in Gikuyu culture suggesting the masculinised level of the society. Proverbs then, poses evidence of male's intentions of being in control over discourses that are in the society. Women's representation in the society is mainly negative. The study was informed by a combination of Wodak's Discourse Historical Approach and Connell's Hegemonic Masculinities theory. The theories benefited the study in terms of their practical approaches, perspectives and also the analytical tools. Further, they were utilized for the purpose of exploring the complex understandings of manliness as inscribed. The data was analysed descriptively as the researcher described possible attitudes and behavior that the subjects have. The beneficiaries of the study are other researchers since it will inspire future research in the area of gender and language by showing how language planners can inculcate issues of social justice such as gender equality into the curriculum and it will also be of help to institutions interested in gender issues together with curriculum developers in their efforts to mainstream gender strategies into the planning and implementation of language.

Keywords: Gender Ideology, Masculinities, Femininities, Matriarchy, semantics, sexism.

INTRODUCTION

Gender ideologies are defined as cultural beliefs that are systematically organized and constructed by the society to enhance gender practices and relations. Gender ideology is said to contain narratives, proverbs, legends and myths and in them, it states how each of the genders should behave. In relation to these, the society's ideology in gender is grounded mainly on social and religious principles and later used as the background to justify the different responsibilities, rights and also which reward each gender will get after abiding to the rules. This strengthens the research by showing how an important language is just as a vehicle used in determining both genders and mostly women in relation to oppression. Since all societies have sets of systems that they use towards censuring and also controlling the feminine masculine behavior, women are often on the losing end since men use these systems to subordinate them.

Oha, [1] states that proverbs are said to be one of the tools that men in the Gikuyu society are said to use so as to limit their women to the domestic sphere other than them exploring on how they can be of help in the economic and social spheres. Proverbs are highly respected for their use of colorful imagery and the educative role they play and so, one can simply ignore

the sexist tone in most of them. In Africa, no matter the political and psychological battering they have caused the women, they keep on been reproduced. Hussein, [2] states that some of the detrimental effects of meaning on a few proverbs have on womanhood yet these same proverbs are also used by women themselves. Proverbs; either traditional or modern are widely used by the Gikuyu people in their daily socialization hence a very powerful tool of communication. Onyango [3], states that African societies are mostly patriarchal and that their power and also their ideological structures are inclined towards proverbs and songs which are mostly used to show gender constructions. This implies that in shaping the lives of men and women, an ascribed status is constructed and that everyone is judged from it.

Since language is defined as a symbolic act of valuing and representing things, we clearly note that one can not in any case separate what they say from what they perceive of a thing; a dancer cannot be separate from the dance. They go hand in hand. As Hahn [4] stated, '...what we call something summarizes our attitude towards it'. Correspondingly through what the society states in their proverbs, we get to know the society's view towards both women and men.

The article was guided by the following objectives;

- I. To evaluate and analyze the depiction of women in African oral literature using Gikuyu proverbs.
- II. To determine how economic and socio-cultural factors contribute to the portrayal of women among the Agikuyu community.
- III. To investigate how the image of a woman as exemplified in Gikuyu proverbs affects gender roles and attitudes in the community.

This article's discussions are significant in elaborating meaning of several Gikuyu proverbs and in showing the beliefs and culture of the Gikuyu people too.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The article operated within the theoretical frameworks of Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach which was important in discourse topics analysis and also in discursive strategies that are embedded in this proverbs and also Connell's Hegemonic Masculinities Theory which seeks to explain the reason men dominate societal roles more than the women and also other subordinate or even less dominant forms of masculinities in a society. The theory offers a solution finding trans historical, static, workable, and international definitions of what we really mean by the term masculinity. Discourse-Historical Approach [5] is a development coming from CDA and enabled the researcher analyze the proverbs critically by exposing the masculine ideologies that are dominant. This theory does maintain that language has more to do with power and ideologies and it is not merely a vehicle of communication. CDA does draw attention from ideology, criticality, and power the three elements that are very crucial. Ideology, which shows how meaning is conveyed after being constructed is perceived as implicit while coming up and while maintaining the uneven power relations. On criticality, how we should distance ourselves from the data hence uncovering the connotative meaning in a proverb even if it contains unequal powers, and lastly, power in a male dominated society's context since DHA does critically analyse the language that is expressed in Gikuyu proverbs. We thus see the interest Discourse Historical approach has on the gender relations that are unequal and how to help the disadvantaged by enlightening the society.

DATA

The paper's data constituted Gikuyu proverbs. The proverbs were collected through a questionnaire. Twenty proverbs were collected purposefully, transcribed and also analyzed qualitatively the main purpose being revealing socio control, gender, and power, relations that are depicted within the said proverbs. Mugenda [6], states that in purposeful

sampling, handpicking the subjects is the norm since they possess the necessary characteristics or are deemed to be informative. The results of the paper are then presented descriptively.

Basing on Wodak's [5] Discourse Historical Approach principled criteria, the discourse topics on Gikuyu proverbs were identified so as to disclose social control, power, and gender relations. The strategies entrenched in the Gikuyu proverbs were then analysed. While analyzing, the researcher paid attention to answering the following questions;

- How do we refer and name women and men in Gikuyu proverbs?
- Which features and character traits do we give to both women and men?
- Which arguments justify unequal power relationships in the use of proverbs?
- Which perspectives are the attributions, arguments, and also naming articulated?
- How are the utterances that discriminate articulated? Is it intensified, overtly, or mitigated? [5]

Gikuyu proverbs are regarded as a vehicle that the Gikuyu people use to proliferate ideals related to marriage, work, birth, death, property ownership, leadership and parenting.

Gikuyu people in relation to Masculine proverbs

The Gikuyu people originated from Mumbi and Gikuyu (the first man) who gave birth to nine beautiful daughters who got married to men that were provided by God. Initially, the Gikuyu community was matriarchal but was viewed as wicked and dictatorial. The men then planned a 'coup' and impregnated all the women at the same time and at their 'weak' state, they overthrew them. Since then, there are proverbs and myths which explain these hence viewing women as subordinates. The community became patriarchal to date and the proverbs and myths showing how wicked women were and they are believed up to date. Kenyatta [7] claims that the Gikuyu men do find the sexuality subject imperative and have come up with a narrative legitimizing the masculinity notion. They have also come up with their own masculinity folktales as proof that they hold power over the women. In the folktales, the women are regarded as wicked, unpredictable, and unreliable.

DISCUSSIONS

Marriage

The Gikuyu traditional society expected that both women and men were expected to marry and the women were expected to take good care of their husbands. They were expected to be the companions of their husbands. As a wife, a good wife at that, one was

expected to first take care of all her husband's desires and needs and the rest of the household came second. Guided by Discourse Historical Approach [5] CDA drew attention to criticality which is one of the elements which is an instrument of communication. Criticality which entails uncovering the unequal power connotations is used since the wife is expected to stomach her husband's likes and dislikes and always keep them in mind for the society to regard her as a good wife. The important role the wife played is well brought out in the following proverb:

Nyoni ya njamba ndiri gitara.
(A male bird has no nest.)

According to the society, the home was always regarded to belong to the woman. The society has pegged several roles to women hence the various attitudes the society has on them. The women have slowly come to believe that they are men's subordinates and are inferior to them because physically, men are stronger than women. The women have then been made to believe that physical ability goes hand in hand with intellectual capability. The society has also let them believe that. The society endorsed the beliefs and approved them. This distorted image has been inscribed in the beliefs and attitudes of the society.

Property Ownership

Women were often seen as economic assets for their father's since the girl's dowry was paid to the father after her marriage. Bride price in the African society was crucial and was paid as a token of appreciation bonding the union of the two families. The dowry was paid to the bride's family by her husband to be and his family. The major qualities that were looked at before the girl was married are her industriousness, behavior, and also her beauty. Beautiful girls always fetched more cattle and were a target to every good looking man but only the wealthy were considered as seen in the above proverb:

Mwari mwega ahitukagira thome wa ngia.
(A good (beautiful) woman passes by the gate of a poor man.)

As illustrated in the above proverb, only men who were rich were considered by the family as a future son in laws and the poor men were expected to settle down with the 'less beautiful' women. Wealthy men were worshipped by the rest of the community and especially the poor and they were questioned on nothing and everything they did was regarded correct as stated in the proverb below:

Uthuri wa gitonga ndunugaga.
(A rich man's fart does not smell.)

Women were regarded a disgrace to the society, family, and peers if they lost their virginity before they got married. In this society, the girl's were not expected to have pre-marital sex. In case they indulged in social behavior that was unacceptable, their value did diminish as the proverb below shows:

Muka mucangacangi ndagaga mwana.
(A woman who roams about never misses a child.)

The proverb means that a woman, who does not remain chaste till marriage, will eventually get a child. Such a woman would never get married as a first wife to a bachelor but would get married to an older man as his wife/wives. She was regarded to as a 'gicokio' a derogatory term which means one who has been defiled and rejected. Divorcees were regarded to using this term. Wachege [8] reckons that the girl's fathers would be heard lamenting 'njohi yakwa ni yaitikire' meaning 'my beer spilt'. The girl was a lost cause and her value had diminished. He farther states that if a woman got married as a 'gicokio' the man marrying her would be compensated or bribed since the value of the woman had already depreciated and he was doing the family a favor. The man was given a goat that was referred to as 'mburi ya gutira nyondo' meaning a goat to stiffen or support he breasts. It should however be noted that as the woman faced such ridicule and harsh social treatment, her partner, the man did not face such harsh treatment, he was ostracized by his age mates which was not very cruel as what the woman had gone through. The outrageous thing is that responsible man would himself insist on marrying a virgin and the society accepted.

Leadership

Men were regarded as leaders after circumcision unlike women who even after circumcision (presently known as Female Genital Mutilation-FGM) still 'never matured' as seen in the above proverb:

Muthuri niagimagaraga nomutumia ndatigaga wana.
(The man comes out of childhood, the woman remains in childhood.)

This proverb means that unlike men, who mature after circumcision, the women never mature hence men should take care of the women. Men tend to use this reasoning, to subordinate the women and instill in them the inferiority complex. Connell [9] in his theory, does helps in elaborating the broader ideological roots of power and gender relations dynamics and through the use of proverbs, men gain power over women and have been known to regard them as the other. He elaborates how hegemonic ideologies

legitimize, preserve, and naturalize the interests of the prevailing marginalizing and subordinating the claims of all the groups. This is unfair since a woman is equaled to a child and mature decisions are therefore made by the mature once only. She is therefore not entrusted with any leadership responsibility [8]. This notion that a woman cannot be entrusted with any responsibility is further emphasized by Kenyatta [7] who states that women were not allowed to stand the oath yet all members of the said family were to take part in the ceremony. Women then got comfortable as the subordinates since from a tender age, they were socialized to believe they were inferior.

Parenting

A woman's primary role is motherhood. She is socialized to know this, from a very tender age. A woman, who is barren, is ridiculed and ostracized. Lippert [10] notes that, this is the only role that gives a woman status. She is regarded as the mother of the home, hence the home's cornerstone and without her, there is no home. The society also delegated some crucial role to her as seen in the proverb below;

Mundu utathiaga oigaga no nyina urugaga wega

(The person who does not travel thinks that his/her mother is the best cook.)

The woman in the above proverb is viewed as the family cook and feeding her family was primarily her obligation. A woman who was not good in the kitchen would be sent back to her parents by her husband so as she can be taught how to, showing how seriously the task was in the traditional Gikuyu setting. Though regarding women as the cornerstone of the society is positive, it also limits them to the kitchen and hinders them to explore into other economic activities. Many times, people have been heard justifying this by saying that the woman's position is in the kitchen.

In the Gikuyu society, a woman without kids and is incapable of getting any is referred to as '*thaata*' which means a woman who is barren. The husband of such a woman was permitted to divorce her and marry a different wife or wives but this was after the woman had slept with a man of her husband's age, and even visited a medicine man to help her conceive. She was ridiculed since women's primary role was to cook and bear their husband's children, who were a source of wealth to her husband. The ironic bit being that, if the problem was on the man, the society hid it and all the blame landed on the woman. The worth of a woman, was pegged on her ability to bear her husband children and the society sympathized with a woman who has lost her child more than one who is barren as shown in the proverb below;

Mukuithia ari itigi kuri muthati.

(One whose husband has died is more worthy than a barren one.)

Some of the responsibilities bestowed on of the Gikuyu women were molding her children spiritually, emotionally other than just physically. The society blamed the mother incase her child/ children became indiscipline or did not conform to the societal needs. This is exemplified in the following proverb;

Kori kaiyaga ta nyina.

(A kid steals like the mother.)

CONCLUSIONS

The Gikuyu society is patriarchal which is portrayed even in their naming system. The Gikuyu proverbs do play a major role in setting the Gikuyu social status hence cannot be ignored. They emphasize the dominant role played by men over women. Women on the other hand, tend to be subordinates of the men, and are scrutinized by the society which more harshly than their counterparts. The Gikuyu women occupy a marginalized status because of this system dominated by men. In the families, the women are regarded as a future loss since they later live their family after marriage unlike men, who are viewed as investments. After marriage, they are regarded as strangers or intruders and actually regarded as 'andu a jaa' people from outside. The social status of women which is low and the attitude towards them is clearly seen in the proverbs above. The Gikuyu proverbs therefore, try to recapture the traditional paradigms in relations of gender which seem to reiterate a social or cultural gender related hierarchy in the Gikuyu society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

So as to address women and the extent of their marginalization, positive images of them ought to be brought to light and get rid of those that portray them in negative light. So as to understand the situation clearly, the society needs to dig deep so as to understand where these negative portrayal emerged from, how it has been sustained over the years, its effect on the women's self image and its effect in a real life situation. The negative proverbs on women need to be eradicated too and replaced by proverbs which regard both women and men as equal despite their gender.

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