

Kimwimbi Women as Mirrored in the Cultural & Social Notions & Expressions

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Abstract- Among the Mwimbi linguistic group, expressions exist or are used for a variety of purposes including communication and all are geared towards socialization of societal members so as to enable each fit in their expected caliber. In the social context words and expressions have been used by Mwimbi speakers to explicitly devalue women by normally not saying what they mean. The purpose of this study therefore, is to establish the notions expressed by cultural and social beliefs and *practices* upon which devaluing of women is based. The objective of this paper is to find out the cultural and social notions and expressions used to devalue women in Kimwimbi Language. Halliday's Social Semiotics Theory was used. A qualitative research design was used. Data was collected in Mwimbi in Ganga Ward Maara sub county, Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya. The population includes all the expressions that contribute to devaluing women in Kimwimbi. Speakers of the language were selected through purposive sampling. Data was collected using focus group discussion guides and a semi structured interview guide. The paper established that the Kimwimbi Language uses expressions that are heavily embedded on cultural and social attitudes to devalue women.

Keywords- Culture; Society; F.G.M; Exclusion; Degradation; Distortion; Subordination

1. INTRODUCTION

In the daily use of language people do not only learn words from dictionaries but rather infer their meanings in particular contexts (Cameron, 1986). Lexis (all the words and phrases of a particular language) play a significant role in meaningful communication without which it would be difficult to interact in language and hence the researcher's reason for thesis concentrating on expressions of the Kimwimbi language. Oduol (1990) recommends that particular attention be paid to the kind of language used in relationships since it establishes and identifies people's ideological stance (views or attitudes), beliefs and values. Therefore the choice of a word in a language is not entirely random. Rather, the context of the speaker, the goal and/or the purpose of the talk and beliefs, attitudes and values are implemented in it.

In this respect, Eckert(1998) talks of a Community of Practice(COP) and defines it as a group of people linked by a common purpose with ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values and power relations to mention but a few. This means practices emerge as people relate jointly and the endeavor to co-exist as members of one community contributes to each member's social identity and devaluing occurs within such communities acting on the devalued to create a personality. This is usually achieved through a people's language in constant use and in a social setting and in this case the Mwimbi community language of devaluing which acts on women and create various identities connoted by expressions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Lakoff (1973) posits that social-cultural goals broadly called politeness cause people to express opinions and preferences in a great variety of linguistic forms. He further states that from the time we are children gender roles usually feature in conversations, humour, and land conflicts. In addition, gender roles mostly explain from driving styles to food preferences Therefore since language is a means through which culture gets transmitted, devaluation using language is a way of socializing people into understanding their expected roles in society. This is done through interactions among people in daily living as the theory posits.

Abdalla (1982) posits that preference for a boy child to a girl is a terrible form of discrimination which denies the girl child good health, education, recreation, economic opportunity and the right to choose her partner. Son preference refers to a whole range of values and attitudes. It may mean that a female child is disadvantaged from birth which determines the quality and quantity of parental care and the extent of investment in her development.

According to Kagwanja (2015), among the Kikuyu the birth of a child is welcomed with five sets of ululations whereas that of a girl is met with four such sets of ululations and this is a practice common in many Bantu communities. This definitely tells girls/women that something is not okay with the female child and the ideology is propagated and entertained since childhood shaping the personality of a woman.

Patriarchy is where men are supposed to be superior and rule over women. This indoctrination has been propagated year after year until some women seem to have accepted the lesser position making them unable to rise above what society offers them. Culture powerfully dictates what women become whereas men can rise to be the best of their ability. As Barasa (2008) asserts, women's reproductive roles and their responsibilities for domestic labour limit their association with the resources that are highly valued. Men are freed from domestic responsibilities and their economic obligations in the public sphere assure them of control of highly valued resources which give rise to male privilege which makes men claim superiority over women.

Waita (1992) in contributing to the gender debate tries to understand cultural problems and changing gender roles in the rural Kenyan communities. In this respect he focuses on land ownership, ownership of children, access and control of other resources. He concludes that in the traditional society patriarchy embedded itself in a process of disinheriting women and especially in controlling land, children and decision making. In his discussion it is revealed that the role of oral literature like that of tradition is largely ideological, perpetuating status quo and in this case placing women where society wants them.

Abdalla (1982) posits that FGM forms an important part of the rites of passage ceremony for some communities, marking the coming of age of the female child. It is believed that, circumcision controls a girl's sexuality ensuring virginity before marriage and chastity thereafter. However, FGM leads to health complications and untold psychological problems among others. This has given rise to devaluing language as those who have complied deride those who have not and those who have not feel good about being whole.

Obododimma (1998) says that women are regarded as sexual objects and infantile in their reasoning as the following narrative proverb shows;

"Nwa-agbogho ugwuta sin ne ya na out nwoke ka ya na- agara onwe ya, o wee tuburu ya raa. Nne ya weesi ya gaa rakwuru. O gaa, a rachie ya ozo" (an ugwuta/oguta girl told her mother that as she was going on her way, a man came and raped her. Her mother told her to go and retaliate following which she went and was raped again).

"A na- echere ogeri, o na-eche okwa uri ya" (one would be thinking of a woman's good but she would be thinking of her make up kit.)

This irresponsibility is linked with love for vanity and pleasure as well as being materialistic. Culturally then, women are perceived insignificant, weak, deprived and irrational. In Igbo, proverb use is a male art which is used to consolidate their superior, cultural and ontological position. In the contexts where these proverbs are used (mainly meetings of kinsmen) women are hardly allowed

to be present except where the issues at stake affect them, like in judicial situation

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.

This study is guided by Halliday's (1978) Social Semiotics Theory which introduced the term 'social semiotics' into linguistics. Halliday's work argues against the traditional separation between language and society, and exemplifies the start of a 'semiotic' approach, which broadens the narrow focus on written language in linguistics. For Halliday, languages evolve as systems of 'meaning potential' (Halliday, 1978) or as sets of resources which influence what the speaker can do with language, in a particular social context. For example, for Halliday, the grammar of the English language is a system organized for the following three purposes (areas or 'Mata functions'):

- Facilitating certain kinds of social and interpersonal interactions (interpersonal) where for example the term woman is used in relations and interactions of men and women in the study as children don't call their sisters women.
- Representing ideas about the world (ideational). The meanings bring out a certain mentality or view that people have about certain creations and in this respect the woman.
- Connecting these ideas and interactions into meaningful texts and making them relevant to their context (textual). The expressions are relevant to the culture or environment where they are used and that is why they are understood as devaluing. This study utilizes the ideational sense of the theory to determine the meanings and interpretations of expressions used to devalue women in the Kimwimbi Language. This is by expecting that respondents will be guided to give appropriate expressions that fit within the description fronted by Halliday's argument.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Population of the Study

The target population is the larger group, Mwimbi to which the researcher was to generalize the findings. The population for this study was all speakers in Mwimbi Division, Maara sub county, Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya. As per the census activity carried out in the year 1999, Mwimbi is home to a populace totaling to around 172 000 people.

4.2 Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

Purposive sampling was used and Orodho (1998) defines purposive sampling as selecting respondents using set criteria. Therefore fifteen men and fifteen women aged 40 years and above were selected. The sample of thirty participants was convenient in that it enabled the researcher to get an in-depth knowledge by more concentration on discussions rather than being involved in managing a large sample. Secondly, the intensity of the study when dealing with fewer respondents helped gather relevant opinions and have a clear understanding of the

issues pertaining to the devaluing of women. The conclusions made helped to make amenable recommendations.

This way it was possible to gather appropriate information because according to Chomsky (1986), every native speaker of a language has intuitions as to the well-formedness of language structures and use. These intuitions span all areas of language, which include phonology, semantics, pragmatics, morphology, discourse analysis and sociolinguistics.

4.3 Methods of Data Collection

The researcher systematically interviewed the sampled men and women using a semi-structured interview guide and also a focus group discussion guide was used where the researcher involved respondents in coordinated discussions and data was recorded on cards and later noted down on paper.

4.4 Methods of Data Analysis

Due to the qualitative nature, the collected for this study was analyzed throughout the data collection period in addition to a more intense analysis at the end of the study. The aim of the qualitative analysis of this empirical investigation was to examine the various elements of the captured data to clarify concepts and constructs and to identify patterns, themes and relationships according to the objectives. For each respondent, field notes and interview transcripts were analyzed using a constant comparative method, and data were reduced into general descriptive categories. Using the constant comparative method, the researcher searched through the data for recurring themes or events that could be used as categories to further reduce the findings. An initial set of categories were developed for the interviews and focus group discussions. Words and expressions continued to be developed until all the diversity in the data were accounted for. Accordingly, the following eight qualitative content analysis steps were employed in this study:

- Reading through all the field notes and transcriptions from taped interviews to get a sense of the whole and an overall impression of the content and context.
- Selecting the transcript which has the most relevant and information rich to find underlying meanings of words and expressions.
- Developing categories by grouping interrelated words and expressions together.
- Evaluating words and expressions with interrelated meanings for relevance to the thesis questions and thesis aims.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Cultural and Social Notions that Contribute to Devaluing of Women in Kimwimbi Language

The objective of this study was to find out the cultural and social notions and expressions that give rise to the devaluing women in the Kimwimbi language. Kimwimbi,

being an African language, draws a lot from African literature which presents the paradoxical location of (m)other as both central and marginal and is examined and framed by the idea of 'mother'-motherland, mother tongue, mother wit, motherhood and mothering. During the analysis it was found out that the Kimwimbi Language and gender devaluing of women, it emerged that various cultural strongholds are responsible for the devaluing of women.

Firstly, women were believed to fit in as housewives. This is the expectation that women are only supposed to work in the home and not outside. For example in exp. 23: *Akugura Murugi* 'He has married a cook' the connotation is that it is the permanent job of the woman. It was reported that the women in the Mwimbi community have had to face hostility and get denied opportunity to work fulltime and some were even made to leave jobs and stay at home and tend the farms.

The researcher also found out that women were believed to only fit in house hold chores such as cooking and cleaning and waiting upon their esteemed husbands. The exp. *gawikarire riko ta muka* "have you sat in the kitchen like a woman" attests to this since women are the only ones allowed to be in the kitchen according to the Kimwimbi traditions and so finding a man in the kitchen is frowned at. Any woman not seen to accept these roles is ridiculed and demeaned as illustrated by exp. 55 *gutibu bwarema arume butigirwa aka* "no task has been too difficult for men to be left to women". This expression has been used to demean women whenever they try to initiate development activities in to show they are helpless and not considered good enough to carry out tasks that have been marked men's. Another exp. 32 *mburi ya muka gaitagwa* "woman's goat is killed" was given and the researcher was made to understand that a woman is not valued in economic development of the society such that her achievements are looked down upon and sometimes done away with all together. This was done to ensure that a woman remained under the man's control without threatening his headship of the home by being economically empowered. In addition, exp. 82 *muka mukui ukirite nyukwe na gukia* "a short woman who defeats your mother in grinding" which shows that this society rates women and measures their success by how well she performs at home especially the house chores. The comparison of a woman to a small insect emphasizes how insignificant a woman's work is considered to be. This is strengthened by Ogundipe (1994) who asserts that in most African societies, women's work was viewed as unimportant with men wondering what makes women tired at the end of the day. This is despite the fact that the work done by women is so vital that without them one wonders what life would be like as one respondent wondered aloud. In addition Ndungo (1978) suggests that marriage imprisons and enslaves women while sucking their vitality and humanity.

5.2 Expressions on Son Preference

In one of the Focus Group Discussion sessions, it was reported that in Mwimbi a home without a son is considered extinct and people therefore sympathize with the parents for lack of a caretaker in their older days. Therefore, women without sons have been blamed hence exp. 54 *kaiji kajiara wa kaugagirwa nkemi itano na kairitu ithatu* "when a boy is born, a total of five ululations are made while a girl receives only three upon birth" brings this out since less joy accompanies the birth of a girl as compared to a boy. This is a belittling attitude as children grow knowing they are treated differently as a respondent in an interview session confessed how her mother had told that she would not have gone ahead to get their last born who was a boy, if the interviewee had been a girl. This connects well with Kagwanja (2015) who reveals that at one time she was surprised when her grandmother told her that in Kikuyu a son is worth fifteen girls and that a son is said to be a piece of God and so highly valued. In exp. 35 *kaiji gakerwa mpitho, mukeeri akenaga gakura; indi muka akerwa mpitho, mumwiri akenaga akua* "if a boy is told a secret, the one who told him rejoices when he grows up; while if a woman is told a secret, the one who told her rejoices when she dies" the study discovered that a woman cannot be trusted as much as a son can. The son is taken to be more mature than the woman with the ability to keep secrets. This connects with exp. 24 *aka bati siri* "women have no secrets" and also with exp. 63 *"mwana umukuru na ithe kabeganene"* (an elder son is equal to the father) hence should be given the father's respect and in case of the father's absence, he presides over the family issues and this brings down the woman to the level of children. A woman without a son is allegedly not complete and is deemed not to have completed bearing children. Therefore the woman is likely to get devalued and hence to avoid this she goes on getting many children since the man keeps expressing discontentment and can even be sent away from her matrimonial home.

5.3 Expressions Denoting that Women are meant to Marry, Bear and Nurture Children

At another level, devaluing was seen to take the form where the cultured women marry, bear and nurture children without fail as exp. 28 *mwana umuremu kana atikumba mauntu ni wa gina* "a child who is disobedient or cannot perform belongs to the mother" shows. The researcher was able to gather that children carry their father's names but once they are not successful, the mother can even be abandoned and left to take care of them without the man's assistance. This came close to exp. 76 *kiana gia nkari gikunyaga o ta gina* "a young of a leopard pinches just like the mother" which shows mothers as the people who teach children bad behaviour implying that only mothers are misbehaved in parenting and even fails to recognize the good work of bringing them up. Consider exp. 78 *kujiara ni kunene jia gaichau akurinduka* "giving birth is so important that *jia gaichau* (a

woman by that name) has resurrected" which has the connotation that it is children who keep women going and without the they may never live long hence *jia gaichau* gets revived by her children. Exp 31 *muka ni ta kiuru* (a woman is like a bird's nest) which has the implication that a woman is just like a nest meant for receiving and incubating the young ones after which it loses meaning; and is demeaning to women who do so much work in carrying and giving birth to children hence reducing their value to the level of a nest is indeed devaluing.

All these expressions testify to the fact that women are necessary to give birth, bring up children and not remain unmarried. If this is not the case, they are labeled as seen above. Women are also expected to be helped by their children hence one who fails to get a child is looked down upon and also seen as helpless. This goes in line with the assertion of Somjee (1992) who says that in Maasai land, when a woman gives birth, her recognition of her fertility is celebrated by weaving *enkitati*, a traditional ornament which a barren woman cannot wear, so that they are overtly put to shame. The children's health and wellbeing is the mother's responsibility and she is blamed for the children's ill health and misbehavior. The Mwimbi woman is relied upon to make a man proud by getting children and ensuring they grow and are well brought up. This responsibility makes women patronized and ridiculed in case children fail as it may happen sometimes.

5.4 Expressions Indicating Women as not being Recognized as Belonging but as Strangers

Another sense or cause of devaluing discovered was about a woman's identity in the matrimonial home whereby she becomes a stranger and she continues to be treated so regardless of the number of years she stays married. It is in this respect that the following expressions were coined in Kimwimbi language to serve this purpose. Exp. 14 and 15 *muka* and *mbiji* "one who comes" connotes an outsider meaning there is no time a woman will ever feel part of her matrimonial home but she instead feels insecure and unwanted. Exp. 38 *aka bati mwiriga* "women have no clan" shows a woman as one who lacks identity since in the Mwimbi community people are identified in clans and so a woman's clan is dissolved upon marriage. It is only the man who is allowed to attend clan meetings and eat meat probably from a goat she has been feeding. This act of discrimination is done to emphasize the fact that women own nothing and therefore cannot contribute to societal development and Exp. 2 *munyore* "useless" supports this finding too.

Looking at exp. 43 *muka enukaga o ntuku* "a woman goes back to her parents' home every day" and exp.45 *mujii ni wa muntu murume* "a home belongs to a man" portrays a woman as unsettled and can leave any time bringing out a sense of alienation. Exp. 43 is used to justify alienation of women blaming it on her failure to be settled while exp. 45 helps the men to assert themselves and ignore the needs of a woman who needs attention like anyone else and this

makes women unable to function fully in society and also portray the lowly status accorded to women even though the children they bear are highly regarded. Njau and Kabira (1992) highlight the fact that a woman with children will always have a bond with the husband's home. The child would be a ticket to the homestead because even if she is sent away she can always come back to live with the children. Men assert themselves as the bonafide owners of property and the woman is just a caretaker like a hired hand which makes most of the property to be kept under the man's name leaving the woman out or taking her in as part of the property and in case of the demise of the man a woman is left at the mercy of the laws and if they are selfish they send her packing like a total stranger.

5.5 Expressions and Assertions on Patriarchy, Female Genital Mutilation and Discrimination of Women

In Kimwimbi, there were several expressions that are used to ensure men dominate and rule over women excluding them from being co-managers of family affairs. Such expressions are used to silence women and make them consider themselves unworthy to stand up for what she is capable of doing for instance exp. 12 *nyukwe* "derogatory word for mother" which men use to avoid sounding nice to their wives so that they can justify their harsh treatment of women especially because their devaluing actions are open to children.

Exp. 6 *mutubu* "fat and shapeless" also has similar work of silencing women meant to shame a woman using her looks and exp. 44 *nduru ikenjwa ni muka kayumaga* "if a woman uproots a yam, the plant dies" because it is believed a woman's nakedness that the yam plant sees causes the drying. A yam is a kind of food highly valued by men for roasting and it is very nutritious, so this assertion is therefore only meant to keep women away from men's valued foodstuffs as the thesis er found out. This connotation is similar to that of exp. 36 *muka ni wa kwonwa ti wa kwigwiwa* "a woman is meant to be seen and not to be heard" which is closely connected to exp. 17 *mutumia* "one who keeps quiet" and both show women as silent observers who are not allowed to speak on any issues be they economic, political, religious and so on. Infact a man in a focus group discussion spoke confidently saying that even women who preach in church are sinning and they will burn since it is alleged that women should not speak in church and this he did as he quoted Paul who was advising women to keep silent in a particular church in the bible.

In addition, exp. 49 *arume tibo aka* "men are not women", exp. 50 *nkingo ititukaga kiongo* the neck does not rise above the head", exp. 51 *arume ti ba nyukwe* "men are not your mothers", exp. 52 *muka atimbatha* "a woman cannot rule over me" and exp. 60 *mukuru niatumagwa ni kurumwa atirumagwa* "a man (elderly) can be sent but should not be insulted" all bear a threatening tone whereby the woman is warned against joking with men since men and women differ in value, the latter being more valuable

as exp. 49 shows and exp. 50 seems to be telling a married woman that her equivalent position is that of a neck and as a neck bears the weight of a head, the woman should do likewise as far as the husband is concerned. As the thesis er was explained, this symbolism was used to ensure married women never make effort that is likely to outshine their husbands. The thesis er was to understand that when a man says that a woman cannot rule over him, it means that a man cannot accept any idea from a man however good unless he rejects it and use it later as his own idea; while insulting a man may mean just disagreeing with what he wants.

Discrimination was found in some expressions which were closely related to patriarchy since it was reported that men use the expressions to show that women are weaker. These include; exp. 39 *muka na iguru batimenyagirwa* "a woman and the sky are never predictable" which insinuates that a woman being unreliable can be compared to the sky that keeps changing in indicating weather changes. This was understood as discriminating as men have unpredictable tendencies too. Another one is exp. 27 *Itirithua ni muka jinuka* 'a woman cannot shepherd and bring home" with the sense that a woman's work of shepherding is looked down upon. This is meant to leave the woman out of important activities especially that bring good returns so that she cannot benefit from the ventures. Exp. 57 *gankweruka maguta muntu uria uri muka akieruka matanda* "I'm belching fatty meat as the man with a wife belches vegetables" was usually said by young warriors who would feed on meat to remain strong for their duties and therefore they would mock their married counterparts suggesting that they feed on vegetables. This is a biased statement against women and is meant to despise their efforts in taking care of their husbands.

Female Genital Mutilation was also found to affect the status and functioning of women since the researcher discovered that circumcised girls differ with the uncircumcised and do not keep company as exp. 16 *muthera* "uncircumcised woman" shows. The circumcised call the 'undone' "*muthera*" as a mockery since they feel secure, for circumcision was meant to prepare girls for husbands and it was said that during the seclusion period, the initiates would be taught how to take care of men. The origin of FGM was given in a story whereby it is said that girl from another tribe had an incurable wound and parents had sought healing everywhere to no avail and they then announced that anyone who would cure their daughter would be allowed to marry her.

Consequently, a very poor man showed up and said that if he was allowed to be with the girl, he would cure her. The desperate parents accepted and it is said that the man made his medicine by cutting part of the girl's private parts which is claimed to have healed the girl who then became his wife and as a result she was very obedient to him. When other men saw this they sought the healer to know why his wife was so submissive and instead of the man telling them the truth, he told them to bring their wives to him at a fee so that he could do to them what he had to his

wife hence introducing FGM which was later borrowed by other communities like the Mwimbi. This is in line with what Ngugi wa Thiong'o (2004) in his novel *The River Between* where he presents Muthoni as desperately in need of circumcision in order for her to be a complete woman in the ways of her tribe. For her, circumcision meant getting a husband and children since as the community in which she lived dictated, no man would marry an uncircumcised woman.

The above findings are supported by Grosz (1994) who posits that female sexuality and women's power of reproduction are the defining (cultural) characteristics of women and at the same time, these very functions render women vulnerable, in need of protection or special treatment as mostly prescribed by patriarchy. In patriarchal societies, motherhood is the only thing seen to add value to a woman. Consequently, women's bodies and their productivity are used to explain and justify the different social positions and cognitive abilities of the two sexes. Hence the presumed notions that a woman's body is incapable of men's achievements, being weaker, more prone to (hormonal) irregularities, intrusions and unpredictability. Hence women's social and economic roles are restricted to their biological terms. On a similar note men dominate and rule over women in Kimwimbi and can decide anything without the consent of a woman. Out of this he makes statements that will favour his decisions and silence the woman who would dare to claim their rights. The labels are therefore given and passed on from age to age in order to indoctrinate and ensure male superiority continues and these labels reduce the value of women and place them at a controllable position for men's domination as Wanyoike (2011) argues that though marriage is considered conventional for men and women, it is more oppressive to women than it is to men.

6. CONCLUSION

Various expressions connoting cultural and social backing in devaluing of women in Kimwimbi were analyzed and explained accordingly. It shows that Kimwimbi Language devalues women on the basis of various cultural aspects which include: son preference, considering women as house workers. The Kimwimbi Language employs expressions embedded on cultural and societal attitudes and beliefs to devalue women.

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