

MUSINGS

ON COMMUNICATION AND PERFORMANCE FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT



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DEVELOPMENT**

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CHAPTER THREE

LANGUAGE AND GENDER IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S *THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD*

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Introduction

The concepts of language and gender have attracted a good number of critics who have studied the use of language in social contexts of communication (Chilton, 2004). One of the most important aspects of language in social contexts of communication is its power and properties. Language is greatly used by those who seek to assert and maintain their power and those who seek to resist it both at the micro and macro levels of the society. Most researches within the context of feminine African literature have largely been in terms of theme, few have centered on the use of gendered language using linguistic approach. At the micro level where our interest lies in this paper, there are conflicts of interest, struggles for dominance and effects between individuals and between genders. Gender simply refers to "sex-role identities used by humans to emphasise the distinctions between males and females" (Adegbite, 2009, p.12). Therefore, gender refers to behaviours associated with members of that sex.

The words "sex" and "gender" are often used interchangeably but they are not synonyms in any way. Sex relates specifically to the biological and physical feature which makes a person male or female at birth whereas gender refers to the behaviours associated with members of a specific sex. Gender is therefore socially constructed but sex is not. This paper through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) studies gender identity and subject positioning in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. This novel is purposely selected because it portrays a couple's life that is not really influenced by western ways of life and it is the first novel of one of the pioneers of African female writers. Thus, her style has not been influenced by critics. Our objective is to identify the socio-cultural practices that define gender identity in the novel and determine the way characters talk and are talked to, based on their sex. The paper shows how language use is not just an individual's activity but a social act that actively constructs gender asymmetries in the studied novel by pointing out how being a man or a woman affects the ways characters talk or are talked to. Furthermore the paper shows why counteracting phallic subjugation by reclaiming the language through denaturalisation and resistance could not be envisaged by Buchi Emecheta in *The joys of Motherhood*.

Sociolinguistic relationships between language and gender have attracted the attention of many critics. From Lakoff's (1975) identification of a "woman register" to Kramer (1978) who coins the term "genderlect" to refer to differences in male and female speech, critics have shown that there are differences in male and female talk styles. But

with the wind of feminist movement female writers have redefined the literary landscape to subdue the phallic overbearing presence of the male characters who relegate the female gender to the position of second class citizen (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994). Curiously some of the female writers in describing their pains still ascribed consciously or unconsciously linguistic and stylistic expressions, that confirm the fact that the sexist and gender biased African writing is not exclusively male (Ogunyemi, 1988 ; Oloruntoba, 1998). This points out the idea that language is gendered and could demand a conscious effort to be denaturalised by individuals hence the study of *The Joys of Motherhood*. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) will form the basis for our theoretical framework. After a brief overview of this approach, an emphasis on the methodology coupled with the summary of the studied novel will be done.

Theoretical Framework

A discourse, according to Tablot (2020, p.116), is a social interaction in specific contexts. Discourses are historically constituted social constructions in the organisation and distribution of knowledge... knowledge does not arise out of things and does not reflect their essential truth: it is not the essence of things in the world. Discourses are constituted in history and society; what is included as truth, access to that truth and who may determine it; all these depend on relations of power in institutions (Tablot, 2020, p.117). On the other hand, counter discourses propose alternative versions of social reality; and this is where the critical perspective comes in. It has important implications for movements committed to bringing about change, such as feminism. CDA may bring the gender identity out of the conversation by scrutinizing some of the sociocultural practices that define this gender identity. CDA aims at adopting a viewpoint that asks questions about the rational and legitimacy of something. It helps to remove normal biases from a point of view to determine whether a conclusion is the most valid one. To do this, a subject of study must be thoroughly analysed.

Culture is revealed through the use of language. Interaction is more often than not gendered and it determines gender identity and subject positioning. The bounding, rejection and humiliation of women from the public sphere are often not constitutional but are done through conversation, interaction and storytelling that CDA helps to reveal.

CDA is a form of social practice and the context of language is very crucial (Fairclough, 1989; Fairclough, 1995; Blommaert, 2005). The thematic focus of CDA is to unmask opaque meanings. It is mostly concerned with the discourse of power, abuse, race, dominance, inequality, ideology, hegemony, belief and how these are enacted in texts and talks. There are different models of CDA. Some of them include: socio-semiotics by Fairclough (1989), socio-cognition by Van Dijk (1995), discourse historical approach by Wodak (1995). Each of the models has its principles and tenets. The discourse analysis model used in this paper is a model of Van Dijk (2004), it lays more emphasis on the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in social and political contexts and more importantly its mental aspects. As Van Dijk puts it, mental models define and control our everyday perception and interaction in general and the production and comprehension of

discourse in particular. There is a sort of mental representation that seems to determine the level of power control and language used according to gender in most circumstances.

A large proposition of discourse analysis concentrates on spoken interaction neglecting the fact that discourse can be written as well. Through CDA, we may ask ourselves: who does the speaking in the text? What is the position and viewpoints from which they speak? CDA stops us from thinking of texts as though they actually have fixed meanings independently of the social worlds they circulate in. The texts meaning is not already there, it is the potential meaning that can be there at first. The text gets its meaning when people interpret it. It means paying a lot of attention to society and history in which the discourse takes place. This conception of discourse developed in CDA provides a valuable framework for studying language and gender. It enables the analyst to overcome the sense of ordinariness and obviousness that everyday language gives; hence our choice for the analyses in this paper.

Methodology

The analysis is committed to examining the way language contributes to social reproduction of gender identity, ideology and subject positioning (power to act) in society in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. This analysis explores the discursive strategies in the construction of gender and power in *The Joys of Motherhood* to stimulate critical awareness of the power of language. The aim of the analysis is to show "non-obvious ways in which language is involved in social relations of power and domination" (Fairclough, 2001, p. 229) in the novel. It shall be used to explore the social construction of gender.

Synopsis of *The Joys of Motherhood*

The Joys of Motherhood is a fictional story written by Buchi Emecheta. First published in 1979 by Allison and Busby, it is about Nnu Ego's journey to conform to the role of motherhood set by the standards of the Ibo tribe of Nigeria. It tells the tragic story of Nnu Ego, the heroine and daughter of Nwokocha Agbadi's proud, handsome and wealthy chief who encounters a lot of problems with childbearing and was rejected by her first husband Amatokwu because of her barrenness. Nnu Ego returns to her father's house. To avoid the embarrassment, Nnu Ego is remarried to Nnaife, an ugly laundry man, whom she does not love but hopes to stay with if she can have a child. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, characters are placed in gendered frames in terms of behavioural traits, physical attributes and hierarchical relationships. The gendered frames provide a good background for the appreciation of the gendered talk types.

Gender Identity and Subject Positioning in *The Joys of Motherhood*

In the novel under scrutiny, the interaction between male and female characters is gendered. The gendered expressions in the novel show the discriminatory language used to keep the female gender in a lesser position by creating in her a sort of gendering behavioural consciousness. Tablot (2020, p. 116) argues that "knowledge does not arise out of things and does not reflect their essential truth; it is not the essence of things in the world." The female gender in *The Joys of Motherhood* has been made to believe that she

is of a lesser value. As revealed through the following paragraph, the gender ideology of Enu Ego's village Ibuza considers the male gender as the ultimate, and a woman as a failure if she is without a child for her husband (p.62)

The Gender Identity and Ideology of Ibuza

A close reading of *The Joys of Motherhood* shows that, according to Ibuza's culture, a male child is regarded as a priceless jewel unlike the female one; it does not matter if he is able to achieve anything in life or not. The warning, given by Nwakusor to Adaku the second wife of Nnaife, who was displaying her wealth to ridicule the first wife, is quite illustrative:

Don't you know that according to the custom of our people you, Adaku... is committing an unforgivable sin? If Nnaife had been married to only you, you would have ended his life...I know you have children, but they are girls who in few years 'time will go and help build another man's immortality... Though Ibuza men admired a hard-working and rich woman, her life was nothing if she left no male child behind when she had gone to inherit the wealth, children who were her own flesh and blood (p.166).

The male child is the only sex that is able to grant to an Ibuza's woman a licence to real motherhood, the female child is not able, she can only help the mother to "tell the world that she is not barren" (p.66). When a man has many female children and no male child, he is regarded as one of the most miserable men even if he happens to be a king (p. 11). To corroborate this assertion, Cordelia referring to Enu Ego's first delivery states "you have given your husband a son. It's not very common for people to have sons for first baby. You are very lucky" (p.53). To confirm the statement Enu Ego reiterates:

I know what you mean, Girls are love babies. But, you see, only now with this son am I going to start loving this man. He has made me into a real woman - all I want to be, a woman and a mother. So why should I hate him now? (p.53)

A son is the preferred child, a girl is just a "love baby", a woman is not yet one if she is not a mother. Nnu Ego at 25 years believes that her own "life was nothing but a catalogue of disasters" (p. 9) because she has been reconfigured to adopt a specific gender identity which says motherhood is the only parameter for a woman's recognition and self-esteem. That is why Enu Ego's focus after the sudden death of her first born who happens to be a male child was to terminate her life because the child that turned her into her acceptable societal status was no more (pp.7-9). Nnaife, the husband has the same conception regarding women identity or status in Ibuza. When Enu Ego became pregnant, he affirmed without any doubt: "you look pregnant... what else does a woman want?" (p. 49).

In terms of behavioural traits, a close reading of the novel shows gendering behaviour in the text. A woman is expected "to mind the home" (p.51), "stoop to men" (p.11) any woman that behaves otherwise is "very stupid" (p. 43) "rude and egocentric"

(p.12) "wild and uncontrolled" (14). A description of Ona, the king's daughter who refuses to marry the proud hunter Agbadi is a perfect example of the gendering behavioural attitude.

Ona was a very beautiful young woman who managed to combine stubbornness with arrogance. So stubborn was she that she refused to live with Agbadi. Men being what they are, he preferred spending his free time with her, with this woman who enjoyed humiliating him by refusing to be his wife. Many a night she would send him away, saying she did not feel like having anything to do with him, even though Agbadi was not supposed to be the kind of man women should say such thing to. (p.11)

The behaviour to put on is designed based on the sex of the person involved and therefore it is a gendering behaviour. Women are not to disgrace the man who asks them in marriage or who pays for them to be brought to town. They do not own themselves and therefore must not forget the tradition of their fathers (p.62). As a woman Nnu Ego can never oppose her husband if he desires to marry another wife because her disagreement will only be referred to as a disgrace by her own biological father who, being grounded in the Ibuza culture, will just have to rebuke her by saying:

Please don't disgrace the name of the family again. What greater honour is there for a woman than to be a mother, and now you are a mother – not of daughters who will marry and go but of good-looking healthy sons, and they are the first sons of your husband and you are his first and senior wife. Why do you want to behave like a woman brought up in a poor household? (119)

Gender Positioning in *The Joys of Motherhood*

Physical attributes and hierarchical relationships are also based on gender in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Women are gendered as domestic social subjects; as wives, mothers, daughters and as such are expected to do whatever work is necessary in the maintenance of their families, regardless of how arduous and unpleasant it may be. Nnu Ego, the senior wife and Adaku, the second wife inherited by Nnaife the husband both agree that the world is "a man's world" (p.127) when Nnu Ego gave birth to a set of female twins. They only console themselves with the position the society has given the female child: "still ...these girls when they grow up will be great helpers to you in looking after the boy. Their bride prices will be used in paying their school fees as well" (p.127). The daughters are positioned as merchandises that could be sold to cater for the needs of the boys or instruments specialised in taking care of some domestic chores. Nnaife rejected the twins at birth because they were females. "He did not even suggest their names ...but was happier weeks later when Adaku, the new wife gave him a son" (p.127), moaned the mother. Their girls are not even expected to receive any education because they are meant to be exchange for money as soon as possible. "In twelve years' time, when their bride price start rolling in, you'll sing another tune" (p.127), adds Adaku to console Nnaife who sees the birth of a set of twins as a cross to carry.

The boys are positioned right from childhood in a superior pedestal belonging to men; as such they are not meant to participate in cooking which is a woman's job. Oshia, the first son of Nnaife ignores Adaku the day she dares to send him to fetch some water from the tap for the evening meal: "I am not going! I am a boy. Why should I help in cooking? That is a woman's job." (p.128)

The Linguistic Implications of Gender Identity and Positioning in *The Joys of Motherhood*

Adegbite (2009) acknowledges the socio-cultural constraints within which women and men make their linguistic choices and the impact of the constraints. When women and men are in agreement, there is conformity and social peace but the contrary is a panacea for trouble and chaos. "Gendered discourse as a constraint accounts for the stubborn reality that if women and men do not speak in ways associated with their sex, they are likely to be perceived as speaking and behaving like other sex and to be negatively evaluated" (p.14). A discursive construction of paternity and maternity in the novel shows that power relationship is gendered, and gendered discourse gets articulated through language which reveals the issue of power asymmetries in conversation.

The Gendered Power Relationship in *The Joys of Motherhood*

Being a woman or a man affects the way protagonists talk or are talked to in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Power relationships get articulated through language that brings out the difference between a woman and a man's speech. Language is one of the instruments through which power relationship is articulated. Johnstone (1993), studying women and men as storytellers, concludes that stories told by a man reflect local cultural expectation. A man is usually the protagonist in his own story; when he is not, he is telling a story about another man. Men tell about exploits that display their own skill, courage and wit. Men use dangerous situations they encounter, as opportunities for personal display. The story tells of contests. By contrast, women's stories are often about other people both female and male. They do not deal with bravery but they are more likely to portray someone's foolishness rather than their heroism.

The novel contains many stories but two of them deserve our attention: the first one is based on Nnu Ego, a female protagonist and the second one is centered on Nwakocha Agbadi a male one. The female protagonist looks powerless in her story. At 25 years of age, she wants to terminate her life because she has just lost her four weeks old baby she had been longing to get after many years of barrenness. Her action displays madness or foolishness and not heroism, for the reader can only wonder how her death could be of benefit in solving her problem (p.9-10). On the contrary, the story about Nwakocha Agbadi, a male protagonist, shows that Nwakocha Agbadi is a very wealthy local chief who does many exploits. He is a great handsome wrestler. Even though he was wounded to death by an elephant, he struggled to recover his precious life heroically. The story about Nnu Ego shows her embarrassment and fear and most importantly her childish attitude. However, that of the male protagonist portrays his skill, resourcefulness and conquest. The language is used to portray women as weaker vessels and men as powerful beings.

Ibuza's culture determines the vocabulary usable by a woman or a man. Morality is determined by the cultural beliefs of Ibuza, and obligation to family is prominent and dictates the choice of most words by women. On the contrary men's talks deal more with the assertion and maintenance of their position of authorities. Therefore, men are centers of attraction which put the female protagonist at a vulnerable position; men are family judges and they are also the ones that set up standards Adegbite (2009). One of the mistresses of Nwakocha Agbadi, the proud hunter who refuses to marry him is the subject of uncomplimentary remarks just because she refuses to be the eighth wife. Her status as a princess notwithstanding, she is described as a stubborn and arrogant girl (p.11), a wild and uncontrolled woman (p.14), a heartless bitch (p.19), a troublesome and impetuous woman who has the audacity to fight with her man before letting him have her: a bad woman (p.21). Meanwhile Agunwa, the submissive first wife is qualified as an unobtrusive, quiet and complete woman (p.22). Language does not merely reflect a pre-existing sexist world; instead it actively constructs gender asymmetries within specific socio- historical contexts (West et al., 1997).

Issues of Power Asymmetries in Conversation in *The Joys of Motherhood*

Male speakers use a competitive style of speech while women use a more co-operative style. In other words, male protagonists dominate their female counterparts through the use of language. Women, according to Lakoff (1975) use many linguistic forms which weaken or mitigate the force of their utterances while men do not. A vivid example of men talk is "Damn you and your food, Nnu Ego" (p.205) ... I have a mind to tell you and your brats to leave this house immediately. I was not created to suffer for you till I die" (p.206), says Nnaife abruptly to his wife. Meanwhile the linguistic forms used by women are expletives. The conversation below which takes place in a private domain between Nnu Ego and Nnaife shows the means by which Nnaife dominates while Nnu Ego searches for co-operation in their home.

But, Nnaife. That paper alone won't employ you, will it? "... You must have a master first. All I see all over the place are soldiers...Are they to be the new masters? Why are they all here in Lagos? Nu Ego asked. "There is a war going on. I told you before... (p.85)

The force of the utterance of Nnu Ego in the above conversation is weakened by the preposition "but" and the tag question "will it?". She politely ask her husband to seek for his opinion even though she had been told the answer earlier. This is a strategy that she uses to build a bridge for her request. On the contrary, the response of the husband is not mitigated. He goes straight to the answer and seems to blame the wife for asking question on a matter that has been treated before.

I had thought Oshia would be going to school, starting after Christmas. Now we have little money to buy even food"... "Nnaife, since we are not sure when the new person will be here, can I use part of the money we have left to buy some stocks of cigarettes and matches and start my little business again?" ... "We can't lose, and it will give me something to do?" (pp.85-86)

The above passage is mitigated with the use of “I had thought”, “Nnaife, since ...”, “can I use...”, “we can’t lose” and the question mark which shows that Nnu Ego is seeking for permission. Her style is elaborate and affective. She uses the pronoun “we” to show desire for co-operation. She formulates requests as proposals with sufficient reasons rather than give orders in order to avoid confrontation and make things easy for all. (Mulac et. al., 2001). The man’s utterance as exemplified by the quotation below contradicts this concern for cooperation:

“And what of Oshia? Do you want to lose him like you lost Ngozi, while you are looking for money? Who is going to take care of him when you go out to sell your stuff?

“Listen, Nnaife at times, I don’t know what to do of you...”

“But, woman, you have to look after your child. That at least is a woman’s job”

“I would prepare his morning meal and yours too before leaving the house. All you’d have to do is to keep an eye on him.”

“What if a new master comes tomorrow, eh?

“When the new master comes, we’ll make a plan for that. He hasn’t come yet, has he? (p.86)

The above passage further illustrates male dominance. Nnaife refuses to look after their only son because, to the best of his knowledge the societal norm dictates that caring for a child is a woman’s responsibility. According to him, Nnu Ego wants to sell her “stuff” not “theirs” even though the gain will be used for the feeding of the entire family. The leadership of Nnaife is proven by his reluctant attitude toward his wife’s request which portrays his wife’s subordination with no trace of authoritative behaviour. Nnu Ego unlike Nnaife is from a relatively well-established chieftaincy but Nnaife maintains his leadership status by telling her to cater for her child; meanwhile he resists being told what to do. His speech is direct, succinct and without any affection: “And what of Oshia? ... “But, woman, you have to look after your child. That at least is a woman’s job”. Power relations in *The Joys of Motherhood* is asymmetrical such that women’s interests are systematically subordinated to men’s. The obvious financial constraints notwithstanding, Nnu Ego cannot start a petty business without Nnaife’s approval. Women opt for collaborative talk while men look for differences, feminine talk is more like melting in together (Coates, 1996). When Nnaife raised the issue of the coming of the new master, Nnu Ego simply replied: “When the new master comes, we’ll make a plan for that. He hasn’t come yet, has he?” Her answer secures relationship and focuses more on rhetorical questions which maintain and confirm the shared world of their joint possession.

Conclusion

The paper shows the empirical differences between the speech of women and men in Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* through the study of cross-sex interaction of characters. It highlights gender-related patterns of talk. It identifies the role of language in creating and maintaining social inequality between women and men. It also pinpoints

the cultural influences on gender that are kept through language. The paper shows that language use is not just an individual activity but a social act that actively constructs gender asymmetries in the novel by pointing out how being a man or a woman affects the ways characters talk or are talked to in *The Joys of Motherhood*. It concludes that based on Buchi Emecheta's *The Joy of Motherhood*, gender identity is socially constructed and takes the shape of individual culture while the ways of speaking are not just sex-linked but could also be sex-class linked. Illiterate women have a way of speaking different from the way literate women do, the style of each individual is highly influenced by their cultural background because there are sociocultural constraints within which women and men make their linguistic choices.

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