

OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN IN KISWAHILI AND ARABIC PROVERBS

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A number of Kiswahili and Arabic proverbs are used as a strategy to objectify women in Swahili and Arab societies. "Objectification of women", as discussed in this paper, is a notion borrowed from feminist literature, notably Nussbaum (1995) and Langton (2009). While it covers about ten aspects in this literature, the present study looks at only four of them, for which it could easily find illustrate examples from the two languages. The four aspects expound on the following terms used by Nussbaum (for the first three) and Langton (for the last one): *instrumentality*, *denial of autonomy*, *ownership* and *silencing*. Although *silencing* is treated as just one aspect here, from this paper it emerges as almost synonymous with the overall concept of *objectification*, since it underlies virtually all the proverbs illustrated with.

Keywords: Proverbs, objectification of women, Swahili society/culture, Arab society/culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of objectification of women comes from feminist literature. According to Nussbaum (1995: 257), objectification covers seven properties: "instrumentality", "denial of autonomy", "inertness", "fungibility", "violability", "ownership", and "denial of subjectivity". *Instrumentality* refers to "treating the person as a tool for another's purposes", *denial of autonomy* to "treating the person as lacking in autonomy or self-determination", *inertness* to "treating the person as lacking in agency or activity", *fungibility* to "treating the person as interchangeable with (other) objects", *violability* to "treating the person as lacking in boundary integrity and violable, 'as something that is permissible to break up, smash, break into'", *ownership* to "treating the person as though they can be owned, bought, or sold", and *denial of subjectivity* to "treating the person as though there is no need for concern for their experiences or feelings". Langton (2009: 225) later proposed three more properties: "reduction to body", which refers to "the treatment of a person as identified with their body, or body parts"; "reduction to appearance",

which refers to “the treatment of a person primarily in terms of how they look, or how they appear to the senses”; and “silencing”, which refers to “the treatment of a person as if they are silent, lacking the capacity to speak”.

In both Swahili and Arab societies, the objectification of women through proverbs is common currency. A comparison of proverbs in Swahili and those in Arabic is of (anthropological) linguistics interest because though the two languages belong to different language families, the former has borrowed so much, linguistically speaking, from the latter because of historical reasons dating back to the 8th century. Knappert (1982: 544) writes: “The real linguistic synthesis into what we would now regard as Swahili took place from the 8th century onwards during the first Islamic period when Arabic speaking governors, administrators and traders from Yemen and Iraq took control of the coast [of East Africa]”. It is assumed in this paper that the great amount of contact which the Swahili language has had with Arabic must have created more convergent aspects of culture than divergent ones. This means that more similar interpretations than different ones are expected from the proverbs that will be used for illustration in this paper.

The Arabic from which illustrative proverbs have been chosen in this study is that spoken in Egypt. This choice was motivated by the fact that it is this dialect of Arabic that is taught in East African schools. Some could also justify this choice by arguing that Egypt has played a leading role in the inception of women’s associations in the Arab world, as Abu Sarhan (2011: 54) suggests, when he says that “[Egypt] was the pioneer country in the number and efficiency of its women’s associations”. And this could be supported by Othman’s (2013: 96) comment that “the meaning and interpretation of proverbs must always interface with the cultural aspects of the society whose proverbs are being researched, analyzed, or interpreted”. However, in spite of the content of these two quotations, it could equally be argued that the effects of Egypt being such a pioneer in promoting women’s associations is a relatively recent phenomenon which cannot possibly have affected (long-standing) proverbs to the point of causing changes to the linguistic formulation of Egyptian Arabic proverbs.

The following sections deal with different aspects of objectification of women each at a time. Four aspects, not the ten mentioned in the opening paragraph, are discussed. The six that will not be are: “treating the person as lacking in agency or

activity”, “treating the person as interchangeable with (other) objects”, “treating the person as lacking in boundary integrity”, “treating the person as though there is no need for concern for their experiences or feelings”, “the treatment of a person primarily in terms of how they look, or how they appear to the senses”, and “the treatment of a person as identified with their body, or body parts”. These will not be dealt with in this paper because illustrative examples of them were hard to come by. As for the four aspects that will be discussed, each of them will be illustrated with two proverbs from Swahili and two from Arabic.

2. THE TREATMENT OF WOMEN AS TOOLS FOR OTHER PEOPLE’S PURPOSES

The objectification of women that is manifested in the treatment of women as tools for other people’s purposes can be observed in the Kiswahili proverbs (1) and (2):

(1) *Mwanamke ni malkia wa moyo* – ‘A woman is the queen of the heart’.

(2) *Mwanamke ni ua* – ‘A woman is a flower’.

By referring to a woman as the queen of the heart, Proverb (1) appears to celebrate the inner strength of a woman, thus equating her with a queen who is elevated and adored in Swahili society. On the other hand, the imagery of flower in Proverb (2) appeals to both the sense of sight and that of smell, that is to beauty and fragrance, which are objects of love expression. In these parallels drawn between women and queens on the one hand and between women and flowers on the other, women are men’s tools in the sense that women as queens of men’s hearts are expected to satisfy the male folk’s wishes and desires, so as to bring joy and happiness to them, just as the beauty and fragrance of flowers can make a man feel happy. It should be noted that ordinarily women’s actions in Swahili society have to be sanctioned by the men, whether directly or indirectly. This is so because, before their marriage, women in Swahili culture are supposed to be under the control of their fathers, their brothers and male relatives, and, once married, that control is transferred to their husbands, whom they are expected to serve diligently, without fail. Thus, a woman who is symbolized as a queen and a flower in proverbs (1) and (2), respectively, is ultimately meant for the pleasure of the end user, that is her husband. It should be stressed that in Swahili culture, regardless of powerful a

“queen” might be, she is bound by tradition to not only respect her husband but also to follow his orders.

In proverbs (3) and (4) is manifested the treatment of women as tools for other people’s purposes in Arabic.

(3) *Asa’a al-daaba al-sareea wa akhud al-mara al-mutwiya kulaha tumtiya* – ‘Keep a fast-moving animal and marry an obedient woman, as they are the enjoyment of life’.

(4) *Huratu swabarati baituhaa umarati* – ‘A virtuous woman had patience with her husband and her house flourished’.

In Arab culture, animals such as donkeys, mules, and camels are used to transport both people and goods. The services offered by these animals in terms of what they carry, the amount to be carried, as well as the distance to be covered depend on the owners of those animals. Therefore, it can be concluded from the parallel drawn between the services offered by a fast-moving animal and those offered by somebody’s wife, as implied in Proverb (3), that women are generally treated as tools for other people’s purposes in Arab society. This idea is amplified in Proverb (4), where the households’ prosperity is considered to be a housewife’s responsibility. To relate proverbs (1) and (2), on the one hand, to (3) and (4), on the other, it can be argued that women’s services manifested in love and devotion in Swahili society are mirrored by obedience and patience in Arab society.

3. THE TREATMENT OF WOMEN AS PEOPLE LACKING IN AUTONOMY OR SELF-DETERMINATION

The idea that women lack autonomy in Swahili society transpires from proverbs (5) and (6):

(5) *Mke hukaa katika kivuli cha mumewe* – ‘The wife stays in the shadow of her husband’.

(6) *Mke kumtii mume ndio sheria* – ‘For a wife to obey her husband is the law’.

Proverb (5) clearly expresses women’s dependence on men. This is contained in the meaning of the word *kivuli* (‘shade, shadow, place of refuge’), which implies that by being given the shade by her husband, a wife thereby remains in the shadow of her husband, meaning that there is not much she can do on her own. For its part, Proverb (6) encourages a woman to obey her husband. It focuses on wives’ absolute

obedience to their husbands without the former being given an opportunity to air their views. It is obvious that by vesting absolute authority in men, this proverb strips women of their freedom of thought and expression, hence treating them as people who lack autonomy or self-determination.

The Arabic proverbs (7) and (8) echo the Swahili ones (5) and (6).

(7) *Waladaka khairi wa bitaka ikhitariliha* – ‘Let your son choose his bride, but choose a bridegroom for your daughter’.

(8) *Al-raajul kuluhu wali al-mara* – ‘Whoever a man is, he is the woman’s guardian (caretaker)’.

Proverb (7) attributes to a son enough discernment for him to be able to make wise choices but assumes that a daughter lacks such discernment and, thus, is not capable of making judicious choices for herself. Proverb (8) is quite explicit in suggesting that a woman is not capable of deciding on her own and, thus, belittles women even more.

4. THE TREATMENT OF WOMEN AS PROPERTY THAT CAN BE OWNED, BOUGHT, OR SOLD

This type of treatment is illustrated in proverbs (9) and (10) in the case of Swahili culture.

(9) *Ukipata chungu kipya, usitupe cha zamani* – ‘After acquiring a new pot, do not throw away the old one’.

(10) *Mkeka mpya haulaliwi vema*– ‘A new sleeping mat is not pleasant to sleep on’.

Though not explicitly mentioned in either proverb, the woman will be understood, in Swahili culture, to be represented by *chungu* (‘pot’) in (9) and *mkeka* (‘sleeping mat’) in (10). And it is telling that both pot and sleeping mat are property that can be bought. Proverb (9) depicts the survival of a woman’s marriage in Swahili society as being solely dependent on her husband’s goodwill. For its part, Proverb (10) hints at the fact that women ought to learn to do certain things which their husbands will like.

That women are perceived as property in Arab culture transpires from proverbs (11) and (12).

(11) *Khalitaha al-mara qirbat dam inn shiltaha kharat wa inn waa'at* – ‘A woman is a leather bag full of blood: if you carry it, it pours out of the bag; if you leave it, it becomes pus’.

(12) *Mauti al-maratu tajidiidi al-urusi* – ‘The death of a wife is the renewal of the wedding’.

Clearly, the property imagery employed in these two proverbs is even more demeaning to the women: a woman as a delicate leather bag difficult to handle and a woman as something from whose death some happy event can arise.

5. THE TREATMENT OF WOMEN AS IF THEY ARE SILENT OR LACKING THE CAPACITY TO SPEAK

The treatment of women as people who are silent or lacking the capacity to speak is illustrated in proverbs (13) and (14) for Swahili (with the latter being Proverb [6] repeated here) and in (15) and (16) for Arabic.

(13) *Kuku hawiki penye jogoo* – ‘A hen does not crow when there is a cock’.

(14) *Mke kumtii mume ndio sheria*– ‘For a wife to obey her husband is the law’.

(15) *Rayi al-mara qurubatu iniqatatu fii al-khilaa* – ‘Women’s opinion is like a leather bag full of water that has been punctured in the desert’.

(16) *Aaqilatu al-niswaani qalibuhaa mitulu habatu al-dukhani* – ‘The brain of the wisest woman is like the size of a millet seed’.

In order to argue that Proverb (13) is gender-biased, it is important to put its lexical constitution into perspective: the use of *hen* rather than *cock* is, as Kobia (2016: 226) suggests, a deliberate one and is based on biological (i.e. female) affinity. The proverb evidently points to women’s inability to express themselves in the presence of men. In Proverb (14), the obedience of women to their husbands is taken as the law, thus leaving the women no option to give views of their own.

Turning now to the Arabic proverbs, the imagery of a leather bag full of water punctured in the desert in Proverb (15), suggesting that such water goes to waste without benefiting anyone in particular, equally suggests that it would be a waste of time for a woman to try to give her opinion. But there probably cannot be proverb mean to silence women than Proverb (16), which openly equates the size of the wisest woman’s brain to a millet seed. And there cannot a better illustration than proverbs (13) to (16) of the view, expressed e.g. by Wamutiso (2014: 353), that the

treatment of women as people who are silent or lacking the capacity to speak is actualized by denying women space to air their views. Such denial, as Saidi (2010: 65) argued, is bound to cause self-doubt on the part of women about their ability to express themselves.

6. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to illustrate how the feminist notion of “objectification of women” is manifested in Swahili and Arab cultures through proverbs. Although the notion itself encompasses ten aspects (six proposed by Nussbaum 1995 and for by Langton 2009), the paper has illustrated the four of them for which it could find illustrative examples easily. First, there is the objectification of women that involves treating women as tools for other people’s purposes. The proverbs that were used to illustrate this aspect suggest that women’s service delivery to men is manifested in love and devotion (in the case the Kiswahili proverbs (1) and (2) and in obedience and patience (in the case of the Arabic proverbs (3) and (4). Second, there is the treatment of women as people lacking autonomy or self-determination. This was illustrated by proverbs that show women’s dependence on men and their absolute obedience to their husbands (in the case of the Kiswahili proverbs (5) and (6) and women being denied the chance to make important choices in life, like choosing their marriage partners (in the case of Arabic proverbs (7) and (8). Third, there is the treatment of women as property that can be owned, bought, or sold. Both the Kiswahili proverbs (9) and (10) and the Arabic ones (11) and (12) which illustrate this aspect imply that women are people whose activities and behaviour have to benefit their male counterparts in one way or another. Fourth, there is the treatment of women as people who are silent or lacking the capacity to speak. Both the illustrative Kiswahili proverbs (13) and (14) and the Arabic ones (15) and (16) show, in unveiled terms, society’s total, and quite demeaning, disregard for women’s views and ideas. Although this silencing of women has been dealt with as just one aspect on a par with the other three, it could be argued that whatever these latter involve is one form or the other of it: that is, the ultimate effect of all those other forms of women’s objectification is to silence women’s voices.

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