

Breaking the Linguistic Binaries: Deconstructing Signs and Reconstructing Gender in Flora Nwapa's *Cassava Song and Rice Song*

Biswajit Mondal

Abstract

Language is not only 'a system of voluntary produced (symbols) signs' (Sapir 8) or 'a means of communication', but it bears the load of a nation's culture, its ideology and hegemony; and constructs the dichotomy of "insiders" and "outsiders", and the differences of male and female. It constructs our thoughts, our perception of reality, and thus assigns our individual and cultural roles. Man is the maker of language and he imposes negative meanings on females; They are always presented as mute, vulnerable, inferior and submissive manipulating the linguistic process of signification to control power and to establish patriarchal hegemony. The Nigerian woman writer Flora Nwapa refutes to use 'the alien tongue', intends to deconstruct the established signs and emphasizes to present woman with positive connotations. The present paper aims to foreground how Flora Nwapa deconstructs the linguistic signs and reconstructs a new gender identity of females praising and glorifying cassava crop with reverence and dignity in her poetic volume *Cassava Song and Rice Song*.

Keywords: Cassava; Gender; Patriarchal hegemony; Signification; Signs.

Introduction

Two aspects of a linguistic sign are 'signifier' and 'signified'. Whereas 'signifier' is a sound, 'signified' is the meaning or mental concept, and that meaning or concept is attached with a signifier through the process of signification. Man is the creator of linguistic signs and he always attaches negative meanings with woman or with the things related to her. For example, yam is considered a worthy crop (cultivated by males) and cassava unworthy (cultivated by females) in Igbo culture. Thus, language is masculinized, and as soon as we enter the system of signs, we become

acculturated and a social, cultural and individual meaning is imposed on us (which Lacan calls the Symbolic Order). Therefore, Marks and de Courtivron argue, "Meaning is located not in the thought of the enunciator but in the system of signs itself...." (xii) Western feminist linguists also believe that male language is 'a species of Orwellian thought-control', by which they construct reality and make women see things in their own way. Hence, they have emphasized again and again for linguistic reformation to reject patriarchal derogation and domination on woman. This feminist dissatisfaction is bitterly expressed in Annie Leclerc's statement:

Nothing exists that has not been made by man- not thought, not language, not words...We have to invent everything anew. Things made by man are not just stupid, deceitful and oppressive...More than anything else, they are sad, sad enough to kill us with boredom and despair...We have to invent a woman's word. (74)

Leclerc's call to 'invent a woman's word' is quite significant because linguistic signification and cultural production of meaning is man-made which reflects 'dual hierarchical oppositions' in which woman is always placed at the negative pole. This masculine structuration has far-reaching consequences because "the group which has the power to ordain the structure of language, thought, and reality has the potential to create a world in which they are the central figure". (Spender 106) However, these linguistic tensions in women's writings are ubiquitous and, to a large extent, universal. African women writers also struggle with this masculine language and meaning. Indeed, this linguistic dominance is reflected in African linguistic signs, riddles, idioms and derogatory proverbs like "community secrets can never reside in the house of a woman", "a woman can empty her womb for you, but not her heart", etc. But whereas western feminists and linguists insist on inventing 'a woman's word', African women writers concentrate to 'deconstruct' the androcentric language and this "deconstruct(ion) is not to negate or to dismiss, but to call into question and perhaps, most importantly, to open up a term, like the subject, to reusage or redeployment that previously has not been authorized". (Butler 18)

Flora Nwapa has redeployed the signs of cassava and yam of Igbo culture to deconstruct the hegemony of phallogocentric language and reconstruct a new gender identity for woman in *Cassava Song and Rice Song*. The Igbo society is very much patriarchal. Gloria Chuku observes that Igbo society is highly stratified. Gender differentiation is a vital force of social organization and 'when Igbos talk about farming, they talk about yams' because it is 'central to Igbo food culture, food security, and the prevailing

gender ideology of male and female crops' (46-68). Of course, the crop cassava is signified as 'female-crop', a foodstuff of poor folks in contrast with the yam, a male-crop. The association between women and cassava, thus, devalues women by attributing negative qualities of cassava to them. Women are portrayed as ordinary, of low worth, and even compared to the odor of cassava. The comparison equates the crop and the women themselves, so any degradation of one is also an insult to the other within the male-dominated cultural and economic framework (Oha 104). Breaking this prevailing binary opposition of cassava and yam, Nwapa glorifies woman and womanhood through the glorification of cassava and its significant attributes and roles during the Nigerian civil war.

Cassava Song and Rice Song (1986) is the only poetic collection of Flora Nwapa. She makes her major intention clear in an interview that she covets to subvert the gender hierarchy of Igbo society and wants to establish woman's subjectivity in the male-oriented milieu: "I try to project the image of women positively. I attempt to correct our menfolk when they started writing, when they wrote little or less about women.... I started writing to tell them that this is not so. (When) I do write ... in Nigeria, in Africa, ... to paint a positive picture about women... who are very, very positive in their thinking, who are very, very independent, and very, very industrious". (Nwapa 27) So, she employs local metaphors and similes, and deploys subaltern counter-language to present the female gender as positive and strong being rather than negative and weaker. Her gender-oriented counter-rhetorics revolve around food and agriculture as West African women are the primary participants in food production and supply networks. Through the treatment of food and farming images, she seeks to signify a socially productive Igbo womanhood going outside the socially constructed circle of 'feeding into' the Mother Earth or 'good housewife' stereotypes that pervade West African culture.

Nwapa, a poet with an intricate awareness of Igbo gender politics, takes the woman-cassava association as a literary paradigm. Apparently, she glorifies cassava, the muted crop. But literally she glorifies the woman, the muted social being. She openly questions the masculine logic of presenting woman's cultural roles as insignificant by rewriting woman's active participation in domestic deeds, farming and war; she reframes linguistic signs to contradict masculine presuppositions regarding woman, and thereby tends to transform prejudice into glorification, hate into love, dishonour into honour, and disadvantaged weakness into privileged strength. Hence, she begins the volume by emphasizing some of the exceptional attributes of cassava:

You grow in poor soils
 You grow in rich soils
 You grow in gardens
 You grow in farms.
 You are easy to grow
 Children can plant you
 Women can plant you

Everybody can plant you. (5-12)

The excerpt expresses the simplicity and adaptable nature of cassava, emphasizing that anyone can cultivate it. The poetic persona, therefore, asserts, "We must sing for you/ Great cassava, we must sing/ We must not forget/ Thee, the great one" (12-16). This sentiment is echoed by Korieh, who points out that cassava has an advantage over other crops as it can endure harsh conditions and thrive in less fertile soil. Additionally, the poem portrays the theme of ingratitude, particularly towards women, as it illustrates how people tend to neglect and disregard cassava once it has fulfilled its purpose of sustaining them:

As children, you fed us
 You were like a mother
 You fed us fat

But we easily forget... (29-32)

Cassava is personified here. It is compared with an affectionate mother who cares and feeds the Igbo people. But patriarchal Igbo culture 'sing(s) for the yam' only. Both cassava and yam are the main foodstuffs of Igbo people. Yet, yam is only considered the most important crop for being cultivated by males and that's why an annual festival is celebrated that is called 'The New Yam Festival'. The festival takes place in early August. During this festive event, yam is consumed across the communities. Furthermore, individuals proudly exhibit their harvested yam tubers, which serve as a tangible representation of their notable achievements. The display of yam tubers showcases the collective accomplishments of the community and underscores the significance of yam within their cultural practices. Nwapa uses cassava and yam metaphorically for man and woman respectively, and expresses her anger and disillusionment for denying the contribution of cassava/ woman in the society:

We sing for the yam

We have yam festival
Why, Oh why are
These denied you...
The yam is great
But you are greater
Great yam
You only have
A false value
Stop your arrogance! (Section 7)

Nwapa shows how the importance of cassava is ignored and forgotten in the patriarchal society through the celebration of yam festival because the festival is also a cultural sign. So, she deconstructs the cultural sign to de-centralise the patriarchal hegemony placing and proclaiming the significant role of cassava/ woman during the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970). Igbo people were mostly affected in the war. Nearly two million Igbos lost their lives. Lots of males partook in the war leaving the burden of their families on women and forgetting to cultivate yam. But, cassava/ woman took care of the children and family. Furthermore, many women also joined the civil war and sacrificed their lives. The poetess expresses her gratitude to the subaltern martyrs and the women (who took care of children and family in absence of their husbands) addressing them as 'saviour' just like cassava was the 'saviour' during yam scarcity 'in the time of peace' or 'in the time of war':

Don't be angry
Great mother
You were our Saviour
During the war.
You have been our Saviour
Long before the war.
When the yam disappeared
Great Mother was with us.
We never lack Cassava
In the time of peace
In the time of war
We never lack Cassava. (Section 9)

Cassava, thus, plays a very crucial role during and before the war just like woman in the war and in the family. But their contribution in the household chores is always unrecognized as cassava's:

Who will wash the pot?
 Who will wash the mortar?
 Not me.
 Not me.
 'Never mind'
 Mother says quietly
 'I'll wash the pot'
 Mother and Cassava are one.
 Yes they are one
 One loves her children
 The other
 Also loves her children.
 Both you and Mother
 You are long suffering
 You love your children
 You are wonderful. (Section 11)

Nwapa also seeks forgiveness for this ignorance: "...You must pardon us/ Great Mother Cassava/ Great Mother Cassava/ You must pardon us" (32-36). Asking for 'pardon' from cassava, Nwapa suggests that it has consciousness, elevating and empowering it to the position occupied by human and spiritual beings in Igbo culture. This metaphorical personification enables Nwapa to construct cassava as female. Cassava is not just 'like a mother', for this simile facilitates the subsequent metaphorization, making the relationship closer and stronger. Verbrugge argues that metaphorical language activates a 'transformational process', in the sense that one event is transformed into 'another event that was previously experienced as very different in kind'. He also argues that this transformational process is "fanciful in quality, since it alters conventional identities. It is directional, in that one event (the topic) is transformed by a second (the vehicle). It is partial, in that the topic is not completely reidentified as the vehicle ... it is fusalional, because there is a plastic remodelling of the topic by the vehicle, rather than a preservation of separate identities". (168)

Of course, by the feminised process of signification (metaphorization), Nwapa deconstructs the derogatory androcentric meaning of cassava and attaches a laudatory meaning, and through the deconstruction she compliments cassava and woman. This cassava-woman or cassava-mother relationship is made more stronger in the expression of 'Great Mother Cassava'. This inseparability is repeatedly emphasized, not merely as an implicit bonding, but as an explicit event: "Mother and Cassava are one."

However, other gendered terms for cassava in *Cassava Song and Rice Song* include Great Mother, Great Woman, Lover of Children and Mother Cassava. This variability in naming opens up and pluralizes cassava, which is resistant to the monocentric masculine-ordered culture. The multiple references triggered by Nwapa's rewriting of cassava conform with Spender's assertion that "if more than one set of names were available, users of the language could elect to use those names which best reflected their interests But because it has been males who have named the world, no such choice exists and the falseness of the partial names they have supplied goes unchecked". (109) The otherness of mothers and female cassava producers in Igbo societies is thus not regarded by Nwapa as an inferior otherness; it is presented instead as an empowering subject that places Mother (cassava) in a relationship of equality - even superiority - to Father (Yam):

We thank almighty God
For giving us cassava
We hail thee, Cassava
The great cassava... (1-4)
You, Mother Cassava
You deserve recognition
You are no cash crop
But you deserve recognition. (43)

Conclusion

Nwapa, thus, deconstructs the male-oriented derogatory and monocentric language for cassava/ woman, and reconstructs a new language of respect and dignity mentioning the significant qualities of cassava/ woman and their roles in household chores or during the nationalistic crisis. They tend the family, participated in national war and maintain economic balance. So, they are not weak, inactive and useless; rather very strong,

very active and very productive. They, therefore, deserve recognition and respect. That's why, Nwapa idealises cassava as a mother figure to express gratitude and reverence to woman and motherhood, and through the glorification of the crop, their domestic and social roles are made visible. Furthermore, she employs the adjectives like 'Great', 'Saviour' several times, she seeks forgiveness for men's ignorance, and employs capital 'C' for cassava to present cassava as a worthy crop, a motherly figure to deconstruct the phallogocentric linguistic domination of Igbo culture. Her linguistic signification resembles to male-centric linguistic pattern. But, whereas male-centric culture attaches negative 'signified'(s) with cassava to ideologize their superiority on women and in society; she employs positive signified (s) to deconstruct the androcentric signs and to reconstruct their own superiority (which is even greater than Father's) and dignity in the Igbo society.

Works Cited:

- Acholonu, Catherine Obianuju. *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*. Afa Publications, 1995.
- Bailey, Charles, and Albert Sechehaye, translators. *Course in General Linguistics*. By Ferdinand de Saussure, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966.
- Butler, Judith. "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism'". *The Postmodern Turn: New Perspectives on Social Theory*, edited by Stephen Seidman, Cambridge University Press, 1994. 153-70.
- Cameron, Deborah. *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*. Palgrave, 2002.
- Chuku, Gloria. "Gender Relations in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Society." *Igbo in Atlantic World*, edited by Toyin Falola, Indiana University Press, 2016. 46-68.
- E. Marks and I. de Courtivron, editors. *New French Feminisms*. Harvester Press, 1981, pp.Xiii
- Korieh, J.C. "Yam is King! But Cassava is the Mother of all Crops: Farming, Culture, and Identity in Igbo Agrarian Economy." *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol. 31, no.1, 2007, 221-32.

Leclerc, Annie. "Woman's Word". *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*, edited by Debora Cameron, Routledge, 1992. 74-79.

Nwapa, Flora. *Cassava song and Rice Song*. Tana Press, 1986.

Nwapa, Flora. "The Poetics of Economic Independence for Female Empowerment: An Interview with Flora Nwapa." Interview by Marie Umeh. *Research in African Literatures*, vol.26, no. 2, 1995, 22-29.

Sapir, Edward. *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech*. Hartcourt, 1921.

Spender, Dale. "Extracts from Man Made Language." *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*, edited by Debora Cameron, Routledge, 1992. 102-10.

Ugo, D. "Iwa ji Ofu (New Yam Festival) in Igboland". africanloft.com, 2007.

Verbrugge, Robert R. "The Role of Metaphor in Our Perception of Language." *Annals of The New York Academy of Sciences*, vol. 433, no. 1, 1984, 167-83.

Yana, Idris Hamza. "The Metaphors for Women in Flora Nwapa's "Cassava Song"." *International Journal of Social Sciences and Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. 4, no.1, 2019, 17-22.