

AFRREV LALIGENS

An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies

Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

Vol. 2 (2), Serial No 6, May, 2013:87-96

ISSN: 2225-8604(Print)

ISSN 2227-5460 (Online)

Rationalisation and Intertextuality: An Analysis of the Language of Men's Reactions to Gender Equality in Zulu Sofola's *The Sweet Trap*

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Abstract

*It has been observed in Zulu Sofola's *The Sweet Trap* that male characters view and speak about the female characters in very discriminating manner with the aim of subjugating women and maintaining their supremacy over them. This paper explores the discursive strategies in terms the linguistic and non – linguistic strategies which men use to maintain their dominance*

over women in Zulu Sofola's play. The paper also shows that men explicitly (through verbal and non- verbal actions) and implicitly (through the demands of culture) discriminate against women or suppress gender equality or recognition and even discredit the women through language. The two discursive strategies of maintaining male power and female marginality are rationalization and intertextuality. While rationalisation is a strategy in which men use pure reason instead of experience to dominate women, intertextuality is the use of legitimate events or mechanisms operating in the society to work against women. In rationalisation, men try to vindicate themselves and blame their actions on their forefathers' age-long practices (tradition). This paper explores the language use in these practices in the above-mentioned text.

Key words: Rationalisation, Inhibition, Aggression, Justification and Intertextuality

Introduction

The study of language in relation to gender has two foci: an observation of how men and women speak differently and an observation of how men and women are spoken about differently. Coates (1986) demonstrates that differences in speech patterns of men and women are acquired early in life as in when children begin to learn to speak. He goes on to prove that other gender stereotypes such as how boys and girls should behave are also learnt along with language. These speech patterns and gender stereotypes affect cultural values. Our acquisition of language and building of gender stereotypes are intertwined with our cultural values. Concerning language and culture, Coates concludes that there is a gender-exclusive distinction which reflects a distinction between societies in which gender roles are more strictly defined and societies in which they are less strictly defined.

Halliday (1978: 9) also claims that even cultural values in gender are learnt along with language and so our language is moderated by our attitudes towards the gender roles operating in the society around us. Since our focus is on the observation of how women in particular are spoken about differently, let us anchor our study on Robin Lakoff's idea.

Robin Lakoff (1975: 45), in "Language Usage and Women's Place" states that the marginality and powerlessness of women are reflected in both the ways women are expected to speak and in the ways in which women are

spoken of. This papers deal with the second issue: how men view and speak about women who fight for their rights and how they explicitly discriminate against such women or suppress them through language with reference to *The Sweet Trap* (henceforth known as *TST*) by Zulu Sofola.

In drama and other interactional events, there are some linguistic and non-linguistic strategies that contribute to maintaining male domination and imposing stereotyped images of women which form a source of discredit and subjugation of women. Two discursive practices in *TST* in which male power and female marginality through language can be detected are rationalisation and intertextuality.

Rationalisation

Rationalization, according to Garfinkel (1984:267), is an attempt to make one's opinion, feeling or expression publicly acceptable. It is an (un)conscious defence mechanism that involves unacceptable behaviour and ad hoc hypothesizing of ridiculing or subjugating others. Ernest Jones introduced the term 'rationalisation' to psychoanalysis in 1908; and he defined it as "the inventing of a reason for an attitude or action the motive of which is not recognized" (Phillips 1994:109). Rationalisation tends to distort reality by creating false but credible justification of one's actions. This practice is usually employed by men as a reaction against women's liberation in order to maintain male denomination. Rationalisation has to do with acquiring knowledge through the exercise of pure reason rather than experience. We see rationalization at work in men in *TST* acting on what their forefathers thought about women rather than on what they know of or see in women. With this at the back of their minds, they exhibit certain negative characteristics which are detriment to the harmonious co-existence of men and women at home and in the society at large. Rationalization in men can present itself in the form of either an overt or covert sexism. Some obvious overt sexist attitudes in men in *TST* include aggression and abuse of women, while some obvious covert sexist attitudes include: inhibition, ignorance and evasion tactics, justification and toning down of negative actions.

Aggression

The aggression shown towards women who try to take any decision of their own may be interpreted as a sign of an identity crisis or a threat towards

masculine hegemony. Typical instance of aggressive utterances with subjugative intentions abound in *TST*. When Dr. Sotubo learns that his wife is bent on celebrating her birthday in spite of his objection, he becomes violently angry and with an overriding intention to minimize her importance and contribution in his family, he utters:

Get it into your head once and for all that your university education does not raise you above the illiterate fish seller in the market. Your degree does not make the slightest difference. You are a woman and must be treated as a subordinate. Your wishes, your desires and your choices are subject to my pleasure and mood. Anything I say is law and unalterable. When I say something, it stays; whether you like it or not. Clear? (*TST* 10).

In the above extract, we see Dr. Sotubo's repression of his wife reflect in his use of aggressive language. His language expresses stereotyped attitudes and expectations. When a man equates his educated wife with an illiterate fish seller in the market; reminds her that she is a woman and thus subordinate to him; and insists that his words are unalterable by her then, he is using sexist language to denigrate his wife. To him, all women are the same irrespective of their levels of education. To him also, all women are expected to subjugate themselves under their husbands. They are not by any means to take decisions in the families. These are stereotyped expectations moulded by culture.

In another instance, Dr. Oyegunle, inundated with his wife's wisdom and knowledge, declares

I married her because I believed that time that an unspoilt village girl would make a better wife than these university rough-necks. I was sure at that time that village class-three pass would be better controlled than these citified society women ... (*TST* 21).

Dr. Oyegunle's aggressive language is full of regrets. What he sees in his wife is contrary to what he expects. He equates 'an unspoilt village girl' and 'a village class-three pass' to 'a better wife and 'university rough-necks and citified society women' to bad wives. These are outdated assumptions that inform some men's skewed thoughts. Dr. Oyegunle is totally disappointed to

learn that these assumptions do not hold water in his own case and so he turns to aggressive language.

Even Mr. Ajala also shows his own aggression to his wife by employing a tactics, which is to publicly disgrace his wife before nullifying their blasted marriage (*TST* 73). These expressions used by Drs. Sotubo and Oyegunle who react to their wives' liberation movements are so aggressive that they point to a significant underlying insecurity on the part of the men. Their excessive emphases on graduate women who ruin their homes demonstrate the existence of identity crises in these men. These identity crises have been internalized in them and they play them out throughout the course of the play; they show them in the form of aggression.

Abuse of Women

Those who are married to graduate wives seek external intervention of other men to secure their glorified positions in their families. Instances of abuse in the form of name-calling with the intention of attacking the women abound in the *TST*. Dr. Oyegunle refers to Mrs. Ajala's friend as "circle of misguided friends" (*TST* 18) and calls his wife, who declares that she has her own rights as a co-occupant of their house, all sorts of names including "a class three village girl" (*TST* 23), "village dunce" (*TST* 22) and an "ass" (*TST* 22). He also refers to educated women generally as "university rough-necks" and "citified society women" (*TST* 22).

Dr. Sotubo, on his own part, calls his own wife an "idiot" (*TST* 33) and a "senseless" woman (*TST* 34). Even the unmarried Salami also has the same internalized aggression towards women, and in a very chauvinistic and sarcastic manner, he abuses the Oyinbo Reverend sister who challenges the Okebadan boys by calling her "Blessed". This is a sarcasm which attempts to equate her with "little gods" (*TST* 26). Other abusive names he gives other girls in the play include, "misguided imps" (*TST* 29) and "blood suckers". These are inglorious names men with deflated egos give to women who aspire to change the position of things around them for good. They try to malign women with overt gestures of abuse and unfriendliness in their attempts to defend the status quo (culture) and the established social order (the patriarchal order). These kinds of reasoning which also establish that education for a woman must end in the man's kitchen, and that, educated or not all women are the same in everything, are portrayed in the *TST* as a normative discourse. Clearly, the words and phrases are very abusive and

discriminatory. To discredit the opposite gender by name-calling is an instance of overt rationalization, through vituperation.

Inhibition

Inhibition, according to Marti Rojo and Callejo Gallego (1995:455), is a type of imperfect censorship which “involves the intention of avoiding non-legitimate overt sexist expressions”. In a phatic exchange between Dr. Sotubo and Mrs. Ajala at the beginning of the play, Dr. Sotubo tries to rationalize their discussion on the parody of women by presenting men’s behaviour as non-sexist. He claims that Okebadan festival has nothing to do with humiliating women, and that it is an epitome of his forefathers’ understanding of the value of psychological and emotional release of tension (*TST_4*). His argumentative progression about Okebadan festival throughout the play starts with subjectivity and ends with partial objectivity. For example, his initial argument with Mrs. Ajala is highly subjective because as a male he does not see anything wrong with Okebadan festival even when it makes jest of women. Later on in Act 2, Scene 2, his stand on Okebadan becomes less subjective and towards the end of the play, he seems to condemn some of the activities of Okebadan in which the members went overboard with their jest of women. Typical examples of inhibited expressions are seen mainly in Dr. Sotubo’s utterances.

Inhibition is also an exercise of pure reason without reliance on the senses. It is indicative of the fact that there are always many things available for men to reason from (some starting point other than sense experience). The starting point for Dr. Sotubo is that Okebadan has always been there ever before he was born and since their foremothers did not object to it, he sees no reason why today’s women should now wake up to oppose it. The Okebadan issue coupled with the issue of female education which, no male in *TST* thinks should go beyond the kitchen, constitutes clear and distinct ideas which men are born with. These ideas constitute a form of knowledge that has helped to shape some cultural images of women though we are not sure how relatively conscious the men are about this knowledge. One cannot help but feel sorry for men like Dr. Sotubo and Dr. Oyegunle who feel that women are pre-ordered human beings suitable for manipulations to favour the men. These ideas help to shape males’ language prejudices against women by perpetuating cultural assumption that represses women. These are also the ideas that trigger off the conflicts in the play, although their resolutions are

not in favour of women but at least men have come to realize that the society is not as pre-structured as they think.

Ignorance and Evasion Tactics

These are covert sexist manipulations which men in *TST* employ to hide their sexist attitudes while trying to maintain their power and male domination over women. In Act 11, Scene 1, Salami narrates the humiliation of a European Rev. Sister and affirms that Okebadan is a festival introduced by their forefathers to check the excesses of women (*TST* 29). This statement is an accusation Dr. Sotubo responds to by claiming ignorance of the origin of Okebadan. With an evasive answer: "could be", it is inferred that he is not sure. So, the truthfulness of his former statement to Mrs. Ajala about Okebadan in Act 1 Scene 1 becomes questionable. Evasion tactics also shows in Dr. Okon's actions. As reported by Dr. Oyegunle, Dr. Okon's attitude to his own wife is strange. He inundates his wife with his ignorance of her sexist activities so much so that "his wife keeps on creating a hell... while he keeps on enjoying it" (*TST*_19). He does this purposely and with the intention of frustrating his wife.

Justification

Justification is an act of absolution. Men in *TST* try to vindicate themselves by proffering sufficient reasons why women are treated the way they are treated. Instances of justification abound in the play. These men especially Dr. Sotubo and Salami, plan some of their utterances so that they will seem non-sexist. When Bisi accuses Salami and his friend, Kunle, of disgracing her friend in public, Salami answers with: "Why not, they asked for it" (*TST* 30). He goes on to blame the girls for bringing humiliation on themselves.

SALAMI: Uncle, you don't know these modern girls. Anything to teach them some sense (is good). Kunle, the king of the Panthers Club said 'no' to Bisi's desires and hell was turned loose on our chief. She started posing with other fellows (girls) to make him look stupid (*TST* 30-31).

Salami's utterance above is self-exonerating. Here, the assumption of legitimate reason becomes the thrust of the argument. In the same vein, Dr. Sotubo blames the Rev. Sister who went to Mapo Hill for bringing humiliation onto herself: "European reverend sisters? What was she doing in Mapo Hill at this time of the year?" (*TST* 29). Even towards the end of the

play, after the humiliating failure of the party organised by women, Dr. Jinadu who is called in as an arbiter to settle the families concerned, blames the cause of the face-offs on Clara, Dr. Sotubo's wife. Her insubordination to her husband, according to him, has led to the chain reactions of men defending themselves using all manners of strategies including humiliation of women:

DR. JINADU: You have failed to behave like a child from a good home....(TST 75).

When her husband intervenes, Dr. Jinadu intensifies his scolding of Clara:

DR. JINADU: She has carried the whole episode this far and it must see its natural conclusion. Kike (Clara's pet name), on your Knees! (TST 75).

This exculpatory discourse of justification is a functional move in the interactional strategy of face-keeping. His main advantage is to portray men as non-sexists' while emphasizing the powerlessness of women. So, it is a strategy of maintaining male domination as normative.

Toning Down of Negative Actions

Dr. Oyegunle is a culprit here. He tones down Mr. Ajala's marriage crisis as something ordinary saying: "Separation is now the vogue among couples. So, to say that couples are separated is saying virtually nothing. They used to live separately" (TST 18). Another person is Dr. Okon who "has no intention of altering (his wife's) situation of raving with 'volcanic anger' (TST 19): His method of toning down is through evasion and pretending to be condemning the actions of the Okebadan boys while trying "to prevent himself from laughing" (TST 30). This shows that he enjoys the boys' negative actions against the women.

Intertextuality

This is a coinage by Julia Kristeva (1980:69) which states that meaning is just transferred directly from writer to reader but is mediated through codes imparted to the writer and reader by other texts. Lemke (2004:1) sees intertextuality as a principle of creating social meaning in a text against the background of other texts. In this study, intertextuality is the introduction and the use of any legitimate and normative event in which sexism operates. In TST, the introduction of Okebadan festival as a cultural code is a mechanism

specially designed to control and to humiliate women. It is a prominent form of intertextuality in which *TST* creates its meanings. Okebadan involves the rejection of women through creation of stereotypes, marginalization, and creation of negative images of women. It plays an essential role in carrying out male sexism in reaction to female independence in the play.

The participants in the Okebadan group are all males. Their actions are to imitate women; to make fun of their physical attributes, and sex organs; and to harass women openly. The Okebadan has no particular locality of operation. They harass women both inside and outside their homes. It embodies the attitudes of the participants or the attitudes of its sponsors, especially their contempt of women and their scorn towards women's liberation attempts. Some of the functions of Okebadan festival in the play include:

1. The dramatization of examples of behaviour and dressing of women which transmit stereotypes. For example, the imitation of women's behaviour in the manner of "semi-literate villagers" (*TST 27*), and the act of speaking to the foreign Reverend Sister in English with Ibadan accent to show some degree of marginality of women. The emphasis on female dressing with much exaggeration to show that women dress in such crazy fashion is not true. The second intruder who is supposedly representing women "is dressed in women's clothes and a mini skirt, wears high heels, high wig, large earrings and is very heavily made-up" (*TST 40*), and "he struts like a woman of class" (*TST 50*). These are all exaggerated stereotypical images. There is nowhere in the play women are described in that manner.
2. Another function of Okebadan festival is to present women as sex objects. The same second intruder "giggles flirtatiously" in "tantalizing manner" when he is slapped in the buttocks (*TST 50*) or flipped at the bust by another man. Clearly, this is a portrayal of women as cheap sex objects to be toyed with by men. This also is a clear case of marginalization of women.

The exaggeration of women's manner of dressing, speech, educational states, actions and general demeanour are not only demeaning but are also segregatory. They set women out as objects of fun, and sex, and as second-class citizens. These degradations are couched under the so-called festival observed with the intention of

upholding the culture of a society. Okebadan festival is therefore a symbol of male reaction to feminism in the play, *The Sweet Trap*

Conclusion

We have seen how language is used for the transmission of cultural beliefs and values. This language use greatly affects male-female relationship in the play. Even though gender roles are less strictly defined in the society in which the play is set, certain male attitudes (aggression, abuse of women, inhibition, ignorance and evasion tactics, justification, toning down of negative actions and formation of sexist groups) humiliate women in a bid to put feminism in check. They are ways men react to women's attempt at liberation. They also help to reinforce the status quo which is that males must dominate females in this part of the world. To this effect, while women try to change the status quo, men try to resist all forms of change and their overriding attitudes towards female attempts at liberation is that of minimizing the importance of females in the affairs of the society.

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