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Linguistic Choices and Gender Roles in New Nigerian Literature: An Examination of Alpha Emeka's *The Carnival* and Razinat Mohammed's *A Love Like a Woman's and Other Stories* (Pp. 133-146)

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Abstract

*This paper is premised on the Systemic Functional approach to text analysis, which considers a work of art as a consequence of the social milieu (Senkoro, 2005). Specifically, it takes Hasan's (1985) view that without linguistics, the study of literature remains a series of personal preferences. It examines how power is invested along gender lines through language choice in two works of fiction, both by new Nigerian writers: Emeka's novel *The Carnival* and Mohammed's short story collection *A Love Like a Woman's and Other Stories*. It seeks to achieve two objectives. The first is to evaluate whether, and to what extent new Nigerian writing is holding onto, or shifting from established ideologies regarding the portrayal of women in fiction, especially by male writers. The second is to compare the two works, *The Carnival*, by a male writer, with *A Love Like a Woman's* written by a female, to see whether and to what extent the two differ in their portrayal of characters of the two sexes. The final part of the paper draws conclusions on the basis of the evidence from the two books that would help in validating the notion of gender positioning in Nigerian fiction, or re-assessing same. The paper argues that such an examination of broader contextual properties of*

texts affect their description and interpretation, and concludes that by thus determining positions available within texts, we can make a proper evaluation of how gender is grounded in new Nigerian writing.

Keywords: gender, feminism, transitivity, verbs, reductive, critical discourse

Theoretical Perspectives

Gender, feminism and power have been approached from various theoretical perspectives. For example, there is a growing amount of work within a broadly defined sociolinguistics that takes an ‘interventionist’ approach to matters. This work has been called ‘linguistics with a conscience and a cause, one which seeks to reveal how language is used and abused in the exercise of power and the suppression of human rights’ (Widdowson, 1998). Two of its main exponents are Fairclough (1995, 2001) and van Dijk (1993), who have championed an approach called ‘critical discourse analysis.’ This work focuses on how language is used to exercise and preserve power and privilege in society, how it buttresses social institutions, and how even those who suffer as a consequence fail to realize how many things that appear to be ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ are not at all so. They are not so because it is power relations in society that determine who gets to say what and who gets to write what. The claim is that politics, medicine, religion, education, law, race, gender, and academia can only be understood for what they really are within the framework of critical discourse analysis: as systems that maintain an unequal distribution of wealth, income, status, group membership, education, and so on (Wardhaugh, 2006).

Susan Ehrlich (2006) maintains that people *do* gender through the linguistic choice made by speakers. In the same way that lawyers construct their legal identity through language, so do men and women construct their (gendered) identity through linguistic practices. Interestingly, Ehrlich makes a case for bringing together the two main areas of language and gender research: the study of language use and the study of sexist language. Her argument is that the one is the product of the other, that sexism is an act (doing things with words) with outcomes affecting identity and judgements. From the point of view of studies of language and gender, the issue is not merely to describe how language is used differently along gendered lines, but to use such an analysis as part of social critique and transformation. A central element of critical applied linguistics, therefore, is a way of exploring language in social contexts that goes beyond mere correlations between language and society,

and instead raises more critical questions to do with access, power, disparity, desire, difference, and resistance. It also insists on a historical understanding of how social relations came to be the way they are.

One version of critical theory, based on various lines of thinking deriving from the great line of Marxist thought, is called *emancipatory modernism*, based as it is on modernist frameworks of materialism and enlightenment. It reminds us that critical applied linguistics needs at some level to engage with the long legacy of Marxism, neo-Marxism, and its many counter-arguments. Critical work in this sense has to engage with questions of inequality, injustice, rights and wrongs. According to Poster (1989) “critical theory springs from an assumption that we live amid a world of pain, that much can be done to alleviate that pain, and that theory has a crucial role to play in that process” (p.3). According to this view, applied linguistics may have an important role in either the production or the alleviation of that pain. But it is also a view that insists not merely on the alleviation of pain, but also the possibility of change.

Gender and Feminist Studies

Gender and feminist studies have occupied the front burner in intellectual discourse worldwide, especially in the last two decades. Feminism can be traced to many disparate trajectories; some reflecting highly localized responses to particular conditions, while others are trans-national in their reach and importance. In the main, it refers to the political and intellectual movement for the liberation of women (Mama 2005). The relationship between gender and feminism is complex and often hard to fathom. But it seems that both focus on the political, institutional and social challenges of women in contemporary society, and the place of women in what is often termed a “male dominated” society. Although the term ‘gender’ itself is in theory meant to address the two sexes, it often ends up focusing disproportionately on the female gender. Both globally and in the African context, gender and feminist issues have generated such diverse intellectual voices that it will be futile to attempt a comprehensive or even representative acknowledgement within the space available here.

In Africa, the CODESRIA Gender Series has provided a major platform on which African intellectuals can engage the muted and emergent issues affecting women. The stated goal of the series, according to its editors, is “to challenge the masculinities underpinning the structures of repression that

target women” (CODESRIA Gender Series 4, 2005). The extent to which such “masculinities underpinning the structures of repression” have been identified, discussed and new pathways found, or solutions proffered, along with the sometimes confusing interests among scholars of this calling, is elaborately and eloquently discussed by Amina Mama (2005).

She identifies four conditions that have fuelled the development of gender and women’s studies in African contexts. The first is the development of political consciousness inspired by women’s political engagement both during colonial rule and since independence. The second is the internationalization of feminism, and the resulting manifestation of gender discourses within international agencies and national governments, which is seen to have stimulated intellectual, activist and policy interests involving women in modernization. The third condition is the gradual but steady growth in the overall number of women gaining access to higher education, and their related exposure to diverse intellectual resources and influences. And the fourth is that the political, historical and economic conditions of African intellectual development have generated critical engagement with Western intellectual agencies, notably the organization of knowledge, and the methodologies for the production of knowledge.

It would seem though, that on the whole, gender activists and feminist apologists tend to take a holistic approach to the issues they engage. In doing so, they sometimes tend to overlook certain salient, but crucial factors that may be at the root of the socio-political or economic inequality of women, the very issues they seek to address. Le Roux (2005) argues that the main and perhaps most important issues tend to go undescribed because they are occluded, hidden, or belong to the *non-dit*. According to this view, the *non-dit* “refers to what is not said in a society, what is swept under the carpet or excluded. It also refers to that which is difficult to study, because it is occluded, hidden or silent—such as sexuality, or taboos” (2005:19). According to Le Roux, the *non-dit* remains excluded, undescribed because of the methodologies in sociology, anthropology and history, which tend to homogenize. Such disciplines tend to focus on what is visible and quantifiable, such as census results and the public sphere of work, economics and resources.

She suggests that alternative forms of sources need to be mined for what they reveal of the excluded, the marginalized and the deliberately omitted. She declares: “In particular, I propose that we use fictional texts as sources where

little or nothing else can be found” (Le Roux 2005:33). The reason is that fictional texts reveal certain patterns of how power operates in society, and in particular allow for the excluded—the *non-dit*—to move out of its hidden, occluded subject position and become visible. Above all, it enables us to have a fuller understanding of human experiences and human behaviour.

Literature as the Mirror of Reality in Society

There is some debate as to whether fictional texts can be used as a reliable source for historical or sociological research. Many have dismissed it as ‘imaginary evidence,’ ‘subjective,’ even as ‘inadequate science’ (Mitchell, 2000; Visweswaran 1988). It is often so dismissed on the claim that it is not necessarily based entirely on documented facts. Historians thus regard it as a non-historical source. These arguments are true. Yet, since not all social reality is recorded, recordable, or researched, it is argued that fiction fulfils a valuable function by making visible the patterns, networks of influence and questions of identity that are central to the maintenance of a prevailing society (Le Roux 2005).

Lye (1999), writing from a poststructuralist perspective, asks: “Most compellingly, is literature a means of representing reality, or it is a means of representing particular imaginative constructions that we take to be reality but which may have ideological, cultural, political meanings, which ground and shape the reality we think we are looking for?” Whichever way we answer this question, it would validate the argument that literature, indeed fiction, is a valuable source for evaluating the realities in societies. If we concede that it is a means of representing society, we would validate the proposition directly. But even if we said it is a means of representing particular imaginative constructions of reality, it would still be true that ideological totalizations or instantiations are in fact based on, or influenced by, particularities in society.

At the level of literary writing itself, it has often been said that African male writers depict few women characters in their works, while those that do, present them as mere cardboard cut-outs (Le Roux 2005:27). For instance, Kumah notes that due to

the male-dominated literary tradition, many depictions of African women are reductive—perpetuating popular myths of female subordination. Female characters in male-authored works are rarely granted primary statue—their

roles often trivialized to varying degrees—and they are depicted as silent and submissive in nature; remaining absent from the public sphere (9).

Elsewhere, Carter (1997) notes that the syntactic choices in romances and stories in similar genres often encode a conventional gender positioning of men and women. The strategy is to keep in place existing ideologies, not challenge them.

In this paper, we evaluate this claim using data from Emeka's *The Carnival* to see whether in his portrayal of women he merely reproduces existing ideologies of women and womanhood; whether he presents gender relations as the African society most stereotypically constructs them. Specifically, we examine structural patterns in scenes which portray male and female characters together, such as love scenes and other family or office settings. Further, we examine Mohammed's *A Love Like a Woman's and Other Stories* to see if character portrayal is significantly different in a work written by a female. Senkoro (2005) insists that, "a work of art is a consequence of the social milieu" (8). Thus it can be argued that social behaviour captured metaphorically in works of art, and the social component of a socio-cultural perspective reflects the feminine-masculine relationships in the real world.

Gendered Scenes in *The Carnival* and *A Love Like a Woman's*

Emeka's *The Carnival* is not a love story. It unravels the process of destabilization orchestrated by power-hungry military politicians in order to legitimize the abortion of democratic structures and the consequent perpetuation of military rule. But in telling the story, several scenes bring the male and female gender together; some involve relationships of intimacy involving romance. *A Love Like a Woman's* is true to its cover title. All eleven stories have one form of male/female intimacy or the other. These interactions ground the production of gendered language.

Lexical Choices in *The Carnival* and *A Love Like a Woman's*

One of the structural indicators of where power is invested in a dialogic encounter is the verb choice. Other indicators include the prepositional patterns and the discourse patterns. In the following examples in *The Carnival*, the active verb is nearly always attributed to the male, and where it is otherwise, the female is seen carrying out an action that indicates some form of dependence on the male. The examples also show that prepositional

choices are made in such a way as to place the male in a commanding position, physically or metaphorically in relation to the female. This is clear in the directional poles in which the male/female characters find themselves in relation to the preposition: who is up, who is down, etc. Especially in *A Love like a Woman's* even the discourse strategies place the female at a disadvantage, both in the construction of discourse as well as in the narrative, which often overtly paints the same picture.

Transitivity Patterns

Example 1:

Obi . . . stretched out his arm again—to link it back, but felt two hands holding him tight. He turned slowly, gazed at his girlfriend—Shola. She looked away at first . . . tears rolled down her cheeks. . . . He took her into his arms, and held her close. She sobbed for a few minutes, and stopped (11).

Example 2:

*The door clicked three times. “Shall we?” he said, and took her by the hand (p42).
He took her by the hand again. “Let’s go.” (p. 43).
He took Shola by the hand and descended the small stairway (p. 52).*

In Example 1, Obi the man, is presented as carrying out the liberating, protective action, “he took her into his arms, and held her close.” This action is in response to the ‘tears rolling down’ Shola’s cheeks, and her sobbing. On the other hand, Shola’s only action, holding him tight with both hands, is done out of fear, she is seeking protection. Even so, this action is passively reported, “Obi . . . felt two hands holding him tight.” In Example 2, the female Shola is three times presented as doing nothing except being led by the hand like a child, or a blind person. The expression “took her by the hand,” “he took her by the hand again,” and “he took Shola by the hand” becomes a recurring decimal. The impression is that each time Obi and Shola have to walk together, she must be held by the hand. On the face of it, this image is supposed to portray care, love and romance, perhaps. But notice that it is he that holds her by the hand, it is he who performs the action, she is presented as passive, docile, inert, acted upon, as if she is lifeless matter.

Example 3:

They were standing face to face now, gazing at each other. He felt a certain part of him begin to rekindle itself. She looked away. It was obvious she felt the same way too. . . . “A gulf ball fell on someone here last year and he almost lost his life if not for God’s intervention.” She stared into his eyes (95).

Even when the action is merely verbal or gestural, the man is always shown to be in charge. Note in Example 3 that whereas the man relates an experience, she merely “stared into his eyes.” This becomes significant when the scene is compared with a similar one (on page 11 of the book).

She looked away at first, and then gazed back. The faint smile on her face was warm, but uneasy. Tears rolled down her cheeks. He took her into his arms, and held her close (11).

In this passage, the she even has a hard time looking at him, “she looked away at first.” But when she looks at him, “tears rolled down her cheeks.” On the contrary, the man “took her into his arms, and held her close.” Thus, whereas passive verbs are associated with the female “tears rolled down her cheeks,” the active voice is associated with the man, using action verbs, “took,” “held.”

Example 4:

He raised his right arm and lowered it gently on her shoulders. She turned and seized him across the waist in an embrace. Her face was raised facing his, her eyes were closed and her lips gradually parted. It was surrender not only of the body, but also of the soul. “Kiss me,” she moaned. The last aorta of resistance in him gave way and he grabbed her with all his strength and devoured her lips. . . he lifted her into his arms. She held the low bough of a mango tree and moaned with pleasure. . . He held her by the shoulders, pressed her against himself, and kissed her on the forehead (97).

It would appear that the argument advanced earlier about the use of the passive for the woman and the active for the man is unsupported in Example 4, because here “she turned and seized him across the waist in an embrace.” But this is quickly weakened by the counter use of words as surrender in the very next sentence, “it was surrender not only of the body, but also of the

soul.” On the other hand, it is not in doubt that the man is again, fully in charge. “He grabbed her with all his strength and devoured her lips. . . lifted her into his arms. . . held her by the shoulders, pressed her against himself . . .” The verb ‘grab’ is modified by “with all his strength,” and other verbs such as “devoured,” “lifted,” “held” and “pressed” all stand in sharp contrast with the almost helpless posture in which the woman is presented. What is even more interesting is that the man’s actions when in love are not markedly different from those he performs in anger. As can be seen in Example 5, the verb ‘grab’ is used when the man is angry, same as was used in the previous example when he was supposed to be in a love relationship. Similarly, when an armed robber tries to rape Chioma, the same verb ‘grab’ is used.

Example 5:

When the trousers finally fell to the floor, he grabbed Chioma by the waist and pulled her closer to himself (277).

It would seem that in Carnival, the man’s actions are the same when he is happy and in love, as when he is angry, or when he is paranoid and demented; he ‘grabs’ the woman. That may account for why the woman’s responses appear like one hounded by a brute beast. In 4, the man’s ‘grabbing,’ ‘devouring’ (like a lion), ‘lifting,’ ‘holding,’ and ‘pressing’ the woman, leads to her ‘moaning,’ and ‘moaning with pleasure.’ It is ironic that the male writer would interpret such moans of the woman as pleasure, though there is little evidence to prove that the woman finds pleasure in such violence on her body.

Example 6:

Brown was enraged. He flung the cup, and it shattered on the solid floor. He grabbed her “so you wan to kill me.” (p. 140)

Example 7:

She got to Junior’s door. It opened before she had the chance to knock. Junior pulled her in, and locked it again. He turned quickly and grabbed her from behind. “Stop that,” she said, with a low tone. “Stop that,” she said again, struggling to break loose, but Junior tightened his grip. He kissed her on the head, neck and shoulders. Her objections turned into a giggle. He loosened his grip, and began to explore her whole body—finally, his hands settled on her breasts. “This whole

*thing makes me feel somehow,” she said, with a shiver. . . .
“Don’t bother about it.” He ran his fingers down her hips,
and she began to tremble. He turned her around, and gave
her a long kiss on the lips. When he lifted her into the bed,
she gave a faint moan and lay passive while he undressed her
(p. 176).*

Example 7 underscores the point made earlier, that the woman’s moans may not be out of pleasure as suggested. Note the sequence of events as she got to Junior’s door. He “pulled her in, and locked” the door. “He turned quickly and grabbed her from behind.” She protests twice verbally, saying “Stop that,” all the while “struggling to break loose.” This is her only active part, but this is countered effectively by his “tightened” grip. With this grip, he goes to work on her, kissing her on the head, neck and shoulders. Weakening her, “he loosened his grip, and began to explore her hips, and she began to tremble.” The scene is similar to a boar constrictor when it catches its prey. It must first immobilise it, stretching it and breaking its bones before settling down for the swallow. In the case of Junior’s prey, “when he lifted her into the bed, she gave a faint moan and lay passive while he undressed her.” *A Love Like a Woman’s* presents a similar picture. In 8, notice how Efida the man is portrayed, in relation to Afi the woman.

Example 8:

*Without asking any questions he swept her from the ground into his arms and retraced his way to the hut. Afi was so cold that she could neither utter a word nor shrug to register her objection at being carried in that manner. All she was vaguely aware of or capable of showing was her total submission to this man who called himself Efida (p. 15)—
“Something to Live for.”*

Here too, the man is associated with the active verbs swept and retrace. On the other hand, Afi “could neither utter a word nor shrug to register her objection.” She was helpless, inert. Thus all she was capable of showing was “her total submission to this man.”

Example 9:

“You are finally back from harloting in Ramat?” he asked her as he walked menacingly towards her. She had quivered

with fear and when she picked little Bello, her hands, wavering as they did, slipped and Bello roared in terror as he dropped back to the floor again. Salisu could not contain his anger and he landed a hard blow on Laila's face, sending her hard onto the floor. . . . She remained sprawled on the ground while Salisu walked and talked heatedly and, finally, handed her a piece of paper which meant he was divorcing her not once, not twice, but three times, according to Islamic injunctions (61)—“Laila.”

Examples 8 and 9 are all the more interesting because they come from a woman's pen. Notice the near beastly picture of the man in 9, in contrast with the pliant, submissive and even helpless position of the woman, a victim. While he “walked menacingly towards her,” she ‘quivers with fear’ and is unable to keep her hold on the baby, dropping her on the floor. He ‘lands her a hard blow on the face, sending her to the floor.’ Her action? None. She merely remains “sprawled on the ground.” The man walks and talks heatedly. Then hands her a divorce letter.

Prepositional Patterns

Carter suggests that women are positioned with the preposition **up** because “the women always appear to be very small.” (13). If they look “up,” they look into the man's face, but if they look “down,” it has to be to the ground. In 10 this is the case even when the woman is initiating a discourse as seen in the case of Kulu. Here Kulu approaches Vendi the male medicine man, to seek a solution to her husband's decree to stem their childbearing as a measure to fight poverty.

Example 10:

*“Vendi,” she (Kulu) called him a second time, her head downcast and her two hands rubbing each other, “I don't want to have any more children,” she concluded not allowing her face to emerge from its downcast position (p.38)—
“Sterile Water.”*

She calls Vendi, “her head downcast,” and it remains so until she concludes her discussion, “not allowing her face to emerge from its downcast position.” In addition to this downcast position, ‘her two hands are rubbing each other,’ showing nervousness.

Example 11:

*She turned and seized him across the waist in an embrace.
Her face was raised facing his.”—Carnival, p. 97.*

The underlined has no preposition, but notice the directional placement of the woman’s face in relation to the man. She has to ‘raise’ her face to face his, showing that he is a towering figure, besides whom the diminutive female would look up to.

Conclusions

Readers can no doubt relate to the incidents captured in the eleven examples in the two works of fiction as reflective of reality in the Nigerian society, irrespective of religion. The portrayal of female characters in relation to male characters in the short story collection, written by a female, is a bit extreme. It is not clear what message the writer hopes to pass. What is clear is that her female characters are presented as so strongly disadvantaged, marginalised and oppressed, that it leaves the reader with a view that all men are selfish, savage, brute, unthinking and unfeeling beasts. Even the male character Efida in the opening story who rescues a lady from a suicide attempt, is eventually seen to possibly hold an ulterior motive, lust. Maybe that’s the author’s way of promoting feminism. In “The U-Turn,” Samson Koji, an aeronautic engineer living abroad who has been arranged to marry Mary Rose brutally and heartlessly breaks the latter’s heart when he arrives and finds that Mary Rose is not the beautiful, elegant, petit girl he had imagined. He would not even permit her to embrace him. In fact, he wonders in his heart “is it possible that this could be Mary Rose? . . . Is it possible that such a beautiful name could belong to such a grotesque figure?” (69). So he boards a plane and returns to London, shattering the dreams of Mary Rose.

Such issues are discursively portrayed in all the stories, but are outside the scope of this paper. The paper examined transitivity and prepositional choices in the two works of fiction. But it is clear that, as far as the portrayal of women in fiction is concerned, there is not much difference between Emeka the male writer and Mohammed the female. If anything, the female writer Mohammed appears to be more forceful in casting female characters in positions of servitude, perhaps to press home the point that African women are marginalized, deprived and oppressed. The problem is that critics have argued that negative portrayal of female characters in fiction is characteristically a phenomenon of male writers (see Carter 1997; Senkoro 2005; Kumah 2005). Both portray their female characters in disadvantaged positions while exalting men. This is captured both in their transitivity

patterns as well as their prepositional patterns. Indeed, the findings in this analysis validate Wardhaugh's observation, that "even those who suffer as a consequence (of the power dynamics channelled through language) fail to realize how many things that appear to be 'natural' and 'normal' are not at all so" (15). This comment can be applied to the writer of *A Love Like a Woman's* especially if we read in her portrayal of women the view that she considers it 'normal.'

The older generation of male writers have been found guilty of depicting women as reductive, thus perpetuating popular myths of female subordination (See Kumah quoted earlier; also Carter 1997). This micro analysis shows that new Nigerian writers, male and female, appear to be continuing in this tradition. It validates the claim about male writers but may also be extended to some female writers, like Mohammed, that African fiction writers seek, not to change existing ideologies but to entrench and perpetuate popular myths of female domination.

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