

Sexist Language and Feminine Portrayal in Abimbola Adelakun's *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs*: A Feminist Stylistic Approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the deployment of sexism against women in Abimbola Adelakun's Under the Brown Rusted Roofs. While the novel has received little attention from critics, its few critical responses have focused on the creative uses of language and the characterisation of female characters in the text. Inquiries about the intersections of language and gender in the text are missing in the literature. This paper fills this gap in the literature by examining how sexism manifests, at the sentential linguistic level of the text, to discriminate against females in talks and during talks. Against the backdrop of feminist stylistics' approach to the investigation of gender biases at the sentential level, purposively sampled textual materials are subjected to qualitative analysis through the description and interpretation of sexist language in the text. The analysis reveals that proverbs, normalised gendered cultural sayings, comparisons, and abusive expressions are deployed for the portrayal of females as inferior, silenced, and subjugated individuals in the culture, using rhetorical strategies like rhetorical and unpalatable questions and semantic strategies like presupposition, insult, and negative vocatives. This discriminatory representation of females seems to negate Adelakun's intended goal of inspiring females to consciously stand up for their rights. On that note, the study concludes that a feminist project like Adelakun's Under the Brown Rusted Roofs, in addition to creating credible images of females, should be deliberate with the use of creative de-gendered language to enable females to possess and exert (linguistic) power when they talk, are talked with, or are talked about.

Keywords: feminist stylistics; sexism; sexist language; cultural novel; third-generation Nigerian writing

INTRODUCTION

Abimbola Adelakun's debut novel, *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs* (henceforth *Rusted Roofs*), is a cultural/traditional novel set in the rural Ibadan city of the 1970s/1980s in Western Nigeria. The novel, according to Dibia (2009), is Adelakun's personal challenge to move away from the city/urban fiction popular in contemporary Nigeria and focus on the traditional lifestyle of the Ibadan people in a contemporary era. Being a realist presentation of the socio-cultural intricacies surrounding daily lives in the Yoruba society, Ademilokun (2017, p. 63) submits that the novel clearly depicts the physical, cultural and psychological settings of the Ibadan city as it captures its prevalent polygamy, political volatility and relative poverty, especially in certain rustic parts such as the *agboolés* (extended family compounds). Likewise, Odutola (2020, p. 334) describes *Rusted Roofs* as not only taking readers into the world of those who live under the brown roofs but also employing names which would wake the imagination of Ibadan in any reader. On this ground, Dibia (2009) submits that *Rusted Roofs* suffices as a seminal work in both Yoruba/Ibadan culture and women's writing in Nigeria.

Scholars have established the relationship between literary expression and the society in which it is produced. For example, Eagleton (2016, as cited in Anyanwu, 2024, p. 116) submits that literature is a ‘cultural mirror’ that reflects the values, ideologies, and biases of the society in which it is produced. Reiterating this position, Anyanwu (2024, p. 116) posits that studying literary works is important to understanding societal attitudes and perceptions such that ‘the portrayal of women and gender dynamics in literature holds significant implications for understanding how societies perceive and treat women.’ Consequently, an investigation of *Rusted Roofs* as a cultural novel should shed light on the disposition of females in the Yoruba patriarchal culture. As such, this study attempts a feminist stylistic analysis of language materials in *Rusted Roofs* to uncover the gendered dispositions that influence the construction of women in the text.

RUSTED ROOFS AND NIGERIAN WOMEN’S WRITING

Apart from reflecting the culture of the Yoruba people, *Rusted Roofs*, as Dibia (2009) indicates, exemplifies a type of Nigerian women's writing. Interestingly, Nigerian women's writing emerged as protest writing which aims to reject male writers' wrong positioning and imaging of women (Idowu-Faith, 2016, p. 393). Kolawole (1997, as cited in Mikailu 2013, p. 282), one of Nigeria's greatest feminist theorists, construes Nigerian women's writing as projecting this protest quintessence by averring that women writers are not only speaking back but also fighting back to deconstruct distorted images or misrepresentation of African women. In the same way, Alkali (2012, p. 18) states the goal of early women writers is:

To haul the image of the woman to the centre stage by creating a string of credible female characters worthy of discourse, not as prostitutes, mistresses, naggers, or over-dependent, subservient wives and battered mothers, but as co-travellers, worthy companions to men, respected mothers and wives who are stakeholders in their moulding of the nations.

Unlike Alkali, Egya (2013, p. 219) categorically identifies ‘Achebe’s negligible portrayal of women in his early novels noted partly for their celebration of male heroism in the Igbo society’ as the trigger that led to the development of feminist novels in Nigeria. Egya (2013, p. 211) also argues that Nigerian women writers not only use diverse tropes that unsettle male-invented conventions that are considered inimical to the self-development of the girl-child in the society to pursue their goals but that they do so within a gynocritical realisation of what Irene Danysh calls “a woman’s voice”. In Umar’s (2019, p. 99) understanding, this counts as the ‘feminisation of literary vision to reverse and correct the absurd image of women’. Thus, Udoette and Akpan (2023, p. 58) conclude that the primary goal of Nigerian women's literature appears to be an effort to correct and re-direct attention to the ideals and worldview of women while charting the significance of the feminine element in literary texts.

As a third-generation writer, Adelakun is also committed to elaborating on the tragic failure of the postcolonial Nigerian nation, unearthing the debilitating effects of polygyny and other cultural practices on women, and reimagining the feminine image. For this, Lamidi and Aboh (2015, p. 36) commend Adelakun for being neither detached nor indifferent to the ugly socio-political chasm in her country and subsequently label her a social engineer who is actively involved in reflecting and refracting every bit of her nation’s developments. While Udoette and Akpan (2023, p. 59) opine that *Rusted Roofs* exposes patriarchy and urges women to fight for their own liberation, Agboola (2019, p. 1) states that the novel is about the projection of the gendered

subaltern who rises above the limitations controlling her socio-cultural, economic and religious existence.

Adelakun's detailed attention to cultural practices in the novel enables her to project characters like Alake and Sikira within the 'realist portrayals of the suffering woman', which is a characteristic of earlier Nigerian women's writing (Egya, 2013, p. 232). The subjugation of Alake and Sikira is evident in their polygynous marriages where, as the younger wives in their different homes, they are the materials for their husbands' sexual gratification (Aboh, 2015, p. 38) in a culture where sex is euphemistically described as men's food (Aboh, 2015, p. 40). Besides their stereotypical reduction to sexual gratifiers, child bearers and care providers (Udoette & Akpan, 2023, p. 59), both women are also victims of various forms of physical/domestic abuse. This, according to Udoette and Akpan (2023, p. 62), is their husbands' strategy to make them submit to their authorities at all costs. It is necessary to point out that this vivid representation of feminine suppression does not imply that Adelakun is instantiating within a defeatist agenda. Rather, as Udoette and Akpan (2023, p. 63) argue, Adelakun is on a female consciousness-raising project which is meant to open the eyes of women to their pitiable positions in order that they may liberate themselves from the age-long traditions of patriarchy and reject polygyny (Udoette & Akpan, 2023, p. 61). Although Rene Herbale (as cited in Boyd, 2007, p. 278) holds that the visibility of violence against women in texts has the risk of projecting women's suffering as a 'social insignia of male power' that further reifies masculinist dominance, the realist portrayal of women's socio-cultural conditions remains a common strategy for enlightening women about their subservient and debilitating conditions in the patriarchal culture and thus encouraging them to reject their continued oppression.

Agboola's (2019) interrogation of Afusa as a subaltern woman connects *Rusted Roofs* to recent Nigerian women's writing which pushes forward the principle of social reconstruction as a way of rewriting and reimagining the woman in the context of the socio-cultural strictures around her. To Egya (2013, p. 232), the works of female writers like Zaynab Alkali, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, and Sefi Atta, from the 2000s, show that 'the Nigerian woman takes a bold step not only to alter her condition and improve her life through professional engagement but also to actively participate in the activism that seeks to alter the socio-political contradictions of her society.' He further reasons that this, perhaps, is the latest direction in Nigerian women's writing:

It is no longer the joys and pains of a toiling mother as we see in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*; it is not just the extrication of oneself from marital inhibitions, the foray into professional and commercial self-empowerments as we see in Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough*; the movement...is towards positive activism that will enable the woman to resolve the socio-political problems that the man fails to tackle.

(Egya, 2013, p. 232)

Although Afusa is not educated like the five daughters of the Eagle woman in Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Children of the Eagle*, she undoubtedly fits into Egya's (2013) image of the 'new woman' who is the knowledgeable, successful, and economically empowered heroine of 21st-century female writers. As a new woman, Afusa is a professional in her locale, demonstrating herself as an industrious and ingenious trader, informed citizen, education and health advocate, and political analyst. This helps her, unlike other women, to jettison the ephemerals to prioritise her children's education, build her business, and persuade her husband to contest for an elected post. Agboola (2019) thus describes Afusa as a subaltern woman in the following terms:

She is not only a wife to one of the richest men in Ibadan, but is also a self made (*sic*) woman in her chosen profession. She is known for her aggressive business acumen in the market place, which makes her stall never to be short of goods unlike the rest of the women at the market. In the novel, Adelakun deliberately portrays to the readers the subaltern's penchant for work.

Aside from Idowu-Faith and Ogunlana (2021) which attempt to uncover both overt and covert sexist lexical items pushing discriminatory ideology against women in *Rusted Roofs*, other responses to the text have mainly been concerned with its creative and functional deployment of language. Such works include Lamidi and Aboh (2015), which investigated naming as an identity construction strategy in the text; Ushie and Aboh (2013), which explored the deployment of appositive relations for strategic discourse functions of appositives in the novel; and Aboh (2015) which uncovered the deployment of euphemisms as face-saving strategies in the text. For Ademilokun (2017), language, in the novel, serves as a tool of African identity formation with its uses of lexical transfer, literal translation, coinages, code-mixing, proverbs, incantatory discourse, Yoruba Muslim discourse features and, Yoruba advertising and lineage praise poetry. These features, Ademilokun (2017) concludes, foster Yoruba colouration and identity on English and thereby strategically contribute to the nativisation of English in the text.

Notwithstanding Adelakun's creative language employment and feminist agenda in *Rusted Roofs*, there are many instances of where sexist language is deployed against females in the text. This, to a large extent, undermines Adelakun's commitment to reinventing the image of females in the text and, therefore, calls for a critical investigation. Thus, the aim of this study is to explore *Rusted Roofs* at the sentential level in order to uncover how sexism discriminates against women in talks (when being talked about) and during talks (when being talked with). To accomplish this aim, the study will attempt to provide answers to the following questions:

- RQ1. What examples of sexist language are evident in *Rusted Roofs*?
- RQ2. What linguistic and stylistic patterns do the sexist expressions take?
- RQ3. In what ways do these sexist expressions derogate women and contribute to their gendered portrayals in *Rusted Roofs*?

To address these questions, this paper investigates sentential structures in the text within the theoretical frame of feminist stylistics.

SEXISM

According to Litosseliti (2006, p. 13), sexism was coined in the 1960s to describe the 'discrimination within a social system on the basis of sexual membership'. Reasoning along this line, Umera-Okeke (2012) describes sexist language as any language that is supposed to include all people but unintentionally (or not) excludes a gender, which can be either males or females. For Fajobi and Olusegun-Joseph (2012, p. 239), sexism facilitates unjust references to or treatment(s) of a particular sex as inferior to the other, whereas sexist language 'often showcases the superiority of the male gender over the female.' Mills (2008, p. 36) subsequently describes sexism as a form of language use which affects conversations, one's views of other people and one's own place within society.'

It has been established that there is a close tie between sexist language and cultural practices in a patriarchal society where the discriminatory use of language against the female is rife. This is so because of the unequal power relationship which casts maleness as the standard against which femaleness is measured as a deviation. Ezenwa-Ohaeto and Ikemelu (2021, p. 123) thus describe patriarchy as 'a system of practice that sees men as being superior to women' such that '[the] unequal power relationship between women and men...makes men to be in control of women's life.' Similarly, Litosseliti (2006, p. 13) takes sexism as a historically hierarchical relationship between men and women, where one is the norm, and the other is marked as 'other' or 'inferior'. This relationship of male-as-norm and female-as-deviation further establishes how language is crucial in reflecting and constructing the world according to a society's socio-cultural purview.

Generally, sexism is classified into direct/overt and indirect/covert sexism. Indirect sexism is subtle yet deeply ingrained, creating an exclusionary environment where certain groups feel unwelcome. Mills (2008, p. 153) describes this as a "chilly climate" sustained by systematic markers. It can be identified through elements like humour, presuppositions, conflicting messages, metaphors, collocations, and androcentric perspectives.

Overt sexism, on the other hand, is easier to identify and may necessitate investigating the sexist implications of words, phrases, and sentences. While the investigation of individual words will focus on lexical items such as generic nouns and pronouns and other marked words, the analysis of phrases/sentences will be on ready-made expressions, presupposition/inference, jokes/humour, and transitivity choices. In their study, Darweesh and Abdullah (2016, p. 90) identify ten biases that are usually projected in sexist language, be it direct or indirect sexism:

- Negative evaluation of women
- Males are the norm; that is, females appear as dependent beings and as followers.
- Women are weak, lacking in strength and ability
- Comparing women to inanimate objects
- Semantic derogation/disparagement of women
- Women are no more than possessions
- Valuing women based on their appearance rather than their intelligence or personality
- Glorifying the maltreatment/mistreatment of women
- Vulgarity when speaking about women
- Negative presentation of women

Darweesh and Abdullah (2016, p. 90) further explain that there are three linguistic strategies for accomplishing sexist language: rhetorical strategies (e.g. metaphor and simile); semantic strategies (e.g. presupposition and implication, insult terms, negative lexicalisation, proverbs, words or statements with negative connotation, and sexist slurs and disgusting statements); and structural strategies (e.g. disclaimers). What stems from this is that sexist language arises from various discursive practices that are damaging to the person against whom the discriminatory language is used. Such is the case of normalised and well-dispersed linguistic forms like proverbs, witty sayings, comparisons, and so on, which may be generally accepted as folk linguistic truths in culture but are indirectly discriminatory. If close attention is not paid to normalised language use, the stereotypical and outdated beliefs they project about women will be left unveiled, and this will imply that men's experience is valid human experience and women's experience is deviant.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

The study takes a feminist stylistic approach to the description and interpretation of gendered language in *Rusted Roofs*. Mills (1995) conceives of feminist stylistics as the sub-discipline of stylistics, which uses stylistic techniques and tools to address the concerns of feminism. Mills (1995, p. 1) thus conceives of feminist stylistics as the sub-discipline of stylistics which utilises stylistics devices such as ‘point of view, agency, metaphor or transitivity’ for the description and interpretation of gendered linguistic encoding in a text.

The conventions for undertaking feminist stylistics, as outlined in Mills (1995), indicate that a feminist stylistic analysis can focus on words, phrases/sentences and discourse to reveal explicit or implicit sexist meanings. Mills (1995, pp. 157-158) suggests that the investigation of sexism at the sentential level may focus on language systems to reveal ready-made phrases which refer to gender difference; metaphors or figurative language that draw upon gendered assumptions; jokes and humour which depict gendered propositions; comparison of males and females with different elements; and transitivity choices which unveil who acts or is acted upon. This study primarily investigates proverbs, common cultural sayings, comparisons, and abusive expressions, teasing out their sexist meaning using feminist stylistic techniques complemented with the characteristics of sexist language identified by Darweesh and Abdullah (2016). This theoretical model invests this study with a rigorous, retrievable, and replicable process of unearthing discriminatory practices that indicate who has power, can have it, and how it is exerted (Sunderland, 2006, p. 21). Also, the model helps document how gender difference is represented in texts in order that structures and ways of thinking may change (Mills, 1995, p. 157).

METHODOLOGY

Data for this study were drawn from Abimbola Adelokun’s *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs*. The text was selected for analysis because of its realist portrayal of females within the complex intricacies of the patriarchal Yoruba society, the author's goal of creating the image of the new woman, and the sparse critical response to the text in spite of its richness. In the pursuit of the study’s goal, sentential structures which evidence embedded linguistic sexism were purposively sampled and subjected to qualitative analysis within the theoretical framework of feminist stylistics. The qualitative analysis, taking both descriptive and interpretative approaches (see Sunderland, 2006, p. 167), focuses on sentential structures so as to unveil gender slants at work within the text’s discourse frameworks (see Mills, 1995, p. 157).

DATA ANALYSIS

The study identifies four sentential structures which exhibit sexism in *Rusted Roofs*. The four structures are proverbs, normalised gendered cultural sayings, comparisons, and abusive expressions. Each of these is discussed in subsequent sub-sections.

PROVERBS

According to Oloruntoba-Oju (2009, p. 230), while the deployment of gendered proverbs in all socio-philosophical domains is pervasive in Yorubaland, many Yoruba proverbs have skewed gendered orientation. As a result, while proverbs are taken as universal truths in culture, they encode sexism enshrined in cultural presuppositions. One proverb in the text which relies on folk-linguistic stereotypes of alleged female verbosity (Sunderland, 2006, p. 25) is “*A woman goes to the river for the love of gossip!*” (p. 19). This proverb has a negative presupposition which connotes that women have a proclivity for gossip. Besides this, the statement undermines women’s sincerity in the performance of their cultural gender role of providing water for their house members’ use. The statement is thus reminiscent of Lakoff’s (1975) stand that even though women are socialised into being ladylike, they are ironically not rewarded for being ladylike. Invariably, a woman’s glad acceptance of the cultural gender role of home keeping does not mean she will be praised in culture since culture’s evaluation of her role is like a two-edged sword: whether the role is performed or is not performed, she is never commended.

That Baba n’sale (henceforth Baba) reprimands women using this stereotypic proverb and subsequently commands them to go home highlights gender imbalance within the text’s projected society. As a matter of fact, Baba is not different from the women he is reprimanding because he also lingers at the scene of the fight between Alhaji and Sikira after the fight has settled. Equally, the impoliteness in Baba’s imperative to the women points to his assumed superiority over the women and the construal of women as the unwelcome out-group. Coincidentally, Baba’s thinking that he is male and an unquestionable powerholder within the patriarchal society where the women are the deviation from the norm has been debunked by an earlier authorial cue, which foregrounds Baba as a gossip:

He was a short, wiry old man who was stooped with seasons of life *but was never absent at any scene of a fight between a man and his wife in agboole Alabeni.*

(p. 19, our emphasis)

On that note, Baba’s audacity to label the women as gossip is founded on that cultural stereotypic presupposition which, according to Mills (2006, p. 146), states that ‘women’s talk is trivial, that women engage in gossiping more than men, that two women talking together can be assumed to be gossiping’. In essence, not only does the literal meaning of the proverb institute stereotypic biases against women, but its contextualised interpretation also emphasises how language can be sexualised to favour men and denigrate women.

In addition, Baba’s earlier statement at the scene of the fight between Alhaji and Sikira exhibits what Darweesh and Abdullah (2016, p. 90) describe as glorifying the maltreatment/mistreatment of women. Baba’s statements are made up of a command and another gendered proverb which castigate Sikira and support Alhaji’s beating up of Sikira:

“Shut up your mouth! *A woman throws out her character and blames her head for not giving her a good husband...*”

(p. 19, our emphasis)

This proverb is sexist because, according to Oloruntoba-Oju (2009, p. 231), it is a gendered dictum that is usually cited in real-life situations identical to the one described in the proverb. Oloruntoba-Oju (2009, p. 231) thus concludes that the proverb projects the phallic code, which blames a woman for the abuse she suffers from her husband. In this particular context, rather than

rebuke and correct Alhaji as an abusive husband, Baba construes Sikira, the wife, as the culprit and provocateur who merits the punishments meted to her by her husband. The proverb, within the cultural ideology in the projected society, thus has the gendered meaning of the man being perfect and superior and the woman being childish and needing stringent treatments so that she can behave and please her lord and master.

The last proverb for consideration is “*It is the cotton the mother gathered that the daughter is spinning*” (p. 43), which an elderly woman uses to castigate not just Alake but also Alake’s mother when Alake runs away from her marital home because of the tedious chores she has to attend to daily. Like the previous proverbs, this proverb, in line with Darweesh and Abdullah’s (2016, p. 90) submission, displays the negative evaluation and presentation of women in the culture because it presents both Alake and her mother as lazy women while it also queries Alake’s mother’s competence to properly nurture and train her daughter.

NORMALISED GENDERED CULTURAL SAYINGS

Apart from proverbs, there are commonplace everyday expressions with contextual sexist meanings. For example, the statement “*It is your mother’s intestines you bit into*” projects the sexist meaning that whatever negative trait a child exhibits is inherited from the mother. Three instances of the statement are presented in extracts (i) to (iii) below:

- (i) “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!” (p. 218)
- (ii) “Come, when did you acquire this habit of trying to lawyer your father? *It is your mother’s intestines you bit into!* Go away from here!” (p. 208)
- (iii) “*It is Bili, the stupid girl who took a bit of her mother’s intestines!* You can’t believe she was playing *ekun meran* with children of her fourth sister’s age! Can you imagine! Someone whose mates are already having children in a man’s house!”

(p. 117)

Although this expression means differently in context, it usually triggers a common sexualised semantic denominator that children’s negative traits are picked from their mothers’ negative traits. Invariably, this normalised cultural expression does not only blame mothers for their children’s shortcomings but also castigates the women for allegedly possessing negative traits.

In extract (i), Baba addresses his toddler, Sauda, who picks goats’ faeces to eat despite his attempts to stop her. As Baba fails to stop the child, he ends up using the statement to blame the mother for the child’s misdemeanour. This is incongruous because Baba is the one who fails to stop the child and so should be blamed for the child’s nauseating act of eating goats’ faeces. In extract (ii), Baba uses the statement to address Idaya, one of his daughters, who is curious to know why a goat’s mouth never stops moving. While the mother says she does not know why, Baba says it is because goats’ mouths itch. The girl, not convinced of Baba’s reply, asks further questions. Rather than for Baba to answer and praise the girl for her inquisitiveness, he silences her using this discriminating statement while ordering her away from the place. That Alake, Idaya’s mother, is within the earshot of the statement shows Baba’s lack of regard for his wife and underscores female powerlessness and inferior position in the culture.

In (iii), the expression is used in the context of Alhaji's transfer of the aggression of his political failure to the children playing a hide-and-seek game outside the house. While the children flee as soon as he barges out of the house, Bili is unfortunately a bit late. So, Alhaji catches her and beats her mercilessly. Baba walks in with Motara, Bili's mother, and asks Alhaji what the matter is. It is at this point that Alhaji replies using the expression. As Alhaji name-calls Bili a stupid girl who took a bit of her mother's intestines, he also name-calls the mother and blames her for the daughter's supposed childish and stupid behaviour. The immediate context of the statement, as well as the discursual construction of the mother, conveys the linguistic discrimination against women in the culture.

In (iii), the complex nominal group "*Someone whose mates are already having children in a man's house!*", as a declarative sentence whose elided subject and verb can be recovered from the previous parts of the text, is another gendered normalised cultural saying which makes marriage, childbearing, childrearing, and other domestic roles the ultimate aspiration for women in a patriarchal culture. Ezenwa-Ohaeto and Ikemelu (2021, p. 129) argue that this gendered stereotype is built on the socialisation of female children, right from infancy, into believing that they are only fit for the domestic roles of wife, mother and housekeeper. So, once these are achieved, every other thing becomes a trivial matter. In the same vein, Chukwuma (1999, as cited in Ezenwa-Ohaeto & Ikemelu 2021, p. 129) notes that:

Marriage still remains the most greatly desired state of being for most young girls in every African society. ...there is nothing else that bestows as much status and social worth on a woman in a patriarchal society where her worth is predicated on male interest.

In other words, for a girl like Bili to command respect in the patriarchal society, she must aspire to marriage and be married. This explains why Alhaji uses the statement to vilify Bili who is still unmarried. Consequently, Bili should hide her face in shame for being unmarried, not minding that she lacks the power to choose and decide whom to marry by herself.

Apart from socialising female children into seeing being a wife, mother and housekeeper as their ultimate roles in the culture, they are also bred to be obedient and submissive to an eventual husband (Umar, 2019, p. 98). These ideals are at the backdrop of the vilification that Alake receives from her family when she runs back home after marrying Baba:

- (iv) It was a tortuous time for her, and when she could not bear it anymore, she left Baba n'sale's house to seek refuge in her father's house.

"I am suffering," she cried when her father called his *agboole* members together and warned her in their presence.

"Suffering in what way? He does not give you food, or he does not perform his manly duties?"

To this, she burst into tears and began to weep hysterically.

(p. 43)

Unfortunately, the family trivialises Alake's experience which the narratorial cue describes as tortuous. Silencing Alake, the family interprets her tortuous experiences as running away from mere household chores. Since her plea to her family to reason with her contravenes the patriarchal ideology that marriage is the ultimate fulfilment for a woman, Alake could not win her case against her husband and the male members of her family. Another silencing of Alake is implied in her father's summation of her marital needs to the provision of food and her husband's performance of his manly duties. This unmasking of language as a veritable tool for silencing women during talks and for discriminating against women in society.

Alake's running away from her marital home also uncovers how other common and normalised sayings in the culture attribute the shortcomings of children to the failure of mothers to properly nurture and train them.

- (v) Her father's brother turned to her mother, who stood some distance away from the meeting, watching with her arms folded and her face a mask of sadness.
 "Do you see your life now?"
 "Me?" the woman asked, surprised.
 "You! If you had brought up this child well, would she have turned out like this? Did you hear her?"
 "It's not my fault," the woman pleaded.
 "It is not your fault?" her father said, rising from his chair sharply as if he sat on a pin.
 "Your daughter ran away from her husband's house because of simple household duties, and you still think it is not your fault? Who helped you raise her? Is that something that a third ear should hear?"
 "Children of nowadays," an old woman said between attempts to chew kola nuts on toothless gums, *"they have no training. It is the cotton the mother gathered that the daughter is spinning."*

(p. 43, *our emphasis*)

In extract (v), a total of six rhetorical and unpalatable questions (Culpeper, 2011) which insult Alake's mother are used by Alake's father to blame the mother for daughter's decision to escape from her marital home. Addressing Alake's mother this way is a nuanced evaluation and representation of the mother as a failed mother. The father, exonerating himself from Alake's failure, works within the gendered ideology that cedes the good child to the father and the bad one to the mother. This ideology is evident in Alake's mother later warning to Alake not to ever again run back home from her marriage because 'a good child belongs to the father':

"Don't come here again and disgrace me. ...A good child belongs to the father, but the bad one is the mother's. Everybody is blaming me for not training you well."

(p. 44, *our emphasis*)

As much as Alake's mother would have loved to help her daughter and intervene in her precarious situation, she is herself a helpless woman who strives to be in the good books of culture even at the detriment of her daughter's wellbeing. Thus, even though the mother contributes to the silencing of her daughter, she is herself a silenced woman.

Extract (vi) captures another stereotypic statement which usually blames a woman in the culture for any ill-luck her husband experiences after marriage.

- (vi) *"...Iyanda died shortly after he took a third wife. That woman's feet were not good in his house at all..."*

(p. 199, *our emphasis*)

The sexist meaning encoded into the italicised discriminatory common cultural statement in extract (vi) builds on gender imbalance. That a woman has good or bad feet is a common cultural point of view in Yoruba culture. The cultural purview evaluates a newly married woman and attributes the successes or failures her husband experiences to her. The underlying sexism in the statement becomes apparent when one considers that a similar statement is hardly ever uttered against a man when the wife suffers any form of good/bad luck in a newly contracted marriage. This negative evaluation of Iyanda's wife contributes to how language can be used to negatively portray women in talks.

COMPARISONS

Comparisons can be a fertile ground for covert sexist language. Such comparisons can discursively encode negativity and discriminatory perspectives against both the positive and negative traits of women in culture. Extract (vii) contains an example of the negative representation of women in talks:

- (vii) He took a first bite, another and threw the rest in his mouth. "This your *akara* is as tough as the phlegm in the nostrils of an old woman..."

(p. 85)

The gender discrimination embedded in this statement can be unveiled from the lack of empirical facts to back up the claim that the phlegm in an old woman's nostril is different from that of an old man. Also, that nothing warrants and justifies this comparison shows that the submission stems from the low value ascribed to women in the culture.

In extract (viii), Baba compares women to children and thus negatively represents and evaluates women in talk.

- (viii) Alhaji...called one of his children to clear the plates. The child picked up Alhaji's plate, which still contained some food and meat and took it inside the *eede* to hide it. He then came back to pack Baba n'sale' plates.

"Next time, you pack the visitor's plate first," Alhaji said to the boy. "You don't say because one contains food and one doesn't; you will pick the one with the food first."

"Children," Baba n'sale said, "*they are just like women. Their thoughts are never far from their bellies.*"

(p. 209, *our emphasis*)

The italicised portion compares children to women and implies that women are greedy and lacking in critical thinking. Ordinarily, the child, in this context, should have been corrected without bringing women into the sentence. Ironically, Baba, who views women as greedy, is the one who runs afoul of cultural expectations as he eats the entire food on his plate. Owomoyela (2005) records two proverbs which indicate Yoruba cultural dining etiquettes:

À-jẹ-tán, à-jẹ-i-mọra, ká fí ọwọ mẹwẹwá jẹun ò yẹ ọmọ èyàn. Eating-absolutely-everything, eating-with abandon, eating with all ten fingers is unworthy of human beings.

(Owomoyela, 2005, p. 54)

"Moyó" ñjẹ "mo yó," "mo kọ" ñjẹ "mo kọ"; jẹun nşó, àgbà ọkánjùwà ni. "I am full" means "I am full"; "I decline" means "I decline"; eating with abandon, that is the father of all greediness.

(Owomoyela, 2005, p. 77)

In Yoruba society, parents and elderly people, especially men, are not expected to eat their entire food, especially when little children are around. This expectation becomes higher when the man is a visitor in a home where he must not give the impression that he is poor and cannot afford such a meal at home. Unfortunately, Baba fails this cultural expectation but rather ends up instituting a gendered bias against women.

Extract (ix) contains a superficially positive comparison which, when critically examined, has a negative attribution for women:

- (ix) “Afusa!” an astonished Alhaji asked. “How come you talk like a man?”
“I listen to you men when you are talking.”

(p. 108)

In the extract, Alhaji seemingly praises Afusa, his wife, for her wise contribution to their interaction by comparing her contribution to that of a man. However, implicit to Alhaji's praise is that women, unlike men, lack the mental capacity to make positive contributions to discussions. Afusa, on her part, agrees with Alhaji's submission by saying that she learnt how to reason logically and talk sensibly from listening to men when they talk. This way, Afusa constructs herself within the man-as-norm ideology, thereby highlighting the cultural disposition to women.

ABUSIVE EXPRESSIONS

Abusive expressions are harsh and inherently face-threatening assertions and vocatives that are uttered against a target for some perceived shortcoming and provocation. In male-to-female interactions in the text, abuses are expressed against women and children, and this implicitly places women and children in the same social class. As established in the previous section, an abusive expression uttered to correct a child is often constructed in a way that includes women, either individually or generally. Abusive expressions in *Rusted Roofs* occur as insults of various types like pointed criticism/complaints, unpalatable presuppositions/questions, negative vocatives, dismissals, etc. (Culpeper, 2011, p. 256).

Further to Alhaji's assertion in extract (iii) that Bili is supposed to be in a man's house bearing children, Baba moves to ask Motara, Bili's mother, how long Bili has been menstruating. Without doubt, this personal question invades Bili's private space and is thus face-aggravating. However, Motara's reply that Bili is yet to menstruate results in Baba directing unpalatable questions, blame, a face-threatening directive, and a negative vocative at Motara:

- (x) “At sixteen years, she hasn't started, and you are sitting down here? Have you killed a chicken for her?”

Motara shook her head helplessly.

....

“What nonsense are you saying like a mute in whose hands a child has died? Who is supposed to be running up and down asking for help but you? No wonder the girl is behaving like the white cock that does not know itself as an elder among its peers. Get out of my sight, stupid woman!”

(p. 117)

Three unpalatable questions— “*At sixteen years, she hasn't started, and you are sitting down here?*” “*What nonsense are you saying like a mute in whose hands a child has died?*” and “*Who is supposed to be running up and down asking for help but you?*” – all indirectly construct Motara as low-witted and irresponsible. That a woman of Motara's age can only respond by shaking her head helplessly recalls Onyenakeya et al. (2019) submission that men, in the patriarchal Nigerian society, are culturally perceived as superior to women and, as such, they (women) are expected willy-nilly, to kowtow, gratify or pander to the whims of the men.

Extract (x) also contains blame (*No wonder the girl is behaving like the white cock that does not know itself as an elder among its peers*), a face-threatening command/dismissal (*Get out of my sight*), and a negative vocative (*stupid woman*). As established in the preceding section, a woman is usually blamed for her children's shortcomings while the father goes scot-free; Baba uses these abusive expressions to blame Motara. Besides, ordering Motara out of his sight indicates that Baba does not consider that she has the agentive power to speak or be heard.

A situation similar to the one in extract (x) is evident in extract (xi) where Motara is negatively presented:

- (xi) ...Baba n'sale stood up and shook his wiry body. He raised his voice and called Motara.
"Have you prepared food for your husband?" he asked when she arrived.
"I am still on it."
"*What sort of woman are you? You don't want your husband to eat?*" He looked at her contemptuously and hissed. "*Alhaji, I am going to my house. My women are not good for anything, but at least they don't starve me.*" He got up and left.

(pp. 118-119)

Motara has invited Baba to their home to persuade Alhaji to eat after losing his political seat because of a recent military coup in the country. After Baba has succeeded at persuading Alhaji to eat, he steps out to ask Motara for Alhaji's food. Her reply that the food is still being prepared annoys Baba and becomes the ground to abuse her. In this instance, Baba uses two unpalatable questions, complemented with a contemptuous look and a hiss, against Motara. The last two italicised lines in extract (xi) contain inferential abuse, which negatively portrays Motara as good-for-nothing. The gravity of the abuse resides in Baba's comparison of Motara to his wives, whom he describes as 'not good for anything', who, nonetheless, are better than Motara because they do not starve him. This not only insults Motara, but also construes her as the worst of bad women. Baba's low rating of Motara and his wives shows that women are powerless and inferiorly rated in the culture.

In another perspective, while culture permits men or husbands to verbally abuse their wives, a woman doing the same to her husband will be an aberration. This explains why Alhaji feels justified for mercilessly beating Sikira, who abuses him using the word '*Agbaya*' and responds to his questions with retorts:

- (xii) "I suppose you women want me to get angry?!" He said as he burst into the *eede*, his *agbada* billowing behind him.
"Get angry if you want to get angry!" Sikira shouted back at him. "*Agbaya!*"
"Sikira! Did you run into madness, or did madness run into you?"
"I don't know which one of you ran into the other!" Sikira retorted.
"Ha!"
"Sikira!"
"What is 'Sikira'? What?!"
"Sikira, it is me *o!*" Alhaji said.
"So?" she asked...

(p. 18)

Because it is not expected in a culture that a woman respond to her husband using retorts or abuses, Alhaji could not contain his surprise at Sikira's effrontery. He thus replies to Sikira with the declarative "*It is me, o!*" where '*o*' is a surprise emphasis sub-type of the emphasis pragmatic maker (*O_I*) identified by Unuabonah and Oladipupo (2018, p. 16). Other linguistic items which

encode Alhaji's surprise are the unpalatable question "*Did you run into madness or madness ran into you?*" and the exclamatory statements "*Ha!*" and "*Sikira!*". Following this abominable act, Alhaji both slaps and beats Sikira up. Baba subsequently justifies Alhaji's action by utilising unpalatable questions and a proverb:

"What are you crying about? A woman throws out her character and blames her head for not giving her a good husband. What if he beats you because of Afusa? Is he not your husband?"

(p. 19)

The unpalatable questions and the proverb normalise Alhaji's physical and verbal abuse of Sikira and also ascribe the fault of the abuse to her. The last unpalatable question ("Is he not your husband?") not only glorifies the abuse, but also portrays Alhaji and other men as unquestionable lords and masters who have power and must exert power over powerless women. Crucial to interpreting this event as sexist is Adichie's (2017) second feminist tool, which asks: 'Can you reverse X and get the same results?'. Invariably, the impossibility of reversing these talks and actions in similar heterosexual situations indicates that the culture permits, perpetuates, and promotes the discrimination of women.

CONCLUSION

This study employed the techniques and toolkits of feminist stylistics to unravel how language, at the sentential level, projects sexism against women in talks (when being talked about) and during talks (when being talked with) in Adelokun (2008) *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs*. The findings reveal that linguistic sexism is evident in proverbs, normalised gendered cultural sayings, comparisons, and abusive expressions. Selected extracts from the text illustrate how interactions are founded on the patriarchal ideology of male superiority and female inferiority in the cultural milieu of the text. Owing to this, women are negatively evaluated and represented, constantly silenced, and consistently treated as low-witted in talks and during talks via rhetorical strategies (e.g. rhetorical questions and unpalatable questions) and semantic strategies (e.g. presuppositions and insults).

As a feminist/cultural project, *Rusted Roofs* has been previously established to project the creative use of language and the raising of female consciousness for female emancipation in the culture. However, while the instances of sexist language analysed in this study attest to the author's realist presentation of the Yoruba culture, the employment of more deliberate and creative language reform strategies like alternative terms, renaming/neologism, inflicting pejorative words positively, answering back/wit, etc., (Mills, 2008, pp. 83-91) or the stylistic or grammatical reconstruction of ready-made statements (Fajobi & Olusegun-Joseph, 2012) would have contributed significantly to the author's commitment to instigate women's liberation in the novel. This study thus concludes that creative writers need to pay particular attention to the nuances of both overt and covert sexist meanings in language, to contribute to the creation of a world where gender equity and gender equality reign. This study also contributes to research on Nigerian women's writing in general and Adelokun's *Rusted Roofs* in particular. More importantly, the study provides insights into how language can be deployed to resist institutionalised discriminatory linguistic practices.

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