

GENDER ISSUES AND THE USE OF LANGUAGE IN THE SONG OF THE WOMEN OF MY LAND BY OUMAR FAROUK SESAY

Martina C. Uche*

Abstract

In most African societies, culture is being observed. In these societies, despite western civilization, the impact of gender still plays a very big role to the extent that women are still being marginalized. Similarly, women have played significant roles in their families, societies and communities despite the many challenges countered in their day-to-day activities of their lives. Every woman whether young or old has a role to play in the society she finds herself. Women in Africa have made serious impacts in their various fields of human endeavor in their different disciplines like songs, law, and so on. This paper examines the contributions of women in Africa with particular reference to the use of language in the songs of the women of my land. This poem has contributed immensely to gender issues in its various compositions. The lyrics of this poem ranges from encouraging high moral values on the part of women, to that which encourage and emphasize the need for women's endurance, patience and taking solitude in songs. This is geared towards the upliftment of the various families, the nation and Africa in general. Unfortunately, some of these women suffer some setbacks as a result of seeming negative attitudes by their male counterparts and the society in general. The study uses a qualitative research design and employs thematic analysis to analyze the poem's language and content. The researcher finds out that there are issues of gender and portrayal of society in the poem. The theory for this study is social power theory, propounded by Max Weber (1922). The findings show that in the society, women are being exploited. The researcher recommends that adherence to certain cultural practices can be handled patiently. Men should also change their attitudes towards women. Men and women are equal before God and that is why God does not discriminate in endowing songs talent in both male and female alike.

Keywords: Gender issues, language, songs, women, Oumar Farouk Sesay

Introduction

The subject matter of gender has generated a lot of interest within our societies. While some scholars argue in favour of equality of men and women, others posit that men are naturally superior to women. Gender issues entails that all human beings both men and women should be free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without limitations, but in some cases, there are rigid gender roles that affect the women negatively. Women have been victims of oppression, exploitation and other inhuman and un-dignifying treatments. In the case of Africa, women have come under the double yokes of oppression by their men, as well as the colonial system the continent had come under at some point in its history. Despite this unhealthy reality, African women have continued to endure their condition, singing away their sorrow and hoping for a new dawn of joy. This is particularly applicable to the peasant women in the rural areas of the continent, where women toil daily in the sun, in the fields, and contribute to the sustenance of their families and their countries, but left unsung. In fact, only a few numbers of their communities even have good memories of these women after their death. When occasionally a person remembers such women or one of them, it is not uncommon to see the person compose or perform a dirge in their memory. Apparently, this is what Oumar Farouk Sesay does in this poem "the song of the women of my land". He uses language to explain this unfortunate state of women in our everyday societies and communities. Language plays a very

big role in our everyday social life. Its role in social interaction and the part it plays in representing or constructing social reality is highly noted and appreciated.

In this study, the researcher has chosen to analyze the themes of “the song of the women of my land”, a poem written by Sesay. The poem is about a meditation on the plight of African women, especially that of the peasant women in traditional African society. The poet recalls how women in this society and, perhaps most Nigerian women were subjugated to oppression and hard labour on plantations in a clear tone of regret and lament, he also recollects how the women coped with their subjugated condition by immersing and entertaining themselves singing. The lyrics of the song, which consist of the stories of their lives, unfortunately, are hardly remembered today. The tunes of the song, which are a shadow of the substance, are the only things available to the poet to write about. In other words, the poem gives the reader a little fragment he is able to remember from the experiences and song of those women. The poem is seen to centre on gender issues in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to reveal the themes in the poem “The song of the women of my land” in order to gain a deeper understanding of the poet’s message and the societal issues he addresses. These themes were developed from the poem. By analyzing these themes, we can see how the poet uses language to comment on the gender issues and also how he engaged the reader in a thoughtful exploration of Nigerian society and gender.

Research Questions

- a. What themes are present in Oumar Farouk Sesay’s poem “The Song of the Women of My Land?”
- b. How do you see “The Song of the Women of My Land” as a dirge about dirge?
- c. Closely examine the use of any other three devices in the poem.

Conceptual Clarification

There is need for conceptual clarification on the major terms used in this study as such will give a better understanding and insight of the terms. These terms have been listed on the keywords

Gender

The word, gender refers to the “sex of a person or organism or a category of people or organisms” (Awajiusuk,, 2015). Traditionally, gender has referred to grammatical classifications in languages. Gender has over the years, portrayed women as weaker sex. In fact, the concept of gender presents the woman as one who is superficial, with interest mainly in fashion, beauty and little love for deep thinking. Gender is mobilized to also take away the voice of women, and their power to be heard. This is the reason why females are clamped under a husband or brother in whatever they do. This finally robs the women off some personal rights. Everyone has the right to be treated fairly and to have the opportunity to fulfil their potential; society is more united and peaceful in an equal setting where everyone feels included. Similarly, Ayantayo (2015) says “gender has to do with socially unequal division into femininity and masculinity”. In other words, it means a situation in which sex rather than individual skills and

qualification plays a large part in determining who should or not participate in conflict resolution because in the past, conflict resolution is confined to the domain of men at the exclusion of their women counterpart. In such a structure, women played passive role. Corroborating this fact, Donna Pankhurst notes “women consistently remain a minority of participants in carrying out projects. They receive less attention than men...” (Pankhurst, 2002). We should analyze the rationale behind the marginalization in the light of normal and acceptable requirements so as to move our societies forward. Furthermore, for the purpose of emphasis, discrimination against women in Africa and its effect on women is captioned in the report of Beijing Conference and it states:

While entire communities suffer the consequences of armed conflict and terrorism, women and girls are particularly affected because of their status in society and their sex...the impact of violence against women and violation of human rights in such situations is experienced by women of all ages, who suffer displacement, loss of home and property, loss or involuntary disappearance of close relatives, poverty and family separation and disintegration, and who are victims of acts of murder, terrorism, torture, sexual slavery, rape, sexual abuse and forced pregnancy in situations of armed conflict cleansing and other new and emerging forms of violence (UN, 1996).

Albert (2004), in a seemingly corroborative manner assesses the extent to which the Beijing observation practically reflects in Africa. He underscores the fact that women were not given sufficient space occasioned by the tradition of male chauvinism, which places women at the back door... Consequently, gender is especially significant because it is a master status; that is, it cuts across all aspects of social life. No matter what we attain in life, we carry the label male or female. According to Iwuoha (2013), “proper understanding of gender will make people know more of their maleness and femaleness and as such, there should be no feeling of inferior” For Epstein (1988), these labels “convey images and expectations about how we should act”. They not only guide our behavior but also serve as basis of power or privilege. This is what gives us insight into our own experiences with gender. Gender is social, not a biological characteristic. Epstein opines that it “consists of whatever behavior and attitudes a group considers proper for its males and females”. It varies from society to another. We learn our gender as we are socialized into the behaviors and attitudes our culture asserts are appropriate for our sex. The expectations associated with gender differ around the world. Gender sorts us on the basis of sex, into different life experiences. It opens and closes doors to property, power and even prestige. Like social class, gender is a structural feature of society.

Issues

This is an important topic or problem for debate or discussion. In this study, the issues of gender is the centre or topic in question.

Language

Language is defined as a “system of communication with other people using sounds, symbols and words in expressing a meaning, idea, thought, and so on”. It is also “a systematic means of communicating by the use of sound or conventional symbols” (www.goggle.com, 2007). Furthermore, The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English (2001) defines language as “speech and writing that is used by people of a particular country or state”. Going by these definitions, we would be safe to say that language can be expressed in speech form,

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written or through gestureemics. Language can only be used by human beings. It has been identified as a potent instrument for transformation, moral training and overall change in behavior modification. Humans have the gift of creativity in language to capture the uniqueness of each context and language situations. Language is individualistic and people use different styles in different social contexts. This explains the fact that the study of the people's language can reliably predict the social situations under which the language is generated. MacCallum emphasizes that "our language changes to meet the needs of people". The careful choosing of language in Sesay's poem has helped him to pass his message across to the reader.

Song

This is a musical composition performed by the human voice. It is often done at distinct and fixed pitches (melodies). In the same vein, Merriam-Webster defines song as "the act or art of singing a poetical composition"(https://www.merriam-webster.com). The above definitions confirm the fact that song is something that is composed and is melodious.

Women

Women are adult female human being, a female member of a workforce team. Dictionary.com defines women as the plural of woman, the summit of human happiness, the surrender of man to God (https://www.dictionary.com).

Oumar Farouk Sesay

He is the poet who composed "The song of the Women of My Land". He is a graduate of Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone. He is a notable Sierra Leonean poet whose works have been published in a number of anthologies. He composed this particular poem with emphasis on the suffering of women.

The song of the Women of My Land

Like a sculptor chipping away at bits of wood,
Time chisels away bits of their memory

It stripes away lyrics of the song of the women of my land
Leaving only a fading tune echoing the song.

They sang in the forlorn fields
about their lives, songs
of how they ploughed the terrain of their landscape
for memories of lyrics lost in the vast void of time,
in those days when a song beheld their lives;
when servitude cuffed the ankles of their soul,
and dereliction decapitated the epic of their lives

With a song, they sponged off their anguish,
to behold their collective pain,
to celebrate their gains
give lyrics to the tune of their lives,
cheat the tyranny of time
and commune with the yet unborn
to give meaning to an epoch lost in antiquity,

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yet time stripes the lyrics and scars the time,
leaving a dying song.
Dead!

Like the woman who died long ago,
Leaving the song to tell the story of their lives.

Today the tune roams the forlorn fields
Like their souls looking for lyrics.
To tell the tale of the servitude
of the women of my land
Who ploughed their soil and soul
For a song to sing the story of their lives
The song of the women of my land
left in the memory of the wind.

Now feeding the verses of poets, it echoes in
Wriggling in rhythms and melodies,
Hollering in distant tunes
In places far afield the forlorn fields,
where the song of their lives died.

The stuttering lips of my pen
And the screeching voice of my rib
try to sing the song of the women of my land
In verses far from the theatre of toil
where they left a song that now roams the land
stripped of lyrics like a scorned ghost.
The tune tuning the tenor of my verse
is all that remains of the song of the women of my land
who labored and died leaving a dying song.

The dirge of their lives!

In lines 1-10 of the poem, the poet compares how time wears away the memory of the contents of the song of the women being spoken about in the poem. He likens this to the way a sculptor chips off bits of wood in his attempt to create his art. Time is said to strip off the lyrics of the women's song in a manner that leaves the song with little or no substance. The researcher observes that the poet makes reference to the time past, therefore, this stipulates the time when cultural system was still being practiced, that is when there was no civilization. This is to say that the poem is a comparative observation about pre-colonial African society and post-colonial African society.

Lines 11-18 indicate that the women actually sang about their lives, which were characterized by servitude and hard labor in lonely and miserable conditions. This is because the masters hijacked the administration of the plantation where they work due to the power they hold over them. They sang of how they worked tirelessly and took solace only in their singing. They sang of how they risked being killed for neglecting their duties. The poet repeated how the women warded off their collective sorrow and pain by singing to "celebrate their gains". This repetition serves to intensify the conclusion that the oppression of the women was so intense and can only be relieved through their song. They also sang to tell their stories, to while away the oppression

of their present condition, to reflect about the future, and to interpret and understand their past or history. These lines are also a lamentation of the current state of gender issues in Nigeria, where the state of affairs in families are in the hands of men who are not suitable for leadership roles in their homes but have taken over power because they are called the head of the families. However, the poem is a critic of a society controlled and manipulated by many who have the power over others.

In lines 19-46, the poet insists that in spite of the fact that the women tried to resist the oppression of time, it nevertheless succeeds in stripping the songs of their contents, leaving only distorted tunes and “a dying song”. He emphatically adds later that the song is dead, and compares the death of those women who died long ago and left the song to tell their stories. We also learn that the tunes of the song roam the deserted and abandoned plantations, just the way the souls of the dead women searched for lyrics to tell the stories of their oppressed and sorrowful lives. The song turns out to be left in the uncertain memory of the poetic persona who, like other poets, uses the lives of these women as inspiration or subject matter of their verses. With the uncertainty of their memories, the result is that they come up with verses suffused with wriggling rhythms and melodies crying out from the abandoned plantations “where the song of their lives died”. Furthermore, the poet comments on his efforts at capturing the lives of the women in his verse. He observes that the lips of his pen stutters while his own rib screeches in the attempt to sing the song of the women of his land. In other words, he finds it difficult trying to capture the story of the women in his poem since the events making up the women’s story took place at a place and time far away from the present. Besides, the song has been stripped off its lyrics/contents, while all that is left is what the poem offers. This suggest that many parts of the women’s story of oppression and hard labor are unaccounted for in the poem. The poet notes that the song of their lives is, indeed, a dirge.

The lyrics of the above poem is a meditation on the plight of African women, especially that of the peasant women in traditional African society. The poet recalls how women in this society were subjugated to oppression and hard labor. In a clear tone of regret and lament, he recollects how the women coped with their subjugated condition by immersing and entertaining themselves with singing. The lyrics of the songs, which consist of the stories of their lives, unfortunately are hardly remembered today. The tunes of the songs, which are a shadow of the substance, are the only things available to the poet to write about. In other words, the poetic persona is only giving the reader a little fragment he or she is able to remember from the experiences and songs of those women. Here, the poet made use of language to present the state of the women and how they have really suffered thereby giving us insight into gender issues.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses the theory of social power, propounded by Max Weber (1922). The theory opines that power is a resource that is evident in inter-personal relationship in a given society. According to Wolfe and McGinn (2005), social power is derived from one’s relationships to others, meaning that one cannot have social power in the absence of other people. In this view, power is a truly relational construct. It is an outcome of a relationship involving people of different classes, or same class, where people influence others either because they are higher in the social order, or, even if they are in the same social class, they are higher in other social indices. In the literature, social power is differentiated from personal power. Personal power is

the degree to which holders of power are capable of acting with agency or of exerting influence in the environment (Overbeck and Park, 2001; Van Dijke & Poppe, 2006) in addition to “power over oneself and freedom from the influence of others” (Lammers, Stocker, & Stapel, 2009). This is a suggestion that social power operates, particularly in a system where personal power is weak or where personal power is subdued by circumstances.

Social power is perceived as the (potential) ability to influence others’ behavior (Andersen & Berdahl, 2002). Furthermore, Fiske and Depret (1996) questioned the system of equating power with (potential) influence. In this power-as influence perspective, power is an outcome of social interactions rather than a structural feature and thus cannot be manipulated as an independent variable. The second issue with the view is that it confounds the power of the agent with the weakness of the target (Fiske & Berdahl, 2007). Consequently, it is presently more common to define social power in terms of control over the outcomes for someone else (e. g. Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Gainsky et al., 2003; Keltner et al., 2003). In the study of social power, several related concepts were encountered such as status, authority, dominance, and leadership, which require clarification. According to Sonja (2019), status, in a broad sense produces differences in respect and prominence (Keltner et al; 2003); but more narrowly defined, status can result from the power an individual possesses as a result of social group membership (Schmid, 2010). However, it is possible to have status without power (example, Mother Teresa) and power without status (example, a corrupt politician). In the same vein, authority is defined as power derived from institutionalized roles (example, director, foreman, manager), which is also termed position power or structural power. Dominance includes personality dominance and dominant behavior. Personality dominance can be understood as an individual difference variable describing the extent to which an individual has the desire to influence or control others (Schmid, 2010); dominant behavior is any behavior used with the intention to gain or maintain power over other people (Keltner et al., 2003). This is really the aspect that this study depends on.

Themes in the Poem

Theme is a crucial aspect of literary analysis, reflecting the underlying ideas and message that poets seek to convey through their works. “Theme is the central and dominating idea in a literary work” (Harmon Holman, 2013). Similarly, Murfin and Ray surmise that “theme is the general concept or message that an author wishes to communicate to the reader”. Furthermore, “theme is the central idea, the thesis or even the message of the story” (Bain, Jerome and Hunter, 1991). Readers reach out from their own subjective worlds toward that new and different vision of the author with the help of the common elements (the general), and especially through the common places of theme, bringing back the particulars and generalizations of the story to their own reading and living experience. At this point, it is concluded that theme “is a generalized, abstract paraphrase of the inferred central or dominant idea of a story”(Bain, Jerome and Hunter, 1991). The definitions above show that theme is the central idea in any work of art. That is, the message that the writer passes on to the reader through his/ her write up. The write-up may be prose, poetry or drama.

In the above poem, Sesay uses language to explain the themes inherent in the poem. Consequently, there are four themes embedded in the poem: the oppression of women, endurance, the power of time and the importance of song.

The Oppression of Women

This poem speaks on the oppression and condition of women in rural and at times urban Africa today. Their work, is described as servitude. Some were forced to work in the farms without being paid, that is as slaves. In this kind of treatment, we see that the people that made them to work uses their power to torment them. It also addresses how the oppressed women try to cope with their condition by resorting to singing. They sing to psychologically make light of their burden, to foster a sense of companionship and solidarity, to celebrate their achievements, to tell their stories, and to forget their sorrow. They also sing to entertain themselves. All these are typical of Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. This kind of song is popularly known as work song. This is social power which cannot exist without people being involved. Similarly, they influence them because they feel that the women are helpless and cannot do anything to alleviate their suffering. This is where gender issues come to play.

Endurance

This is another theme in the poem. The long-suffering capacity of women is clearly underscored in the poem. In their miserable and hopeless plight, African women continue to endure, taking succor in singing, and even celebrating their achievements. While ploughing the soil, they also plough their soul “for a song to sing the story of their lives”. Despite being faced with daunting tasks and risks of death, the women still carry on as if all is well and, even sing “to cheat the tyranny of time”.

The Power of Time

In the above poem, the power of time is also explored. With time, everything is said to undergo changes, whether advantageously or disadvantageously. Time compromises memory and engenders forgetfulness. In the poem, time “chisels away” the memory and the lyrics of the song of the women of the persona’s land. It leaves a fading tune and a dying song instead. There are clearly negative things attributed to time. On another occasion, time is presented as tyrannous but which, fortunately, the women are able to cheat through singing.

The Importance of Song

Song is presented in the poem as a very useful art in so many ways. It is depicted as a biographical medium, as we learn that the women of the land used it to tell the stories of their lives. It also serves a therapeutic purpose. With their song, the women were able to survive the individual psychological torture and the collective pain they suffered. They were able to survive the tyranny of time, able to dialogue with the past and even imagine the future. The song also serves entertainment purpose and as a means of celebrating the women’s achievements. In spite of the fact that the song suffers loss of lyrics and fading tune, it is generally depicted as a valuable artifact.

“The Song of the Women of My Land” as a dirge about dirge

Dirge is a lament for the dead, especially one forming part of a funeral (Oxford Language). In the same vein, “dirge is a song or hymn of grief or lamentation especially one intended to accompany funeral or memorial rites” (www.merriam-webster.com). The two definitions confirm that dirge is a song for funeral rites. Sesay’s poem is filled with regret and tone of lamentation. He regrets and laments not only the death of the women, but a number of other

things. They include the loss of the lyrics of the women's song, the treatment of the women while alive, and also the gradual death of the surviving tunes of their song. It is a very serious poem. The poet has no time for light-heartedness or extravagant use of words that may detract from his message. With diction involving servitude, oppression, death, dying, pain and the like, a somber mood easily persuades the poem. While the poetic persona describes the song of the women of his land as a dirge at the end of the poem, meaning that their lives were sorrowful since the song is about their lives, he is also a composer of dirge as far as this poem is concerned. Therefore, one could say that "the song of the women of my land is a dirge about dirge".

Closely examine the use of any other three devices in the poem

The poet uses other devices in the poem to present the message: diction, imagery and structure

Diction

The poet's choice of words is relatively simple. The words are well chosen and aptly deployed, thereby helping in the delivery of the message, which is quite important in functional arts like African poetry. But for a few instances of metaphorical implications, most of the words used in the poem have literal meanings.

Imagery

Imagery is well deployed in the poem. Images of different kinds were used to help the reader connect with the message of the poet. That is the oppression of the women which is a gender issue. We have visual, auditory and olfactory images. Visual images are evoked of a sculptor trying to create a physical object, of women ploughing fields, of women singing, of abandoned and deserted fields. There are also auditory images evoked by fading tune, singing, echoing songs, hollering, stuttering lips, screeching voice and so on. These images contribute to the development of the themes of the poem by deepening the reader's understanding through mental pictures.

Structure

The poem consists of forty-six lines, and eight unequal stanzas, with a one-line stanza being the shortest and a nine-line stanza being the longest. Though interrelated, each stanza focuses on slightly distinct parts of the overall message. . . . the last stanza summarizes and strongly emphasizes the women's story as a dirge.

Discussion of Findings

From the discussion so far, it follows that Sesay's poem "the song of the women of my land" contains gender issues which is a societal problem that needs to be curbed.

Recommendations

The researcher recommends that:

1. African women in generally and Nigerian women in particular should be sensitized on their rights.

2. Females should not be feeling inferior to their male counterpart because the Bible created them equally.
3. Nigerian women should be sensitized on their right to 50/50 share of the marital property in the event of divorce.
4. Women rights activists should not rest on their oars in ensuring that women are not marginalized or discriminated against in sharing of marital property on divorce.
5. Men should also change their attitudes towards women this is because they are equal before God and that is why God does not discriminate in endowing song talent in both male and female alike.

Conclusion

This paper discussed Gender Issues and the use of language in the “song of the Women of my Land”. It looked at some concepts like gender, issues, language and so on. Some prescribed gender roles as they affect the women in literature were highlighted. Also discussed were the lyrics of the song of the women. The emphasis was to bring out the gender issue as it was played out in the poem that affected the women. The poem is a very rich and complex exploration of the social realities of contemporary Nigeria. It highlights on the following themes: the oppression of women, endurance, the power of time, the importance of song. The women in the poem were so oppressed that they had no other choice than to resort to song which helped them to tell the stories of their lives and serves as a therapeutic purpose. This song also helped them to survive their individual psychological torture and the collective pain they suffered. In summary, the poem portrays a society where power is concentrated in the hands of men and other individuals who use their influence to oppress the women because they have no say. This is a gender issue that needs to be stopped. Women should be free as their male counterpart because God created them equally.

Martina C. Uche*

Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
mc.uche@unizik.edu.ng, 08062515178

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