

The Societal Construction of Femininity as Depicted in the Metaphor of Chicken in Swahili Proverbs

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Abstract

This paper is an exploration of the Swahili societal construction of femininity as depicted in proverbs formulated on the metaphor of 'chicken.' Birds, both domestic and wild are acknowledged as harbingers; therefore, they are couriers of signs, messages, and teachings. Bird signification in most cases is culture-specific but not arbitrary in its application given those birds, chicken included have been used as predictive signs capable of canvassing human behavioral patterns and even cognitive processes. Chicken is a popular bird reared by the Swahili people for its nutritional and commercial value. Apart from these material benefits, chicken is also critically embedded in the Swahili cultural life as reflected in the ubiquitous proverbs framed on the metaphor of chicken. The paper examines these metaphors with the view of understanding how the proverbs formulated within the chicken metaphor trajectory are used in the construction, circulation, and maintenance of perceptions of femininity in Swahili society. It also explores how the chicken attributes are appropriated to make reference to women either positively or negatively. This paper is premised on selected tenets of the feminist literary theory so as to enable an insightful examination of the societal construction of femininity in the selected proverbs.

Key Words: Attributes, Construction, Depiction, Femininity, Proverb, Swahili Proverbs, Societal

Introduction

Femininity, as used in this paper, refers to a set of attributes, behaviors, and roles generally associated with girls and women. Though femininity is sometimes used to refer to the quality of being female, it is used here to imply its social construction and deployment of gender roles and functions. In order to understand its implications in the exploration of the construction of femininity, this paper acquiesces to Milner's (1969, p. 199), the definition of a proverb that focuses on the "symmetrical structure, form and content of proverbs" so as to uncover the inscribed perceptions of femininity in Swahili proverbs. It is also used here in terms of wanting to explore the positive or negative values that they eventually circulate. Indeed, as Lugano (1989) asserted, there is no literature that can be deemed to be complete in the true sense of the word without it delving into issues dealing with

women. It further acquiesces to Ampofo's (2001) assertion, being a man or a woman should be treated as a contextual framing due to the fact that every society has a set of ideals, both overt and covert governing what it means to be recognized as a man and a woman respectively. In order to understand these concepts of social framing as well as the construction of femininity and gender generally in Swahili proverbs, this paper aimed to analyze both the surface and the sub-texts of selected Swahili proverbs framed within the trajectory of the chicken metaphor. This type of analysis will enable the unraveling of the meanings and nuances embedded in the metaphor of chicken, with an overall view of discerning the inscribed perceptions of femininity in the selected proverbs.

By taking cognizance of the fact that every culture has its own fundamentals of what constitutes an ideal man or woman, this paper argues that each society has a set of accepted behaviors to which individual members of either gender are expected to conform. Ideally, what constitutes maleness and femaleness and what makes certain attributes of gender to be perceived as dominant and, therefore, to be taken as the norm, is socially constructed. This line of argument accords with Fasiku's (2006, p. 51) argument that "proverbs are products of peculiar and particular experiences of people." On another level, as Eco (1985) asserts, a metaphor is the substitution of one element of language for another by virtue of resemblance between their referents, a comparison that evokes clear and memorable messages (Lakoff, 1997). Therefore, it can be argued that chicken, like other animals have routinely been employed metaphorically in works of art to discuss human behavior and characteristics (Olateju, 2005). It is not uncommon, therefore, to find both domestic and wild animals used metaphorically in proverbs to refer to human characteristics and behavior. The interpretation of these animal metaphors is based on the culture and context of their usage (Olateju, 2005, Sanauddin, 2015, Wan Ismail, Samian & Muslim; 2016). However, in respect of the metaphor in Swahili proverbs, this paper has borrowed a lot of insights from Kobia's (2016), study and assertions that the metaphor of chicken is very pervasive in Swahili proverbs.

Construction of Femininity Regarding Delivery and Nurturing of Children

Femininity is so intricately intertwined with the bringing up and caring for children to the extent of comparing a mother who has a child to a chicken that is sitting on its eggs to hatch as depicted in the proverb, "*Kuku akiatamia hana matembezi—a brooding chicken doesn't promenade.*" A hatching chicken essentially reflects attributes such as being selfless, caring as well as being devoted to the service of others. These are considered feminine; therefore, the sub-text thematic import of this proverb is that the role of nurturing children is a full-time job that demands the full attention of the mother so as to properly cater to the needs of the young ones. That reality is symbolized through the mothering instincts of the chicken that make

them to sacrifice not only movement but also their diet; in order to warm the eggs till they hatch.

Similarly, the role of nurturing of children is so demanding that it requires the mothers to be totally engaged in that exercise through word and deed. In some subtle way the proverb intimates that the role of giving birth in the Swahili society is a sole responsibility of women. This reality is acknowledged through the use of the proverb, "*Jogoo hatagi mayai—a cock does not lay eggs.*" This is an acknowledgement of the fact that the conception and delivery of children is a function reserved for women, consequently maternal productivity, selflessness as well as devotion to the service of others are considered feminine attributes. On another level, this proverb celebrates procreation as an integral part in the continuity of the human race. The role of raising children in Swahili society as echoed in the proverb, "*Jogoo halei mwana—a cock does not rear a child,*" absolves men from the functions of nurture and, therefore, subtly frames them as feminine. The proverb reiterates the Swahili cultural beliefs that insulate the men from the role of nursing and caring for young children; but instead lays it squarely on the mothers' shoulders (Kobia, 2016). Clearly, the use of this proverb implicitly projects a complex femininity framing, which ultimately constructs perceptions of femininity. It is these attributes amongst others that enable mothers to nurture and care for the children effectively but also cleverly construct perceptions of femininity and masculinity.

Being a mother in the Swahili society is a celebrated role for women as evidenced in the proverb, "*Kuku akiacha wana ana mayai tumboni—if a hen leaves her chicks she has eggs in the womb,*" which intuitively means doing all that is in their powers to ensure the safety and well-being of their children. By making metaphorical references to eggs, the womb, and other chores relating to procreation, the proverb implicitly constructs perceptions of femininity predicated on such attributes as providing, caring, responsibility, and devotion to service. This is on and above the fact that the proverb demonstrates that the Swahili society values children to the extent of encouraging mothers to conceive as soon as they are through with the weaning process of their young ones. This assertion accords with Lugano (1989), in her assertion that women in Africa are taught from the early stages the importance of parenthood. Consequently, women with children as brought out in the proverb, "*Kuku mwenye watoto halengwi jiwe—a hen with chicks is not hit with a stone,*" but rather are treated with respect in comparison to those who are barren. This is due to the fact that children are taken as a blessing not only to the family but the society at large. Here femininity is framed in terms of the attributes of compassion and devotion. It is not uncommon, therefore, for the mothers with children to be accorded fair treatment, while those who can't bear children are treated with contempt, as implied in the proverb's statement "*halengwi jiwe—is not hit by a stone.*" In other words, the teachings of this proverb seem to

suggest that the Swahili mothers are accorded a befitting treatment courtesy of their ability to deliver children.

Construction of Femininity Regarding The Education of Children

The raising of children by mothers in the Swahili society as projected in the proverb, “*Kuku havunji yaile—a hen does not break her own egg,*” is closely connected with tender human sensibilities, patience, and care. This implies that Swahili mothers are usually cautious while undertaking the nurturing and disciplining of their children. The theme of this proverb depicts the parent-child relationship that entails protection, discipline and care. In other words, the metaphor of chicken as employed in this proverb projects femininity in terms of attributes focusing on protection, care and patience. Consequently, this metaphor represents a caring mother in African communities as has been argued elsewhere by (Kobia, 2016). Swahili mothers are depicted positively through the use of this proverb as being cautious disciplinarians who nurture and discipline their children with love, rarely harming them. This nurturing may also include corrective punishment by Swahili mothers as a means of education and discipline. This is captured in the proverb, “*Teke la kuku halimumizi mwanawe—a hen’s kick does not hurt her chick.*” By depicting mothers as disciplinarians who are cautious, this proverb frames feminine constructions in those terms, consequently intimating nurture and mentorship as significant in constructing gender binaries.

The role of mothers as educators as reiterated in the proverb, “*Mwana wa kuku hafunzwi kuchakura—the chick is not taught to peck,*” this is yet another framing criterion for femininity. The metaphorical import in this proverb focuses on the role played by mothers in nurturing and educating their children, intimating that by making reference that a “chick doesn’t need to be taught how to peck” is an acknowledgment that children learn on their own through discovery methods from their mothers. Therefore, teaching, directing and encouraging discovery as intimated in this proverb, are attributes appropriated in the construction of femininity. This is particularly so considering what the sub-text of the proverb “*Mtoto akibebwa hutazama kisogo cha mama yake—when a child is carried, he/she looks at the mother’s nape*” suggests. Clearly, these proverbs hail the engagement between mothers and their children, which enables the children to learn how to use the environment to their advantage. This is also captured in the proverb, “*Yai haliatamii kuku—the egg does not hatch a chicken,*” essentially meaning that children owe their very existence to the mothers. It is important to observe the varied behavioral and characteristic attributes appropriated from the chicken metaphor to make references to roles or functions undertaken by mothers and in a hushed way, those undertaken by fathers. Such attributions are at the core of social and gender framing, ultimately constructing perceptions of femininity and masculinity.

The Construction of Femininity Regarding Physical/Mental Weakness

Women in Swahili society are generally viewed as being weak hence in need of protection from the male folk. This prejudiced assertion is regularly naturalized in Swahili proverbs such as, “*Ukimpiga kuku wamtafuta mwenye kuku—if you beat a chicken you are after the owner.*” Chicken in this proverb, at least on the assumption of the lexical choices framing in the proverb, intimates something female; hence it is easily transmitted to depict wives in Swahili society as the husbands’ property. That sense of entitlement on the part of husbands arises from the fact that traditionally husbands were supposed to provide for their wives’ basic needs as well as protect them from any danger or persons who might want to harm them. Consequently, this proverb frames femininity in terms of attributes focusing on helplessness, weakness, and dependence; hence husbands are elevated and imbued with capacities to salvage hapless wives. Additionally, women are depicted in the proverb, “*Kuku wa mkata hatagi, akitaga haangui, akiangua hutwaliwa na mwewe—the hen of a poor person does not lay eggs, if she lays eggs, she does not hatch them, if she hatches the chicks are taken by the hawk*” as being totally dependent on the male folk for their success in any undertaking. These attributes are projected in terms of property ownership such that a poor person’s hen that cannot raise the chicks, intimates a poor man’s wife, it further intimates a poor man’s wife in need of protection and security from its owner. Clearly, the teachings of these proverbs demonstrate the common perception in Swahili culture that views married women as the property of their husbands who deserve to be taken care of and protected, however, the façade of husbands providing protection is a utilitarian framing of femininity.

The Swahili society also perceives women as weak people who can easily be taken advantage of. This fact is alluded to in the proverb, “*Kuku mgeni zawadi ya kunguru—a new chicken is a gift to the crow.*” As stated elsewhere, a chicken refers to a woman, while a falcon is used in reference to a man (Kobia, 2016). It is obvious that this proverb teaches that women can easily be taken advantage of by men, especially if they are in new places. Consequently, this proverb projects the feminine attributes of being weak, helpless, and dependent. It is important to note that it is easy for those whose aim is to subjugate the women in society to advance such proverbs as an argument of keeping women in the houses for fear of being taken advantage of by the men. Perhaps the epitome of women’s physical weakness seems to be addressed in the proverb, “*Dua la kuku halimpati mwewe—the curse of the chicken does not bother the hawk.*” The proverb echoes further the attributes of weakness, powerlessness, and dependence as attributable to women. The metaphor of chicken in this proverb projecting the chicken’s vulnerability is a subtle construction of femininity in which weakness is attributable to women (Kobia, *ibid*). These proverbs subtly address the unequal power relations in the Swahili society between the male and female, where men are depicted as being powerful and determined to have their way. They also seem to address the fact that in most African societies, powerful people who are always men, use their might to their

advantage against the weak and powerless who are always women. These proverbs reiterate the fact that the inequalities and unfairness that are profound in most societies are a hindrance to the success of the weak of those societies.

The acknowledgment of the women's skills and knowledge in the Swahili proverbs are only limited to the precincts of the household, specifically to the nurturing and raising of children. However, generally, speaking women are perceived in Swahili proverbs as ignorant people in need of education and guidance from their male counterparts. Hence, in the patriarchal framing of femininity, ignorance, unintelligence, and foolishness are projected as feminine attributes. Indeed, this is what is embedded in the sub-text of the proverb, "*Kuku hawekwi shahidi wala hajui sheria—the hen is not taken as a witness because it does not know the law.*" It is worth noting that femininity is projected to depict women as being less intelligent than men, hence the excuse to deny women public participation in important societal matters.

The framing of femininity in Swahili society within the trajectory of the chicken metaphor is presented as a justification to relegate women's views and ideas to the periphery as exhibited in the proverb, "*Kuku jike hawiki penye jogoo—a hen does not crow where there is a cock.*" The hen according to Kobia (2016), is used to depict the female gender, while the cock depicts the male gender; hence the insinuation of silence on the part of the chicken in the presence of cocks subtly projects passivity, weakness and docility as innate characteristics of femininity. In depicting women as passive and weak, this proverb is critically implicated in the construction of femininity within the paradigm of subjugation of women while at the same time canonizing the masculinity. The proverb brings to the fore unequal power and gender relations that are evident in the Swahili society. Furthermore, the femininity attributes projected in this proverb are a manifestation of the male dominance that is common in Swahili society as suggested in the proverb, "*Mke kumtii mume ndio sheria—a wife to obey the husband is the norm.*" It is worth noting that even though the attributes of being obedient and respectful adduced to women as brought out in this proverb, are positive characteristics; however, the fact that they appear to be imposed on the women folk negates the positive message that they portent.

Conclusion

The behavioral and functional characteristics of chicken that are metaphorically deployed in the construction of femininity in Swahili proverbs tend to focus more on the negative aspects of chicken. Where positive aspects of chicken are appropriated in proverb formulation and usage, there is a tendency for such usage to project some form of patriarchal benefit. Where mothers are acknowledged and celebrated as in taking care, molding and nurturing of their children, such acknowledgment is predicated on lineage longevity and affirmation of the society's expectations. The same is true, where Swahili mothers' influence touch not only on

their children's character but other people who hold leadership positions in society. Overall, femininity is constructed in subdued and supportive roles wherein Swahili women nurture their children, tend to various household chores, and serve their husbands. The subdued projections of feminine attributes generally construct negative femininity in which women are depicted as less intelligent than men, helpless and powerless people. Equally, within the subdued projections of women's attributes, femininity is framed in terms of underpinning unequal power relations in the Swahili society between male and female members. Men are depicted in these proverbs as being powerful and dominant, hence inclined to subjugate their weaker counterparts (read women). Femininity in Swahili proverbs within the trajectory of the chicken metaphor entails the circulation of inequalities and unfairness in this society.

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