

Proverb Usage and the Silencing of Women's Voices: An Exploration of Swahili and Arabic Proverbs

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Abstract

This paper set out to answer three research questions being: how does the depiction of women as ignorant people in need of guidance inscribe the silencing of women's voices? The second one being in what ways does the depiction of women as objects of pleasure inscribe the silencing of the voices of women? As well as what inscription of the silencing of women's voices does the depiction of women as passive objects potent? This study adopted a Feminist Literary Theory also known as Feminist Literary Criticism as advanced and expounded by Napikoski (2017) which is based on two tenets being; the postulation that foregrounds identification with female characters and the re-evaluation and counter-reading of the hushed functions of proverbs in the world in which they are utilized. Silence as used in this paper entails the unsaid, the unspeakable, the repressed, the erased and the unheard. The culture of silence is evident in the depiction of women in Swahili and Arabic proverbs which implicitly or explicitly demand that women are only seen and not heard. Silence is also exhibited in the Swahili and Arabic proverbs' depictions which either support or seem to condone the meting out of punishment to girls/women as a means of education, discipline or simply for fun. Similarly, silence is echoed in the depiction of women in Swahili and Arabic proverbs which demand of women to obey

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their husbands without question and not to complain while facing punishment or difficult situations, but rather suffer quietly.

Ikisiri

Makala hii inadhamiria kujibu maswali matatu ya utafiti: je, ni kwa jinsi gani usawiri wa wanawake kama watu wajinga wanaohitaji kuongozwa katika methali za Kiswahili na Kiarabu unachangia kunyamazisha sauti na usemi wa wanawake? Je, ni kwa jinsi gani usawiri wa wanawake kama vyombo vya kustarehesha katika methali za Kiswahili na Kiarabu unachangia kunyamazisha sauti za wanawake katika jamii? Je, usawiri wa wanawake kama viumbe wenye hisia baridi katika methali za Kiswahili na Kiarabu unaashiria nini kuhusiana na ujitambuzi, ujiteteaji na usemi wa wanawake kwa jumla katika jamii? Ili kuyajibu na kuyajadili kwa kina maswali haya, makala imekitwa katika misingi miwili ya Nadharia ya Ufeministi kama inavyojadiliwa na kuwasilishwa na Napikoski (2017)—kwanza kuweka kipaumbele na msisitizo katika masuala ya kujitambulisha na kuwatetea wahusika wa kike katika maandiko ya kifasihi, na pili, haja ya kufasiri upya na kudadisi majukumu yanayotekelezwa na mianya ya ukimya na unyamavu inayotekelezwa na tungo za kisanaa ikiwamo methali za Kiswahili. Katika makala hii, dhana za ukimya na unyamavu zimetumiwa kuashiria mambo ambayo, japo yapo, hayasemwi, hayatamkwi, yanabanwa na kupembeza ili yasisikike. Utamaduni na desturi za ukimya na unyamavu ni uhalisia ulio wazi kuhusiana na usawiri wa wanawake katika methali za Kiswahili na Kiarabu, usawiri ambao kwa njia wazi au njia fiche unashurutisha kwamba wanawake waonekane tu na wala wasisikike. Ukimya na unyamavu unajitokeza katika methali za Kiswahili na Kiarabu ambao ama unaunga mkono moja kwa moja au kuonekana kuunga mkono kudhalilishwa na kuadhibiwa kwa wanawake, husingizia kufanya hivyo eti kuwa ni njia na utamaduni halali wa kuwaadhibu wanawake, na wakati mwingine uadhibishaji huo unawasilishwa kama njia ya kujiburudisha kwa wanaume. Hivyo hivyo, ukimya na unyamavu unaojibainisha katika methali hizi huelekea kushauri, kuelekeza na kuwashurutisha wanawake kuwatii wanaume wao bila upinzani wowote. Kwa jumla, methali nyingi za sampuli hii zinaelekea kuhalalisha wanawake kukabiliana na mateso yao kwa hali za ukimya.

1.0 Introduction

Proverbs are considered as a courier of wisdom which arises from and in turn portrays everyday life, in terms of explaining and solving problems as and whenever encountered by different members of a given society. Inherent in all these teachings are both overt and covert inscriptions of norms, philosophies and worldviews critical

for the organization and functioning of society. This means that the relationship between proverbs and culture is always intricate and closely bound with that given culture, its traditions as well as its worldview. Ordinarily, proverbs are products of joint production in the sense that peoples' usage of the same is an expression that people accept the truth value communicated in the proverbs. This is because proverbs are words of wisdom that are carried from generation to generation; transmitting and reflecting a peoples' accumulated wisdom which is generally agreed and adhered to without question because, proverb validity and origin is always predicated on the threshold of sage wisdom. Proverbs always reflect and bring out a particular culture in terms of its explication as well as its functioning in the overall cultural life. The meaning and interpretation of proverbs must always interface with the cultural aspects of the society whose proverbs are being researched, analyzed or interpreted (Othman, 2013).

The analysis of how Swahili and Arabic proverbs are employed in silencing women's locution is critical in understanding the role silence plays in the establishment of patriarchal power as well as enabling the circulation of prejudiced cultural values. In terms of proverb analysis, silence essentially entails the unsaid, the unspeakable, the repressed, the erased and the unheard always embedded in the subtexts of proverbs. At the core of this debate, silence is perceived as that which is imposed by proverbial wisdom, and there are many proverbs in the Swahili and Arabic languages that are premised on the trajectory of silence. The silencing of women's voices is actualized variously in terms of objectification, that's the treating of women as objects. Objectification denotes instrumentality, essentially treating women as tools, insinuating men treating women as objects of men's purposes—in which case "purposes" intimate variety, range and extent to which women can be used as instruments (Nussbaum, 1995).

Another strategy in proverb usage that is critical in perpetuating silence is the denial of autonomy, which in practical terms intimates treating woman as people lacking in independence and self-determination thus making women dependent on the men. The third strategy is predicated on the idea of inertness, implying that women generally lack agency and are prone to inactivity. The fourth strategy is subsumed in the concept of "fungibility" that is the treatment of women as objects capable of interchangeability, essentially interchangeable with other objects (Nussbaum, *ibid*). In Swahili and Arab contexts, the payment of dowry is a practical demonstration of this idea of interchangeability. Consequently, the formulation of proverbs within the trajectory of objectification, ownership and exchange is extensively deployed. Silence is also actualized in terms of how women are seen, that is, the reduction of the women's bodies from whole persons to parts, such that women are seen in terms of their body parts rather than being constituting whole humans. Women are thus reduced to appearances in terms of how they look or appear, ultimately silencing women and portraying them as silent, lacking capacity to

speak (Langton, 2009). Ultimately, the silencing of women's voices in Swahili and Arab proverb usage is predicated on perception of "sexual dominance" (Wamutiso, 2014). This is manifested mostly by limiting the range of women activities to the domestic and homestead contexts entailing housekeeping and child rearing. Such dominance is critical in creating possibilities of self-doubt on the part of the women to the extent of women failing to see themselves as capable and efficacious, as persons capable of valuable locution (Saidi, 2010).

This study was motivated by the fact that the depiction of women through proverbs is pervasive in both Swahili and Arab societies. 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.

1.1 Methodology and Data

The proverbs selected from the Swahili and Arabic sources are the ones which refer to female gender explicitly or in ordinary proverbs used to designate female-male relationships. It is important to note that such renditions need not always be explicit; they are discernible once the given proverbs are subjected to critical re-reading

focusing on a given proverb's sub-text and in distinct contexts. The way these proverbs are used and applied played a key role in the selection of the proverbs which talk about women in the two languages. The study data of thirty-five proverbs from Swahili and Arabic, fourteen from Swahili and twenty-one from Arabic proverbs which talk about women was analyzed according to the issues they address. The Swahili proverbs were collected from three main sources: Wamutiso (2014), Mkota's (2009) and Ndalun and King'ei (2016). The Arabic proverbs, on the other hand, were collected from three main books; Burckhardt (1972), Elder (1927) and Bayumi's (2004). In examining the silencing of women's voices through the use of Swahili and Arabic proverbs, our main research questions are: (1) How does the depiction of women as ignorant people in need of guidance inscribe the silencing of women's voices? (2) In what ways do the depiction of women as objects of pleasure inscribe the silencing of the voices of women? (3) What inscription of the silencing of women's voices does the depiction of women as passive objects potent?

1.2 Theoretical Framework

As a study that premises its methodological procedure on feminism and feminist related theories, this study basically acquiesces to a truism that feminism is a contested field of theoretically competing understandings, perspectives and prescriptions. It acknowledges that in general terms, sex is a foundational and incontrovertible axis of social organization, in which, unfortunately women are subordinated to men in virtually all fields of human endeavor. Thus, feminism in its various manifestations is critically implicated with sex as an organizing principle of social life upon which gender and gender power relations are structured, negotiated and maintained.

This study adopted a Feminist Literary Theory also known as Feminist Literary Criticism mainly because this theory is broadly concerned with the need to understand, explore and defend the rights of women, however widely defined. This theory, therefore, obliges a critic or literary analyst to decisively scrutinize feminine-masculine relations in his/her given social and material world from multiple contexts and provide strategies which will help remedy the conditions that negatively affect a majority of women in that given world. The Feminist Literary Theory as used here has drawn a lot of its inspiration from the assertions advanced and expounded by Napikoski (2017), which foreground a feminist viewpoint, feminist theory and feminist place and space concerns. This is so because this theoretical framework is attentive to issues of difference—which abound in proverbs, the questioning of social power—which is circulated by proverb usage and finally hoping that social justice can be realized by exposing covert schemas. This study is thus based on two tenets of the Feminist Literary Theory as expounded by Napikoski (*ibid*) as follows: The postulation that foregrounds identification with female characters and the re-

evaluation and counter-reading of the hushed functions of proverbs in the world in which they are utilized.

2.0 Proverb Usage and the Silencing of Women's Voices

There is no doubt that proverbs as products of folklore and as aspects of cultural "oralities" entail a lot of literary relevance and significance. Proverbs are a rich source of imagery and concise expression; in terms of their verbal methodologies they involve comparisons, use of allusive wordings and ultimately exhibit a habitual metaphorical form. Thus, any analysis of the depiction of women in proverb formulation inevitably necessitates paying attention to certain discernible lexical patterns, figures of speech such as satire, symbolism, similes, metaphor, allusions and a myriad of other linguistic forms, because it is in these forms that inscriptions of overt sexism, biting wittiness, derogatory depictions, the embodiment of negative values and female stereotyping become manifest. In this sense, analyzing proverbs revolving around or focusing on women enables an understanding of how women in Swahili and Arab cultures have been perceived through millennia through a patriarchal prism. Indeed, a large number of proverbs related to female gender or used in reference to anything feminine, function negatively and harmfully for women such that proverbs mentioning wives, mothers, mothers-in-law, daughters, daughters-in-law, sisters or any other category of women, are more likely to be negatively nuanced in terms of vanity, infidelity, niggling, and unreliability.

Other negatively nuanced proverbs in Swahili and Arab cultures related to women are likely to delve into such negativities as laziness, wickedness, weakness, parasitic existence, unintelligent agency and caring only about their outward appearances. Where proverbs may mention beautiful or intelligent women, it is most likely from a patriarchal prism in which they stick out as trophies or possessions for the advancement of patriarchal interests. Thus, women depiction in Swahili and Arabic proverbs is noticeable through a number of ways in which such proverbs make reference to women metaphorically either in the imagery of property, ornaments—natural or man-made, edible delicacies or in the imagery of tame or tamable animals and birds. Indeed, there are other female related proverbs whose depiction is premised on social values that underpin social institutions such as marriage, culture and religion. Furthermore, where female related proverbs celebrate women, they are most likely focused on women-wives engaged in and restricted to home and family related issues. Understanding the various forms of how women are depicted in Swahili and Arabic proverbs is critical in understanding how such depictions enable the inscription of the silencing of women's voices.

It is important to understand the role of silence not merely in the establishment of patriarchal power but also how such gendered silence is critical in the inscription of the silencing of women's voices. Silence in essence entails the unsaid, the unspeakable, the repressed, the erased and the unheard. In this study

silence is regarded as what is imposed by proverbial wisdom, and there are indeed many proverbs in these cultures that are premised on the inscription of silence. Silence is a constant trope in Swahili and Arabic proverbs relating to women or focusing on women related issues. There are many proverbs in these cultures which clearly espouse the ethos of the unsaid, thus, implicitly encouraging silence as a virtue on the part of women. The culture of silence is evident in the depiction of women in Swahili and Arabic proverbs which implicitly or explicitly demand that women are only seen and not heard. Silence is also exhibited in the Swahili and Arabic proverbs' depictions which either support or seem to condone the meting out of punishment to girls/women as a means of education, discipline or simply for fun. Similarly, silence is echoed in the depiction of women in Swahili and Arabic proverbs which demand of women to obey their husbands without question and not to complain while facing punishment or difficult situations, but rather suffer quietly.

2.1 The Depiction of Women as Ignorant People in Need of Guidance

There are a number of Swahili and Arabic proverbs which depict women as ignorant people in need of guidance that can be administered either through word of mouth or punishment. This is captured in the Swahili proverb, "*Fimbo impigayo mke mwenzio ukiiona itupe mbali—if you come across the stick used to beat your co-wife throw it far away*". In thematic terms, this proverb addresses the idea of punishment, both physical and psychological as being critically ingrained in Swahili culture where men are culturally allowed to punish. The proverb also canvasses another cultural practice, polygamy which allows Swahili men to engage in multiple marriages. Though the proverb may appear to circulate a positive message, the selfless act of one wife intervening to shield a co-wife from corporal punishment, this heroic act intimates women's lack of voice, they are not enabled to negotiate what constitutes a punishment or how such punishment may be enacted. Alternatively, women's locution is routinely projected as noise as in the proverb, "*Debe tupu haliachi kutika—an empty tin makes the loudest noise*". Though there is nothing essentially feminine about this proverb, its usage in male-female interactions can make it critically nuanced as to connote gender and notably women objectification. In such contexts, women's locution regardless of its content is potentially regarded as noise making; effectively watering down contributions made by women in society. It discourages women from expressing themselves freely, hence inculcating the culture of silence.

The actualization of silence may also be seen in terms of what proverbs seem or actually encourage. For instance, there are various proverbs which subtly encourage women to obey men absolutely as in the proverb, "*Mke kumtii mume ndio sheria—a wife to obey the husband is the norm*". Though the proverb may be perceived as inculcating good morals, discipline and obedience, the fact that it is unidirectional and singularly focused on women cannot be ignored. This is because

its overall emphasis is focused on the absolute obedience of the wives to their husbands without being given an opportunity to air their views. This eventually silences women's voices in whatever interactional circumstances. It is obvious that by vesting absolute authority in men, this proverb strips women of their freedom of thought and expression hence silencing their voices.

The circulation of the culture and ethos of silence is pervasive in Swahili proverb usage. This is what is implied in the proverb, "***Kuku hawekwi shahidi wala hajui sheria—the hen is not taken as a witness because it does not know the law***". To argue that this proverb is gender biased, it is important to interrogate its lexical constitution. The use of chicken rather than cock is deliberate, and therefore, transferable based on biological affinity (Kobia, 2016). Consequently, it subtly suggests that women's ignorance especially with matters law is responsible for their denial of public participation like standing in as witnesses. Women's participation as witnesses as perceived in this proverb ingeniously silences women's voices. This is so because the inclusion of the metaphor of chicken in the formulation of the proverb enables the depiction of women that foregrounds weakness and helplessness. It further depicts women in terms of inexperience and ignorance, thus, denying the critical roles played by women in society, ultimately silencing of women's voices in the society.

Proverbs which depict women as ignorant people in need of guidance also abound in Arabic culture. For instance, the proverb, "***Zauju al-dharataini qaqaabaini dirataini—the husband of two parrots is like a neck between two sticks that strike it***" is framed within that derogatory trajectory. It is important to understand that this proverb can be used in multiple contexts, however, the use of metaphor of a parrot insinuates more than what would ordinarily be expected in normal circumstance. The parrot is used synonymously with noise making, consequently its reference to women depicts women as people prone to making lots of noise that amounts to nothing. This proverb presupposes that women just like parrots simply mimic and follow what the men do or allow them to do. A similar message is echoed in the proverb, "***Al-kalaam laki ya jaaratuni alaa anti himaaratuni—it is you I speak to, my fair neighbor, but truly you are an ass***" intimating that women are intellectually challenged and incapable of understanding and following simple instructions. It further suggests that women are slow learners; hence their learning can sometimes be actualized only through crude methods. This is further implied in the proverb, "***Thalathatuni maa tarifau minihumu aswaa: al-mara wa al-naqaaratuni wa al-himaaratuni—do not take your stick away from three things: a woman, a drum and a female donkey***", which curiously and through skewed logic justifies the use of corporal punishment on women. The overall objective embedded in proverbs which overtly or otherwise depict women disparagingly is to silence women's voices in the society.

The pervasive upholding of physical and psychological punishment against women is a complex patriarchal strategy which ingeniously disempowers women and ends up silencing their voices. This is what is embedded in the proverb, *“Maa qadara ala hamaatihi qaama li’mraatihi—he was not a match for his mother-in-law, he then rose up against his wife”*. The punishment of daughters, mothers and women generally serves as a tool for collective punishment whose ultimate objective is to silence the voices of women. The metaphor of the donkey in Arabic proverbs, particularly about women is negatively nuanced. This is because the various manifestations of the donkey in Arabic proverbs depict women as foolish and stubborn, thus their articulation of any issues is prejudged. The donkey metaphor in the proverb *“Atikiraaru yualimu al_himaaru—repetition teaches (even) a donkey”* further undermines women’s intellectual capacity. The ethos contained in many Arabic proverbs erodes women’s self-confidence, relegates women’s participation in public discourses; as scheme of things which ultimately contributes to the silencing of women’s voices in society.

The pervasive Arabic proverbs’ blatant disregard for women’s opinions routinely renders such opinions useless or inconsequential in decision making processes. This is what is entailed in the proverbs: *“Aaqilatu al-niswaaani qalibuhaa mitulu habatu al-dukhani—the brain of the wisest woman is like the size of a millet seed”* and *“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”*. Both proverbs are overtly derogatory, they out rightly equate the size of the wisest woman’s brain to the millet seed, an obvious and disdainful belittling of women’s intellectual capacities. It makes a mockery of women’s intelligence, erodes their self-esteem; hence discouraging them from engaging in problem solving ventures that require constructive thinking. The metaphor of a punctured leather bag full of water in the desert is an assault on women’s opinions, ideas and understanding. Additionally, women’s ability to perform tasks is equally assaulted and belittled as captured in the proverb, *“Al-mara kaana qalati duqahaa ukhutahaa—if a woman shows disrespect, punish her by marrying another wife.”* This proverb’s thematic import insinuates that women learn things the hard way. When all these proverbs are interrogated collectively, they present varied avenues, complex strategies and ingenious schemes through which women’s voices are silenced in these societies.

2.2 The Depiction of Women as Objects of Pleasure

The depiction of women as men’s pleasure objects in Swahili and Arabic proverbs is sometimes formulated on the trajectory of objectifying women, that is, reducing women either to edible objects or visual objects that induce pleasure. For instance, the Swahili proverb, *“Anayeonja asali huchonga mzinga—he who tastes honey makes a hive”*, though it is non-feminine in its surface presentation, however when used in contexts of male-female relationships can insinuate strong objectification

nuances. The honey metaphor in this proverb in its object manifestations conjures a variety of benefits; it is used as a relish to enhance the taste of a number of foodstuffs, it is used as medicine and it is a preservative in many ways. Consequently, when women are presented in the imagery of honey, the overall depiction is deprecating in the sense that women are presented as passive objects devoid of agency. The symbolic construction of hives connotes a sense of domesticating women and the overall impression created is that women are deprived of voice.

The edible and domesticated or ownership trajectory is invasive in Swahili proverb formulation intimating that whatever is eaten does not negotiate the how and when of its eating. This is perceivable in the proverbs, "*Bila nyuki hupati asali—without bees you cannot get honey*" and "*Fuata nyuki ule asali—follow the bees to eat honey*". Both proverbs are predicated on the idea of eating, the important thing to note is that what is edible is routinely at the disposal of the eater. Therefore, when used in interactions or debates canvassing women-male relations, they depict men as the eaters (active/go-getters) and women the eaten (passive/lacking in agency).

The eating trajectory as a silencing strategy is also observable in other Swahili proverbs which depict women as foodstuffs or something edible. This is what the surface manifestations of the following proverbs present, "*Chakula bora ni kile ukipendacho—the best food is the one you love*", although the reference here is overtly about food, the connotation may actually encompass women as something edible within patriarchal framing. Sometimes the eating metaphor may be limited to "tasting" so as to validate the suitability of that which has to be eaten. Other Swahili proverbs with similar framing of women include: "*Ukila nanasi tunda lingine basi—if you eat a pineapple, no other fruit can match it*" and "*Ukila zabibu, utaleta majibu—if you eat grapes, you will bring feedback*". The eating perceptions in these proverbs are similar to the idea of tasting discussed earlier. Equally, the Swahili proverb, "*Tunda jema halikawii mtini—a good fruit doesn't last long on the tree*" is framed within the trajectory of eating and ultimately silencing of women's voices. The depiction of women as honey, foodstuffs, fruits, pineapples and grapes is an objectification strategy which reduces women to mere commodities and therefore as objects, they are deprived of voice.

The objectification and commodification of women in Arabic proverbs as a strategy of silencing women are observable in several proverbs as in "*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*". This proverb connotes ownership and enjoyment as seen from the men's point of view. Women are depicted as service providers as intimated by the reference to beasts of burden. In other words, "obedient women" work for the satisfaction of men, they are not accorded an opportunity to express themselves with regards to the services they offer. They are as such silenced culturally. Even in situations such as

marriage as in the proverb, “*Al-zawaji sutra—marriage is a shield*”; the accruing benefit is attributable to men. The wisdom underpinning the reference to marriage as a shield is a patriarchal strategy that shields men from shame, yet any indulgences in such vices as illicit sex in all its forms including fornication, adultery as well as prostitution is seen as feminine.

When these proverbs are considered collectively, that is, the depictions of women and beasts of burden, marriages as shield, women’s voices are not heard. In other words, women’s views and aspirations are relegated to the periphery as alluded to in the proverb, “*Mauti al-maratu tajidiidi al-urusi—the death of a wife is the renewal of the wedding*”. In this proverb death is not a loss but rather it’s an opportunity for excitement of marrying new wives; women are presented as dispensable and replaceable objects. Where women are not depicted as pleasure objects in Arabic proverbs, they are depicted as victims of blame as in the proverb, “*Azahilaqi al-himaaru wa kaana mini shahiwatu al-himaaru—the ass slipped and fell as a result of the ass driver’s desire to see a lady*”. Constant fault finding and blaming of women discourages women’s participation in public discourses and eventually silences their voices. The silencing strategy also employs schemes such as outright negativity which devalues women’s beauty, ability and capacity to undertake tasks, no matter how menial. In general negativity breeds insensitivity on the part of men towards women affairs as in the proverb, “*Dharabatu al-intaya zai mash’ati al-dinnaya—punishing a female is like rubbing butter over the body*”. In situations where proverbs unashamedly hail and celebrate corporal punishment against women, the long-term effects of such celebration simply dispirit women from public participation; hence ends up silencing their voices.

2.3 The Depiction of Women as Passive Objects

Passivity and docility both as social attributes and character traits are critically entrenched in the depiction of women as passive objects. By attributing these tributes to women, Swahili proverbs subtly end up dehumanizing and ultimately silencing women’s voices. This is what is observable in the proverb, “*Ukipata chungu kipya, usitupe cha zamani—do not throw an old pot for acquiring a new one*”. Essentially, the imagery of the pot in the proverb objectifies women as passive people, it depicts women as open vessels and as such objects are incapable of locution. A similar ethos of passivity and docility is perceivable in the proverb, “*Mwanamke ni maji ya dafu, hayapendezi ila dafuni mwake—a woman is like the water in a young coconut, it is not pleasant except in its shell*”. This proverb’s thematic import focuses on women’s value which is subtly reduced to smallness of the coconut shell. Passivity in all its manifestation and in reference to women is confining and restrictive, thus intimating confinement to homesteads and home chores. When women are not depicted within the passivity frame, they are portrayed

in terms of docility as in the proverb, "*Kuku hawiki penye jogoo—a hen does not crow in the presence of a cock*", connoting restriction and docility.

Passivity and docility are also observable in Arabic proverbs where in most cases they are expressed explicitly. For instance, the proverb, "*Waladaka khairi wa bitaka ikhitariliha—let your son choose his bride; but choose a bridegroom for your daughter*" explicitly expresses preference for sons and as such accords them privileged positions compared to women. In this proverb girls are deprived of agency, consequently curtailing women's freedom of expression, alienating them from mainstream activities, eroding their self-confidence and ultimately silencing their voices. Equally, the proverb, "*Al-rijaalu qabaayilu wal al-niswaani nifaayilu—men are with their tribes and women are with their good deeds*" implicitly expresses the silencing of women's voices, this is so because in these proverbs men are judged collectively in terms of their tribes while women are rated on one's individual performance.

The reference of men's performance in collective terms insulates men from taking individual responsibility while women are projected to take individual responsibility. This is observable in the proverb, "*Twaibu al-hadeedah wa al-dharibu naseebu—choose a good wife from a good family and having children is a matter of luck*". The responsibility of choosing a marriage partner is presented as a sole duty of men while women are presented as passive objects of men's choices. The silencing of women's voices finds expression in proverbs such as, "*Lubusu al-buswatu tabuqa urusatuni—dressing a stick turns it into a bride*". This is because this proverb lays emphasis on the women's appearance, thus downplaying the quality of their personalities as well as their intellectual capabilities. Silence is also actualized in terms of victimization, that is, women are blamed for mistakes which are not necessarily theirs as in the proverb, "*Tabuusu al-harifu taqilau asinaanishi—he who kisses his lover tears out his teeth*". This proverb is plainly chauvinistic in terms of its apportioning blame to women even in situations where men are apparently in the wrong. Even though the women are routinely blamed without proper justification, women are nonetheless called upon to serve the men as in the proverb, "*Huratu swabarati baituhaa umarati—a virtuous woman had patience with her husband and her house flourished*".

One other strategy through which women are silenced is predicated on pushing women to extreme ends where they are left with little or no choices. This is observable in the proverb, "*Alifu ashiiqunu walaa musitahiluni—a thousand lovers rather than one husband for hire*". This proverb is rooted in the traditional Arab culture whereby a widow had to first sleep with a foreign man not legally married to her, for "cleansing" purposes for her to before being allowed to remarry. The men who performed such rituals were mostly poor and ugly; which is the wisdom behind the widow's preference to sleep with a thousand lovers rather than such kind of a man. Similar ethos is intimated in the proverb, "*Maa akitharu khatwabii wa maa*

agalu firaashii—how great is the number of my wooers, but how small is the quantity of my furniture”. Apportioning of blame, demanding service from women, the use of cultural beliefs that demean the stature of women as framed in the proverbs canvassed here are critical in silencing of women’s voices.

3.0 Conclusion

The silencing of women’s voices in Swahili and Arabic proverbs is actualized variously in terms of objectification, that’s the treating of women as objects. Objectification denotes instrumentality, which put in other words it refers to the treating of women as tools; thus, the treating of women as objects meant for the service of men. Consequently, the formulation of Swahili and Arabic proverbs within the trajectory of objectification and ownership is extensively deployed. Another strategy in Swahili and Arabic proverb usage that is critical in perpetuating silence is the denial of autonomy, which in practical terms intimates treating women as people lacking in independence and self-determination thus making women dependent on the men.

The other strategy is predicated on the idea of inertness, implying that women generally lack agency and are prone to inactivity. Silence is also actualized in terms of how women are seen, that’s, the reduction of the women’s bodies from whole persons to parts, such that women are seen in terms of their body parts rather than being constituting whole humans. Women are thus reduced to appearances in terms of how they look or appear, ultimately silencing women and portraying them as silent, lacking capacity to speak. It is evident that the treatment of women that only focuses on their physical appearance, coupled with the depiction of women as ignorant people works in denying women accessibility to leadership responsibilities, hence silencing their voices. Silence is also perpetuated in the Swahili and Arabic proverb usage through the use of punishment whose net effect is the discouragement of women from public participation. Additionally, the silencing of women’s voices in Swahili and Arab proverb usage is predicated on the perception of “sexual dominance”, where the men are depicted on the one hand as being go-getters while women are depicted as being passive recipients; that are fully dependent on the male folk.

This is manifested mostly by limiting the range of women’s activities to the domestic and homestead contexts, entailing housekeeping and child rearing. Such dominance is critical in creating possibilities of self-doubt on the part of the women to the extent of women failing to see themselves as capable and efficacious, as persons capable of valuable locution. Ultimately, the constant demand for women to serve the male folk patiently regardless of their condition, the belittling of women’s capabilities as well as the use of punishment as discussed in this paper help in the advancement of the silencing of women’s voices.

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