

## Women's Marginalization and Negative Perceptions about Women: The Example of Yoruba Proverbs

Eunice Omolara Olarewaju

Department of English

Faculty of Arts

Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria

### Abstract

*Gender bias as well as marginalization of women is a common phenomenon in most African societies. The marginalization is borne out of the negative perceptions that every typical African society has about women. The present study focuses on how Yoruba culture, a highly patriarchal culture, has discriminated against women as well as how it has culturally portrayed them negatively in different ways. The data for the study comprises Yoruba proverbs drawn from interactions with elderly Yoruba people, those gathered from the compilations of Owomoyela (2005) as well as Yoruba proverbs found in scholarly articles. Results indicated that some Yoruba proverbs have served as an instrument of marginalization as they are replete with gender biases. The study also revealed that through the use of certain proverbs, women are denigrated, inter alia, as promiscuous, treacherous, dirty and dishonest. The study concludes that women are not accorded much dignity in Yoruba culture. The negative perceptions and stereotypes that are used to describe women is a pointer to the fact that they are considered as inferior to men. Therefore, this study concludes that Yoruba culture supports patriarchy and is characterized by gender bias and prejudices against women.*

### Introduction

It has been established in the literature that that gender prejudice against the female folk and marginalization of women constitute a global phenomenon and there is no doubt that such bias and discrimination often meted out to women have economic as well as social implications (Bennett, 2002; Bako& Syed, 2018). Women's marginalization occurs whenever women are discriminated against and are not given equal opportunities, like their male counterparts, to participate fully in economic, socio-political, religious and cultural activities or discourses. That it is a global phenomenon is also attested to by the United Nations (2014) *Women World Survey Report* which shows that marginalization of women is common across the globe and also underscores the fact that in order to empower women, economic empowerment and an enabling environment must be put in place for them. This cankerworm, marginalization, is a phenomenon that is evidently observable not just in cultures across the globe but also in almost every sphere of life; be it politics, religion, economy, governance and education to mention just a few (Gurr, 1970; Bennett, 2002; Olugbemi, 2004; Ake *et al*, 2019).

Although women's marginalization is ubiquitous in varying degrees and intensities, it is more common in Nigeria notably because it is widely supported by some cultural and traditional practices (see Syed & van Buren, 2014; Adegoke, Adegoke&Oyedele, 2016; Ake *et al*, 2019). In fact, Syed and Buren (2014) remark that gender equality varies as a result of different socio-cultural and ideological practices. According to Johnson (2014), just 15% of women are in the academic faculty and even most of these women are discriminated against and do suffer from harassment and violence. Bako and Syed (2018) also argue that there are cultural and structural challenges that cause inequality and hinder women from participating fully in all sectors. They note that the unemployment rate of women is higher than that of men.

Women are hardly allowed to occupy certain positions in the society. In the area of politics, Nigeria has never had a female governor and the number of women in the National Assembly is still disappointingly low compared to the number of men. The report published by Statista on December 12, 2022 titled "National Assembly (House of Representative) in Nigeria 2016-2019, by gender" shows that the female gender is underrepresented compared to their male counterparts and this has been the trend over the years. Also, the number of female political appointees is extremely low compared to their male political appointees (Olugbemi, 2004). In the area of finance, till date, the only woman that ever rose to the position of the Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, Sarah Alade, was appointed on acting capacity. This is not to talk of the domain of religion in which women are forbidden to become Imams and lead the congregation in mosque; similarly most pastors and church leaders are men.

The gender bias against women and their marginalization in the society can be considered as the result of the negative perceptions that the society, especially the African traditional society, has about them. This paper focuses on how Yoruba culture, through the lens of its proverbs, perpetuates and perpetrates gender inequality through

marginalization and discrimination against women. In Yoruba culture, discrimination against women are borne out mainly by negative perceptions about them. The study is thus aimed at analyzing Yoruba proverbs that represent women negatively.

### **Studies on Yoruba Proverbs**

Given the gamut of research on proverbs in different parts of the world, one can rightly guess that proverbs constitute one of the most vibrant areas of scholarship. It is an area which has attracted the keen interest of philosophers, musicians and anthropologists as well as linguists (Fasiku, 2006; Daramola, 2007; Akande and Mosobalaje, 2014). Proverbs, though usually short and concise, often contain wisdom and the values of a particular people. There are as many definitions of proverbs as there are scholars interested in it. Thus, defining a proverb in any definitive manner can be very challenging and this accounts for several definitions that there are on proverbs. As numerous as the definitions of proverb are, Finnegan (1970) points out that scholars have agreed on what is common to proverbs: proverbs are fixed and always very short and they are always accepted as containing the truth and wisdom of a group of people. Mieder (1985) corroborates Finnegan's view by claiming that proverbs are short sayings in which the values, traditions, morals and wisdom which are transmitted orally from one generation to another are embedded. Mieder emphasizes the oral nature of proverbs as well as their function in preserving the culture and traditions of people in his definition (Mieder, 1985).

Faloju (2017) seems to be corroborating Mieder's view when he points out that the customs, worldview, taboos, and beliefs of a people are portrayed in their proverbs and sayings. Owomoyela (2005) also note that proverbs are inferred from keen observations and reflections about life, environment and natural phenomena. He goes on to say that the skilful and adequate use of proverbs in any discourse or argument is considered as an authoritative source.

### **Existing Works on (Yoruba) Proverbs, Marginalization and Negative Perceptions about Women**

Yusuf's (2002) study focuses on sexism in English and Yoruba. He examines cases in the two languages with a view to showing how the two languages have influenced each other. The study reveals that there are areas in which sexism exists independently in the two languages. It also shows how the two languages reinforce each other.

Daramola's (2007) study of the offensive proverbial songs in one of the albums of Tunbosun Oladapo show that "gender bias in the rendition of offensive Yoruba proverbial songs is a reality" (p. 129). Balogun (2010) argues that some Yoruba proverbs which relate to women contain some elements of oppression and as a result they infringe on the dignity and fundamental human right of women. The study demonstrates that the proverbs considered debase women and inherently contain negative perceptions about women.

According to Mmadike (2014), there are several sexist proverbs which promote male domination in Igbo. The 15 Igbo proverbs he works with show three major categories. The first group consists of those that illustrate the inferior status of women in Igbo culture, the second comprises proverbs that envision how the female genital is represented while the third category are proverbs that portray women as sexual objects. The paper concludes that the sexist proverbs studied reflect the Igbo patriarchal society and that they are often used to support cultural biases and discrimination against women. Similarly, Faloju (2017) investigates how Russian and Yoruba portray women negatively. He draws some proverbs from the two languages in order to show gender biases towards women in the two cultures. The study shows that women are represented as lazy, treacherous, malicious, and sometimes foolish in the two cultures.

Aragbuwa (2020) carries out a feminist critical discourse analysis of ten Yoruba proverbs having to do with women and provides the alternate version of each of the ten proverbs studied. By focusing on the sex-related post-proverbial versions of the ten proverbs drawn from Ademowo and Balogun's (2015), she argues that the post-proverbials studied depict linguistic violence against women as they are represented among others as being promiscuous. The study reveals three major types of gender biases revolving around gender role distinctions, prejudices against women and attempts on the part of women to resist discrimination against their folk. It also shows that the traditional sex-related proverbs as well as their post-proverbial are sexist in that they contain "verbal molestation, objectification, and denigration of women, which can all be described as linguistic violence against women" (p. 15). In a related study, Aragbuwa and Omotunde (2022) examine 100 Yoruba proverbs which deal with women with a view to finding out how women are metaphorized generally in Yoruba culture. The selected proverbs were gathered from both published and unpublished sources and the criteria for the selection of proverbs are, first, popular usage of the proverbs and second, their ease of translation into English. Results indicate that women are portrayed negatively as weaklings, devilish, inferior to men, whores and procreant. The study concludes that the consistent use of disparaging language to portray women in Yoruba culture demonstrates the misconception and negative perception that people have about them.

Similar to Faloju's study, Khan (2021) also examines the theme of *talk* and *silence* and how this is affected by the gender of the speaker in Yoruba and Punjabi. Serving as the data for the study were eleven (11) Yoruba proverbs drawn from Owomoyela (2011)'s collection of proverbs and eighteen (18) Punjabi proverbs gathered from the

collection of proverbs by Shahbaz (2004). Both Yoruba and Punjabi proverbs which served as the source of data for the study were purposively selected based on one criterion: their link to gender and talk. Using FCDA as the theoretical framework,

The study reveals that the Yoruba proverbs analysed depict women as talkative who are deceitful, insincere and as people who have loose tongues. Similarly, Khan points out that women's talk, as Punjabi proverbs show, is considered trivial and insubstantial while men's talk is characterized by logic and sense. The study concludes that the view about gender and talk as indicated by proverbs in both cultures favors men but discriminates against women.

### **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

The Yoruba proverbs which serve as the data base for this study were drawn from two major types of sources. The first source was from elderly Yoruba people in the course of my interactions with them on proverbs relating to gender biases and perceptions of women in Yoruba culture. As a Yoruba woman who has lived in Yoruba land for about six decades and as somebody who has directly experienced gender biases and discrimination in different forms, I am also fully aware of some of these Yoruba proverbs as they are occasionally used in conversations. The second source was from compilations of Yoruba proverbs by scholars such as Owomoyela (2005) as well as from the Internet. While there are thousands of Yoruba proverbs having to do with women generally, only those that denigrate women or discriminate against them were selected for this study.

The theoretical framework that is used in the analysis of data for this study is Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) which, according to Lazar (2007), is capable of enhancing the understanding of power relations in discourse. As a theoretical approach, FCDA is concerned with an appraisal of discursive features and structures in conversations and written text and how such discursive strategies can enhance the understanding how hegemonic relations are endorsed, sustained, perpetrated and challenged. (Lazar 2005). Its primary thrust is not just to expose gender inequalities and biases but also to resist such inequalities in their entirety (Christie, 2000).

### **Data Analysis and Discussions**

This section presents the analysis and discussions of some Yoruba proverbs that discriminate against women on the one hand and on the other hand also discusses Yoruba proverbs that depict women negatively. The section is divided into subsections in line with the various themes that the selected proverbs enunciate.

#### **Gender Bias against Women: The Example of Yoruba Proverbs**

There are several Yoruba proverbs that instantiate gender bias and discrimination against women. Though there is a thin line of demarcation between proverbs that espouse gender bias and those that show negative cultural perceptions about women, they are for the purpose of the presented study treated separately. Let me proceed to discuss proverbs relating to gender bias.

##### **Example 1**

Obìnrin kò gbòdò mọ awo.

A woman is forbidden from belonging to the cult

##### **Example 2**

Àìlókùnrin nílẹ̀ lobìnrin ñ jogún àdà.

It is when there is no male child that a woman can inherit a cutlass.

Example 1 is a Yoruba proverb that attests to the fact that Yoruba culture supports the exclusion of women in certain Yoruba traditional practices. Women are forbidden to participate in certain rites and cult; hence the saying "Awo Egúngún lobìnrinlẹ̀şe, awo Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ lobìnrinlẹ̀ mọ, bóbìnrinbáfojúkanorò, orò ágbe." (Women can participate in the cults of egúngún and gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ but if the attempt to participate in the cult of Orò, they will be consumed). Women are forbidden to enter into the grove of Orò as, if they do, it may resort to their untimely death. Hence, the Yoruba proverb as found in Owomoyela (2005:182) "Obìnrin tógéginígbo Orò, ó géágémọ" (A woman cutting trees in the grove of Orò may be cutting her last). However, no matter how young a man is, he is culturally allowed to visit the Orò grove and to even behold Orò or participate in activities related to this cult. That women are not allowed to see Orò in Yoruba culture is supported by the proverb "Etilobìnrín fí ñ gbóhùnorò" (A woman can only hear the voice of Orò). This marginalization of women regarding their exclusion in Orò cult has been well orchestrated in Akintan (2013) and Ayodele (2015). Similarly, during Agemo festival in Ijebuland, women are forbidden to come out not to even talk of participating in it. Women often stay indoor during this festival as they dare not catch a glimpse of Agemo whereas males, both young and old, can move freely during the festival (Akintan, 2013).

In most parts of Yoruba land, Ifa cult is dominated by men and considered to be a business in which only men are traditionally supposed to engage (Olaleye, 2020).

Example 2 is also a Yoruba proverb that promotes gender exclusion and discrimination against women. The proverb suggests that inheritance is the right of men or a male child and it is in the absence of a male child that a woman

can inherit. Women are thus positioned in Yoruba culture to play a second fiddle. In most traditional African culture, of which Yoruba culture is a vibrant component, women do not have right to inheritance. The reason for this is connected with the fact that women themselves are meant to be inherited after the death of their husbands.

In Yoruba culture, they are considered as “àjẹmógún” (a property to be inherited alongside other property). The term àjẹmógún emanates from the traditional practice which allows a woman who loses her husband to be given as an inheritance and a wife to the deceased brother. This gender bias against women has been pointed out by Ajayi and Olotuah (2005) who remark that women’s right to own real property such as land and buildings has always been violated in traditional African setting. The practice of excluding women from inheriting their parents’ property is also common among the Igbo as reported by Chegwe (2014).

### Negative Perceptions about Women

In this sub-section, the focus is on how some Yoruba proverbs (and by extension Yoruba culture) show negative perceptions about women, disparage them and portray them as lesser human beings. The proverbs show that women can be treacherous, dirty, dishonest and promiscuous among others as shown below.

#### Women are treacherous

The first theme that is discussed here relates to the presentation of women as being deceitful, disloyal and treacherous. Women are often portrayed as people who cannot be fully trusted and who are capable of betraying other people including their husbands. Proverbs that disparage women and show that they are treacherous are numerous in Yoruba culture and listed below are some examples.

##### Example 3:

Obìnrin bímọ́ fúnni, kòpé kó mọ́ pani; obìnrin kò bímọ́ fúnni, kòpé kómọ́ pani.

Whether a woman bore a man a child or not, it doesn’t stop her from killing her husband.

##### Example 4:

Obìnrin l’òdàlẹ̀, Obìnrin lèké, kámá finú hàn f’óbìnrin.

Women are traitors, women are treacherous, let no man reveal his secret to women.

##### Example 5:

Ènìyàn tí kò gbọ̀n nìb’óbìnrin mulẹ̀, ojú tí obìnrin bá mawo ní bàá jẹ́.

Only a stupid man takes an oath with a woman; the day a woman knows the secrets of a cult, that cult is destroyed.

##### Example 6:

Bí obinrín bá máa dánèkéwo, a da aṣọ́ dúdú bora.

When a woman wishes to engage in mischief, she wears dark clothing. (Owomoyela, 2005, p. 242)

##### Example 7:

B’óbìnrin bágbọ̀n lágbọ̀n jù, péńpé lasọ́ ọkọ́ rẹ́ mọ́.

A husband’s undersized clothes indicate his wife’s excessive cunningness.

##### Example 8:

Ọkùnrin tí kòtí ì kú, obìnrin rẹ́ ni kòtí ì pá.

If a man is still alive, it is because his woman is yet to kill him

The proverbs above (Examples 3 to 8) generally depict women negatively one way or the other. The first two proverbs (Proverbs 3 & 4) show that women are perceived to be treacherous and deceitful in Yoruba culture. They can betray their husbands or the fathers of their children to the point of killing them (Proverb 3) and men are enjoined never to divulge their secrets to their wives because of the fear of being betrayed. The two proverbs therefore serve as a warning to men not to be careless when dealing with women especially when secrets are involved; men must be aware of women’s deceit, disloyalty and treachery. Similarly, the third proverb (Proverb 5) shows that there are secrets to be kept away from women as revealing such secrets to them can be counter-productive and catastrophic for men. This confirms Tiamiyu and Olaleye’s (2009) view that women are not reliable and have loose tongues which can sometimes cause them to reveal certain secrets.

Example 6, “Bí obinrín bá máa dánèkéwo, a da aṣọ́ dúdú bora” shows that women are stigmatized in Yoruba culture as inherently mischievous while Example 7 represents women as crafty and devious. The last proverb “Ọkùnrin tí kòtí ì kú, obìnrin rẹ́ ni kòtí ì pá” portrays women as murderers and as people who can kill at will. There are other similar proverbs in Yoruba one of which is “Adásínìlòrùn, obìnrin Ọ̀dògọ́, ẹ̀lẹ̀rún wẹ̀rú, ó ní kí wọ̀n jẹ́kí ọkọ́ òun ti oko dé” (A great impicator, Odogo’s wife, a slave owner was looking for his slave, and Odogo’s wife told him that he should hold on till her husband came back from the farm). This proverb indicates that Odogo’s wife has implicated her husband by implying that her husband might know the whereabouts of the missing slave.

#### Women are garrulous

Another perception about women as some Yoruba proverbs show is that women are naturally talkative and they often find it difficult to control their tongues.

**Example 9:**

Obìnrin kì í ròhìn àjò tán

A woman is never done telling about the trip she took (Owomoyela, 2011, p. 390).

**Example 10:**

È má finú hàn obìnrin a benu mí mú bí òbẹ

Never confide in a woman, her lips are as sharp as knives

**Example 11:**

Obìnrin kòní gògògò.

Women have no Adam's apple.

Examples 9 to 11 depict women as talkative. The belief that women talk too much and can hardly control their tongues is one of the negative cultural stereotypes among the Yoruba; hence the Yoruba expression "Obìnrin a benu mí mú bí abẹ" (Women's tongues are like razor blade). Example 9 shows that women could keep on talking about the same thing several times while Example 10 portrays women as people who are not to be trusted with secrets as their mouths are like sharp knives that can injure their holders. The expression, "a benu mí mú", often used to describe the female folk in Yoruba culture also connotes that women for which it is used to describe lack manners and do not normally exercise caution while addressing people; such women can engage in abusive and derogatory conversations. That women are perceived as not having the ability to keep secrets is buttressed by Example 11. The Yoruba generally believe that it is because men have Adam's apple that enables them to keep secrets. Thus, because of the general opinion among the Yoruba that women do not have Adam's apple, they are stigmatized as people who cannot be confided in.

**Women are unfaithful**

The patriarchal nature of Yoruba culture has not only contributed tremendously to the marginalization of women but has also subjected women to ridicule. A man can have a wife and several concubines but a wife who has a concubine is treated as a promiscuous woman who should not be accorded dignity in the society. Thus, any extra-marital relationship a woman engages in is usually discreet and must not be known by her husband whereas a husband can be proud to even invite his concubine(s) to his matrimonial home. This double standard is depicted by the Yoruba proverb "Ojú kan ni àdà ní, èyí tó bá lójú méjì ti di idà" (A cutlass has only one sharp edge, the one that has two sharp edges has become a sword) which traditionally points to the fact that a woman must be faithful to her husband and must not engage in illicit love affairs. This proverb does not apply to men who can have more than one wife and sometimes many concubines. Below are other Yoruba proverbs that represent women as being promiscuous.

**Example 12:**

Obìnrin mọ àlẹ mẹfà soju fúru - (Faloju, 2017:45)

A woman has sex with six concubines and pretends as if nothing ever happened.

**Example 13:**

Okó ilé kì ní jọ obìnrin lójú, àfi tí o ba dó tìta – (Ojoade, 1983: 205)

The penis at home is despised by a woman and always prefers the one outside.

**Example 14:**

Obìnrín re ilé àlẹ, ó fi ilé iyá è tan ọkọ jẹ - (Owomoyela, 2005, p. 250)

A woman goes to her lover's house and uses her mother's home to deceive her husband

**Example 15:**

Òwú tí iyá gbòn, lẹmọ ran.

A child takes after her mother.

**Example 16:**

Ìtākùn l'obìnrin, yòò maa fà káni -(Oladele Balogun, 2010:33)

Women are climber plants that overrun any available space.

The portrayal of women in Examples 12 to 16 seems to generalize that women are promiscuous and unfaithful. While Example 12 represents women as capable of having multiple sex partners and pretend about it, Example 14 which is related to Example 12 goes further to depict women as liars who could deceive their husbands that they are going to visit their mother while, in actual fact, they are going to meet their concubines or secret lovers. Example 13 pictures women as covetous creatures who are not usually satisfied with what they have; hence they still have concubines outside. When a female child keeps misbehaving or flirting about, the blame is usually on her mother. Hence, the Yoruba would say the child behaves like her mother (see Example 15) whereas a good child belongs to the father.

This is yet another proverb which demonstrates gender-bias. The last proverb, Example 16, reveals a negative perception about women in that it implies that a woman can have one husband but have illicit affairs with different people; hence the expression "...yòò maa fà káni" meaning "will be spreading around". This again buttresses the view of the Yoruba about the adulterous nature of women (see Daramola, 2007). As a matter of fact, the Yoruba consider an adulterous woman as a murderer as the saying "Obinrin tó ñ yan àlè, bí kò bá pa ara rẹ̀, yó pa ọkọ" (A woman that is promiscuous, if she does not kill herself will end up killing her husband). The view about unfaithful women as murders is supported by Fabarebo's (2018) study.

### Women are dirty

Sometimes, women are portrayed as dirty human beings. When women are described as dirty, it does not necessarily mean that they are physically dirty in terms of their dresses and appearances. It may have to do with indecent behavior. Here are some proverbs which reveal that women are dirty.

#### Example 17:

Ọmọ lèrè ọ̀bùn obinrin

Children are the only rewards of marrying a dirty woman.

#### Example 18:

Ọ̀bun ríkú ọkọ tìràn mó, ó níjọ tí ọkọ òun tikú, òun kò bu omi la orí.

A stinking woman uses the death of her husband as an excuse for not taking bath for a long period of time.

#### Example 19:

Obinrin tí à ñbá sùn, tí ñ só; ohun tí yòò bí lón bíyẹn.

A woman that is farting during copulation is already giving birth to what she desires.

Example 17 is usually used in respect of the female gender and whenever it is used to describe a woman, it portrays such a woman as not just dirty but also worthless. Such a woman is considered as indecent and that the only gain that her husband could have from her are her children. Similarly, Example 18 shows that a dirty woman will always find one excuse or the other for not taking proper care of herself while Example 19 implies that a woman who is farting during copulation lacks manners and nothing good can come out from her. Thus, Example 19 prescribes what a decent woman cannot do within the context of Yoruba culture and traditions. Generally speaking, the negative perceptions inherent in the various proverbs above corroborate the findings of Khan (2021) and Adegbola (2021) whose studies also found out that women are discriminated against in Yoruba culture through proverbs and other cultural practices.

### Conclusion

The paper has examined some Yoruba proverbs which denigrate and disparage women. Findings of the paper reveal that the studied proverbs portray women as dishonest, malicious, unfaithful and dirty among others. It also shows that women are highly marginalized in Yoruba culture as reflected in the proverbs examined. The study concludes that women are not valued and are not accorded much dignity in Yoruba culture. The negative perceptions and stereotypes that are used to describe women is a pointer to the fact that they are considered as inferior to men. Therefore, this study concludes that Yoruba culture supports patriarchy and is characterized by gender bias and prejudices against women.

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