

## Language, Society and Gender

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### **Abstract:**

Gender Studies is a common academic scholarship in contemporary global society. Its field of study has generated a lot of controversies about its peculiarities and subjects of discourse, especially in the European world and African society. The peculiarities and discourses are sometimes assumed to be subjected to different conceptual opinionated ideologies. These affirmations make it distances itself from the biological roles of sexuality. Previous studies have largely examined it from gender roles to the neglect of its deeper gender bias of women in society. This paper, therefore, discussed the gender bias and inequality that women encounter in their various societies and how they champion their course through the revolution of self-consciousness and power relational competitiveness. It also investigates linguistic devices deployed by the selected playwright to assert the gender inequality and liberation of womanhood from the patriarchal society. This is with a view to determining the role of literary writers as social critics and revolutionary vanguards. The selected playwright for the study is Ahmed Yerima. The selected text for the study is Ahmed Yerima's *The Sisters*. Schechner's Performance, Freudian and Jungian psychoanalytic theories were used to analyse the sociological realities of the selected literary text. The data were subjected to literary analyses.

**Keywords:** Gender, Language, Society, Self-consciousness, Liberation.

### **Introduction**

Language is a societal bound (Adekunle, 2017: 68). It is a reflection of the cultural realities of society (Greenberg, 1971; Babajide, 1999; 2000; Adekunle, 2014). According to Butler (2003: 4), language is first and foremost a means of human communication in sociocultural and psychological contexts and that this fact must determine our view of how language should be modelled. Lamidi (2000: 110) avers that: "A language is a useful tool in the hands of human beings and because of its versatility, it lends to many different functions in the society. One of these is its facility for interpersonal and interactional purposes". This is why he says that a language and society are so closely related that we cannot discuss one and neglect the other (2000: 106). He further affirms that language is a useful tool for the integration and maintenance of society (2000: 106).

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Adeyanju (2011: vii) believes that the inevitability of language in all fields of human endeavour is incontrovertible and no meaningful task could be accomplished without the instrumentality of language.

On day-to-day interaction, Apte (1985: 199) maintains that: “although the linguistic performance of most of the native speakers of a language is suitable for everyday social interaction”. Apte practically showcases that language is a product of its society. On this note, Stubbs believes that is concerned with language in use in social contexts in particular with interaction or dialogue speakers (Stubbs, 1983: 1). According to Fowler (1986: 19), language is the choice of the instrument of socialization, which is the process by which a person is, willy-nilly, moulded into conformity with the established systems of beliefs of the society into which s/he happens to be born. Stubbs opines that language is the best medium of social interaction in different communities.

On gender’s parlance, it is a medium in which women voice in one accord, to unanimously create a self-discourse identity, a counseling mode, that fosters their relationship with their female counterparts (Aries, 1976, 1996, 1998, 2006, 2007, 2008, Cameron, 1989; Morgan, 1996; Coates, 1997; Johnson and Aries, 1983; Troutman, 2001; Morgan, 2002; Jacobs-Huey, 2006; Aries and Seider, 2007; Karpowitz, 2012; Aries, Olver, and Taubman, 2014, Adekunle, 2014, Adekunle 2017). This is the reason Tannen (1993: 25) says: “gender characterizes the use of language and how particular characteristics of women’s language may be linked to the gender relations of a given society.” Wodak (1997: 2) affirms that feminists criticized those traits employed in justifying the unequal and unjust treatment of women.

In the same vein, Giddens (1989: 158) views that gender is concerned with the psychological, social and cultural differences between males and females. To Defrancisco (1997: 38), gender dynamics deals with more than mere surface differences in women’s and men’s speech; they are about power constructions of gender.” On this note, women’s language has been said to reflect their conservatism, prestige consciousness, upward mobility, insecurity, deference, nurturance, emotional expressivity, connectedness, sensitivity to others, solidarity. And men’s language is heard as evincing their toughness, lack of effect, competitiveness, independence, competence, hierarchy, control (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992: 90). Also, there are circumstances when women speakers, drawing on stereotypes of femininity to guide their behavior will appear to be acting in a more polite way than men, there are many circumstances where women will act just as impolitely as men (Mills, 2003: 2).

In conclusion, gender and language are a fruitful site for investigating the dynamics underlying language choice, including such dimensions as

power solidarity (Tannen, 1993: 9). Therefore, this paper investigates language, gender and society in Yerima's *The Sisters*. It discusses the gender bias and inequality that women encounter in their various societies and how they champion their course through the revolution of self-consciousness and power relational competitiveness. It also investigates linguistic devices deployed by the selected playwright to assert the gender inequality and liberation of womanhood from the patriarchal society.

### **Analysis**

All the aforesaid literary and linguistic critics stated above revealed the instrumentality of language in societal interaction and its contextual usage and its interpretation. In the contextual analysis of the play, *The Sisters*, analyzed below, reveals the use of powerful emotional language employed by the playwright, Ahmed Yerima, through a character, Taiwo, who voices her emotional and psychological traumas through powerful dramatic monologues. It logically demonstrates how a social critic uses literary works to champion his course and also purges his society from societal excesses or flaws.

TAIWO: Get me out of here! I must leave! I do not want to be here! Nana! Is there anyone there? (She tries to move her wheelchair and finds that it is locked.) Oh my God, she's locked it. What a wicked soul. (Shouts) Get me out here! (Tired, she takes out her book, she reads a page. She takes Out a cigarette, lights it and smokes. Then, she begins to scribble as she reads.)

Dark embers of my inner soul  
The drink lobes of sadness pours.  
Melting, pelting...dropping drops of tears  
Wrapped once in stately glory,  
Now naked in cloves of sorrow...pity!  
(Pauses, looks around)  
Oh the drink lobs of the rich and powerful  
Must now tilt to pour out...pour out  
The innocence of a shaded life  
Now searching for pity  
Where there is none...pity! (9)

*The Sisters* sarcastically lampoons the brutal nature of the bureaucratic power, socio-political decadence and religious hypocrisy of the military dictators and the bourgeoisie in Nigerian society and Africa at large. Besides, *The Sisters* also consciously uses women to create gender-conscious in order to reveal gender inequality and inequity faced by women in Nigeria and African in extension. The names of the sisters are Taiwo, Nana, Funmi, and Toun, who are members of the same family. Here, Taiwo is shown as an intelligent realist who sarcastically

ridicules the evil practices and tyrannical actions of her in-law, the late President of her country. This is why she says in the dramatic monologue above that: “Oh the drink lobs of the rich and powerful must now tilt to pour out...pour out”. The use of repetition of “pour out” as alliteration and assonantal sound is to emphasize the high level of wickedness that must be openly narrated to the public hearings as a way of releasing her bottled up emotional trauma. She reveals this further by saying: “Dark embers of my inner soul, the drink lobes of sadness pours. Melting, pelting...dropping drops of tears”.

Again, Taiwo is a complete representation of the downtrodden masses that are in the state of abject poverty confined by socio-political and economic realities around them. The appearance of Taiwo on the stage in a bright red flowery dress, with red shoes and bag, and, at the same time, protesting as she is wheeling into the room by Nana proved this. A “bright red flowery” with “red shoes” and “bag” signified “danger” and “hardship” in which they find themselves because “red” often stands for “danger” or “calamity”. Besides, the “wheeled chair” shows the state of economic stagnancy in which they find themselves. “Get me out of here! I must leave! I do not want to be here! Nana! Is there anyone there?” portrays the emotional depression and psychological trauma in which they pass through in their countries and the way of escape out of the problems. The use of command tone “Get me out of here!” and interrogative gesture “Is there any one there?” shows how the society is seriously looking or waiting for a saviour who will deliver her from sociological challenges posed by the societal superstructures. Just as Taiwo is hopeless and tired of the situation in which she finds herself. They are locked up with fear. For Taiwo to get rid off the fear of socio-economic problems, she takes to a cigarette as a way of escape “She takes out a cigarette, lights it and smokes. Then, she begins to scribble as she reads” and, at the same time, uses religion as a form of therapeutic relief as shown below:

Taiwo: Do not call me. (*Begins to sing and hum.*)  
 Nobody knows the troubles I have seen,  
 Nobody knows but Jesus,  
 Nobody knows the troubles I have seen,  
 Glory hallelujah! (10)

The use of indefinite pronoun “nobody” as an anaphora in the lines of the dramatic monologue above for emphasis purpose shows how Taiwo has been deserted in her hopeless position “Nobody knows the troubles I have seen”. To get off the mess, she practically resigns her faith to God’s hands by saying: “Nobody knows but Jesus”. She takes

solace in her religion, Christianity, by resigning her faith to the hands of her Lord and Saviour Jesus.

Also, Taiwo sees “death” as capital punishment and victory over the late President of her nation as displayed in the excerpt below. He relates the President’s lifestyle to biblical accounts of Pharaoh of Egypt and his people and how the mighty Israelites pulled down the walls of Jericho through God’s mighty power.

Taiwo: I am sorry again. Besides, I did not want anyone to share in my supreme moment of glory. God had handed over the moment to me, and in triumph, I scribbled...death...oh death...which breaks through the mighty walls...of Egypt. Treks down the well-paved road to Jericho only to snap the neck of the almighty. I received public acclaim for that one (11).

She sees death as an instrument that can stop all universal leaders who perpetuate themselves in power as it stopped her in-law, the late President. The moment they die, people automatically gained freedom from them. “Death” is the total summary of their existence on earth. This is the reason she says: “I did not want anyone to share in my supreme moment of glory. God had handed over the moment to me, and in triumph, I scribbled...death...oh, death...which breaks through the mighty walls”. The political world leaders believe that, they are the royal family, aristocratic lineage and the chosen race ordained by God to rule. They also assume that without them the world is incomplete. These are the leaders who have looted their countries’ treasuries and also mortgaged the future of their country people as well as underdeveloped their nations because of their myopic and parochial inclinations. In this case, this play metaphorically portrays that no absolute power resides in man except God.

Besides, Taiwo angrily protests against the governmental autocratic nature of the late President who often coerced people into silly actions against their wills as revealed in the excerpt below. The wills of the people are not respected except his. He autocratically eliminates every form of opposition to his rules. As showcased in the excerpt below, Taiwo is forcefully brought into her in-law state burial, the late President, against her wish by the First Lady, Funmi.

Taiwo: I can’t be you, can I? No one has a right to force me to do what I do not want to do. Tonight, I was physically shoved into the car and brought here because the First Lady wanted to be with her sisters. No one has that right, and certainly not Funmi, to make me come here and set eyes on her late husband, and definitely not before her sanctimonious self (15).

In the above, the Taiwo shows how the society is disenfranchised and denied its fundamental human rights. No room for public opinion or public parliament for people to discuss their common interests and goals. On the other hand, the play also shows how women oppressed one another. Funmi, the First Lady of the country forces her sister, Taiwo, to attend her late husband's burial. This metaphorically displays how women of the upper-class use their positions of authority to oppress women of the lower class.

In the same vein, Funmi, the First Lady, is pictured as a self-centered and egocentric woman, who lives a life of affluence. She appears on stage in a flashy manner with a costly dress, a huge gold choker necklace and about six bangles and rings in each hand with a dignified posture. She wants to be seen as a pedestal of goddesses that needs to be worshipped by sycophants.

Taiwo: you stayed there so long but spent your time living it all up. You threw the biggest parties. Dressed so well, had the best jewelry box, and said nothing, did nothing, and now it is all over, you have nothing but five bastard children to show for it. You only re-christened the projects of other First Ladies. You spent most of the time distributing useless gifts, and attending stupid state functions. Nothing, nothing, nothing (25).

Nana: (Nana picks up the cup.) But the office demanded she did that.  
Taiwo: What bloody office? You threw away your family and surrounded yourself with women who humoured your person (25).

Also, the First Lady organizes the “biggest lavish party” in the town to entertain her guests with public money. This is a way of wasting public money that supposes to be for the social development of the nation. It is what is practically obtained in this country, Nigeria, where all the past and present First Ladies use their positions of authority to amass wealth for themselves while living fellow citizens in abject poverty. Besides, they are fond of distributing gifts to some beneficiaries who belonged to their parties: “You spent most of the time distributing useless gifts, and attending stupid state functions”. They use these gifts to deceive masses in the name of good deeds. Not only this, but they also branded projects in the name of “social infrastructures and national development” as a means of looting public coffers: “You only re-christened the projects of other First Ladies”. Projects that are supposed to last for several years for public utility, but they put in place inferior projects which will only last for a while. This shows how callous and inhumane they are. They do not consider the lives and property of

people when executing their inferior projects. The safety of lives and property is nothing to them.

Again, the luxury position of the First Lady, Funmi, has made her forgot her social responsibilities to her family members. This position is what Taiwo in the play satirically called “bloody position”. This connotatively means that she is “bloody-minded”. She is carried away by her luxury position without thinking that the position she occupies will surely come to an end someday. Taiwo is neglected in her state of hopelessness by her elder sister, Funmi. She has dislocated bones after she was shot by the security personnel who came to arrest her husband after an attempted coup that ends up in total failure.

Taiwo: Me? I laid down very still. I had lost control of my body.  
I was bleeding. My cracked pelvis had affected my womb  
As I fell. (Pause) I lost everything.  
Funmi: Oh Taitai. I am so sorry. (Stretching her hand to touch her  
Shoulder.) (30)

She was profusely bleeding when she was shot by the soldiers who came to arrest her husband for plotting a coup against his in-law, the late President of the country. She wanted to shield her husband away from his arresters by protecting him from being arrested. She lost her pregnancy few months after the attack: “My cracked pelvis had affected my womb as I fell. (Pause) I lost everything”. Her husband was molested, maltreated and eventually killed by the soldiers. This means that there is no permanent friend in governance. Despite, Taiwo’s husband is an in-law to the late President. This reveals how soldiers are brutally maltreated by their fellow soldiers in their profession. Lives of fellow citizens are nothing nor valuable. Their fellow citizens they supposed to protect are ironically brutalized.

On the other hand, the play metaphorically displays and, at the same time, lampoons the incessant act of coup plotting in African countries. Many coups are carried out in the name of transformation or fighting against corruption. “Coup plotting” and “corruption” are common practices among military dictators in Africa as shown in the excerpt below:

Taiwo: At about eight o’ clock in the morning, my neighbour,  
a Captain’s wife banged my door, and told me about  
the coup. Right there, I knew. I was dizzy from the  
nausea, and weak all over. I just knew that Joe was  
involved. I began to think of the baby. He had been  
too critical of the government at the Mess and at  
parties. I just knew my Joe was involved. (28)

Funmi: There was nothing I could do. There was Dipo on  
Hand singing “a life for a life”, and the military

Generals telling me there was a procedure to follow.  
I tried everything, even though I knew that Joe's act  
could have made me a widow too, or even killed me.

As revealed in the excerpt above, "Joe" was arrested and executed by his fellow top military generals for plotting a coup against President Dipo. Conspiracy in the military circle is tantamount to "a life for a life". No mercy, no apology, no forgiveness is allowed in the military setting when punishment is meted out to culprits among them. Joe was not spared on this matter. The killing of Joe by the late President made "Taiwo" a widow. This sarcastically shows the actual agonies women pass through when they lost their husbands in such a case and every activity military personnel go through in the cause of defending their nations. Taiwo was left unprotected and uncared for by the government after the death of her husband. This is why playwright, Yerima, is calling for welfare sanity for all the wives of all security personnel who their husbands lost their lives in the cause of defending their nations. The widows and their children are often being neglected by the governments of many nations in Africa, especially in Nigeria.

Apart from the marginalization of the late security personnel's wives by various governments in Africa, the play, *The Sisters*, also ridiculously reveals how women are being cheated by their husbands in the matrimonial homes. This act of infidelity or unscrupulous pleasure is very rampant in many homes, especially among the upper class. Those are the men that always have children outside their wedlock. They have many concubines that give birth to children for them outside their marriage. Many of the men do it secretly without letting their wives know until their death as shown below:

Funmi: No, I won't have this. I don't need this. The two men  
I ever trusted fail me in one evening. How could Dipo  
and the Ambassador have done this to me...to us? First  
I must share my husband's funeral with five or more  
children, and now I must share my inheritance with a  
strange woman I have never met (41-42).

Funmi: Why? If my father a man I loved and trusted can  
Inform me about his bastard child on my sixtieth  
year on earth, and also make this bastard child an  
equal beneficiary to his estate, then I have no moral  
justification to turn out Dipo's bastards. They can  
all come. I don't care anymore (43).

The above excerpt mockingly displays how women suffer greatly in the hands of men in their matrimonial homes. Funmi, the First Lady,



was highly disappointed by her husband, Dipo, and her father, the Ambassador who got children outside their marriages: “How could Dipo and the Ambassador have done this to me...to us”. She did not know until both men died. Her husband has five children out of their wedlock. She got to know on the eve of her husband’s funeral: “first I must share my husband’s funeral with five or more children, and now I must share my inheritance with a strange woman I have never met”. She is unfortunate to have a child. All the things both of them laboured for in their lives are being shared with a strange woman and her children that do know the source of their wealth. They just came to enjoy another woman’s labours. Not only this, her father who she loved and trusted also disappointed her. Her father has a child outside his marital home. She discovered this fact when she and her other siblings were reading their father’s instruction in the will on how to share the property he left behind for them to inherit. Funmi sees both men as “betrayals of trust.” This is the reason she ridicules her father by saying: “Oh my God, my saint had a child outside wedlock?” Here, “saint” is ironically used to mean the opposite. Saints always live by example, but Funmi’s saint is living a “deceitful life”. Also, Funmi calls the illegal children “bastards” to disapprove of such lifestyle.

Again, Toun, a member of the same family, was seriously jilted by her husband. She forfeited all joined acquired properties of herself and her husband to her husband who later divorced her: “I lost everything to my useless husband during the separation struggle” (42). To make it worse, Toun’s husband impregnated Toun’s best friend. This act of infidelity soils their marriage which led to their separation: “His getting my best friend pregnant was the last straw. Thank God we had no child, I just moved my school, married my good Lord Jesus, and now I am at peace” (39). This is what most unserious and irresponsible men do outside their marriage. Once they see that their wives are not pregnant on time, they tend to go outside for strange women to satisfy their lust. They get children outside their wedlock. Most men leave unresolved family conflicts after their death. Some of these conflicts can lead to loss of lives and property or psychological and physiological injuries on wives and children left behind as revealed in the excerpt below:

Toun: ...Mr. Ibeh in his lifetime had kept two perfect homes, One with seven kids at Enugu, and other again with Seven kids at Aba. He had great family photographs taken, and as he was loving to both of them, neither of them suspected of them. On the day of his burial, both wives came with their children, cursing Ibeh’s corpse as the church proceedings took place.

Funmi: After the service, the two women found a convenient

place and fought each other until they were both naked. I had come with the Mrs. Ibeh of Aba branch, I quickly took a night bus back to Lagos. You are Funmi, at least Dipo was a bit discreet.

As revealed in the excerpt above, Mr. Ibeh is a typical example of men who secretly married two wives in separate distances and places (Enugu and Aba) without known to those wives. He manages these distance marriages until his death. This unscrupulous act has left unendurable pains in the hearts of those two women. As a result of these pains, they started cursing their husband's corpse as they proceeded to the church for his funeral rite. Besides, they openly fought each other after their husband's burial: "After the service, the two women found a convenient place and fought each other until they were both naked". This is a public disgrace and bad ending for somebody of higher caliber like Mr. Ibeh. It reveals the social realities of how men maltreat their wives and the consequences of those actions during their earth-stay and after their death. This practically showcases how women are reduced to objects of laughing stock.

Also, parental influences and decisions in marital issues largely contributed to their children's marital separation. Parents give out their daughters for monetary and status purposes. They give out their children for wrong purposes. They do not allow their children to choose for themselves rather choose for them. These are marriages that show that the couples involved are not compatible to each other. They use their children to maintain their status and friendship. They use their children to get businesses from one another. This lifestyle is practically seen among wealthy and high-rank people in Nigeria and Africa at large. This is what I satirically called "marriage of convenience". The marriage is attached to "fame", "wealth", "honours", "rich" and "status". The marriage is without "love". The result of such marriages is divorce or separation. The marriage only flourishes for a while as shown in the excerpt below:

Toun: I blame myself really. I had married him for the wrong reason. He looked handsome, and that was enough for me. Our parents also made us marry for the wrong reasons too. So instead of setting down to being married, we were busy showing each other sadness (39).

Toun got married to her husband because of his physical appearance, that is, the facial beauty without considering love as a major factor: "I blame myself really. I had married him for the wrong reason. He looked handsome, and that was enough for me". This later resulted

in a great regret for her. Besides, she shifted all the blames on the parents who made them married for wrong reasons: “Our parents also made us marry for the wrong reasons too”. This is not but for the selfish interest of their parents who do not care to protect their children’s interests. This singular fact has greatly left pains and agonies in the lives of Funmi, Toun, Nana and Taiwo: “So instead of setting down to being married, we were busy showing each other sadness”.

In a nutshell, the playwright, Yerima, artistically uses resourceful power of language to reveal the psychological, emotional and physiological traumas women pass through in their matrimonial homes in Nigeria and Africa at large. He deliberately uses four sisters (Funmi, Toun, Nana and Taiwo) born of the same parents to represent social inequality and inequity face by women. As revealed in the play, *The Sisters*, female children have no choice or decision of their own in decision making. They are only needed to be seen and not to be heard. This is why Yerima creatively instills gender consciousness in the hearts of the female audiences in Africa by standing up to fight for their socioeconomic, political and religious rights. This is a quest for the total liberation of women from the socio-cultural enslavement of African men.

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