

# Immodesty and Prejudice in Women Language Use: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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**Abstract-** This study examines women- versus-women language use to underscore the fact that women languages are never neutral but embody ideologies and power relations. Literature is filled with men versus women discourses with more of stereotypical conclusions about women language use, leading to voicelessness in respect of women versus women subjugation. Using the tool of Critical Discourse Analysis, this study examined some excerpts from a Nigerian film titled *A Little Lie* to underscore some systems of bias and subjugation in some women's language against their sisters. The analysis of the women language use showed evidences of superiority/inferiority and domination of some women by other women as a result of childlessness. The study recommends that the identity of a woman among her peers should not be determined by whether she has a child or not. In addition, an intentional effort be made to throw in voices into this voiceless area by feminists' proponents, in order to liberate some of these women who are treated as less than a human by other women.

**Index Terms-** language, critical discourse analysis, power, ideology, feminism, African women.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Language is a multidimensional tool that can be wielded in diverse directions to attend diverse goals. These goals are never abstract but concrete as they constitute the structures identifiable in any society. The study of language in the diverse directions is bound to elucidate various concrete activities of man. This has been evidenced in the study of language use in politics, social relations, economy, religion, even in history and more. It is the study of language that gave birth to the two warring ideologies of gender (patriarchy/ chauvinism and feminism) in literature.

Feminism is a system of beliefs and theories that call for a special attention to women's rights and positions in cultures and societies that marginalize women. It is a movement that advocates the women's right and position in politics, religion, public life, economy, job situations and legal status. Feminists' ideologies were tools to redress the positions and rights of the women in societies where women were seen as unequal to men, an aberration, objects of men's fad, property and even of the same status with animals. Such societies were structured in such a way to benefit men to the detriment of women. These chauvinistic ideologies led to the agitation against female suffrage, the condemnation of the society's attitude towards the

aged, treatment of women as inferior, a vindication of the rights of women, a call for attention to the full participation of women in the rights and duties of citizens, women's right to education, politics, marriage and child bearing, child custody, property and more. Further agitations of the feminists include the need for freedom from violence- domestic, social and family, and freedom from structural oppression due to social and political systems fueled by the patriarchal ideologies.

The Beijing conference held in China in 1995 was occupied with the concern that the concept of feminism is a call to sisterhood. A call to stand up for the oppressed woman and to stand down any culture, attitude, belief, or even a society that oppresses, subjugates and dominates women. To that effect, feminism has been addressed from different angles by different feminists.

The impact of feminism has thriven in drawing public attention to the different levels of inequality between men and women as well as to the structures within many societies that belittle and work against women's rights and development. This has resulted in a reconstruction and reconsideration of women's roles, interests and concerns in many cultures and societies. But unfortunately, the feminists or the women themselves, have not made enough concerted effort towards addressing the prejudiced roles many women play against their sisters. These roles might or might not be overt. Few feminist writers have touched this concern partially in their literary works, but the right kind of attention has not been given to this plight by feminist writers. In the area of language use amongst the sister-hood, no serious attention has been paid to understand how women dehumanise, dominate, deny, and even subordinate other women with their language use.

The concern of this study is to explore the ways women language use reveals domination, dehumanization and superiority over others. In other words we are going to explore areas of women activities that are anti-sisterhood, anti-woman development, anti-women rights and anti-women equality. In addition, this study is a call to break the yoke of silence that has kept many women out of the objective realities of the true quest of feminism within the African context. African women writers have used their literatures to address the issues of self-expression, self- definition, self-discovery and as a liberating force towards African woman's self actualization but it seems as if the African woman is very busy outside, that she tends to forget the inside. As noted by Kolawole (1997:6), African women have emerged from silence transcending the many limiting borders imposed on them by patriarchal traditional or

post colonial structures and have taken positions as the mouth pieces for their gender even from various polar ideological stances. She goes further to say that the result of this has made the African woman visible and conscious through the activities of women activists.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Few female voices have identified that women are the problem of their fellow women. This is mostly addressed in literary terms but there seem not to be any serious attention or effort made to see how this is perpetuated in their language use. In other words, women-versus-women discourses have either been taken to be abstract or of less importance in the society. This, the study is out to negate and just as the Whorfian Hypothesis (1956) asserts, “We dissect nature along lines laid by our own language... the world is presented as a kaleidoscope flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely, by the linguistic systems in our minds.” Women language cannot be taken to be abstract or of less importance since we use language to represent the complexity of the world the way we perceive it in our minds.

Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) posit that:

language is not merely a channel through which information about underlying mental states and behaviour or facts about the world are communicated. On the contrary, language is a ‘machine’ that generates, and as a result constitutes, the social world. This also extends to the constitution of social identities and social relations.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a type of research which attempts to reveal the connections between language use, power and ideology. CDA enables one to understand issues regarding power and control as well as the role language plays in these issues.

According to Van Lier (2004), language awareness develops through social interaction. He asserts that focusing on certain linguistic elements in the environment is required to raise critical language awareness. Discourse is one important activity of man which is both semiotic and social. It is an instrument of social construction of reality as perceived by the discourse participants i.e., language use shows language user’s perception of a society or an individual. This, then means that the meaning of the linguistic elements in participants’ discourses have a dialectical relationship with social identities, social relationships and systems of knowledge and belief of the objects of a talk. According to Foucault (2002: p.54), discourses are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak”. This is because texts are the only evidence for the existence of discourses; one kind of concrete realisation of abstract forms of knowledge; which interacts and is influenced by sociolinguistic factors. These discourses manifest ideologies that find themselves into people’s consciousness, and influence their actions. Ideology, according to Hodge and Kress (1993), involves a systematically organized presentation of reality. In other words, the use of different euphemistic or derogatory terms leads to different presentations of realities and therefore, ideologies.

Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) assert that the primary interest of critical discourse analysis is to deconstruct and expose evidences of social inequality as expressed, constituted and legitimised through language use. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been described as “a type of discourse analytic research that studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context,” Van Dijk (200).

In other words, the critical analysis of the women language will challenge us to move from seeing women language as abstract, to seeing such words as having meanings in the contexts where they are used. Robin Lakoff (1975) agrees with the notion when he states that, “Our use of language embodies attitudes as well as referential meanings”. Women saw men’s language as foundational to the attitudes that are marginal to life and concerns of women. Fiske (1994) posits that “our words are never neutral”. In this respect, our words (written or oral) are used to convey a broad sense of meanings and the meanings we convey with those words are identified by our immediate social, political, and historical conditions.

Language is a tool for expressing oneself using words. It serves as a way of knowing, valuing, and experiencing the world. Gracia (2004) asserts that language does things and that it is the creator of realities, and its results can be made explicit and analyzed in the light of the scientific knowledge produced by human/social sciences. Luke, (1997) puts it that critical analysis of language is necessary for describing, interpreting, analysing, and critiquing social life reflected in text. CDA has been able to reveal through studies that written texts and spoken words reveal discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality, and bias and how these sources are initiated, maintained, reproduced, and transformed within specific social, economic, political, and historical contexts (Van Dijk, 1988). As a matter of fact, language use in a discourse is a subtle way of recreating reality and a way of favouring the interests of some people against others. The emergence of critical discourse analysis helps to explain the complexity and articulation of the discursive phenomena that produce discourses. Hence, discourse is the creator of practices, just as practices can comprise different discourses. Discourses play different roles in human lives and in human societies.

Emenyi (2005: 127) also asserts that literacy has empowered women to explore new possibilities that focus on the realities of womanhood that were hitherto ignored by men. She stresses that the common agenda of women writers and critics and other women activists is tied towards an assertion of equality and awareness of sisterhood, the communality of women.

Feminism as a social movement sought to redress the imbalances in the society by providing women with same rights and opportunities as men, so that they will be able to take their rightful place in the world. After the feminist re-awakening in the 1970s, feminists began to realize that equal rights alone cannot free women from sexual and social subordination. Intellectual starvation, economic expression, commercial exploitation, domestic domination, physical abuse, sexual harassment and lack of personal freedom continued to affect the lives of women in spite of laws to the contrary. Hence, Western feminist writers and critics were forced to re-analyze and re-access the socio-cultural setups, looking for clues to explain the mechanism of patriarchy

that contrived to keep women eternally subjugated. (Emenyi (2005). They came to the realization that the notion of difference, whatever its value conceptually, rarely projects social equality or justice or mutual respect. In contexts where difference exists in language use among women, these differences can stratify the women on unequal terms.

The situations of chauvinism portrayed in literatures have always been addressed to the man in the society. But within these contexts, certain utterances and attitudes by some female characters in some works of literature are clear cut evidences to the fact that the female is not free from chauvinism in her treatment of her fellow woman. Etego (2013) projects what she observes from many African societies thus, “women seem to be deceptive in the sense that within its borders, there exist status, class, race, ethnicity, deprivation and subjugation.” There should be a fight against the activities. The “well-to-do” must realize their responsibilities and their limitations and learn to respect other women’s rights, dignity and personality.

Kolawole (1997: p.21) projects the African women writers and feminists as having been crying out against all forms of oppression against women. She goes further to cite Alice walker’s definition of feminism thus:

“feminism is the political theory that struggles to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women-as well as white economically privileged, heterosexual woman. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism but merely female self-aggrandizement.

From the above, it becomes obvious that any aspect of the feminists activities that reveals power-imbalance, oppression, dominance, prejudice, denial etc, must not be glossed over. The lens of the African feminists should be redirected towards the plight of the poor, helpless women especially the housemaids, their madams, the daughters-in law and mothers in-law whose dehumanizing activities have been so prevalent as shown in African movies, on newspaper pages and in the lyric of songs sung by these women against their fellow women, which have remained mute or voiceless.

It is this call to awaken the consciousness of the African women to the plight of her sister in the hands of other sisters- as there exist different worlds within the female worlds- that this work sets out to do. If the African women have been mobilized to fight for their rights and that of other woman from the hand of men, why have they not realized that some women’s rights are being denied them by other women.

The attitude of men towards women who are attributed to be infertile has been of great concern in the struggle between chauvinists and feminists. Flora Nwapa’s *One is Enough* experience portrays the condition of the African woman who has no child. In the intersection of male and female gendered voices by Emenyi (2005), she cites Helen Chukwu who posits that “fertility is a continental flag and childlessness a curse. In the same *One is Enough*, Nwapa’s mother in law sees her as useless (Emenyi 105). The one that has no child is supposedly an inferior (woman) human being or even not deserving life.

Does a woman manufacture children? Can she be a complete woman without children? Has she a right to decide not to have children? And does such decision make her less than a woman or a human being? If a woman is a woman, a human being with equal right to life as any other woman, whether married or unmarried, with child or childless, then there should be revolutionary and reactionary feminists, towards the rejection of those perimeters of oppression found in the female dominant cultures. The lens used for analysis of patriarchal oppression and the emphasis that led to the social changes in patriarchy must be redirected homewards or inwards towards these challenges amongst women.

Obioma (1997) in a paper titled: “The Politics of Mothering” observes that it is a fact that in many African societies, women act as oppressive agents to other woman especially as co-workers, mothers-in-law, daughters-in-law, older women and step mothers. Onwueme (1992) *Go Tell it to Women* laments the disunity among women where women no longer fight for equality but for extermination of even a fellow woman. The analysis of the data will give more insight to these concerns.

### III. FRAMEWORK

CDA provides some approaches to research with the primary aim of uncovering the relationship between language, society, power, ideology, values and opinions. The study adopts Fairclough’s (2003) theoretical-methodological device of critical discourse analysis. This model approaches discourse from three-dimensions. In the first dimension of the model, discourse is analyzed as text by identification and description of the linguistic features. at the second level, discourse is examined from a broader sense of the context of the identified linguistic features; in other words, a link is made between the wider social context of the discourse participants and the situation or condition in which the talk/text is expressed. The third level projects discourse as a social practice or reality. All these dimensions are dialectically related, and are part of the analytic dynamics of the discursive materials. Phillips & Hardy (2002) are of the opinion that social reality is constructed and made real through discourses, and social interactions cannot be understood without reference to discourses that give them meaning. In the same manner, Van Dijk, (1997) asserts that if we aim to understand discourses, we must understand the contexts in which they appear. Seeing discourse as social practice enables us to combine the perspectives of structure and action, so as to determine the position of the women in the network of activities within the film. In other words, the excerpts will help to reveal live performances, social actions and patterns of interaction that dominate women discourses. In this study, the analysis will be geared towards revealing the disparity among women as accomplished or imply through their discourses from the film.

### IV. DATA PRESENTATION /ANALYSIS

The excerpts below are got from an exchange between a daughter-in law and a mother-in law. The discourse ensured as the mother-in law arrived from the village to the house of the daughter-in law.

Mother-in law: Give me a baby, am not asking for babies.

Daughter- in law: Please mama calm down you are just arriving from the village.

Mother-in law: Should I calm down? Do you know what my fellow women are doing to me with their months? ... I have waited enough or don't I deserve to carry my grandchild? I have run out of patience.

If I die without carrying my grandchild because of your wickedness, my blood will be on your head. Ogechi talk to me, tell me if you are taking anything to prevent pregnancy or you don't want baby to suck your breast?

As the son came back from work and the daughter-in law came out to greet the husband, she greets the son with the question;

Mother-in law: "What is this one doing in your house?"

*(the second day of her visit)*

Daughter-in law: Mama I am going to the market. Do you need anything?

Mother-in law: Do I need anything? You cannot buy my need from the market; in fact I will follow you to show you what I need.

Mother-in law: *(As they were driving to the market, she jump out of the car to carry a baby on another woman's back, plays with the baby and tells the mother of the child "My daughter in-law has refused to give her a grandchild."*

*(she carries the baby to the daughter-in law)*

Mother-in law: this is what I need.

Daughter-in law: *(She cries and runs to a church to cry her life out to her God).*

Mother-in law: -let her cry and confess her sins. Who knows the number of abortions she committed and the number of children she killed. Let her confess that God may forgive here and give her children

*(At The Table)*

Mother-in law: Did you look at the dinning table, does it look complete? You are supposed to have father, mother and children so that your table will be full and your food will be sweeter. Why are we eating? Are you not supposed to share food with your children?

Daughter-in law: My mother in-law please leave me alone. What did I do to you? Am I the one to give myself a child? It is not God that gives children?

*(In The Kitchen)*

Mother-in law: What are you cooking? Is that what you came to this house to do? Cooking for who? You should be starving in this house until you have given me a baby. Get out of the kitchen.

Daughter-in law: *(weeping in the bedroom reports to the husband).*

She practically sacked me from my kitchen, put out the fire and throw down my pot.

*(At this point, the son insists that she must leave his house and as she was going, she remarks)*

Mother-in law: What should I be doing in a house like this, where there is no grandchild? Ogechi, I am going to the village. I will take your name to them that you refused to continue their lineage. I don't blame you, it is my son that went

to marry a man like himself. The blood of their family will be on your head.

Give me a child but if you can not, you are useless

These mothers-in laws arrive their daughters-in law places without the simple courtesy of the social interaction that requires greetings versus greetings but plunges into an attack on their childless situations which is a face threatening act or negative face. This shows a bridge of the acceptable social relations between persons who are just coming together, which is based on the fact that they are childless. Their childless situation denies them their social respect which is as a result of the women's social perception of these daughters- in law, which in essence, necessitated the labels they framed for them. From these excerpts, it is a common belief that a childless woman has something to do with her childlessness. Inferred from the utterances above are some systems of beliefs that women hold against the childless woman.

#### V. SUPERIORITY/ POWER/POWERLESSNESS

From the excerpts above, it is obvious that motherhood is an ideology of superiority by which a woman can dominate, derogate and subordinate another woman. Having a child makes a woman powerful while the childless woman is made powerless. Looking at the exchanges from the two, the utterance, "Do you know what my fellow women are doing to me with their months?" goes further to establish the fact that a woman who has no grandchild from her son who is married, makes her powerless (an object of mockery) in the presence of her fellow women who have grand children. In other words, a woman with a grand child has power over another who has none.

Ogechi's childlessness gave the mother-in law the power to act and use words derogatorily at her. The question she asked the son: "what is this one doing in your house?", is evident of the fact that the mother-in law does not see her daughter-in law as having a space she can call her own in that house because she has not child. The use of "this one" instead of her name shows the level of humiliation since lack of name calling shows less or non-existence.

#### VI. SYSTEMS OF SUBJUGATION

A childless woman is termed wicked especially when she is unable to bear children before the death of the mother-in law. Her act of wickedness is buttressed further in the following expressions: "taking something to prevent pregnancy, having killed all her children through abortion (this goes specially to an educated woman), refusing to give a grandchild, deceiving a man to marry her, not knowing that she is a man, and being intentional in stopping or destroying the man's lineage which renders her useless. These constitute ideological stances which are ingredients of women language use against the childless woman.

Childless situation puts on the barren woman the responsibility of the blood of her mother-in law as well as the blood of the husband's lineage, especially where the husband is

the only son. The inability of a woman to give birth invariably brings a curse on her, thus:

“If I die without carrying my grandchild because of your wickedness, my blood will be on your head. ... tell me if you are taking anything to prevent pregnancy or you don't want baby to suck your breast?”

The “them” that the mother-in law will take her name to, are the in-group/ superior/ fruitful women in the village who will wait for her to attack her at the death of her mother-in law, to show her what it takes to be wicked as they perceive it. In my area, it used to be a bitter experience for the childless woman whose mother-in law reported to “them” that her daughter-in law is wicked and does not want her to carry her grandchildren. At the eve of the burial of such a mother-in law- one that died without carrying her grandchildren, the women will normally gather at a corner in the compound and invite the lady over for a talk in pretense. They will form a circle and ask her to enter the middle of the circle. At that, point they will remind her that the mother-in law died with a heavy heart because she did not allow her to carry her grandchildren. Whether she agrees or not, they will pull her in and give her some beatings as a reward for her wickedness. In some other situations, they may ask the young people to gather some black ants during the day and put them in a container and bring to them; which they will do innocently. As the daughter-in law enters the circle, whether at will or by force, they will pour out those black ants on the ground and force her to sit on them so they can sting her. The ants' sting in this case becomes a reward for her wickedness. The mildest treatment will be to barn her from seeing the corps of the mother-in law or from coming near her casket during the burial ceremony.

Implied by word “prevent” and the phrase “don't want” are expressions that embody another belief of some class of women that the beauty of a woman resides in the fact of her standing breasts as against the one whose breasts has fallen. In other words, some women don't want to get pregnant in order not to lose their beauty while others resign from breastfeeding their children so that their breast will not fall flat, thereby making them lose their beauty. This ideology has translated into a business idea in the world today whereby padded brassiere and padded clothes are used as alternatives to keep the woman's appearance more attractive.

Let her cry and **confess** her sins. Who knows the number of **abortions** she committed and the number of **children** she **killed**.

Revealed in the utterance above is another dimension of the beliefs that women hold against the childless woman. A childless woman is termed wicked especially when she is unable to bear children before the death of the mother-in law. Her act of wickedness is buttressed further in “taking something to prevent pregnancy, having killed all her children through abortion, which has turned her into a man, i.e. one that can never get pregnant which also buttresses the fact of her being intentional in stopping the man's lineage which renders her useless.

Thus, the expressions: wicked, prevent pregnancy, refuse to give birth, killed or aborted children, a man, stopping lineage

and useless, are ideological stances which are found among women language use against the childless woman.

## VII. DEHUMANIZATION/HUMILIATION

Dehumanization has to do with violent attack on an individual whether physically, socially, psychologically/ mentally, domestically or by verbal assault. This is accomplished through the use of the declarative and interrogative sentences thus:

“Give me a baby, am not asking for babies”

“What is this one doing in your house?”

“You cannot buy my need from the market, in fact I will follow you to show you what I need.”

“This is what I need.”

“I don't blame you, it is my son that went to marry a man like himself.”

“The blood of their family will be on your head.”

“Did you look at the dinning table, does it look complete?”

You are supposed to have father, mother and children so that your table will be full and your food will be sweeter.

Why are we eating? Are you not supposed to share food with your children?”

“What are you cooking? Is that what you came to this house to do? Cooking for who? You should be starving in this house until you have given me a baby.

Get out of the kitchen.”

“Give me a child but if you can not, you are useless”

In addition, her childless situation has put on her the responsibility of the blood of her mother-in law as well as the blood of the husband's lineage, since the husband is the only son. Her inability to give birth has invariably brought a curse on her. The “them” that the mother-in law will take her name to, are other women in the village who will wait for her at the death of her mother-in law to show her what it takes to be wicked.

Verbally, she was assaulted with derogatory evaluative adjectives: wicked, useless, and the actional verbs: killed, aborted etc.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

This film, *A Little Lie*, is a remarkable masterpiece that projects the misery of an infertile woman in the hand of a fellow woman. It projects a fellow woman's heartless treatment to her fellow sister on the question of motherhood or childlessness. It goes to confirm Obioma's (1997) assertion in a paper titled: “The Politics of Mothering”, where she observes that, it is a fact that in many African societies, women act as oppressive agents to other woman especially as co-workers, mothers-in-law, daughters-in-law, older women and step mothers. And just as Amaka's mother-in-law in Nwapa's *One is Enough* saw her as useless and destroyed her joy and love in marriage, because of her assumed infertility, so did Ogechi's mother-in law. This evil that breads inhuman acts on women by men, has a strong root among women and must be seriously paid attention to if walker's definition of feminism stands true among African women.

### IX. RECOMMENDATION

The study recommends that the identity of a woman among her peers should not be determined by whether she has a child or not. In addition, an intentional effort be made to throw in voices into this voiceless area by feminists' proponents, in order to liberate some of these women who are treated as less than a human by other women.

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