

Language and Psychology in the Gendered Psyche

By

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Abstract

Sexism in language has often generated lots of controversies. While it is mostly believed that sexism is the cause or the effect of women's oppression, challenging this stance proves to be a valuable asset for women writers to engender social change. This paper explores gender power in relation to the women's voice through an overview of women writings. With Alice Walker's womanist view, this paper discusses the interconnection between language, gender and psychoanalysis view which allows the female gender to be at the mercy of their choice of words within and outside the socio-cultural context. It has also come to the fore in this paper that women's creativity has greatly helped to correct women's inferiorised positions through their use of assertive, active and positive female characterisation.

Introduction

Women should not be perceived only in relation to their biological or physiological role but as one that can make positive contributions to the society in which they are. This paper not only explore gender power in relation to the use of language and sexuality within the socio-cultural context, it also recognises gender as a social construct which has incorporated the problem of identity, sexuality and the denial of autonomy that tends to make women voiceless in different societies.

The works of many feminists/womanists linguists such as Patricia Stubbs, Alice Walker, Deborah Cameron, Deborah Coates, Mabel Segun, Modupe Kolawole, Hudson Weems amongst others have reacted against the ill-treatment of women in the global societies, yet the societal perception of womanhood is still crude especially in Africa. This is because most men do not see any positive contribution from women apart

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from their nature and nurture ability. While this view has beclouded many patriarchal societies that they fail to see the capable side of women except the sexual servitude and the domestic role that they represent, Stubb's (1981, p.xii) observes that:

No matter what part in society individual women in fact play, traditional images focus on their domestic and sexual roles. This has the effect of continually limiting women's notions of themselves and their possibilities. It undermines from within the women's movement knows this, and so attempts to combat cultural stereotypes of female experience. These are confronted and hopefully discredited by the creation of new alternative images which instead of narrowing women's consciousness of themselves, try to expand it.

Utilising female potentials in Stubb's observation is a portrayal that women writers are changing their views and the way they write.

Interestingly, psychoanalytic theory privileges questions of subjectivity and sexuality, the women writers have employed the use of culture as a significant symbol to interrogate their situations within the patriarchal setting. This is believed to have an important role in the shapening of things. Culture establishes inequality between the two genders; creates sexism and often gives psychological oppression to the women. However, women, right from the outset have been relegated by culture in most African traditional social setting which reveals the extent of oppression and discrimination. Such discrimination is used against the female sex whereby she is often made to see herself as an incomplete and inferior being that nothing of any important can come from except for her reproductive ability. Osita (2012, p. 204) observes that the root of social oppression against women in Africa can be traced to traditional society where social roles are assigned to men and women along sex lines – male and female.

Female creativity has, however, helped women to correct their inferiorised positions. It is a means through which female dignity, femininity, protestation and feminine aesthetics are identified, depicted and upheld. Through these writings, the constraints affecting women are discarded. In fact, Showalter (1986, p. 14) says that female writings have its own unique character whether because it draws on female body images, uses a woman language, expresses the female psyche and reflects women's cultural positions.

Language in Women's Writings

The first crucial theme to explore is how women writers use language to define women, through female characterisation and engagement with different themes, issues, and cultures. While many critics of female discourse have noted that women's creativity reinforces certain established ideas of women's status in society, this paper shows that most women writers such as Tess Onwueme, Lorraine Hansberry, Julie Okoh, Rona Munro, Caryl Churchill's, Sarah Daniel's, Efua Sutherland, and many more present female characters in a more radical way, which allows women to realise their individual voices, actions or both. Such characterisation gives them the opportunity to move away from socio-cultural impositions on their self-expression. It is of great importance that this paper shows how language plays a part in women's texts, paradoxically, as both a force of oppression and resistance; it attempts to explore the importance of language in women's writings while engaging with Alice Walker's womanist theory as a theoretical framework.

Although women writers of different continents write with the intention of entertaining their audience, the portrayal of most female characters is paramount to them. This entails seeing their writings as an expression of what it is to be a woman from a woman's perspective. The focus of this paper is an exploration of women writers' creation of female characters, both as biological and social constructs (that could be radical or liberal, active or passive, vocal or silent) who have assumed the role of the mouthpiece of their own stories through which the traditional or contemporary themes, society, experiences and issues are addressed.

Apart from women writers being constrained to write in line with what Ellmann (1968, p. 60) calls 'phallic criticism, which is the tendency in female writers writing to want the approval of male critics, they also face the influence scrutiny of female readers (and critics) who focus on the relationship between thought, language and character. Ruthven (1990, p. 31) identifies that to read a canonical text in a feminist way is to force that text to reveal its hidden sexual ideology which tends not to be mentioned in non-feminist criticism. Ruthven's observation also applies to womanist theory which shows a way of deconstructing the canon, and allows the feminist/womanist readers to examine the ideologies behind literary phenomena.

Womanist and feminist readings go beyond a simple rereading of texts. They aim to rediscover undervalued women's writings, historically, artistically and aesthetically. Womanism goes even further, by exploring

more of the womanist view in the female characters and issues discussed by women writers. The womanist critics offer these groups of womanist readers a new critical approach, where focus is put on issues such as mother-daughter empathy that have been long neglected by traditional critics. This allows them the opportunity to explore the situation of the womanist daughter facing the consequences of her actions. While such a view is explored in works like Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa*, Rona Munro's *Bold Girls*, womanism provokes female readers to see gender as a product of arbitrary cultural differentiations imposed upon sexes to support the unequal distribution of power.

One of the expectations of female readers is, however, to see new writing and reading collectives, female characters who can effect the necessary changes that society has denied them, by realising fellow women's experiences as socio-cultural and socio-biological art. This mirrors Ekwierhoma's (2003, p.18) assertion that the woman who encounters a text by a woman authenticates that creativity and narration are not alien to women, because in history women "have also told the important stories of our culture" (Showalter, 1986, p.3). Although Showalter's assertion might be valid, especially as means of including female readers in the historical analysis of women writers, Ekwierhoma's view is perhaps less convincing, as it ignores the readers who may be guilty of biased reading of women's writings that uphold the objectification of the female gender, and who would see the themes in such writing as uncultured, unsocial and unfeminine. As an avenue of communication, language interprets the whole of our experience, reducing the indefinitely varied phenomena of the world around people, and also the world inside of people.

Language as means of communication is a unique attribute possessed by human beings. The ability to use it with clarity, precision and vividness has been questioned by sociolinguists, feminist/womanist and other theorists. This seems to show the extent to which language can be ineffective irrespective of gender, but it is common among the female gender that their voice is solely defined against the view of the 'other'. Language is explored in this study as one of the main means whereby cultures and traditions are transmitted to people. If one accepts that language and culture are interwoven in creativity, then language has the potential to become an influential force in the shaping of writers' works. However, this study explores how language is used as a mechanism of

socio-cultural silencing, and the recovery of alternative forms of women's creative expression. Spender (1980, p. 97) points out that

people who have the power to use language advantageously have the potential to order the world to suit their own ends, the potential to construct a language, a reality, a body of knowledge in which they are central figures, the potential to legitimate their own primacy, and to create a system of beliefs which is beyond challenge

This seems to apply to women writers who have the ability to redress their situation through the use of language in the characterisation they give to their individual female characters. Such writings are not only to correct the low self-esteem caused by discrimination and oppression in society; it also has a potential to erase the negative identity that the female gender has been associated with traditionally. The study of women's language use has a long history and it demonstrates that both genders are treated differently through their use of language. For example, Cameron (1995, p. 41) notices that linguistic rules and standards of 'correct speech' reveal information about patterns of power and privilege in society. In this sense, women writers from different cultural backgrounds share their concern about the ways in which women are (re) presented in language.

This is to confirm the sociolinguists' view that language is governed by social conventions where the social structures account for the trends of language use, which invariably allows women's outward identity to be seen as socially imposed to protect patriarchy. Such a patriarchal stand is a gendered attribute that feminist and womanist theories seek to eradicate in order to help women perceive themselves as capable human beings rather than accepting themselves as simply the opposite of men. Language exposes the kind of social being that people are, regardless of gender, and arguably a patriarchal culture is created through speech. The problem is that women are marginalised in patriarchal societies. Hence, while men find language as a tool to social entry, women see it as an impossible objective. For most women writers, language is not a tool of recognition of who they are, but a tool of oppression. This reflects Spender's point noted earlier about man-made language and also reinforces Deborah Cameron and Jennifer Coates and Deborah Tannen's exploration of written language in particular as an alien concept for women.

Language, much like gender, cannot be easily looked upon without reference to socio-cultural factors that determine one's perception of identity whether personal or national. In line with language creating one's

identity, identity is often defined in terms of one's gendered situation which is often defined by psychoanalysis. Hence these various factors must be taken into consideration and investigated to some extent in any gender focused discourse analysis.

Psychoanalysis and Language

Sigmund Freud's view of psychoanalysis has continued to question femininity and to see the repression of desire in womanhood. Freud sees that the acquisition of the meaning of sexual difference is the crucial moment in the psychological development of human beings. In situations where female children are being brought up under an Oedipal complex, their sexuality and social relationships are naturally subjected to the process of repression. This shows Oedipus complex as decisive to the formation of gendered subjectivity which allows the woman to take up the feminine position that only makes her an object of desire and not the subject of desire. Jackson (1983, p. 129) notes that psychoanalysis is also very bad news for anyone attempting to keep children from becoming feminine or masculine stereotypes. This shows how psychoanalytical theory creates what Cameron (1991, p. 90) identifies as a model of "psychic economy" that effectively makes women totally lost, outside of themselves as they go through the awful submission to the male dominated order. Psychic economy, therefore, entails what constitutes being male or being female. It is determined by culture and bestowed on the individual by an unalterable biological make-up. Spence and Helmreich's (1978) ideas believe that gender identity can be achieved through the erosion of gender stereotypes.

This shows that Freudian psychoanalytic theory allows one's gender identity to evolve through the identification of same-sex parents which develops out of an intrinsic Oedipal stage of psychosexual development. In another formulation of psychoanalytic theory, Chodorow's (1978) overall conclusion is that mothers play an important role in gender identity development. She believes that mothers are more likely to relate to their sons as different and separate because they are not of the same sex and at the same time, they experience a sense of oneness and continuity with their daughters because they are of the same sex. As a consequence, mothers will form a connection with their daughters thereby fostering femininity in girls, which is what Walker (1984) observes in the attitude of elderly women who wish to curb womanish girls and encourage them to obey the socio-cultural norms that define them as feminine. This explores

how women's existence is objectified and often reduced to a 'castrated' state. Meanwhile, mothers distance themselves from their sons who respond by shifting their attention away from their mother and toward their fathers after being ignorantly taught domination as a masculine attribute by their mothers. This identification with their fathers creates a sense of masculinity in these boys. Vaz (2006, p. 234) observes that

relational psychoanalytic theory helps validate the past lives of enslaved African women by remembering, affirming and glorifying their contribution. After excavating analytically and reflecting critically on the life stories of our foremothers, the methodology entails construction and creation of a novel paradigm.

Vaz shows how psychoanalytic theory helps the womanist to discover something new about the theory and the zeal to live in a complex gendered society that has emerged from childhood experiences, from the interactions with empathetic women. On the other hand, Vaz does not analyse how Walker's theory creates an unconscious process and the potential of psychoanalysis theory to disallow the female gender her autonomy, morality and boldness.

Cognitive-developmental theory is, however, another psychological theory on gender identity development identified by Kohlberg (1966, p.23). This theory observes that there are critical events which will have lasting effects on gender identity development, but they are cognitive rather than psychosexual in origin. Unlike psychoanalytic theory and learning theory that will be discussed next, cognitive developmental theory sees that gender identity comes before rather than follows from identification with the same-sex parent. Once a child's gender identity becomes established, the self is then motivated to display gender-aligned attitudes and behaviours.

Apart from the two above, the most influential of the theories of gender identity development are the social learning theories as explored in the works of Fagot (1978), Dweck et al (1978), Buss et al (1990). Although these writers considers some universal features of gender, some of the analysis also show that parents do not always teach the children gender, but children acquire their sense of gender through their reinforcement and punishments. In these theories, the social environment of the child, and factors such as parents and teachers, shapes the gender identity of a child. The parent or teacher instructs and limits the child on femininity and masculinity directly through rewards and punishments, or

indirectly through acting as models that the child imitates. In direct rewards or punishments, children are often given the norms, codes and rules expected of their gender. For example, outward appearances as in what to wear, girls in dresses and skirts, and boys in trousers; object choices like toy preferences, dolls for girls and trucks and balls for boys; and as far behaviour is concerned, girls are expected to be passive, timid and dependent while the boys are to be aggressive, bold and independent. These rewards and punishments create in children the awe to learn appropriate appearance and behaviour in the society. Indirect learning of one's gender identity emerges from modelling same-sex parents, teachers, peers, or same-sex models in the media. Thus, this creates asymmetry between the two genders.

Apart from the fact that many women writers see sexist language as the source and consequences of gendered roles, many sociolinguists have also written extensively on the topic. As so many women writings such as, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Marcella Evaristi's *Mouthpieces*, Irene Salami's *Emotan*, Zulu Sofola's *Song of a Maiden*, Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* and many others criticise sexism in patriarchal societies. This paper however, notes Spender's (1980) observation that language is a cause of female oppression and not just the symptom of it. Spender believes all words are sexist in nature because their meanings and usages are created by men from a non-female view. As the women writers explore language as a form of disseminating information, their works reveal that sexism is a system in which women and men are not only different, but are unequal which tends to be the genesis of the socio-cultural sex roles assigned to both genders.

To do away with the stereotype gendered characters, Aidoo (1986) summarises that the female dramatist should dedicate her creativity energies to expository works. She believes that female writer should be responsible for exposing the sexist tragedy of women's history, protest the on-going degradation of women, celebrate their physical and intellectual capabilities and should unfold a revolutionary vision of their roles. Obviously, such empowerment will reduce the vulnerable and masochistic view of femininity in all ways.

This is also identified by Walker's womanist theory which shows the women writers' engagement with language as an avenue to expose and redress their second class position. This helps them to be able to celebrate their physical, mental, emotional, and intellectual capabilities. The idea Walker creates of female writing corresponds to Woods' (2003, p.115)

assertion that language expresses cultural views of gender, as well as reproduces them. Yet language is not static. Instead, one continuously changes language to reflect one's changing understanding of oneself and one's world. However, while psychoanalysis has been presented as just a method, it shows that nature does not define women, but most often, women use nature to define themselves through emotional inferiority and psychological subjugation.

Conclusion

Womanism recreates a link with histories that include African cultural heritage, enslavement, women's culture, and kinship with other women; especially women of colour. The theory does not only give voice to the silenced and marginalised on the grounds of race or gender, it also considers the simultaneous effects of race, class and gender. However, most women's writings have encouraged their engagements with cultural, aesthetic and social elements of in/visibility in literature at different levels. While such writers reject the notions of social relegation and male supremacy, they engage in creating more positive and assertive female characters that differ from the portrayal of passive dependent female characters often displayed by earlier male and female authors and enable these characters display of worth, capacities and capabilities. Thus, it creates a sense of women's selfhood and self-identity that are presented in the plays through female characters.

Through the exploration of womanist theory and the writers' use of language, most women's writings show that they have their own unique female characters who call the attention of readers to the female images, use assertive languages, express the female psyche and reflect women's cultural positions from different continents which are liable to change. Such exploration portrays the female gender with elements of self-determination, self-affirmation and self-actualization that helps to remove silence, voicelessness and patriarchal conditioning as associated with womanhood. It is however visible that the influence of 'gendered position' has been drastically reduced through several women's writing in African societies thereby making them psychoanalytic writers within the feminist context.

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