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Feminist Postproverbial as a Panacea for Decolonising African Feminist Scholarship

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Abstract

Part of the weakness of feminist scholarship in Africa is its inability to turn knowledge generated in universities (*episteme*) into popular opinion (*doxa*), thereby creating a dislocation between academic epistemic space and mainstream society. This article addresses how a decolonised feminist scholarship can ground equality by reconstructing *doxa* from traditional knowledge, as found in proverbs. In accordance with the AU Agenda 2063, it aims to shatter the economic, social and political glass ceiling that has restricted women's progress by undercutting the imperialist language of patriarchy. It purposes to do this using a medium it calls *feminist postproverbials.*

Résumé

Une partie de la faiblesse de la recherche féministe en Afrique est son incapacité à transformer les connaissances générées dans les universités (*épistéme*) en opinion populaire (*doxa*), créant ainsi une dislocation entre l'espace épistémique académique et la société en général. Cet article aborde la manière dont une recherche féministe décolonisée pourrait ancrer l'égalité en reconstruisant la doxa à partir de connaissances traditionnelles, telles qu'on les trouve dans les proverbes. Conformément à l'Agenda 2063 de l'UA, l'article vise à briser le plafond de verre économique, social et politique qui a limité le progrès des femmes en affaiblissant le langage impérialiste du patriarcat. Pour y parvenir, il utilise un médium qu'il appelle les *postproverbes féministes*.

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Introduction

Language use is an outstanding yet mysterious fact about humans. It is outstanding because its interaction is with every facet of human life and mysterious in its numerosity. Likewise this is true regarding its origin and the fact that it can only be understood when considered in relation to a society. Language is not only a working system of sounds and symbols used for communication in a particular point and period. Language also serves as a depository and transmitter of the knowledge and values that constitute the culture of a community. The implication of language being a vehicle through which the knowledge and values that constitute a culture is transmitted is that 'existing meanings are not ours to command … to reproduce existing meanings exactly is also to reaffirm the knowledges our culture takes for granted, and the values that precede us – the norms, that is, of the previous generation' (Belsey 2002:4).

Proverbs, and particularly African proverbs, have served as a fine medium through which existing meanings get reproduced and norms and values, even when detrimental, transmitted. Since language is largely the product of its history as well as a source of its own development in the future, proverbs as an intrinsic element of language are as well deeply historical. Barry Hallen (2000) attests accordingly that proverbs are an inheritance from the past. It is this historical sense of language as well as its ability to be a source of its own future development that excites the thesis of this work. Particularly, how women have been subjugated through language use and how women's liberation can be achieved through the same medium.

Catherine Belsey, in her book *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction* (2002), suggests that languages can be altered, so long as the changes are adopted by the general populace. This, however, raises some fundamental questions: are we all equipped with the ability to alter language? We might answer affirmatively to this question, but are we all equipped to make such alterations in language aimed at setting in motion women's liberation? Is it a task for academics only? If it is or is not, what should the mechanics of altering proverbial language, as is the case in this instance, be? How can we make reconstructed language acceptable to the populace? Amidst these questions, we draw from Belsey's suggestion that languages are alterable. It is the intention of this work to alter proverbial language through which the ideological exploitation of woman has been facilitated by turning popular opinion (*doxa*), as can be found in proverbs, into knowledge (*episteme*), thus converting *doxa* into reusable knowledge and returning it to the general populace, again as *doxa*, through mass and social media. It calls the medium it intends to use for this deconstruction and reconstruction *feminist postproverbials.*

Feminist postproverbials, as a feminist perspective to the existing idea of postproverbials, are intended to be insightful linguistic reconstructions aimed at positing woman in an egalitarian standing within a new rhetorical tradition. It aspires as well to be a possible panacea to the feminist decolonisation project by being an indigenous solution to an African problem. This work consequently explores the likelihood of adopting feminist postproverbials as a significant commencement point for an African feminist philosophy of language. This article is divided into three sections. The first section considers the need for a decolonised epistemology and why philosophy of language and feminist philosophy of language as obtainable in the West are not answers to the subject matter of what an African philosophy of language and an African feminist philosophy of language should be. The second section discusses feminist postproverbials and the idea of an African feminist philosophy of language. The third section examines the role of the university in ensuring that feminist scholarship in Africa achieves its goal of social transformation. It concludes by challenging African feminist philosophers to pay critical attention to the structures of language, and how they have evolved over time in line with patriarchalism, and to begin the move towards constructing the much needed enabling language of freedom for women.

Decolonisation as a Clarion Call

The Western imposition of theoretical categories on African thought has essentially called for a measure of reversal to which end decolonisation as both a theory and methodology needs be employed. Removing this colonial encrustation in Kwasi Wiredu's deliberation is to bring oneself to a vantage point for viewing African thought materials in their true light (Wiredu 2002:58). To achieve this, Wiredu suggests that concepts be decolonised. Feminist scholarship globally is, amidst other cares, predominantly concerned with the woman question / the condition of woman. So, to Wiredu's non-exhaustive list of concepts requiring disengagement or delinking from Eurocentric thoughts, African feminist scholarship adds the category of woman.

The consideration to 'decolonise feminist scholarship' in Third World countries emanated from a conscious and deliberate anticipation to move away from the canopy of a Westernised feminist ideal, a feminist imperialism that kept Third World women, who are in no way a singular monolithic, beneath a Western gaze. The corresponding homogeneity of these Third World countries lies in their history of being a colonised conglomerate

who have been forced into the culture of the imperial nation with its remnant cultures destroyed such that it begins to view itself from the lens of the coloniser. To this end, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o points out in his book *Decolonising the Mind* that

> how we view ourselves, our environment even, is very much dependent on where we stand in relationship to imperialism in its colonial and neo-colonial stages; that if we are to do anything about our individual and collective being today, then we have to coldly and consciously look at – what imperialism has been doing to us and to our view of ourselves in the universe. Certainly the quest for relevance and for a correct perspective can only be understood and be meaningfully resolved within the context of the general struggle against imperialism (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1981:88).

Africans, for Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, continue to struggle to 'decolonise the mind', that is, 'to seize back their creative initiative in history through a real control of all the means of communal self-definition in time and space' (*ibid.*:18). If colonisation was beyond a single moment, the struggle for decolonisation could not be achieved in an instance. Colonisation had entrenched itself so deeply in our worlds, not sparing our physical world for the world of conscious experience and dropping its anchor in our Popperian Third World of logical content, where intellectual discoveries are produced and critical thinking resonates,[1] the space for this being the academe or our universities. It is the impact of colonisation across these spheres and especially in the sense of our Third World that this article, from a philosophical perspective on feminist scholarship, calls for a decolonisation of our epistemology, our theorised knowledge. The epistemologies that we produce as African feminists should be done using our cultural insights, for us and by us, in order to affirm our agency as Africans. Laudable as this is, its mode however has been problematic due to the inconsistencies in our theorising and the careful denial within some schools of thoughts in academic feminism in Africa about the condition of the African woman. Thus, culture is rather blindly defended against the prevailing condition of woman.

The theoretical grounding of the 'woman question', far from being an empty exercise, is a dynamic and necessary activity in the process of women's liberation. Its ultimate purpose, therefore, is not simply to explain or discuss the phenomenon of women's oppression, but to change and transform it (Petty 1987 in Kuumba 1994:94). The crucial demand that we construct a logical understanding of the condition of woman, which theoretical work is answering to, asks also that we move from the analysis of the problem to answering how the changes and transformation we seek will be actualised. According to Monica Bahati Kuumba, 'theory and action dialectically

interact to provide the stage for women's liberation' (Kuumba 1994:98). In spite of 'the pressure to decolonise feminist scholarship' feminist theorising within the academe in Africa with its ever-pervading tensions thus far has seldom answered 'how?' How do we decolonise feminist scholarship in a postmodern world? The problem this article identifies is a major lacuna in the lack of a decolonising strategy that could enable the reconstruction of the linguistic and ideological structures through which patriarchal and ideological oppression of women is facilitated.

The AU Agenda 2063 – Africa's strategic framework for socio-economic transformation over the next fifty years – states its sixth aspiration as wanting an 'Africa where development is people-driven, unleashing the potential of its women and youth.' This article asks: how do we unleash the potentials of women who have for centuries been subjugated, without first emancipating them from the colonial relationship mirrored in their relations to the African man?

Given the nature of the problems this article identifies, it seeks to propose a possible panacea in suggesting that we make a move towards developing an idea of an African feminist philosophy of language. Before our analysis takes us further into discussing this idea of an African feminist philosophy of language, it is important that we first understand what a philosophy of language is and what its concerns are, as well as what a feminist philosophy of language answers to. With this understanding, we can answer some of the problems this article has identified.

The Philosophy of Language and its African Counterpart

The philosophy of language is concerned with the nature of meaning, reference, learning and thought, intentionality, the relation between language and thought, amongst others. It differs from the more empirical field of Linguistics as the philosophy of language deals with more conceptual issues. Although both are distinct, they are interconnected. Linguistic philosophy takes its roots largely from the logical analysis of Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, (later) Ludwig Wittgenstein, and G. E. Moore at the beginning of the twentieth century. Ordinary language philosophy, as it is also called, was largely a shake-up in methodology besides being a movement, committed to critical analysis of the expressions of language especially those of a philosophical nature; traditional philosophy and the myriad of problems it generated, such as questions about knowledge, ontology, morality, metaphysics. Such problems, for this school of thought, are at a deep level really problems about language and as such the best approach to such problems will be to analyse the meanings of relevant concepts and

propositions. These analyses, according to Peter Lamarque, are likely to show either that the problems are spurious or that they can be illuminated by revealing otherwise unnoticed logical or conceptual relations (Lamarque 1997:1). Philosophy of language, unlike ordinary language philosophy or linguistic philosophy, 'is not a kind of method but a kind of subject matter (i.e., focusing on language and meaning themselves)' (Lamarque 1997:2).

Much as the above concerns about the philosophy of language appear to be objective and thus universal, the language question and the subject matter of what might be termed an African philosophy of language differ largely from what is obtainable in the West. A major chunk of the discussion falls within the purview of what language African philosophy ought to be done in, given the fact that Africa is linguistically and culturally heterogenous. The language question did not arise simply out of a need to choose from the multitude of languages in Africa but out of the disturbing fact that our collective fight against Eurocentrism and imperialism, borne out of the reality of our colonial experience, is done using the language of the colonisers, the language of imperialism. This collective fight against Eurocentrism and imperialism has come to be seen, in some quarters, as a form of decolonisation or/and decoloniality,[2] an enduring confrontation with, and delinking from, Eurocentrism. This delinking, especially in the sense of what Quijano (2007) refers to as 'epistemological decolononization, as decoloniality', is germane to the thesis of this article. However, to understand the essence of our need to delink, it is important too that we understand what we intend to move away from.

Feminist philosophy of language can be seen as a form of *delinking* from what it has come to call 'malestream' philosophy of language. Although it remains a minor area of study in comparison with other fields within feminist philosophy, it has however achieved a lot in a short time. While feminist philosophers of language consider mainstream philosophy of language as 'malestream', arguing that its supposed objectivity is questionable, biased and upholds a male perspective to language use, questions about the nature of meaning are however a valid confluence. Understanding that masculine-oriented modes of reasoning and discourse are not the only way to conceive, represent and express truths, modes of representation and expression seen through a feminist lens have become a necessary alternative.

As part of the ongoing critical work on language and the philosophy of language, the attention of feminists like Dale Spender, Deborah Cameron, Jennifer Saul and Esa Diaz-Leon, amongst others, has been greatly drawn to the supposedly gender-neutral use of terms like the pronouns 'he' and 'man' as denoting all of humanity. Some theorists have argued that 'because these

two words cannot be used interchangeably in all social settings, women are implicitly excluded from some social settings. Others drew the more radical conclusion that terms such as 'man' and 'he' cannot be used neutrally at all' (Gardner 2006:407).

Feminists have also contended that the false gender neutrality of terms like 'he' and 'man' contributes largely to the invisibility of women. This is to say that the use of such terms brings to the mind of the recipient the picture of a male more readily than a female. Similarly, feminists have argued for what Jennifer Saul and Esa Diaz-Leon (2018) refer to as a 'symbolic insult to women'. This argument extends from the false gender neutrality of terms such as 'he' and 'man', and how in a bid to make women more visible, certain occupations, which have been seen as gendered male, have been given female versions. For example, 'doctor' and 'manager' can be replaced with feminine versions of 'lady doctor' and 'manageress'. Feminists have faulted this on the basis that such terms or occupations are premised on the notion of maleness being a norm.

This notion that men are a norm for humanity has immortalised the gendering of occupations to such extent that certain job roles and positions are automatically assumed to be held by a man until stated otherwise. A good example is the riddle of the old grey surgeon.[3] This bias has not spared the academy. In research conducted by Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick at Ohio State University, it was discovered that a scientist's gender could have a big effect on how his or her work is rated and perceived by other researchers. The study revealed that higher ratings were given to the exact same abstracts when the authors were identified with male names.[4]

In spite of the many limitations feminist philosophers of language have faced in their attempt to reform language, they have also made progress. One especially successful reform effort, as noted by Saul and Diaz-Leon (2018), has been the increasingly accepted use of the third-person plural gender pronoun 'they', used in place of the supposed neutral 'he'. Whereas this project has become quite successful, so much so that even prescriptive grammarians have come to accept 'they' as a grammatically correct third person singular pronoun, such problems as false gender neutrality, the invisibility of women, and maleness as a norm might not be peculiar to an African working within the purview of the philosophy of language. If we, for example, look into the Yorùbá language of Nigeria, we would find that there are no gendered pronouns,[5] neither can women be said to be invisible since there are no gender-neutral pronouns which bring to fore the picture of the male more readily than the female. Maleness is as well not a norm, at least not in the sense in which the feminist philosophy of

language discusses it, since most occupations have a somewhat gendered prefix already. For example, '*Iya alaro*' (the mother/woman who makes/sells dye), '*Baba eleran*' (the father/man who sells meat), '*Omo alata*' (the child/young person who sells pepper), '*Onireke*' (the person who sells sugarcane). While Anglo-American and perhaps the entire Western feminist philosophy of language can be distinctively described by its aspiration to scrutinise sexist language in the light of the preceding analysis, the focus of an African feminist philosophy of language should be somewhat different.

The fundamental assumption underlying the differences between these thought systems can be attributed not just to the differences in social contexts in which we have come to use language, but also to the bifurcation of the storage faculty of language into written and oral traditions. And so, while Western feminist philosophy of language might focus more on sexist language in its written tradition, an African feminist philosophy of language must as a necessary first step focus on *her* oral traditions.

Feminist Postproverbials and the Idea of an African Feminist Philosophy of Language

The polarisation of language as orality (as a quality of verbal communication in societies perceived as void of literate technologies) and literacy (a quality of nonverbal communication and an intrinsic hallmark of Western civilisation) as mutually exclusive is an extension of the Eurocentric ideology. The ideology divides the world into two contrasting groups. Such grouping includes the literate 'One' and the illiterate 'Other', the civilised over the uncivilised, the coloniser over the colonised, the developed over the developing/underdeveloped and the global North over the global South. The principal aim of this polarisation appears to be purely an act of subjugation rather than an apparent difference between two contrasting groups. Writing on the history of literacy in the ancient past, Jonathan Draper observes that:

> while literacy and the use of texts in one form or another is pervasive throughout the ancient world, only a tiny minority were able to read and write…. The majority had access to texts only through scribes, who could be hired for particular purposes to read and interpret texts and who consequently had considerable power in the community…. Even the imperial elite relied, for the most part, on professional scribes for their access to texts (Draper 2004:2).

While it is important to note that the literates constituted only a minority, the considerable power they wielded in the community is likewise noteworthy. The contention, however, is whether terms like 'illiterate' and 'uncivilised' would have been applicable to the majority, including the imperial elite,

who could only access texts through scribes. It seems then, to paraphrase Ramsey-Kurz (2007), that such formulations as 'without writing', 'illiterate', 'primitive', or 'savage' hindered any scientifically objective treatment of cultural otherness and caused people and peoples without script to be incorrectly represented as inferior, ignorant and deficient. Consequently, 'orality' for Ramsey-Kurz is to be seen as 'facilitating a politically correct, even egalitarian description of the differences between ... Western alphabetic and non-Western non-alphabetic societies, because such a description would give primacy neither to the written nor to the spoken word' (2007:24).

Orality, in the light of Ramsey-Kurz's analysis, grinds to a halt the historical and perhaps political justification for the rejection of African civilisation by the West, as lacking a writing tradition in most parts of the continent at the time of European invasion. Orality and literacy can therefore be viewed as 'different media that are related specifically to particular cultural matrices and that each has its own particular range of possibilities and limitations. Some things can be done only by means of one medium but not by another' (Draper 2004:3). While literacy might be a feature of Western civilisation, orality is a feature of some African civilisations. Literacy should not be superimposed on orality, neither should primacy be accorded to orality over literacy.

Orality and literacy are also both epistemic systems. For us then as Africans, and those who have been culturally 'othered', delinking from this hallmark of Western civilisation requires a form of epistemological decolonisation. Since what we have now as a written tradition emanated from colonisation and ultimately the Christianisation and Islamisation of the African people, delinking from this Eurocentric assumption, which for Quijano is decoloniality, is 'needed to clear the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings, as the basis of another rationality which may legitimately pretend to some universality' (2007:117). This new intercultural communication and interchange of experiences and meanings, when viewed from an African feminist perspective on language, suggests then that an African feminist philosophy of language as an attempt towards decoloniality ought first to begin from an examination of the oral tradition integral to the consciousness of the African people.

The oral tradition in African ontology, 'is characteristically active and interactive, and it is captured by dynamic language expressed in proverbs, myths, riddles, poetry and folklores' (Njoku 2002:110). A starting point for an African feminist philosophy of language as earlier mentioned should be in the oral tradition of the African people and can be expressed in any of the forms above which also include legends, stories, songs and dances, liturgies and rituals, pithy sayings, adages, arts and crafts, ideas, conventions and

customs. Reforming any of these forms of oral tradition for the feminist agenda could and should count as an African feminist philosophy of language. I consider briefly some ongoing work covering two of the many forms of African orality – oral narratives and proverbs – which when mined for philosophical insights should count as work in African feminist philosophy of language.

The Literary Road to Empowerment

The literary road to empowerment is a gender sensitisation programme which aims 'to sensitize creative writers and the readers on gender prejudices and to create new stories either through retelling old narratives or through the creation of new stories following traditional oral narrative' (Muthoni 1994b cited in Arndt 2000:714). Wanjira Muthoni, a Kenyan feminist and purveyor of the gender sensitisation programme, argues that these oral narratives are distinguished by social conformity and that their basic moral tone is shaped by the patriarchal mindset of Kenyan society. This is, among other things, mirrored in the images of women found in this literature and in their underlying connotation. In this vein, oral literatures do not only mirror but reproduce existing gender relations. Retelling these narratives in a new form is a strategic approach to not only sensitise the society, but to change the image and perception of women. In an interview with Susan Arndt, Muthoni, answering to the intended impact these retold narratives would have, reveals that:

> Although we cannot change the present adults, we hope we can change the children – the way the children perceive themselves and one another. If we manage to do this, we shall have changed the future adults. People who will be adults – say, in ten years time – who will have gone through this sensitization, will have very different images of men and women. So, you know, our hope is to change a whole new generation (Arndt 2000:715).

Muthoni's work is remarkable for what we might call an African feminist philosophy of language because, as Arndt notes, 'aside from organizing this project and editing anthologies of revised stories, Muthoni herself rewrote various misogynist folktales and myths. Without removing them from the genre, she changes tiny bits of oral narratives, which gives them, amazingly, a completely different – often African-feminist – significance' (2000:714). What Muthoni is doing is challenging the dominant patriarchal paradigm while working within an oral literary tradition. She is in essence reforming and rewriting some forms of the (Kenyan) African oral tradition – oral narratives, stories, folktales and myths. By changing language in oral

narratives which show dislike, mistrust or prejudice against women, Muthoni and her colleagues attempt not only to change the image and perception of woman as a negative and inferior other to man, but also to emancipate woman from both a physical and mental slavery. Another important form of orality that requires such a feminist reformatory task are proverbs.

Proverbs, Postproverbial and Feminist Postproverbial Reformations

'*Òwe lesin òrò, òrò lesin òwe. Bí òrò bá sonù, òwe lafi ńwa*'

Yorùbá proverb

> 'Nothing defines a culture as distinctly as its language, and the element of language that best encapsulates a society's values and beliefs is its proverbs'
>
> Pema Tsewang, Shastri

Proverbs are fundamentally defined as brief, succinct but convincing sayings popularly used by a people within a cultural context. Proverbs are believed to express a supposed traditional truth, a moral message or a statement of guidance which often has a commonsensical basis or is based on experience. 'Proverbs are terse and telling, poetic and pithy and filled with wit and wisdom' (Shastri 2012:vii). Proverbs have meanings which are concealed; as such they are indirect sayings and even teachings which become submerged into the minds of their hearers with constant use over a period. These concealed messages in proverbial forms continue to resonate in the minds of their hearers and over time form an assemblage of knowledge. Oyekan Owomoyela, ascertaining the distinction between the English word 'proverb' and '*òwe*', its closest equivalent in the Yorùbá language, claims that, 'constant in the definitions of the English proverb that it is pithy, concise, succinct, brief, terse, and so on, is not always true of the Yoruba *òwe*, which is sometimes quite long-winded' (2005:6). For Owomoyela, *òwe* 'is a speech form that likens, or compares, one thing or situation to another, highlighting the essential similarities that the two share. In Yoruba usage it is always at least one complete sentence' (*ibid.*:3).

Sources of proverbs are almost always situated in the past. Proverbs as a form of the oral tradition are a storehouse of cultural history. It is in this sense of being a storehouse of cultural history that proverbs serve as a link or connection with the past. Most African communities attach immense importance to the past and some communities express this in their veneration of their ancestors, hence much of what we have as proverbial wisdom has been stored in the memories of the people and passed down through many generations. Much of the knowledge garnered from proverbs

then is connected to the past. Much as memory as a legitimate source of epistemic justification can be faulted, our connection to the past, if unchecked, too can be detrimental to the development and transformation of our indigenous epistemologies.

This becomes especially worrisome when considered in the light of Barry Hallen's critique of African oral tradition:

> What was said to be distinctive about African oral traditions was the relatively uncritical manner in which they were inherited from past, preserved in the present, and passed on to future generations. So regarded, traditions resembled 'rules' governing the 'game of life' that determined in a relatively absolute manner what Africans believed and how they behaved, and that they therefore had no intellectual incentive to articulate, explain, and certainly not to challenge (Hallen 2000:19).

Holding tradition in such an uncritical manner means then that we might find ourselves following blindly the way of those who came before us. We might find ourselves holding as true the old Roman adage which says, 'The beaten path is the safe path,' and find that 'there is a certain comfort and assurance in knowing that the road we travel upon is a familiar one and that it will not lead us astray. The image that emerges, then, is of one generation after another following a trail blazed by revered ancestors – of following and then of passing on a tradition set down in custom as well as in word' (Stone 2005:ix). Hallen further contends that, 'a tradition deserves to remain as a tradition only if it proves effective if it does what it is supposed to do' (2000:19). The question we are simply trying to ask from our analysis is: should language derogatory to woman – as used and found in proverbs as well as other forms of African oral tradition – be left unchallenged just because it is tradition and hence sacrosanct?

We should as well remember that our connection with the past through our oral tradition is not only from past to present, but also from present to future. A people's life, according to Stone, 'continues onward ever mindful of their connection to their forebears, but also of what guideposts or markers they will leave for their descendants' (2005:ix). Understanding then that someday, we will as well become ancestors, 'and the wisdom we have gleaned from our experiences will guide those who follow after us' (*ibid.*), ought to be enough motivation for us, especially as African feminists seeking liberation for the African woman, to critically consider what we put into and leave in our intellectual baskets in the name of culture.

Proverbs, as Sotunde claims, contain the 'folkloric experiences of communities including their prejudices, beliefs, superstitions and myths' (2016:2), and serve as beacons across the sociocultural terrain of human

interactions and as such 'are significant as an adjunct to philosophy' (*ibid.*:3). Barry Hallen points out that 'proverbs have long been treated by anthropological and philosophical researchers as a legitimate source of African philosophy' (2009:140). While proverbs can be held as philosophically sagacious, their sacrosanctity will more than likely capitulate in the light of philosophy as critical analysis of ideas. Unfortunately, available literature suggests that theorists working within the purview of African proverbs in relation to gender have espoused the belief that these proverbs cannot be altered and so they merely analyse the gendered nature of these proverbs, and where literature has shown some attempt at reconstruction, they were not essentially for feminist purposes.

In a journal article titled 'Gender and African proverbs', Kamwendo and Kaya agree that some African proverbs have gendered connotations so much that these proverbs 'articulate the deeply entrenched patriarchal systems of African social and cultural organization. They show the subordination of women in society' (2017:92). They however posit that, '[A]s it is not possible to eradicate the existing gendered proverbs in various societies', their study aimed at just documenting and interrogating the gendered proverbs associated with both negative and positive connotations. Similarly, Diabah and Appiah Amfo in their work 'Representation of women in Akan proverbs' focused on doing a 'linguistic analysis of selected gendered proverbs, specifically those that include the explicit mention of women' (2015:4). They however stated their objective as being 'to achieve an understanding of the traditional norms and thought that necessitated these proverbs via the medium of language. Thus, we attempt an appreciation of the socio-cultural parameters that govern our gendered talk, through an examination of these linguistically witty structures' (*ibid.*). While these ventures are praiseworthy, they however did not consider reforming these proverbs for feminist purposes.

In the 'Proverbial oppression of women in Yoruba culture', Oladele Abiodun Balogun outlines a linguistic understanding of gender that speaks to the ways by which language codifies oppression. He argues that 'there are elements of oppression in some of the Yoruba proverbs that relate to women' (2010:21), and that, the most vital but neglected facet of the discourse on gender can be found in the proverbial resources of a people. Although Balogun attempted a deconstruction and reconstruction of some of these proverbs, it however falls short of proffering a solution for dealing with the predicament that language use has imposed on gender and the woman question. This work intends to move beyond a subtle defence of masculinities, as seen in the work of Balogun, to entrenching a feminist

postproverbial as a rallying point of engaging the linguistic structure of oppression with the aim to infiltrate and subvert it.

Feminist postproverbials are simply a critique of existing proverbs derogatory to woman. As well they are an attempt to reform language found to be oppressive to woman, expressed in proverbs. Postproverbial, as coined by Aderemi Raji-Oyelade, is a newly coined proverb used in response or as opposite to, or as a way of extending, a traditional proverb. For example, the saying that 'a friend in need, is a friend indeed' can be postproverbially reconstructed as 'a friend in need, is a friend to feed.' This reconstruction changes the meaning of the proverb by altering the use of the words 'in need'; similarly, the saying that 'a problem shared is a problem halved' can be postproverbially reconstructed as 'a problem shared, goes viral', where once again the use of the word 'shared' has been altered and used in the modern sense as it applies to internet users. These reconstructions then change not just the meaning of the proverb, but its form and value.

In Raji-Oyelade's informative work, 'Postproverbials in Yoruba culture: a playful blasphemy', postproverbials did by extension 'establish the presence of "new" proverbs with new forms, new meanings, and, perhaps, new values' (1999:75). Feminist postproverbials are however not intended to be playful or profane in any sense. They are, instead, incisive linguistic reinventions. These new proverbs with new meanings and new values when appropriated for feminist purposes are expected to reconstruct the traditional space of woman, placing woman within a new rhetorical tradition as equal to man. In reforming some of these traditional proverbs, the inherent biases against woman, it is believed, will be corrected. The initial location for this experiment is set in the language of the Yorùbá people of southwest Nigeria. We will look briefly at three examples of such proverbs and attempt to deconstruct and reconstruct them as a way of buttressing the ongoing discourse.

> '*Akesán lòpin Oyó; ilé oko nibìsinmi obìnrin.* Akesán is the frontier of Oyo; a spouse's home is a woman's place of rest. (Just as Akesan is Oyo's city limit, so a spouse's home is a woman's final destination.)'[6] (Owomoyela 2005:440)

This proverb is tied around woman and her home. Akesan in this proverb represents a supposedly small district at the extreme end of what one might call the old Oyo town, and it is used metaphorically to indicate a boundary. This boundary for woman is established as her 'husband's house'. The proverb lays emphasis on marriage as perhaps the utmost feat of a woman. Such emphasis can be a source of both mental and physical enslavement for some African women who through the use of such sayings have come to believe their zenith is truly set in marriage. This could have encouraged the view that educating a girl child is a waste of effort since her highest

achievement will be her 'husband's house' which does not require formal education. While it might be difficult to ascertain the number of women who have grown up unconsciously bearing this as a general statement and hence a truth, this proverb could have aided the unconscious limitations which some women have set upon the extent to which they can rise and excel. One might also consider this proverb as the reason why some women have chosen to abandon careers and aspirations in a bid to keep their homes. Furthermore, this proverb (amongst others too) can also be attributed to why some men feel they are at liberty to do as they please in marriage, since the limitation is placed on woman and not on the man. A feminist postproverbial reconstruction of this proverb would probably read thus:

> *B'Akesán ti le j'*òpin *Oyó; koni ki ile oko je opinion obinrin*: Even if Akesán is Òyó's frontier, it should not suggest the husband's house as the zenith of a woman's achievement.[7]
>
> '*Obìnrin ò séé finú hàn*. A woman is not suitable to expose one's secrets to. (Women cannot be relied on.)' (Owomoyela 2005:377)

This second proverb holds the assumption that women cannot be shown deep things, to this extent, it portrays woman as unreliable and inconsiderate. Adegbindin (2016) however contends that, '[s]uch identity is obviously an undue generalization about females and its truth questionable' (2016:240). What led to such hasty generalisations about women would be a viable research area, however our concern at present is more on the implication of this saying and that it tends to exclude women from holding certain positions of trust in the society. A feminist postproverbial reconstruction of this saying would have it as:

> Ènìyàn ò se é *finú hàn:* Humans cannot be trusted with secrets.

This reconstruction – juxtaposing females/woman for humans or people – inhibits the apparent bias and sexist nature of the saying, providing us instead with a balanced view of the nature of humans. Treachery, deceit, fraud or verbosity is not rooted in biological sex or gender.

Another Yorùbá proverb says:

> '*Obìnrin tí yó falágbára, okàn kan ní m mmú*. A woman who would marry a formidable man must have an unwavering mind. (Once one has made a decision on an important matter, one should remain resolute.)' (Owomoyela 2016:223)

This proverb attributes physical strength and bravery to man. Physical attributes like strength have long been a fundamental basis for classifying men (males) as superior to women (females) because to a considerable extent

power equals domination and domination itself entails a 'lord/subject' or 'One/Other' relationship. Hence, if one must exercise power, it must be as an ability to influence and dominate others. Male dominance has long been 'seen as rooted in a universal, male "nature" and sexuality; and manifested in all male/female power relations' (Vickers 2012:130). To this end, 'power equaled male dominance' (*ibid.*). The proverb in question, it seems then, reinforces the essentialism/biological determinism argument. As can be deduced from the proverb, the woman is not seen as aspiring to become formidable, she is conveniently placed as the 'other', the wife to the formidable one. Feminists who have argued against biological determinism, for example Simone de Beauvoir, have argued that these presumed intrinsic differences are social rather than biological causes. This accounts for de Beauvoir's famous claim that 'one is not born, but rather becomes a woman'. Behavioural traits like strength and bravery which are often associated to males as men, as well as docility and emotions commonly attributed to females as women, then, are not caused by their biology or genetic make-up. They are instead learnt through language in culture and reinforced through other cultural norms. A feminist postproverbial reconstruction will likely be:

> *Obìnrin tí yó dalágbára, okàn kan ní mmú*. A woman who would become formidable must have an unwavering mind.

It can also be rendered as:

> Ènìyàn *tí yó dalágbára, okàn kan ní mmú*. A person who would become formidable must have an unwavering mind.

Neither of these reconstructions change the meaning of the proverb in any way, they only alter the gendered implication and the dominant patriarchal ideology that the proverb might reinforce.

Following the intimation of the nature and tasks of philosophy of language, feminist philosophy of language and why mainstream feminist philosophy of language might not answer to the peculiar needs of the feminist discourse vis-à-vis the language question in African feminist philosophy, we have proposed that African feminist scholarship move towards its own philosophy of language. To this end we suggest that our oral traditions as Africans should become the focus of our critique and every form of oral tradition in which language has been used in ways that disparage, demean and discredit woman, thereby reinforcing the dominant patriarchal ideology, should be reconstructed. Ultimately, the aim is to alter the linguistic state of affairs. The concluding section will consider the role of the university in ensuring that feminist scholarship in Africa achieves its goal of social transformation.

Feminist Scholarship, Universities and Social Transformation in Africa

The development of feminist scholarship within Africa has benefited hugely from organisations such as CODESRIA, the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD), the Council for the Economic Empowerment of Women in Africa (CEEWA), to mention a few. In the view of Desiree Lewis (2004), this tradition has allowed feminist intellectuals to 'institutionalise their presence, to articulate agendas for African feminism by facilitating research and activism by African women scholars [through organising] workshops on methodology, women and rural development, reproduction, the mass media and development assistance' (Mama 1996 in Lewis 2004:36). These organisations, amidst others, have propelled feminist scholarship within the continent forward.

Feminist scholarship in Africa, in spite of its numerous strains, has in turn made distinctive progress in its bid to interrogate the dominant Western misrepresentations resulting in various false identities of the African woman and of the continent at large. Its consideration to rethink concepts and paradigms found in mainstream feminist scholarship has led to questioning the universal idea that gender is a basic organising principle across all societies. Resulting from these was the need to decolonise feminist scholarship in Africa. As Filomina Chioma Steady asserts:

> [t]he Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) was among the earliest women's organizations … to adopt a critical approach to research, challenging Eurocentric paradigms from a feminist and postcolonial perspective. As early as the mid 1970s, it called for a de-colonization of research and established a critical gender research agenda (Steady 2004:46).

Decolonising feminist scholarship ought then to necessitate not just a delinking from Western modes of knowledge production but also a call for us to return to *our* neglected sites of knowledge production. It calls that we move beyond the academe which is itself a colonial space and follow Claude Ake's suggestion to build on the indigenous. Building on the indigenous for Ake (1991) is necessary in order to significantly advance the development of Africa and this has to entail taking 'African societies seriously as they are, not as they ought to be or even as they might be' (1991:13). African societies cannot be viewed from any other lens but their own. Ake draws a distinction between the indigenous and the traditional contending that: 'there is no fossilized existence of the African past available for us to fall back on, only new totalities however hybrid which change with each passing day' (*ibid.*). In stating that there is no fossilised existence of the African past for

us to fall back on, it appears that Ake argues here of our lack of a written documented past of Africa, but what about that which has been fossilised in our oral traditions, in the language of proverbs, for example, which we have argued has been regarded as too important to be interfered with?

Obioma Nnaemeka, arguing along the lines of building on the indigenous, opines that 'the work of women in Africa is located at the boundary where the academy meets what lies beyond it, a third space where the immediacy of lived experience gives form to theory' (2004:377). This third space it seems is located outside the academy, in the realm of knowledge produced outside the academy. Abosede Ipadeola holds that, 'decolonization must begin from the academy' (2017:402). Combining both views, we can argue that there ought to be a continuum between the academy and society such that indigenous knowledge gathered from the society is rigorously reflected upon, critically analysed and filtered back into the society. It is this dislocation between the academe where *episteme* is generated and the society, the domain of *doxa*, that is responsible for the disconnection between theory and praxis and why feminist scholarship is yet to fully achieve its aim of transforming the society.

The greatest limitation of feminist scholarship within the continent then is its inability to gather *doxa* from the society, filter it through the academe as *episteme* and then return *episteme* generated in the institutions into *doxa* back into the society. Mignolo (2012:40), identifying the nexus between *episteme* and *doxa*, points out that decolonising Western epistemology is a scholarly proposition that affects both the *episteme* and the *doxa.* We will examine briefly these two concepts as their understanding is crucial to the conclusion we are about to draw.

Episteme, the less controversial of the two concepts, is derived from the Greek epistēmē which translates as knowledge. *Doxa*, on the other hand, is often contrasted with *episteme* and seems to be a more fluid concept. According to Takis Poulakos, Plato 'placed doxa between knowledge and ignorance' (2004:51). Furthermore, Plato assumed that 'doxa could be improved through education' (*ibid.*:53–4). In Ruth Amossy's view, 'doxa appears under various guises, such as public opinion, verisimilitude, commonsense knowledge … all that is considered true, or at least probable, by a majority of people endowed with reason, or by a specific social group, can be called doxic' (Amossy 2002:369). *Doxa*'s force, Amossy continues elsewhere, has nothing to do with Truth. 'Its impact derives from its being accepted' (*ibid.*:317). However, from the nineteenth century on:

> doxa has reappeared under various, mainly pejorative, labels. It has been defined as a lack of thought and of style, as the vulgarity of common opinion

> and the banality of worn-out language. It does not rest on materialist philosophy. It is a rather vague notion referring to what is thought, imagined, said in a given state of society. In this perspective, doxa is equated today with a set of other notions more or less closely related to its original meaning. The most famous of these notions is myth (Amossy 2002:375).

As we dig deeper in our analysis, *doxa* as popular opinion begins to bear resemblance to oral traditions one of which is myth, and so to these notions of *doxa* we add proverbs as well as postproverbials especially in the context of the banality of worn-out language. Postproverbials serve here as a classic example of building on the indigenous. This is because prior to Raji-Oyelade's coinage of the term 'postproverbials', these playful reconstructions existed within Yorùbá society and were common knowledge. Raji-Oyelade it seemed had made a move to build on the indigenous by analysing *doxa* – these playful reconstructions – within the academy and generating knowledge as *episteme*, upon which this work is building from a feminist perspective, hence its name, feminist postproverbials. By our analysis of proverbs as *doxa*, within the academy, we have not only unveiled how language use can reinforce dominant patriarchal paradigms which mirror a colonial relationship, we have also been able to show that gender has both colonial and indigenous roots, and unless we look inwards, feminist scholarship within Africa will continually fight the supposed outside enemy at the expense of the enemy within. A Yorùbá proverb says '*Bí kú ilé ò pani, tòdé ò lè pani*'. If one does not die by the hands of an internal enemy, it is difficult for an external enemy to kill one.

Conclusion

Much as it has become imperative to move away from the gaze of a Westernised feminist ideal, decolonising feminist scholarship in Africa ought to commence with the understanding that decolonising one's thinking has to start by decolonising the very language of thought. Language as a superstructural element has so far given a basis or an ideological justification for the exploitation, oppression and domination of woman. Rather than deal a crumbling blow to this superstructural element, feminist postproverbials set out to modify language derogatory to woman gradually and over time by deconstructing *doxa* as can be found in proverbs and other forms of oral tradition and reconstructing it as *episteme*. This will in turn be disseminated back into society through blogs, short stories, movies, novels, and so on, employing both the mass media and social media as means of disseminating reconstructed *doxa* back to society. Feminist postproverbials aspire to open a channel for social transformation by being a significant theoretical

commencement point for an African feminist philosophy of language. Developing the idea of an African feminist philosophy of language will not only undermine the linguistic oppression of women, but will also by design construct the much needed enabling language of freedom for women.

This article therefore challenges African feminist philosophers to pay more critical attention to the structures of language, especially proverbs, and how they have evolved over time in line with patriarchalism. Feminist postproverbials, however, allow us to challenge these oppressive values and achieve in turn critical reevaluations that affect women and gender discourse positively. For feminist scholarship in Africa to truly transform society, it should begin by transforming the academe. Also, for the AU Agenda 2063 to fulfil its sixth aspiration of an Africa whose advancement will depend on the potential offered by the African people, specifically its women and youth, it is important that policies be put in place in the academe to this effect. An implication for policy that this work identifies is the need to include African feminism and Gender Studies as a module in the various General Studies programmes being taught across all African universities.

Notes

1. I borrow here the European thought of Karl Popper in distinguishing between the three worlds.
2. Although Mignolo makes a distinction between decolonisation and decoloniality, we use both concepts here in the earlier sense of its use by Quijano. See for instance Quijano (2007:117). Mignolo clarifies this conceptual muddle in an interview with Alvina Hoffmann, associate features editor at E-IR. See: https://www.e-ir.info/2017/01/21/interview-walter-mignolopart-2-key-concepts/.
3. See www.brainteaserbay.com. This teaser is a good example of maleness being a norm. Although it does not use gender pronouns, readers often assume that the old grey surgeon is a male person
4. See Knobloch-Westerwick, Glynn and Huge (2013). Also: Ohio State University, 'Gender bias found in how scholars review scientific studies', ScienceDaily, 3 April 2013, www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/04/130403122019.htm.
5. See Oyewumi (2005:107).
6. I presented some parts of the analysis of proverbs 1 and 2 at the Toyin Falola @ 65 conference at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria in January 2018. Similar arguments might be found in the conference publication.
7. It is important to mention that this is an ongoing project and some commentators have suggested that a feminist postproverbial mechanics be put in place such that other interested scholars can reconstruct oppressive proverbs following this mechanic. While we ponder on the mechanics of reconstruction, it is important to say that language reformers who choose this method should ensure that the reconstructions promote a feminist agenda.

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