

A Feminist Stylistic Reading of Sexist Terms As Gendered Language in Adelokun's *Under The Brown Rusted Roofs*

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Abstract

*This study investigates gendered language at the lexical level of language of Abimbola Adelokun's *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs* using the tenets of feminist stylistics. The study aims to identify lexical items that overtly and covertly uphold and sponsor discriminatory ideology that demean and undermine women in the socio-cultural context of the text while males enjoy a 'patriarchal dividend' that gives them access to capital and make them desirable. The analysis reveals three categories of lexical items that are sexist and detrimental to female subjects in the text: inherently derogatory words; lower feminine status terms; and female subject objectifying words. Individually and corporately, the three categories of sexist lexical items in the text demean the female subject and facilitate discrimination against them. This study thus contributes to the knowledge of how language use can initiate and reflect the gender ideology working within a specific community.*

Key words: *feminist stylistics, gendered language, linguistic sexism, feminine objectification*

Introduction

Under the Brown Rusted Roofs is Abimbola Adunni Adelokun's debut novel which has variously been applauded as a depiction of the rural and rustic Ibadan city of the 1970s/1980s. According to Falola (2019, as cited in Odutola, 2020, p. 334), a scholar of repute and highly respected

Ibadan indigene, Adelakun took the readers into the world of those who live under the brown roofs, 'brown roofs' being a common literary and metaphoric label for Ibadan. This conclusion aligns with the author's deliberate effort to present and represent the dynamics of life and the customs, traditions, beliefs, and ways of life of the people of Ibadan city in response to Professor Femi Osofisan's lament about the diminishing status of Ibadan city both in producing writers and in being the subject of stories (*The Nigeria Voice*). To this end, Adelakun's main thrust is to unveil the communal lifestyle of the people who make up the different *agbooles* (familial community) in Ibadan city, and, in that event, reveal the customs, mores, and ideologies of the people.

The author uses the polygynous family of Alhaji Arigbabuwo within the *agboole* Alabeni as the major inlet into everyday life in the city. As actions and characters depict everyday life in the city, so do the conversations, as well as conversational topics and discursive strategies, reveal the interpersonal lifestyle of the people and the ideological structure of gender that they portend. The oldest member of the *agboole*, *Baba n'sale* (henceforth Baba), is unravelled as the repository of the people's cultural practices and gatekeeper, of a sort, for the traditions and customs of the people. With Baba's dispositions to socio-political matters, modernity, and gender ideology, he mirrors the patriarchal realities and gender constructs in the socio-cultural context of the text. To Baba, women are either objects or children who must so be treated by every rational male member of the community. This situation reveals the ideological structure of gender in the world of the text as that which privileges the male by ascribing a 'patriarchal dividend' to him in terms of access to symbolic, social, political and economic capital (Lazar, 2005, p. 7). Invariably, the female subject in the text is located within a space of lower power relations compared to the male and this is observable in the way she is referred to and addressed and/or in the way she is expected to use language.

Within the text, gender is thus an ideologically hegemonic construct where the male subject is discursively presented as normal. Being a hegemonic construct, therefore, both males and females perpetuate, produce, and promote discrimination against females in the sociocultural context of the text.

Literature Review

Under the Brown Rusted Roofs has been investigated from different both linguistic and non-linguistic perspectives. Adebisi (2015) examines the novel from the perspective of

communication studies by comparing the exogenous channels employed in the novel with those employed in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Adebisi concludes that both texts are rich in the deployment of exogenous channels for the communication of indigenous knowledge.

Aboh (2014) is a linguistic study which examines how slangy expressions are used to convey the sacredness of sex. He discovers that slangy expressions are euphemistic strategies which account for sex and sexual identity in the text. This study concludes that slangy expressions are used to satisfy the communicative needs of a speech community. From a literary perspective, Aliyu-Ibrahim (2012) investigated how female characters make decisions about whether to stay or leave their polygynous marriages. By identifying two major options available to a woman in a polygynous relationship, she submits that while Sikira represents the option of leaving a polygynous home, Motara and Afusa represent women who stayed and managed the trials and hurts of a polygynous home.

Ayeleru's (2011) concern in his research is to unveil linguistic innovations in both the novel and Adelaide Fassinou's Modukpè's *Le Reve brisé, Enfant d'autrui, fille de personne and Toute une vie ne suffirait pas pour en parlerand*. He describes the language used in both texts as placed within the mother tongue; that is, there is a fusion of the mother tongue and English in passing the intended message of the texts across. For him, the fusion of mother tongue and English features through African orature, transliteration, metaphor, metonymy and translation help the writers to approach their subject matters properly. In his research, Ademilokun (2017) investigates the creative retention of Yoruba cultural ideas and beliefs through lexical transfer, literal translation, coinages, code-mixing, proverbs, incantatory discourse, Yoruba Muslim discourse features, Yoruba advertising poetry, and lineage praise poetry to nativize the literary text and give it a Yoruba colouration.

In her research, Omoregie (2015) explicates the meta-function of gender stereotypes in the text by describing how gender roles are represented in the text. Some of the gender stereotypes she discovers are that men are active, superior, decision-makers and wield social power while women are submissive, emotional, powerless, and occupy a subordinate position in society. Despite the investigations conducted on *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs* so far, no work that we know of has yet investigated the gendered nature of lexical items in the text. It is therefore the intention of this study to examine how particular lexical items in the text privilege the male and demean the female.

Defining gendered language

Litosseliti (2006, p. 58) describes gendered discourses as positioning women and men in certain ways. However, she cautions against labelling the production of gendered discourses with a particular sex or gender since both women and men can articulate gendered discourses in different ways and in different situations. Litoseeliti (2006, p. 60) submits that “[a]n analysis of gendered discourses begs the question: What identities are created as a result of different positioning through different discourses, in different contexts and situations?” Sunderland (2006, p. 53), in a similar line of thought, opines that gendered discourse is the “discoursal representation or construction of women and men, boys and girls in particularly gendered ways in written text or talk – ways that may be idiosyncratic or normative, conservative or progressive.” Sunderland (2006, p. 54) thus concludes that gendered discourse is about “subject positioning” which “[legitimises] the ‘male/female binary’, and [is] potentially constitutive of gender more widely.”

Drawing on the foregoing indicates, gendered language may be understood as the normative or contextual use of language which privileges and justifies a particular gender in terms of their personhood, roles and actions while subverting and condemning the other gender. In essence, gendered language will count as any form of language use that elevates one gender through either overt or covert normative representation and/or positive positioning to the end that the gender looks attractive, desirable and normal while the other gender lacks shine and looks abnormal or aberrant. Relevant to this standpoint is Lazar’s (2005, p. 7) construction of gender as an ideological structure in which ideologies are representations of practices formed from particular perspectives in the interest of maintaining unequal power relations and dominance. Lazar’s submission reveals the prevailing feminist perspective of gender as an ideological structure that divides people into two classes – men and women – based on a hierarchical relation of domination and subordination, respectively. In that way, gendered language is based on the orientation of sexual difference where gender structure imposes a social dichotomy of labour and human traits for women and men in different socio-cultural and temporal contexts.

Taking language as the tool for creating gendered language, gendered language can simply be described as any use of language which re/presents an Other with a bias or a kind of slant because they are different from Self by virtue of sex, race, religion, etc. In other words, any time language uses discursively constructs or re/presents anyone, either overtly or covertly, within the

ideologies of “the other is different from self” to imply that “the other is aberrant” and/or “the other is a deviation from the norm”, that use of language is gendered and oppressive. Gendered language is thus a linguistic game play of who holds and wields power and who does not.

With the particular task in this study being the identification and description of sexist and detrimental terms used specifically to demean and discriminate against women, the study upholds sexist and/or detrimental terms as those linguistic labels which are inherently or contextually negative and are used for the female to emphasise that they are different from the males or inferior to them.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The analysis put forward in this study builds on feminist stylistics which is a functional and critical approach to the description, explanation, and interpretation of the gender ideologies that may be at work in a text at either the level of production or at the level of consumption. Mills (1995) who is pivotal to this theoretical formulation conceives of feminist stylistics as a toolkit which, with the guide of a range of questions directed at the close reading of the text, helps an analyst to unveil the underlying gender ideologies and messages in a text. Mills’ idea of feminist stylistics is founded on the stand that language can be oppressive towards the female, or any gender at that, and that analysts need to reveal how such oppressions work based on the ideologies of gender differences. Influential to Mills’ idea of feminist stylistics is Fairclough’s (1989) aim in *Language and Power* of ‘increas[ing] consciousness of language and power, and particularly of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others’ (Fairclough 1989, as cited in Mills, 1995, p. 1). Standing on the idea that language has the inherent ability to give privilege to a gender over another gender, Mills argues that these privileges are within discursive frameworks and gender ideologies that both men and women either align themselves with or resist, whether consciously or otherwise. Concerning this, Mills (1995, p. 1) submits thus:

because some texts bear messages which work on us in a way which we are not necessarily aware ... It is important to analyse texts carefully in terms of the systematic language choices which have been made. Close analysis may help the reader to become aware of the way that language choices may serve the interests of some people to the detriment of others.

Mills (1995, p. 1) goes further to reveal that the aim of feminist stylistics in engaging in the close reading of texts is to (i) “draw attention to and change the way that gender is represented since it is clear that a great many of these representational practices are not in the interests of either women or men”; (ii) “analyse the way that point of view, agency, metaphor, or transitivity are unexpectedly closely related to matters of gender, to discover whether women’s writing practices can be described, and so on”; and (iii) “use language and linguistic forms as the major tools for unravelling the activities proposed in (i) and (ii)” (Mills, 1995, p. 1). Hence, it is feminist stylistics’ objective to identify, interpret, and explain instances of sexist language across not only the levels of language but also narrative and discursive issues such as point of view, agency, transitivity, etc.

It can be deduced from Mills (1995, p. 62) that a feminist stylistic analysis of a text at the lexical level of language will focus on usages such as sex-specific noun/pronoun use, inclusiveness/exclusion tendencies of generics, sex-specific address terms and negative descriptions of females. The aim of the lexical feminist stylistic analysis, as Mills (1995, p. 62) reveals, is to show that language use can present and perpetuate a particular view of women. Following from the foregoing, therefore, this study aims to identify and explain lexical features of the selected text which are sexist either inherently or contextually. To this end, the objectives of this study are to identify and categorise different manifestations of inherent or situational sexist terms concerning female characters in the selected text; and to explain the critical and functional significance of the terms as contributing to and perpetuating the disapproving and subversive image of female characters in the text.

Analysis

Lexical sexism as gendered language in *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs*

Lexical sexism is evident when sexist and detrimental terms are used in various ways and instances to put the female down, objectify them, connote their lack of power, or ascribe lower statuses to them. Observable sexist and detrimental terms in the data text include derogatory words, objectifying words, and inappropriate use of pronouns and articles, amongst other instances.

Inherently derogatory and negative words

Derogatory words are a type of sexist or gendered language which are inherently detrimental to the female because they name the female negatively. *Emere*, which is the Yoruba word for

someone who possesses a familiar spirit and has potent harmful power, is one such derogatory word that is used for the female in the text:

Extract 1

You are eating a goat's droppings? Is it sweet or is it food? It is your mother's intestines you bit into, you this child with a mouth like the anus of a chicken! Drop it!" The girl looked at him blankly and calmly put another in her mouth. He made to seize it from her hand and as he did so, he was seized by a sharp pain in his back. He uttered a loud cry as he fell on the ground. He tried to scream but no sound came out. A part of his body was suddenly without any feelings. He felt his chest tightening as if a wraith was trying to squeeze life out of him. His last thought before he lost consciousness was: "Sauda is an *emere*." (p. 218)

In extract 1, Baba who has all the while been managing his health with herbal concoctions suddenly goes numb while trying to seize the goat's droppings from Sauda and concludes that it is the girl that attacks him with her powers. Apart from identifying the girl with this negative terminology, the ideology which facilitates the term is that which blames the female for ill-luck in a home.

In another instance, the term is used for Mulika after Rafiu, her husband, beats her into unconsciousness. After Mulika is resuscitated, Alhaji and Baba, call Rafiu to counsel him to be patient with her because she might be an *emere*:

Extract 2

They laid Mulika in the room and for the rest of the day, nobody disturbed her. Even Rafiu was courteous to her. That night, Baba n'sale and Alhaji called Rafiu to talk to him.

"Be careful," they warned. "That girl might be an *emere*, the way she fainted."

"She was arguing with me," Rafiu protested.

"Then you had better be more patient with her," his father warned.

"See it the way a lame man that is trying to deflower a hunchback sees it: a task of patience," added Baba n'sale. (p. 114)

Although Baba and Alhaji both knew the inhumane treatment that Rafiu could mete out to anyone, they both reasoned within the hegemonic gender structure which privileges the male within their socio-cultural context to conclude that Mulika might be an *emere* rather than construct Rafiu as wicked and inhumane in his treatment of his wife. This negative labelling of Mulika is not only derogatory and demeaning, but it also allows a negative and lacklustre

subversive image to Mulika while privileging Rafiu with a ‘patriarchal dividend’ of symbolic, socio-cultural, and power capital. Since Rafiu is the husband and the symbolic power holder, he could not go wrong with his manhandling of his wife so the older men could not as much attempt to blame or castigate him for the event. While enjoying his patriarchal dividend, Rafiu, rather than yielding to the older men’s warning, protested by insisting that Mulika provoked him into the beating that eventually led to her becoming unconscious. Aligning with Rafiu’s reasoning, the older men would resort to persuading him to be more patient with his wife. This negative labelling of Mulika is thus a subjective positioning that ends up celebrating male superiority and domination over the female.

In another event, the term is used in describing Ayisatu, Alhaji and Moriyeba’s daughter who died because of negligence. Both Afusa and Sikira saw that Ayisatu was seriously ill but, Motara, the most senior wife who took up the care of the child when Moriyeba, the mother, was not around, felt that the suggestion to take the child to the hospital was insulting to her sense of experienced mothering. When Motara eventually yielded to Iya Simbi whom Afusa and Sikira secretly invited to come and instruct Motara to take the child to the hospital, it was already too as the child died before they got to the hospital. However, rather than Motara acknowledging the negligence, she ended up tagging the late child as an *emere* who just wanted to cause her mother unnecessary emotional pain.

Extract 3

“She was an *emere*,” Motara repeated as she thanked the group of women who had come to sympathize with them. “It is with these self-same hands that I brought up my children and grandchildren that I used in caring for her. No child ever died in my hands.” (pp. 212-213)

Unfortunately, as extract 4 shows, Alake, though female, worked within the hegemonic gender structure which usually blamed the female for any untoward incident in the family by blaming Moriyeba, the mother of the late girl, for the girl’s being possessed being the *emere* spirit:

Extract 4

“That is why they always say a pregnant woman should not walk about in the afternoon,” Alake whispered loudly among the women she is sitting with. “All the time she was pregnant, she was always moving to and fro. She would walk from the house to the shop not less than four times. Maybe it was when she was going up and down that she picked up an *emere* child.” (p. 213)

Alake's standpoint aligns with the hegemonic gender structure in that culture where the male is constituted as the norm and infallible. Although it was Alake who alleged Moriyeba of indiscretion and blamed her for picking an *emere* child, the other women in the place did not disagree with her nor rebuke her for drawing such a conclusion about someone who just lost a child and was emotionally pained. Thus, while Alake overtly perpetuated and promoted the debased and subverted female subject through her choice of the lexical item and the discursive strategies for blaming Moriyeba, the other women covertly do the same by not disagreeing with the myth and the eventual blame of Moriyeba.

A similar circumstance occurred through Iya Abolore's tagging of Iya Bidemi's neighbours, in her new market space, as the "witches" who were responsible for the death of her (Iya Bidemi's) children:

Extract 5

"Why should they force us to leave this place?" *Iya Abolore* asked. "If we go into the market now, we will go and use our hands to draw trouble with the old witches there. You know how many of *Iya Bidemi's* children died in one week? And it is all because of those witches whose kind of goods she began to sell..." (p. 125)

The labelling of the other sellers around Iya Bidemi is gendered and derogatory since neither Iya Abolore nor the author provided readers with the reasons for the deaths of the children as it was done in the case of Ayisatu in extract 3. However, the fact that Iya Abolore would never have labelled Iya Bidemi's neighbours as witches were they males indicated the deliberate negative subject positioning of the female in this circumstance as influenced by the ideology of male superiority and female's subordinate position.

Lower feminine status terms

Words connoting women's lower statuses are words which do not have corresponding male variants in the socio-cultural world of the selected text. Such lower feminine status terms include:

- a. **Senior** co-wife (p. 11)
- b. The **most senior** wife (p. 17)
- c. Mistress (p. 47)

Although 'senior' premodifies the nominal head words in (a) and (b), the nominal items (co-wife and wife) are mere superficial insignia of power which in an actual sense connote powerlessness

because their male variants do not exist and the older a wife is in a polygynous home, the more she is likely to be sexually side-lined for the newer wives and the more such a position would be likely desired. ‘Mistress’, in (c), has often been identified as a sexist word which impinges lower status on women since it is coded as a sexual term rather than a power term like its corresponding masculine antonym “master”.

Both “girl” and “female child” are contextually employed in the text to indicate lower lacklustre status and the undesirable as seen in extracts 6 and 7.

Extract 6.

Rafiu did not speak to his bride at all, even when they got back home. He simply went into his room and got on his bed. ... Motara had to knock on Rafiu’s door to speak to him about accepting the child...

“Rafiu, my husband,” she began endearingly. “Won’t you even come to look your child?”

“Leave me alone!”

“Why now? You have not even said anything to us.”

“You are the one that wanted the child, not me. How could she have given birth to a girl? All my mates have been laughing at me that I am not man enough to father a son!”

...

He followed his mother to her room. He didn’t greet Mulika. He just stared at the baby.

“Why didn’t you have a boy?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Mulika replied innocently. (pp. 84-85)

Extract 7.

“Rafiu, you didn’t go to work?”

...

“If we don’t go to work now, it is understandable, we don’t have anyone to feed but you have a wife and a female child.”

The others burst into laughter. (p. 99)

In both extracts 6 and 7, Rafiu worked within the limits of patriarchy and thus felt dejected that his wife gave birth to a girl rather than a boy. To him and his mates, giving birth to a girl indicated that he was not manly enough. The undesirability of a girl child, therefore, explains why Rafiu’s friends taunted him consistently.

Just as the words “girl” and “female” are contextually constructed as terms signifying lower statuses, “woman” is also derogatively constructed to connotatively mean a term of lower status in extract 8:

Extract 8.

“You are playing? You are playing ayo with a woman? You didn’t see any of your mates to play with except a woman? Don’t you know if an elder and a child sit on the farm to eat yam together, the child looks straight at the bridge of the nose of the elder?”

“But it is a game,” Fatai insisted.

“Ah! Ah! Ah! That one’s child may resemble one that one may rejoice! Fatai, you are not like your father. If a child does not look like me, I will give away such a child to the government! You are playing ayo with a woman and you insist it is a mere game? What if she defeats you? Do you think she will ever respect you as a man again?” Baba n’sale shook his head dramatically. “Don’t you know that any home where a woman shouts *atoto arere*, it is *arere* tree that grows there? I am sorry for you. Your wife will soon collect the trousers from you and hand you her skirt.” (p. 111, our emphasis)

In extract 8, Baba continuously constructed women as lower status subjects while men were of higher status. On this ground, Baba castigated Fatai for playing the *ayo* game with a woman, though his wife. Baba would thus use several interrogatives to establish that Fatai, as a man, was of a higher status than his wife and therefore should not have condescended to play the game with her. To Baba, Fatai’s playing *ayo* game with his wife was against the stereotypical gender roles ascribed to men or women in the culture. Baba would therefore imply that a breach of that norm would give room for Fatai’s wife to disrespect him by categorising herself as equal to him. Though Fatai did not initially see anything wrong in playing the game with his wife, by the time Baba was done with his construction of women as inferior subjects with lower status compared to men, Fatai had become a different man such that he shouted at his wife when she later came to invite him that they continue with the game they were playing before Baba came:

Extract 9.

They’ve gone,” *Iyawo* said as she came out. *Oya*, let us resume our game.”

“Get back inside the house!” her husband shouted. (p. 112)

As extract 9 shows, *Iyawo* returned intending to continue the game from where they stopped but she met a different man on her return. Fatai, having now been properly schooled to subjectively position himself to be on a higher status than his wife, shouted at and issued a command to his

wife to get back inside, thus instituting a master-servant relationship between himself and his wife.

Female subject objectifying words

Much as words can be employed to bestow lower statuses on women, they can also be deployed in a gendered way to objectify women. In the example below, the use of the indefinite article for women objectifies them:

Extract 10.

“Before I begin to say anything, I want all the women in this gathering to first of all move out to the verandah. All the ‘I am a wife’, ‘I am a daughter’, ‘I am a sister’ should move out first so that this meeting can progress, they have been talking and talking and interrupting us at every turn.”

“Yes, everybody that is a female should leave here, immediately.”

The men agreed and amidst grumbling, all Baba’s wives, sisters and daughters moved to the verandah. (p. 243)

The use of the indefinite article for the female relatives of Baba in extract 10 objectifies the women. The men, working by the hegemony of gender structure in their society, believed that women were irrelevant to the decision to be made, even though most of the decisions to be made were mostly about women. Integral to this negative labelling of women was the hegemonic belief within gender structure that females are talkative and could hardly contribute anything positively and meaningfully to great decisions. One obvious dissatisfaction the men had with the women was that the women were interrupting them at every turn. This communicative behaviour would constitute a challenge to the social and discourse power capital of men since men were supposed to be lords who must not be interrupted by women but must be listened to with awe and reverence.

Further to this negative and demeaning construction of the females by the males in this context is the male relatives’ decision, in extract 11, to first of all “divide” Baba’s widows before dividing his “other” properties as if the women were mere properties:

Extract 11.

“We said we will divide the wives of the deceased, at least those who are still within childbearing age...”

The men agreed with his point and said, should they decide to still inherit his wives, they would set aside some of the property to give to the men who would

be inheriting them. Amusa suggested that they should divide the wives of the deceased first... (p. 244, our emphasis)

Invariably, in addition to the use of the indefinite article for the women, the decision to share Baba's widows, and share them first implies that the women were construed and positioned as mere objects. Thus, with women's lower status and objectification, they were irrelevant to the decision of who would inherit what and who would be inherited by the men. The men displayed their patriarchal dividend over the women to show that the women were powerless to make their personal decisions even in a highly emotional situation like remarriage.

Other instances of objectifying language for women are obvious in the employment of possessive determiners 'your' and 'my' in "...what of your women?" (p. 130) and "My women have been complaining too" (p. 130), respectively. These utterances depict women as possession rather than partners in marital relationships.

5.0 Conclusion

While taking gendered language to mean the different ways through which language serves as an instrument of feminine oppression through either the overt or covert negative construction of the female or the attribution of some negative qualities to her, this study aimed to identify sexist and detrimental terms, as a type of gendered language, concerning female characters in Adedokun's *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs* and to explain the functional significance of such sexist terms. The analysis reveals that sexist and derogatory words occur in three ways in the text inherently derogatory words/terms, lower feminine status terms, and female subject objectifying words. Together, these different manifestations of sexist lexical terms in the text promote and perpetuate both linguistic and non-linguistic biases against the female subjects in the material world of the text. These biases are founded on patriarchal ideology and the hegemony of gender structure at working in the socio-cultural context of the text's projected world. The identified and categorised sexist terms in the selected text project a hegemony of binary gender structure in which the male gender is intrinsically dominant while the female gender is inferior. For this, the analysis importantly aligns with previous research that the gender ideology a particular society holds on to is observable through the linguistic choices available and made within its language system.

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