A Discursive Representation of Women in Sample Proverbs from Ethiopia, Sudan, and Kenya

JEYLAN WOLYIE HUSSEIN
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Haramaya University, Ethiopia
jeylanw@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

As humans, we make a phenomenological interpretation of our everyday existence through discourse, a construct that mediates our way of being in the world (Foucault). In Africa, we use proverbs to do this. This paper discusses how gendered ideology is discursively framed in some sexist proverbs selected from Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan. The paper attempts to show that there are strong intertextual and intercultural threads between the ways proverbs represent the roles, statuses, and identity of women in these countries. The paper suggests that in asymmetrically structured societies, linguistic resources are systematically used to perpetuate inequality. All of the selected proverbs directly or indirectly show that the cultural stereotypes about man and manhood form the base for the discursive construction and reconstruction of gender, to weigh the strength of women's thoughts and practices, and to fix their positions in the society. Implications are drawn on the basis of the analyses.

INTRODUCTION

In Africa, proverbs are linguistic maxims. In a proverb about proverbs, Ethiopians say: "Mammaaksi dubbii gabaabsa" 'Proverbs shorten matters.' In Africa, proverbs are used also as spices to add taste and pungency to speech. They constitute "a powerful rhetorical device for the shaping of moral consciousness, opinions, and beliefs" (Fasiku 51). Ruth Finnegan is right when she says: "In many African cultures a feeling for language, for imagery, and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology comes out particularly in proverbs" (390). It is true that when one wants to deliver a short, eloquent

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remark, one should do that with the help of proverbs. That is why it is said in Ethiopia: "Dubbiin mammaaksa hin qabne ittoo sooqidda hin qabne" 'A speech without proverb is like a stew without salt.' Similarly, the Igbo of Nigeria say: "Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten" (Oha 87). The Zulu of South Africa, for their part, say about proverbs: "Without them, the language would be but a skeleton with out flesh, a body with out soul" (Finnegan 475). These examples clearly show the important place of proverbs in Africa. In this continent, a speaker who eloquently intersperses speech with well-thought-out proverbs is regarded as someone of great knowledge or wisdom. In Ethiopia, it is said: "A bull calf is an epitome of a full-grown bull and a proverb is an epitome of a full blown speech."

This paper aims to examine how proverbs have been used to relegate women to a secondary position in the patriarchal systems in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan. In particular, the paper looks critically at the complex ways in which proverbs have been used to subjugate women through institutionalizing, rationalizing, formalizing, or naturalizing their secondary positions, and sometimes nullifying their total humanity.

AFRICAN SEXIST PROVERBS: WAYS OF DEFINING "THE REGIME OF TRUTH"

Some of the studies on African proverbs and other oral arts have lacked criticality about how public arts can be manipulated to perpetuate injustices. A case in point is interpretation of the proverb "If you marry a beautiful woman, you marry trouble" as a "comment among other things, on the dangers attending prosperity" (Finnegan 391). This interpretation misses the gendered tone of the genre. One can easily notice how uncritical and unjustifiable it is to take the Ethiopian proverb "Woman without man is like a field without seed" as an expression of wisdom. The ideological and gendered tone of the Somali proverb "The most dangerous thing a man needs is woman" equally shows that we are hardly justified in seeing sexist proverbs in Africa as signs of wisdom.

Some of the recent studies on African proverbs, however, have revealed that in Africa proverbs have been used to maintain gendered life in the continent through conveying the African people's understanding of masculinity and femininity. These works have attempted to show also that sexist proverbs offer their users insights about the wider discourse of gender as it is practiced through other symbolic and material representations and actions (see Oha, Hussein). The way African proverbs and other public arts are used to legitimize inequalities can be explained using Michel Foucault's "regime of truth":

> Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (131)

The regime of truth is discursively framed and reframed. In this regard, it is believed that African proverbs are obviously discursive habits in the patriarchal

system created and recreated to reinforce the myth of male superiority. However, one certainly cannot assert that the African proverbs that inferiorize women are deliberately created exclusively by men to limit the social and economic participation of women and to wage a complex series of psychological and ideological war against women. We do not have any evidence regarding who exactly created the proverbs. We cannot say that proverbs that portray women negatively are man-made proverbs. For example, just by looking at a female-denigrating proverb, we cannot say, "Look, this proverb is a fatal bullet man is firing at woman." The only thing we can say is that such a proverb is a patriarchal means to reinforce the secondary position of women. The patriarchal system is the system in which both men and women participate both discursively and through action. One way in which women participate in the patriarchal discourse is through using and maintaining proverbs that disparage them or articulate their subordinate position. As much as a patriarchal system that women do not participate in does not exist, no proverb exists that communicates society's assumed secondary position of women without women themselves using such proverbs. The support that the subjugated offer the subjugator suggests that "our ways of knowing are forged in history and relations of power" (hooks 30). The dominant groups perpetuate their privileged positions and exercise their power "through the production of truth" (Foucault 93). As a strategy, the dominant groups use language and other cultural resources to perpetuate their power and to safeguard their legitimacy. Proverbs, particularly sexist proverbs, are symbolic social practices and as symbolic practices they are oriented toward some objective. Their meanings are configured with and into other wider issues in the society. I remember that when I was a child, my grandmother was using proverbs to eulogize the unchallengeable domination of men over women. One of the proverbs she was repeatedly using to advise other women was "Just as donkeys do not have their own kraal and thus sleep in that of cattle, women do not have their own abode and thus dwell in that of men" (Hussein). While inculcating the superiority of male, this proverb implicitly calls for obedience, subordination, and submissiveness on the part of women. It is a discursively framed position of a woman supporting the perceived superiority of men over women.

Always, the complex historical and ontological foundation of the legitimization of gendered opinion should be critically analyzed to adequately understand such a discursive reproduction of gendered ideology. The existing reality is that African women are both victims and survivors of the proverb-based discursive discrimination waged against them by the patriarchal system. This negative self- and group construction in which women join men and denigrate their position receives a sufficient explanation in Paulo Freire's self-abnegation theory. Self-abnegation occurs where authoritarianism induces "apathy, excessive obedience, uncritical conformity, lack of resistance against authoritarian discourse, self-abnegation, and fear of freedom" (Freire 40). According to Freire, after they have been repeatedly/intensively told about their worthlessness or unproductiveness, the oppressed become convinced of their own worthlessness or unproductivity. With regard to the potential impacts of discourse-based patriarchal suppression of women, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie has stated: "Women are shackled by their own negative self-image, by centuries of the inferiorization of ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy. Her own reactions to objective problems therefore are often

self-defeating and self-crippling" (cited in Davies 8). This simply means that the cultural views about what is feminine or masculine sneak into our day-to-day life and affect our mindset. From the ethnomethodological and symbolic interactionist point of view, this means that the subject's sense of gendered selfhood arises through routinized and managed interaction with those who share a similar understanding about what gender is.

In principle, in a society structured along asymmetrical divisions, discourse, in addition to maintaining the asymmetrical relationship, has the power to persuade the subjugated to accept their own subjugation. Discourse is naturally socially constructed (Fairclough and Wodak). In other words: "Discourse about others is always connected with one's own identity, that is to say, with the question 'how do we see ourselves?' The construction of identity is a process of differentiation, a description of one's own group and simultaneously a separation from the 'others'" (Wodak 126). The other characteristic feature of discourse is that it connects language and society in "a way that defies dichotomized representations of their relationships, in the sense that it is the discursive practices that construct the subjects and objects about which language speaks" (George 156). Underlying the dichotomous portrayals are always assumed as well as practical differences in power or position and the multiple meanings that the society attaches to those differences.

THE SOURCE OF DATA AND METHODS OF SELECTION

The proverbs for this study were collected from published and unpublished works on proverbs from different ethnic groups in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan. Proverbs that speak about both men and women were collected. The reason is that portrayal of women is implicated in the portrayal of men. Therefore, one should look at a proverb about men to come up with a better understanding of the meanings of the sexist proverbs about women. One of the complex matrixes of gender is that the construction of femininity and masculinity is interlocked. This complexity is clear in African proverbs in which both men and women are mentioned. Such proverbs simply show the way people of different social, cultural, and spatial positions construct and negotiate their identities. Identity is "the situated outcome of a rhetorical and interpretative process in which the interactants make situationally motivated selections from socially constituted repertoires of identificational and affilational resources craft these semiotic resources into identity claims for presentation to others" (Bauman 1).

THE FRAMEWORKS FOR DATA ANALYSIS

Texts, as they are discursive practices, are better understood when they are framed within webs of cultural and symbolic intertextuality or ideologeme (intermediality). The reason is that social life

> is discursively constituted, produced and reproduced in situated acts of speaking and other signifying practices that are simultaneously anchored in their situational contexts of use and transcendent of them, linked by interdiscursive ties to other situations, other acts, other utterances. The sociohistorical

> continuity and coherence manifested in these interdiscursive relationships rests up on cultural repertoires of concepts and practices that serve as conventionalized orienting frameworks for the production, reception, and circulation of discourse. (Bauman 1)

Within a given text and across texts, elements of social events, experiences, and practices are dialectically interwoven with other elements to form a coherent whole of the discursive campaign. When one analyzes a text, one should thus look for interdiscursive nodes, a condition wherein "a text alludes to another text" (Danesi 276). A text may allude to mosaic of multiple other texts in the social textuality from which they were generated. Of course, "the allusion only makes sense if the reader is familiar with the hypotext (the text alluded to)" (Nikolajeva and Scott 228). As discursive tools, texts are at crossroads and in complex interaction with multiple other bodies of discourse that are also socially constructed, distributed, and redistributed (Minks 118). Texts (and for that matter any other signifying systems) are constituted by the manner in which they transform other earlier signifying systems. In other words, the textual and intertextual reality of cultural and ideological representations in one text is framed by other texts in various dimensions. In reality, "every text is a mosaic of references to other texts, genres, and discourses" and every text "presupposes a network of relationships to other signs like strings of quotations that have lost their exact references" (Irvine 5). For example, to know a comprehensive gendered meaning of the Kenyan proverb "It is at five that man succeeds," one needs to know what "five" alludes to and why the five elements alluded to are determinants of a man's accomplished life. The Maasai use this proverb to explain that a successful man needs a wife, a cow, a sheep, a goat, and a donkey. This would mean that even if one is rich, one is not successful as long as one lacks a wife (see Mbiti).

In similar ways, proverbs should be interpreted across or posited both on the syntagmatic (horizontal) and paradigmatic (vertical) axes of signification. The first "refers to the texts which precede or follow a particular text," whereas the second refers to "the historical relation which is established between a text and other texts which are part of its immediate or distant social context" (Magalhaes 190). Terry B. Porter makes this complex relationship clearer:

> Discourses are the interrelated sets of texts and the practices of production, dissemination and reception that bring a particular version of social reality into being. . . . They are historically located, and integrally intertwined with other discourses and texts. At the discursive level of analysis, the broad aim is to map the world according to this discourse. (190)

As Porter made clear here, the key issue in discourse analysis is intertextuality. According to Julia Kristeva, intertextuality is a multidimensional and dynamic connection between and across texts or discourse events. The meaning of any discourse event, according to her, is framed by what has come prior to it or comes in anticipation of future responses. According to her, one cannot dissociate a text as solitary unit from other proverbs (textual mass) that enliven it:

> The word's status is thus defined horizontally (the word in the text belongs to both writing subject and addressee) as well as vertically (the word in the text is

> oriented towards an anterior or synchronic literary corpus) . . . each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read . . . any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. (37)

From this perspective, we can say that a proverb, as a piece of folk literature, is always in connection with other proverbs.

The theoretical foundation of the analytic framework used in this study is the poststructuralist and postmodern approach to discourse, particularly the Habermasian and Hallidayian views of the complex relationship between texts, their contexts of productions and interpretations and the broader life world. Underlying the poststructuralist and postmodern approach to the analysis and interpretation of texts is the view that texts gain their meaning from the macro- and micro- cultural and social contexts. The macrocontexts of a proverb are the complex social, cultural, and ideological suprasystem in the life world that affects its production as well interpretation. Again, proverbs share many common elements with other texts or textual significations. For example, one may use the proverb "Woman without man is like a field without seed" to advise a woman who has decided to remain unmarried to convince her that her life is an incomplete life without a man. However, the proverb-based advice here is not as narrowly based as advising a person to take nap when he/she complains of a minor headache. For this reason, every time we analyze proverbs, we have to take into consideration "the supra-textual level where a textual corpus consisting of many texts is used to demonstrate different patterns and configurations." The reason is that there is always conceptual architecture of discourse in any text. Therefore, a single text is basically a corpus of multiple other "concepts imported from other discursive formations are retransformed" (Ifversen 64–65). For example, when we analyze and interpret a sexist proverb from Africa, we should give due attention to the entire social, cultural, and historical attitudes held by the African people concerning what it means to be a man and a woman and the culturally based definitions of who should do what. It is important to note also that within a gendered culture, we have multiple frames of reference and each frame of reference is interrelated and interconnected with other frames of reference. Again, gendered ideology contains scores of discourse and discursive function shaped and reshaped within given ideological configurations and sociohistorical moments (see Kabaji). We should develop a framework to tease out interdiscursivity or interdialogicality between the sexist proverbs and other socioeconomic and psychological domains of a society. The reason is that discourse, language, power, authority, and claims to positions in patriarchal society are interlocked and all of them are simply different sides of the same question: *control through discourse*. In short, linguistic experience is a process of diffusing, inventing, and inculcating cultural worldviews through the moderational and mediational power of language.

ANALYSIS OF THE PROVERBS

We shall see how some proverbs from the three countries interrelate or validate one another as they discuss women, and we shall consider the discoursal structures that govern production as well as interpretation of the proverbs. Proverbs,

like any other discursive texts, have diverse meanings. The impact of contexts, including the intention of the users and their positions in the society, on the meanings of proverbs is unquestionable in this regard. However, there are proverbs whose essential sociosemantic ideologies largely remain unaltered even when they are used under different circumstances.

In Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan there are proverbs that remorselessly downplay or nullify the value of women in the society irrespective of the contexts in which they are used. A good example is the Ethiopian proverb "Women are big, but are not great." Others convey the same tone through equating men that have failed to meet standards of masculinity with womenfolk in general, as in the Kenyan proverb "Woman and an invalid man are the same thing." According to this proverb, women in general, irrespective of their intellectual and social positions, are taken as inferior to men, and men who behave in a way that the society does not approve of them are portrayed as weak and thus are rendered invalid. This proverb is generally a discursive bombardment on men who tend to deviate from the hegemonic model of masculinity. While its target may be individual men who behave in non-normative gendered way, its general discursive goal, however, is to reinforce masculinized power in the society and to keep women under that power.

An Ethiopian proverb shows that there is indeed a situation when a patriarchal society gives more value to daughter: "It is better to have a sharpened Ceeka stick than a useless spear as it is better to beget a good girl and be supported by a son-in-law than having a useless son" (Kelbessa). The proverb indicates the society's view that a fortune-attracting daughter is far better than an invalid son. A critical look at the proverb reveals that it is a discursive text with its two edges sharp. On the one hand, the proverb is a systematic way of reinforcing that males must work to the standard expected of them. That is, it potentially agitates males to become complete unblushing men. On the other hand, it is a subtle way of securing females' compliance so that they do not complain about arrangements made for them by the patriarchal system. On the whole, the proverb is an indirect way of shaping or influencing the behaviors of males and instigating in them the desire to prove their validity by conforming to the highly valued and institutionalized gendered conventions in their society. It conveys also that one way of exercising power is through discursive control of thoughts and behaviors and then securing compliance.

The "EKESUD" (Ethiopian, Kenyan, and Sudanese) proverbs not only portray women negatively, but also limit their destiny and sphere of influence by reinforcing the view that women are expected to follow men. The following Sudanese proverb reveals this discursive reality: "A woman is like a hair that follows the neck." This proverb portrays women as mute and voiceless. Such a general metaphorical representation is further supported by other Sudanese proverbs that complain about or abhor women who oppose or react to situations. Hence the proverb: "A nagging woman is a money-loser and livelihood-stopper." This silencing ideology is further strengthened by a Sudanese proverb that puts a sanction on what women can or cannot possess: "A woman will not be given a leash." This proverb is used to discursively block women from assuming influential—for instance, leadership—positions in their society, a point taken further by another Sudanese proverb: "Women have no king." King is taken here as the strongest and

most important person in the cultural and historical scale of a patriarchal society (see Ahmed). The tone of this proverb is iterated with equally sharp discursive dismantling in the following Ethiopian proverb: "One butter does excel another butter, and women do not inherit from one another" (see Sumner).

The patriarchal society is of the view that as a nation that is kingless is without protection and needs the protection of others, women need the protection of men, as the following proverb reveals: "Woman has broken wings." This proverb may be used to reinforce the assumed physical and moral fragility of women, but there are other proverbs that also denigrate the mental and or intellectual capacity of women, as in the following proverb: "The brain of the wisest women is like durra (millet) seed in its size." Similarly, Kenyans say "A woman cannot see her palm" to convey that women are short-sighted (see Mbiti). The following Ethiopian proverb also shows denial of women's intellect: "The breasts that contain milk cannot contain intelligence" (see Schipper). The frame of reference of these proverbs is the patriarchal society's discursive divide, insisting that women are incapable, fragile, or mindless in general, and that the insignificant intellect they have does not merit the name intellect.

Some of the proverbs in the region show the patriarchal society's desire to communicate its discursive regime of power/knowledge and its aim to limit the sphere of influence of women. The following Ethiopian proverb shows this: "Women in the kitchen/pantry, man in the court." In Ethiopia, numerous such proverbs are used to deny that women possess intellectuality, rigorousness, competence, and rationality, which one needs to possess to take part in the challenging social, political, and economic affairs of the society:

> Woman can grow tall but without wisdom.
> Women cannot speak intelligently, but she can prepare good dish in the kitchen.
> A woman gives birth to knowledgeable persons, but knows nothing.
> A male and not a female administers a household.
> The leadership of a woman makes the water flow upwards. (see Kelbessa)

The pattern of discourse in these five Ethiopian sample proverbs is tied to the society's general stereotypical beliefs that women are naturally inferior and can hardly discharge their responsibilities diligently.

In EKESUD, there are of course, proverbs that convey a patriarchal society's desperate acceptance of women when something better than them is not available. A good example, from Ethiopia, is the proverb "It is better to give birth to a girl than to sit idle" (see Schipper). This proverb is just one example of how the patriarchal system exercises its power. The meaning of the proverb is that although they are not in the first order, as males, females can be useful, for example, as they may attract a fortune when they are married off.

The common message in the proverbs analyzed so far is the patriarchal society's view that women do not have the mental and physical strength that men have. By doing so, the proverbs create discursive preconditions for legitimizing women's unprecedented dependence on men. The following Sudanese proverb confirms this: "Whoever a man is, he is the woman's guardian (caretaker)." This proverb holds intertextuality with another Sudanese proverb that accentuates the society's wider perceptions of women as dependent objects: "A woman is a burden

whether she is married or stays at her parents' home." Another Sudanese proverb with more or less similar discursive tone is "A woman, even if she is an axe, will never break a head."

Women are also portrayed as agents of destruction, according to the following Ethiopian proverb: "When there are many women, the cabbage will be spoiled." This proverb conveys the message that when they are together, women irrationally indulge in unnecessary talk and, as a result, fail to discharge their responsibilities. Even when just two women are together, a great danger lurks, according to the Kenyan proverb: "Two wives are two pots full of poison."

In patriarchal society, women are not trusted. Men are thus advised not to forget themselves with their womenfolk. Such a view is clear in the following proverb, which portrays women as a group with moral laxity: "Do not depend on women; their support is trilling and their weapon is crying." In a sympathetic tone, the following proverb pities the wrongs done **by** a man who has entered into relationship with a woman: "How great is his loss that he made women his business." All of the proverbs that say "Don't trust women primarily!" project evil on women and portray them as an abysmal side of men. They convey the patriarchal society's abhorrence of women's assumed infirmity, indecisiveness, weak-wittedness, and lack of a sense of direction and independence. Such proverbs are used to warn men against indulging with women and impose representational limitations on how men should behave towards women. They accentuate the patriarchal view that a man who is open for and free with women is like one who goes around utterly naked: "He that dresses himself with women is a naked man." A Kenyan proverb makes the same stereotypical projection: "Women, like the weather, are unpredictable to convey their view that they are undependable." The tone of this proverb is reiterated with equal strength in the following Ethiopian proverb: "Women, their hearts swing like their breasts."

Some of the sexist proverbs in EKESUD convey the view that women should not be trusted even when they reflect the most fundamental and highly valued social behavior or standards of life. A good example is the Sudanese proverb "Do not trust the cloud even if it has darkened and do not trust a woman even if she has fastened and prayed." The following Kenyan proverb, for its part, advises against taking a woman's words seriously: "Believe a woman's word the day after." Another Kenyan proverb with similar tone is "A woman's word is believed after the test of time" (see Ndundo). Along the same discursive line, the Sudanese remind each other that it is unsafe to share important messages, secrets, or topics with women: "A consignment will not be given to a woman." According to a Kenyan proverb of similar ideological tone, women should not be told secrets, for they cannot conceal: "Women conceal all that they know not."

The following Ethiopian proverb conveys the patriarchal advice that one way of avoiding the danger that comes with women is dealing with them at a distance: "Do not joke with a servant woman as she will hold you her ashes [i.e. dirty things]; do not joke with a young girl, as she will stab you with her threading punch" (see Hordofa). Dealing with them at a distance may involve, among other things, not assisting them when women are in difficult situations. Hence, the Ethiopian proverb "A maidservant who found some help, hid the mile stone" (see Sumner). Other proverbs in EKESUD inculcate in women obedience, submissiveness, and silence. They remind them that silence is the sign of a fulfilled housewife. Look, as

an example, at the following two Swahili proverbs: "Pride is not a woman's virtue" and "Deceit destroyed good girls" (Ndungo 70). The essence of these proverbs is that men, not women, should talk with an air of competence, seriousness, directness, assertiveness. The proverbs validate the view that in a male-dominated society, women are rendered mute or inarticulate (see Kramarae).

The sexist proverbs in EKESUD not only inferiorize women and marginalize their role, they also communicate the view that women are difficult to manage. How difficult it is, according to patriarchal views, to manage women is explicit in the Sudanese proverb "A woman is a leather bag full of blood; if you carry it, it pours out and if you leave it, it becomes pus" (see Ahmed). Women are difficult to manage, first and foremost, because they are not endowed with the faculty to manage themselves, according to this proverb. In a way that justifies harsh and undiplomatic measures against women, some sexist proverbs in this region discursively legitimize physical assault as the only infallible way of managing women. The following Sudanese proverb is among such proverbs: "Do not keep your stick away from these three: a woman, a drum, and a donkey" (see Ahmed). The underlying meaning of this proverb is that as much as a drum needs a stick to shout boomingly and a donkey to go fast and straight, women need battering to behave mannerly.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

From the discussion so far, it is hoped that readers have grasped that the meaning of a sexist proverb is influenced by the macrostructure that dictates the position of men and women and that also creates conditions for the production of stereotypes about them. This structure is what I call the axiological structure of the discourse. As seen in the proverbs, the ideological basis of the proverb-mediated discourse is metaphorically, thematically, and axiologically structured. The fact that there are proverbs of similar or related meaning across the three countries reveals the existence of what I call *simultaneity and connectivity* in the patriarchal worldview. In these countries, the sexist proverbs about women and their secondary sociopolitical and economic positions are synchronically buried and this synchronic prevalence of the genre simply shows that there are intercultural similarities in the way women are treated in the countries. Again, the analyses suggest that there is ideological symmetry between different proverbial texts and their contexts in the countries. In whatever form they may appear, the sexist proverbs analyzed in this paper serve as ideological weapons used to persuade the public of the assumed weaknesses, fragility, and powerlessness of women, and to legitimize their unconditional dependence on men.

Obvious as it is, there could be some differences in the way we see these relationships, and our differences could be the result of numerous ontological and philosophic approaches that we are guided by. Therefore, the writer leaves to readers the delicacy in the ways our differences affect the way we sense the relationships. The most important idea, however, is that in Africa, proverbs about women are not neutral and they are systematically used to perpetuate domination, inferiorization, exploitation, pathologization, infantilization, and exclusion of women. Furthermore, to understand the meaning of a sexist proverb and why it is used the way it is used, one should look further and see the complex relationships between

discourse, intertextuality, and context. In so doing, one can easily see the ideological foundations of the regime of power/knowledge depicted in the proverbs. In general, the disparagements staged against women—for example, the proverbial claim that women lack control over their own body, thoughts, and actions—are patriarchal society's ideological strategies to discursively delimit women's sphere of influence in the society. The ultimate aim of such an agenda is women's "passive acceptance and respect for male domination" (Gilbert and Taylor 81).

This paper attempted to challenge the traditional view of language as a closed system of human communication, suggesting that language is a vector of power and a constructor of social reality (see Bourdieu; Hirst). Language is riddled with complex social events, themselves heavily laden with a deliberate intention to exercise symbolic power. This paper thus supports the view that in an asymmetrically arranged society, language and other cultural resources are curved or hooked or shaped in different ways and then used as instruments of subordinations, and that "[g]roups who occupy a subordinate or oppressed position in society invariably suffer from linguistic disparagement" (Leith147). The majority of the selected proverbs announce women's assumed powerlessness, infirmity (indecisiveness), and lack of intellectuality. Subtle in the proverbs and in the intertextual and interdiscursive fabrics (ties) between them is the patriarchal inculcation of obedience and loyalty through instilling virtues, fear, inferiority, compliance, conformity, habit, and even guilt in women. Thus, viewed from the discursive-semiotic perspectives, the ideological and power assumption embedded in most of the analyzed proverbs about women is that men should control power and that women should abide by this dominant-subordinate relationship.

The analyses suggest, in addition, that one way of controlling social groups is "by setting up the term of reference and by disallowing or marginalizing alternatives" (Shore and Wright 18). In the context of EKESUD, hegemonic masculinity and de-emphasized femininity (see Connell) are two aspects of gendered life that show that discourse is a process of magnifying one practice or thought, and de-emphasizing or marginalizing the other. In this respect, those who have controlled the discourse also have the power or means to sustain discursive practices (see Fairclough). It should be stressed that in a society where social roles are negotiated along gender lines and the inferiority of women is taken as normal, it is usually difficult to remove the negative attitudes held about women and their roles in the society. There is a tendency to consider the traditional spatial division of men and women as natural and to ridicule the attempt to deconstruct it. At the Nairobi International Conference on Women that was held in 1985, the Kenyan women recommended that women be more equitably represented in parliament. The then president of Kenya, Daniel arap Moi, responded strongly: "God made man the head of the family." He further argued that "challenging that was tantamount to criticizing God" (Gordon 261). This is one of the ways in which gendered culture explains itself in Africa. Daniel arap Moi's comment implied that it is difficult to relinquish a privileged position. In other words, as the French writer Madame de Sévigné noted in the seventeenth century, "the humbling of the inferiors is necessary to the maintenance of the social order" (cited in Schipper 2). This should not, however, continue in Africa. The sexist proverbs that denigrate women and portray them as second thoughts should be discouraged, for they are socially and politically hazardous discourses that potentially exclude women from active

participation in the affairs of their society. Discouraging sexist proverbs and other culturally based symbolic verbal battering is a step toward improving the unhappy conditions of women in the continent in general and in the three countries whose sexist proverbs this paper analyzed in particular.

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