



Gender, power, and symbolism in Yoruba proverbs: A sociolinguistic perspective from African oral literature

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Abstract

This study examines the interrelationship between gender, power, and symbolism in Yoruba proverbs from a sociolinguistic perspective within the broader framework of African oral literature. Yoruba proverbs constitute an important component of indigenous knowledge systems and serve as repositories of cultural values, moral philosophies, and social ideologies. However, beyond their communicative and aesthetic functions, proverbs also encode symbolic meanings that shape gender identities and legitimize social hierarchies. Anchored on Critical Discourse Analysis, Feminist Theory, and Symbolic Interactionism, this study investigates how selected Yoruba proverbs construct masculinity and femininity, reinforce patriarchal ideology, and reproduce power relations in Yoruba society. The study adopts a qualitative research design and purposively selects gender-related proverbs from documented collections and scholarly sources for textual and sociolinguistic analysis. Findings reveal that many Yoruba proverbs symbolically portray men as authoritative, rational, and socially dominant, whereas women are frequently represented as submissive, dependent, emotionally unstable, or confined to domestic spaces. These symbolic constructions not only reflect prevailing sociocultural norms but also contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequality and patriarchal social structures. Nevertheless, emerging reinterpretations of Yoruba proverbs indicate possibilities for challenging traditional stereotypes and promoting gender-inclusive narratives. The study concludes that Yoruba proverbs are not ideologically neutral; rather, they function as sociolinguistic resources through which social meanings, identities, and power relations are negotiated and reproduced. Consequently, the study advocates critical and culturally sensitive reinterpretations of indigenous oral traditions that preserve cultural heritage while advancing gender equity, social inclusion, and transformative discourse in contemporary African societies.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics; Yoruba Proverbs; Gender Representation; African Oral Literature; Symbolism

1. Introduction

The African oral literature occupies a central position in the preservation and transmission of indigenous knowledge systems, cultural values, moral philosophies, and collective memory across generations. Unlike written literary traditions that depend on textual documentation, oral traditions operate through verbal performance, symbolic expression, and communal participation. In this regard, they serve as dynamic repositories of cultural identity



and epistemological continuity within African societies (Finnegan, 2019). Within this broad oral continuum, proverbs constitute one of the most significant genres due to their ability to condense communal wisdom, regulate social behavior, reinforce moral values, and communicate philosophical meanings through metaphorical and symbolic language.

In Yoruba society of Southwestern Nigeria, proverbs occupy a prestigious communicative position and are deeply embedded in everyday interaction. They are frequently deployed in interpersonal communication, traditional ceremonies, political discourse, conflict resolution, and family engagements. The Yoruba maxim, “Òwè lẹ́sìn ọ̀rọ̀, bí ọ̀rọ̀ bá sọ̀nù, ọ̀wè la fi ń wá a” (“proverbs are the horses of speech”), underscores their communicative authority and cultural significance. Consequently, Yoruba proverbs function not only as stylistic linguistic devices but also as repositories of indigenous knowledge systems, moral instruction, and ideological orientation (Akinmade, 2020). Through them, societal norms are articulated, behavioral expectations are reinforced, and cultural values are transmitted across generations.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, language is increasingly recognized as a constitutive force in the production and reproduction of social reality. Rather than merely reflecting society, language actively constructs power relations, social identities, and ideological systems (Fairclough, 2018). Within African oral discourse, proverbs are particularly significant because they are culturally perceived as distilled expressions of ancestral wisdom. Their repeated deployment in communicative contexts contributes to the normalization of social meanings and the reinforcement of culturally sanctioned hierarchies, including gendered power relations (van Dijk, 2020).

In Yoruba culture, gender identities are largely constructed through socially shared norms embedded in linguistic and cultural practices. Masculinity and femininity are often defined through culturally prescribed roles that determine acceptable behavioral expectations for men and women. These constructions are frequently reinforced through proverbs that portray men as rational, authoritative, courageous, and socially dominant, while women are represented as submissive, emotionally unstable, or domestically confined (Ogunyemi & Salawu, 2022). Such representations are not merely linguistic expressions but ideological reflections of patriarchal structures embedded within traditional Yoruba society.

Similarly, oral traditions function as instruments of social regulation and ideological transmission. Proverbs are often used to guide moral conduct, maintain social order, and legitimize existing power structures. Through metaphorical and symbolic language, they communicate societal expectations regarding leadership, morality, marriage, obedience, and authority (Okafor, 2021). However, despite their cultural and pedagogical relevance, several Yoruba proverbs embed gendered assumptions that reinforce inequality and sustain stereotypes about women. These ideological formations contribute to the symbolic marginalization of women by naturalizing male superiority and legitimizing female subordination within communal discourse systems.

In recent years, scholarly attention has increasingly shifted toward indigenous knowledge systems, particularly within sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, gender studies, and cultural studies. This development aligns with broader intellectual efforts aimed at decolonizing knowledge production through critical engagement with African epistemologies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). Within this context, Yoruba proverbs have emerged as important analytical sites for examining the intersections of language, power, symbolism, and identity construction. Nevertheless, existing scholarship has largely emphasized their literary, philosophical, and moral dimensions, with limited focus on their sociolinguistic implications for gender representation.

Although studies on gender bias in African oral traditions exist, many remain largely descriptive and insufficiently grounded in contemporary feminist discourse analysis and critical sociolinguistic theory. Moreover, there is a notable gap in African-centered scholarship that

systematically interrogates how Yoruba proverbs contribute to the reproduction of patriarchal ideology and gender hierarchy in contemporary society (Ajiboye, 2023). This limitation necessitates more theoretically informed and context-sensitive investigations into the ideological functions of proverbial discourse.

Furthermore, the persistence of gendered representations in Yoruba proverbs raises significant sociocultural concerns. Numerous proverbs depict women as weak, dependent, or morally inferior, while men are constructed as custodians of authority, wisdom, and leadership. These symbolic constructions reinforce unequal gender relations by legitimizing asymmetrical social expectations and limiting women's agency in both traditional and contemporary contexts (Adeleke & Ojo, 2020). Given their widespread circulation in everyday discourse, such representations continue to shape social perceptions and reinforce patriarchal ideology across generations (Afolayan, 2022).

In addition, existing scholarship has been largely influenced by Western theoretical paradigms, which may not adequately account for the cultural and epistemological specificities of African oral traditions. Consequently, there is a growing need for African-centered analytical frameworks that integrate indigenous perspectives with contemporary feminist and sociolinguistic approaches (Mohammed & Yusuf, 2021). Such an orientation is essential for a more nuanced understanding of how symbolic meaning in Yoruba proverbs constructs gender identities and sustains power relations.

Against this background, this study investigates the intersections of gender, power, and symbolism in Yoruba proverbs as key components of African oral literature. It specifically examines how these proverbs construct gender identities, reinforce patriarchal ideology, and reproduce social hierarchies within Yoruba society. Furthermore, it explores the broader sociocultural implications of these constructions within contemporary African contexts.

Literature Review

African Oral Literature and Yoruba Proverbs

African oral literature constitutes a vital component of indigenous knowledge systems, preserving cultural values, moral philosophies, historical experiences, and communal identities through oral forms such as folktales, myths, songs, and proverbs. According to Finnegan (2019), oral traditions function as repositories of African cultural memory and historical consciousness, ensuring the transmission of knowledge across generations. Similarly, Okpewho (2020) maintains that oral literature serves as a social institution through which communities communicate collective wisdom, ethical values, and cultural identity. Consequently, oral traditions perform educational, cultural, and regulatory functions within African societies.

Within Yoruba society, proverbs occupy a particularly significant position because they encapsulate indigenous philosophy, social norms, and communal wisdom. Proverbs are frequently employed to instruct, persuade, caution, and regulate social behaviour. As Achebe (2019) famously observes, proverbs are “the palm oil with which words are eaten,” underscoring their rhetorical and philosophical importance in African discourse. Moreover, Yoruba proverbs function as vehicles for transmitting cultural beliefs and preserving communal values, thereby contributing to social continuity and cultural identity.

Gender, Language, and Power

The relationship between language, gender, and power has received considerable scholarly attention within sociolinguistics and discourse studies. Contemporary scholars generally agree that language is not merely a neutral medium of communication but also a mechanism through which social realities and power relations are constructed and reproduced. Fairclough (2015) argues that discourse functions as a social practice capable of sustaining ideological domination and social inequality. Likewise, Van Dijk (2018) contends that language plays a crucial role in the reproduction of power structures and group dominance within society.

From a feminist perspective, language contributes significantly to the construction of gender identities and the maintenance of patriarchal ideologies. Lazar (2017) observes that discourse frequently serves as a site where gendered power relations are produced, negotiated, and sustained. Similarly, hooks (2020) argues that patriarchal societies utilize language and cultural practices to legitimize women's marginalization and reinforce male dominance. Consequently, discourse functions as both a reflection and a reproduction of social inequality.

Symbolism and Cultural Meaning in Yoruba Proverbs

Symbolism constitutes a defining characteristic of African oral traditions because cultural meanings are often communicated through metaphorical expressions, imagery, and figurative language. Within Yoruba proverbial discourse, symbolic representations are frequently employed to convey ideas relating to morality, wisdom, authority, social hierarchy, and interpersonal relationships. Through such symbolic constructions, complex cultural meanings are condensed into memorable and socially meaningful expressions. Furthermore, symbolic language often serves ideological purposes. Bourdieu (2018) argues that symbolic systems possess the capacity to legitimize social structures by presenting them as natural and culturally acceptable. Similarly, Butler (2019) maintains that repeated symbolic representations contribute to the construction and normalization of socially accepted identities, including gender identities. Accordingly, symbolic expressions embedded in Yoruba proverbs play a significant role in shaping perceptions of masculinity, femininity, authority, and social status. Therefore, symbolism provides an important framework for understanding the relationship between language, culture, and power within Yoruba society.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Feminist Theory, and Symbolic Interactionism. Collectively, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for examining the intersections of gender, power, and symbolism in Yoruba proverbs. While CDA focuses on ideology and power relations embedded in language, Feminist Theory examines gender inequality and patriarchal structures, whereas Symbolic Interactionism explains how meanings are constructed through symbols and social interaction.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis, associated with Fairclough (2015) and Van Dijk (2018), views discourse as a social practice through which power relations and ideologies are produced and maintained. Fairclough argues that discourse shapes social realities by reinforcing dominant beliefs, while Van Dijk emphasizes its role in reproducing social dominance and inequality. The theory is relevant to this study because it facilitates the examination of patriarchal ideologies embedded in Yoruba proverbs and reveals how language contributes to the normalization of unequal gender relations.

However, CDA has been criticized for its tendency to overemphasize ideology and domination. Wodak (2021) argues that the approach sometimes neglects audience interpretation, while Blommaert (2020) contends that it may focus excessively on textual analysis at the expense of cultural and historical contexts. Nevertheless, CDA remains valuable for uncovering hidden power structures within discourse.

Feminist Theory

Feminist Theory focuses on gender inequality, patriarchal domination, and women's marginalization within society. Scholars such as hooks (2020) and Butler (2019) argue that language and cultural practices often reinforce male dominance and female subordination. The theory is relevant because it explains how Yoruba proverbs may perpetuate gender stereotypes

through symbolic portrayals of women as dependent, submissive, or inferior. Despite its significance, Feminist Theory has been criticized for relying heavily on Western assumptions. Nnaemeka (2020) and Oyěwùmí (2021) argue that some feminist perspectives inadequately reflect African cultural realities and indigenous gender systems. Nonetheless, the theory remains an effective tool for interrogating patriarchal ideologies in Yoruba discourse.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic Interactionism, developed by Mead and Blumer (2018), explains how individuals create meanings through symbols and social interaction. Since Yoruba proverbs rely heavily on symbolism and metaphor, the theory helps explain how meanings attached to masculinity and femininity influence social identities and expectations. Nevertheless, Carter and Fuller (2019) criticize the theory for focusing primarily on micro-level interactions while paying insufficient attention to broader structures such as patriarchy and institutional power. Despite this limitation, Symbolic Interactionism remains useful for understanding the symbolic meanings embedded in Yoruba proverbial discourse.

Together, these theories provide a robust interdisciplinary framework for examining how Yoruba proverbs construct, communicate, and sustain gendered power relations through symbolic language.

Critical Review of Previous Studies

Several scholars have examined the relationship between Yoruba proverbs, gender, and ideology. Aragbuwa (2020) investigated sexist ideological constructions in selected Yoruba proverbs and found that many proverbial expressions reinforce patriarchal beliefs through representations that privilege men while subordinating women. Similarly, Adegbola (2021) observed that women are frequently portrayed through negative metaphors and stereotypes, whereas men are associated with authority, strength, and social prestige. These studies are relevant because they demonstrate how proverbial discourse contributes to the construction and maintenance of gender inequality within Yoruba society.

Furthermore, Aragbuwa and Omotunde (2022) analyzed the metaphorization of women in Yoruba proverbs and revealed dominant conceptual metaphors that portray women as weak, dependent, or morally suspect. Their findings suggest that proverbial language functions as a vehicle for transmitting patriarchal ideologies across generations. Likewise, Oke (2020) argued that Yoruba proverbs and related oral traditions have historically served as mechanisms for legitimizing women's subordinate status within social and cultural structures.

Beyond Yoruba studies, Fairclough (2015) and Van Dijk (2018) emphasized that discourse plays a crucial role in the reproduction of ideology, power relations, and social inequality. Similarly, Lazar (2017) demonstrated that language often functions as a site for the construction and maintenance of gendered power structures. While these studies provide valuable insights into language, gender, and ideology, limited attention has been given to the combined analysis of symbolism, patriarchy, power, and sociolinguistic meaning in Yoruba proverbial discourse. Therefore, the present study differs by integrating Critical Discourse Analysis, Feminist Theory, and Symbolic Interactionism to provide a more comprehensive examination of gendered symbolism and power relations in Yoruba proverbs.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative opinion paper design grounded in critical and interpretive scholarship. This approach was deemed appropriate because the study examined scholarly arguments, cultural narratives, and ideological perspectives relating to gender, power, and symbolism in Yoruba proverbs. Unlike empirical investigations, the opinion paper methodology facilitated a critical interrogation of patriarchal representations embedded in African oral literature through sociolinguistic and feminist lenses.

To achieve this objective, the study relied primarily on secondary sources of data, including journal articles, books, conference papers, and documented collections of Yoruba proverbs published between 2018 and 2025. More specifically, relevant materials were purposively selected from peer-reviewed and Scopus-indexed publications focusing on African oral literature, gender studies, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and indigenous knowledge systems. In addition, selected Yoruba proverbs reflecting gendered symbolic expressions were extracted and subjected to detailed analysis.

Furthermore, Critical Discourse Analysis, Feminist Theory, and Symbolic Interactionism were employed as the principal analytical frameworks. Collectively, these theoretical perspectives provided conceptual tools for examining the ideological meanings, symbolic constructions, and power relations embedded within Yoruba proverbial discourse. Subsequently, the data were analyzed qualitatively through thematic and interpretive procedures, whereby proverbs were categorized into themes relating to gender representation, symbolism, patriarchy, and social hierarchy. Consequently, the methodology provided a robust framework for critical scholarly reflection and interdisciplinary interpretation of indigenous oral traditions within contemporary African gender discourse. Overall, the chosen approach is justified because it enables a nuanced exploration of the intersection between language, culture, gender, and power in Yoruba proverbial expressions.

Forty Yoruba Proverbs Samples Used for the Study

Proverbs Representing Women

1. “Okọ lóde, aya nílẹ” – The husband belongs outside while the wife belongs in the home.
2. “Obìnrin gbòdò tẹ́rìba fún ọkọ” – A woman must submit to her husband.
3. “Èkun obìnrin kì í jìnà” – A woman is always close to tears.
4. “Aya rere kì í ta ko ọkọ rẹ” – A good wife does not oppose her husband.
5. “Obìnrin láìsí ọkọ dà bí ilé láìsí òrùlẹ” – A woman without a husband is like a house without a roof.

Proverbs Representing Men

6. “Okùnrin ni olórí ilé” – The man is the head of the home.
7. “Ọrọ ọkọ ni òfin ilé” – The husband’s word is the law of the house.
8. “Okùnrin ọlógbón ni ọpá idílẹ” – A wise man is the pillar of the family.
9. “Agbára okùnrin ni idáàbò bo ilé” – The strength of a man protects the family.
10. “Okọ ni olówó ilé” – The husband is the provider of the household.

Animal Symbolism

11. “Obìnrin bí ejò, inú rẹ kún fún àṣírí” – A woman is like a snake full of secrets.
12. “Obìnrin bí adię, kò jìnà sí ilé” – A woman is like a hen that stays around the home.
13. “Obìnrin b àgùntàn, a máa tẹlẹ” – A woman is like a sheep that follows.
14. “Okùnrin bí kìníún” – A man is like a lion.
15. “Akíkanjú bí ẹkùn” – Brave like a tiger.

Domestic Symbolism

16. “Ìdáná ni ọlá obìnrin” – The kitchen is the pride of a woman.
17. “Obìnrin ni ìmótótó ilé” – A woman represents the cleanliness of the home.
18. “Aya rere ni ọṣọ ilé” – A good wife beautifies the home.
19. “Ilé aya ni ibi ìsinmi ọkọ” – The wife’s home is the husband’s resting place.
20. “Obìnrin tó mọ ilé ló mọ ọkọ” – A woman who manages the home understands marriage.

Moral Symbolism

21. “Ìgbọràni ni ọlá aya” – Obedience is the dignity of a wife.
22. “Ìwà rere l’ẹwà obìnrin” – Good character is a woman’s beauty.
23. “Omólúàbí okùnrin ni iyì ilé” – A responsible man is the honour of the family.

24. “*Qkùnrin gidi ní ibáwí*” – A real man possesses discipline.
25. “*Ìfẹ̀ àti ìtósọ̀nà ni agbára baba*” – Love and discipline define fatherhood.
Gender and Power Relations
26. “*Qkùnrin ni olórí, obìnrin ni ọ̀mọ̀lẹ̀yìn*” – The man leads while the woman follows.
27. “*Ọ̀rọ̀ ọ̀kọ̀ ló gbẹ̀yìn*” – The husband’s decision is final.
28. “*Aya rere kì í tako ọ̀kọ̀*” – A good wife does not challenge her husband.
29. “*A kì í fí obìnrin ẹ̀ se olórí ilé*” – A woman is not traditionally made head of the household.
30. “*Agbára baba ni idúró ilé*” – The father’s authority sustains the home.
Sociolinguistic Implications
31. “*Ohun tí ọ̀mọ̀ bá gbọ̀ l’ó máa sọ*” – A child repeats what is heard.
32. “*Òwe ni ọ̀gbọ̀n àgbà*” – Proverbs are the wisdom of elders.
33. “*Àṣà kì í kú nílẹ̀ Yorùbá*” – Culture never dies in Yoruba society.
34. “*Èdè ni àpótí àṣà*” – Language is the container of culture.
35. “*Qmọ̀ tí a kò kọ̀, yóò gbé ilé tà*” – An untrained child destroys society.
Contemporary Reinterpretations
36. “*Qgbọ̀n kò ní akọ̀ tàbí abo*” – Wisdom has no gender.
37. “*Obìnrin lè jẹ̀ olórí bí ọ̀kùnrin*” – A woman can lead just like a man.
38. “*A kì í fí akọ̀ ju abo lọ̀ ní ẹ̀tọ̀*” – No gender should be superior in rights.
39. “*Agbára obìnrin tún ẹ̀ pàtàkì fún àwùjọ̀*” – Women’s contributions are equally important to society.
40. “*Ìdàgbàsókè dé nígbà tí akọ̀ àti abo bá dọ̀gba*” – Development comes when men and women are equal
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Critical Analysis of Samples of Yoruba Proverbs

Classification of Gendered Yoruba Proverbs

Proverbs Representing Women

The selected proverbs construct women primarily within domestic and subordinate spaces, thereby reinforcing patriarchal gender ideology in Yoruba society. Proverbs such as “*Qkọ̀ lóde, aya nílẹ̀*” (The husband belongs outside while the wife belongs in the home), “*Obìnrin gbọ̀dọ̀ tẹ̀ríba fún ọ̀kọ̀*” (A woman must submit to her husband), “*Èkun obìnrin kì í jìnà*” (A woman is always close to tears), “*Aya rere kì í ta ko ọ̀kọ̀ rẹ̀*” (A good wife does not oppose her husband), and “*Obìnrin láìsì ọ̀kọ̀ dà bí ilé láìsì ọ̀rùlẹ̀*” (A woman without a husband is like a house without a roof) portray women as emotionally fragile, dependent, obedient, and domestically confined. These proverbs normalize unequal gender relations and sustain symbolic marginalization within Yoruba discourse traditions.

Proverbs Representing Men

The proverbs representing men project masculinity through leadership, authority, wisdom, and economic dominance. Proverbs such as “*Qkùnrin ni olórí ilé*” (The man is the head of the home), “*Ọ̀rọ̀ ọ̀kọ̀ ni ọ̀fìn ilé*” (The husband’s word is the law of the house), “*Qkùnrin ọ̀lọ̀gbọ̀n ni ọ̀pá idilé*” (A wise man is the pillar of the family), “*Agbára ọ̀kùnrin ni idààbò bo ilé*” (The strength of a man protects the family), and “*Qkọ̀ ni olówó ilé*” (The husband is the provider of the household) symbolically position men as protectors, providers, and decision-makers. Such constructions reinforce patriarchal authority and culturally accepted notions of male superiority within Yoruba society.

Symbolic Representations in Yoruba Proverbs

Animal Symbolism

Animal symbolism reflects culturally embedded gender stereotypes and ideological meanings. Proverbs such as “*Obìnrin bí ejò, inú rẹ̀ kún fún àṣírí*” (A woman is like a snake full of secrets), “*Obìnrin bí adìẹ̀, kò jìnà sí ilé*” (A woman is like a hen that stays around the home), “*Obìnrin bí àgùntàn, a máa tẹ̀lẹ̀*” (A woman is like a sheep that follows), “*Qkùnrin*

bí kìnùún” (A man is like a lion), and “*Akíkanjú bí ẹ̀kùn*” (Brave like a tiger) associate femininity with passivity and masculinity with strength and dominance. These symbolic constructions shape communal interpretations of gender identity and reinforce patriarchal ideology.

Domestic Symbolism

Domestic symbolism positions women within household and caregiving roles. Proverbs such as “*Ìdáná ni ọ́lá obìnrin*” (The kitchen is the pride of a woman), “*Obìnrin ni ìmótótó ilé*” (A woman represents the cleanliness of the home), “*Aya rere ni ọ̀şọ ilé*” (A good wife beautifies the home), “*Ilé aya ni ibi isinmi ọ̀kọ*” (The wife’s home is the husband’s resting place), and “*Obìnrin tó mọ ilé ló mọ ọ̀kọ*” (A woman who manages the home understands marriage) confine women to domestic spaces. These expressions reinforce traditional gender expectations and legitimize patriarchal divisions between public and private responsibilities.

Moral Symbolism

The moral symbolism embedded in the proverbs constructs women through ideals of obedience and loyalty, while men are associated with discipline and authority. Proverbs such as “*Ìgbọ̀ràn ni ọ́lá aya*” (Obedience is the dignity of a wife), “*Ìwà rere l’ewà obìnrin*” (Good character is a woman’s beauty), “*Ọ̀mọ̀lúàbí ọ̀kùnrin ni iyì ilé*” (A responsible man is the honour of the family), “*Ọ̀kùnrin gidi ní ibáwí*” (A real man possesses discipline), and “*Ìfẹ̀ àti ìtọ̀şonà ni agbára baba*” (Love and discipline define fatherhood) reinforce culturally approved moral expectations and sustain traditional social hierarchy within Yoruba society.

Gender and Power Relations

The selected proverbs linguistically legitimize patriarchal authority by positioning men as leaders and women as followers. Proverbs such as “*Ọ̀kùnrin ni olórí, obìnrin ni ọ̀mọ̀lẹ̀yìn*” (The man leads while the woman follows), “*Ọ̀rọ ọ̀kọ ló gbẹ̀yìn*” (The husband’s decision is final), “*Aya rere kì í tako ọ̀kọ*” (A good wife does not challenge her husband), “*A kì í fì obìnrin şe olórí ilé*” (A woman is not traditionally made head of the household), and “*Agbára baba ni idúró ilé*” (The father’s authority sustains the home) reinforce unequal power relations. These expressions normalize patriarchy and sustain symbolic female marginalization within Yoruba sociocultural contexts.

Sociolinguistic Implications

The proverbs demonstrate the sociolinguistic role of oral traditions in shaping cultural identity and gender perception. Proverbs such as “*Ohun tí ọ̀mọ bá gbọ l’ó máa şọ*” (A child repeats what is heard), “*Owe ni ìmọ̀ràn àgbà*” (Proverbs are the wisdom of elders), “*Àşà kì í kú nílẹ̀ Yorùbá*” (Culture never dies in Yoruba society), “*Èdè ni àpótí àşà*” (Language is the container of culture), and “*Ọ̀mọ tí a kò kọ, yóò gbé ilé tà*” (An untrained child destroys society) reveal how proverbs function as agents of socialization and ideological transmission. Through repeated usage, they preserve patriarchal values and influence contemporary perceptions of gender roles.

Contemporary Reinterpretation of Yoruba Proverbs

Contemporary reinterpretations challenge oppressive gender symbolism and promote inclusiveness. Proverbs such as “*Ọ̀gbọ̀n kò ní akọ tàbí abo*” (Wisdom has no gender), “*Obìnrin lè jẹ olórí bí ọ̀kùnrin*” (A woman can lead just like a man), “*A kì í fì akọ ju abo lọ ní ẹ̀tọ*” (No gender should be superior in rights), “*Agbára obìnrin tún şe pàtàkì fún àwùjọ*” (Women’s contributions are equally important to society), and “*Ìdàgbàsókè dé nígbà tí akọ àti abo bá dọgbà*” (Development comes when men and women are equal) reflect emerging feminist responses to patriarchal discourse. These reinterpretations reconstruct indigenous narratives and promote gender-inclusive cultural meanings within contemporary Yoruba society.

Discussion of Findings

The findings revealed a strong relationship between symbolism and power within Yoruba proverbial discourse. The selected proverbs employed symbolic expressions to construct socially accepted notions of masculinity and femininity, thereby reinforcing patriarchal authority within Yoruba society. Men were commonly associated with strength, wisdom, leadership, and authority, whereas women were portrayed through domestic, dependent, and submissive imagery. Consequently, these symbolic constructions function as ideological mechanisms that legitimize unequal gender relations and sustain existing social hierarchies. This finding aligns with Aragbuwa (2020), who argues that many Yoruba proverbs contain sexist ideological constructions that normalize male dominance and gender inequality. Similarly, Adegbola (2021) found that Yoruba proverbial expressions frequently employ negative metaphors that perpetuate masculine hegemony and shape societal perceptions of women.

Furthermore, the study established that Yoruba proverbs serve as powerful cultural instruments through which social values, norms, and gender expectations are transmitted across generations. Through their repeated use in everyday interactions, proverbs contribute to the reproduction of dominant ideologies within communal consciousness. This finding supports the sociolinguistic perspectives of Fairclough (2015) and Van Dijk (2018), who maintain that discourse plays a significant role in reproducing social knowledge, ideology, and power relations. Similarly, the findings demonstrated a close intersection between language, culture, and gender inequality. The selected proverbs reflected deeply rooted sociocultural beliefs that privileged men while marginalizing women. This observation is supported by Aragbuwa and Omotunde (2022), who identified metaphorical constructions in Yoruba proverbs that portray women as weak or inferior, thereby reinforcing patriarchal hierarchies.

Nevertheless, some scholars argue that not all Yoruba proverbs present women negatively, as certain proverbs celebrate female wisdom, resilience, and social contributions. This suggests that proverbial meanings may vary according to context and interpretation. Ultimately, the findings highlight the need for critical engagement with traditional discourse practices while recognizing Yoruba proverbs as valuable repositories of indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage.

Contributions to Knowledge

This study makes significant contributions to knowledge by expanding African-centered sociolinguistic scholarship on gender, symbolism, and oral discourse. Specifically, it advances existing research by demonstrating how Yoruba proverbs function not only as cultural expressions but also as discursive mechanisms through which gender identities, power relations, and ideological structures are constructed and maintained. In this regard, the study provides deeper sights into the relationship between language, culture, and social inequality within indigenous African contexts.

Furthermore, the study contributes theoretically by integrating Critical Discourse Analysis, Feminist Theory, and Symbolic Interactionism in the examination of Yoruba proverbial discourse. Through this interdisciplinary approach, it bridges the gap between oral literature studies and contemporary sociolinguistic and gender scholarship. Consequently, the research offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding how symbolic meanings embedded in proverbs shape perceptions of masculinity and femininity within society.

Moreover, the study contributes to decolonial knowledge production by critically examining indigenous discourse systems from African cultural perspectives rather than relying exclusively on Western analytical paradigms. By foregrounding Yoruba oral traditions, the research highlights the importance of indigenous epistemologies in contemporary academic discourse. In addition, the study provides contemporary reinterpretations of Yoruba proverbs, thereby demonstrating how oral traditions continue to influence gender identity formation,

ideological reproduction, and social power relations in changing sociocultural contexts.

Ultimately, the study enriches scholarly debates on African oral literature, sociolinguistics, discourse studies, and gender scholarship by emphasizing the enduring relevance of indigenous linguistic resources in understanding social structures and cultural realities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed:

First, there is a need to promote gender-sensitive reinterpretations of Yoruba proverbs in order to discourage discriminatory symbolic representations and foster more inclusive cultural narratives. Such reinterpretations should preserve the cultural significance of proverbs while challenging ideological assumptions that perpetuate gender inequality.

Furthermore, educational institutions should integrate critical indigenous discourse studies into language, literature, cultural studies, and gender studies curricula. This would encourage students and researchers to engage critically with African oral traditions and their sociocultural implications. Similarly, scholars, language practitioners, and cultural institutions should intensify efforts toward the documentation, preservation, and digital archiving of African oral literature to safeguard indigenous knowledge systems for future generations.

In addition, the study recommends increased interdisciplinary research on the intersections of language, gender, symbolism, power, and culture within African societies. Such research would contribute to a broader understanding of how discourse shapes social realities and influences cultural transformation. More importantly, future studies should explore comparative analyses of gendered proverbs across different African languages and cultural communities.

Finally, there is a need to promote culturally inclusive feminist scholarship that critically engages indigenous traditions without undermining African cultural identity. Accordingly, scholars should seek balanced approaches that recognize both the cultural value of oral traditions and the necessity of challenging symbolic representations that reinforce social inequality. Through such efforts, African societies can preserve their cultural heritage while promoting equity, inclusiveness, and social justice.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to selected Yoruba proverbs and relied mainly on secondary sources because it adopted an opinion paper approach. The interpretive nature of the analysis may involve subjective perspectives, while contextual variations in proverb meanings across Yoruba communities may also affect the generalization of the findings.

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