

Social Inequality in the Representation of Childlessness Experiences in Gender Discourses: A Pragma-Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines the inequality in the portrayal of the experiences of childlessness in both sexes especially in Africa. There has been an askew representation of the experiences of the two genders involved in the same situation both structurally, socially and emotionally. Women have been continually, the focus of the ugly experiences in the face of childlessness. The study gathered excerpts from four Nigerian home videos as data for this study. The ideology of power and powerlessness, are investigated using pragmatic tools of face and Illocutionary force under the umbrella of critical discourse analysis focusing on how men are ridiculed, subjugated, humiliated and denied their rights as a result of their childlessness. The study finds out that most men that are certified childless medically, go through hell in the hands of their fertile wives. Next is that a man's childlessness exposes him to insults and ridicules from his kinsmen. Additionally, there are social and structural systems of oppression in the African societies that subordinate, subjugate, humiliate and dominate childless men. The study recommends a

liberation fight for this group of men, as well as equity and equality in the treatment of every citizen whether with or without children.

Keywords: inequality, oppression, childless men, power/powerlessness, discourse, face,

Word count: 198

1. Introduction

Childlessness in its various shades is a continental concern and has continued to engage researchers from the socio-economic to socio-political, socio-cultural and even medically. Majority of these researches have women at the centre of their investigations. The reason for this is that in most cultures and societies, women have been at the receiving end of the courses and consequences of childlessness. This is portrayed in most literary works, in films, in documentaries, and so on.

Ombelet, (2011) and Tabogo & Adongo, (2013) in addressing the experiences of childlessness in women, identified stigma, diverse and alternate

marriage as some of the challenges they go through. Ocholor, (2019) identified that childless women get humiliated, dehumanized, subjugated, bullied, subordinated, abused and their social rights denied, unfortunately, by their fellow women. Emenyi (2005:105) portrays the negative experiences of the African woman who has no child drawing from Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough* and Chukwu's "the identity of self" where women without children are treated as inferior or cursed human beings. The question this study poses is, "is it only the women that encounter these negative experiences in situations of childlessness or are the childless men in any way, treated likewise?"

2. Values of Children

In discussing values of children, most studies have identified having children with some economic, cultural, social and psychological benefits. Fawcett's (1982) observes that in Africa and Asia, there are benefits attached to having children which include: emotional, economic, security, self-enrichment and development, identification, family cohesiveness and continuity. Adebusoye (1994) observes that in Africa, the psychological benefit matters a lot as parenthood is perceived as a way of making a person a complete adult. Hence, children confer social respect and elevated status on couples. In addition, Fadipe (1970) observes that among the Yoruba, as in most ethnic groups (including the Igbos), children are validators of marriage and childlessness is often a cause of marital instability.

From these studies, it can be inferred that it is not only the women that receive the social and psychological stigma but both sexes. Children provide companionship, psychological gratification, prestige, security, identity, respect and makes a married person a complete adult,

while childlessness incurs stigma, no status, lack of identity or less than a human status.

Going by the findings of the studies above, the question for this study becomes very clear and that is, why the voicelessness by human rights activists and literary writers concerning the negative social and psychological experiences of childless men especially in Africa?

3. Pragmatics

Pragmatics looks at ways contexts contribute meaning in language behaviors. Pragmatics presume that participants in a discourse context rely on their knowledge of the language system, the knowledge of the world, the knowledge of cultures and conventions of people and knowledge of factors of situations in which communication takes place (Kempson :1977). Thus, discourse contexts provide possible associations to utterances which make available platforms for meaning interpretations. Some of these associations could be structural, social or cultural factors expressed in the linguistic items employed by the discourse participants. Hence, this study evaluates the utterances extracted from the four Nigerian movies to underscore the structural, social and or cultural ideologies that are used by the powerful to dominate, subjugate, humiliate, deny, and subordinate the infertile or childless men.

Out of the many pragmatic tools, this study will employ only the negative face and the illocutionary force of Speech Acts in the analysis of the data.

3.1 Face

Different faces exist in discourses and these are displayed depending on the social contexts and individual participants in discourse

situations. Ho (1994) defines face as the “prestige, honour or ‘good name’ that a person or social group holds and claims within a border or community”. Goffman (1967) defines face as “the positive value that humans attach to their identities and as such face is an individual’s self-esteem”...or positive social value a person effectively claims for him/ herself. Similarly, Scollon and Scollon (1995) distinguish face as a “person’s right and the need to be considered a normal, contributing, or supporting member of the society.

3.1.1 Positive Face and Negative Face

Face is divided into two: positive and negative face..

A positive face is the need to be accepted, to be treated as a member of the same group. to be connected, to belong and know that wants are shared by others; the desire to be appreciated and approved of by a selected others while negative face is the concern of one to be unimpeded and free from imposition. A negative face is concerned with having independence and freedom as everyone else; without being imposed on by others in concerns of the basic claims to territories, right and privileges.

In Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory, face can be lost, maintained or enhanced and must constantly be attended to in interaction. They made a list of acts that threaten the addressee’s positive and negative face. Some of the acts that threaten the addressee’s positive face include: promise, expressing a future debt the addressee must accept and reject, threats, warnings and dares, offers, contradictions or disagreement, expression of violent emotions and reminding. (Brown and Levinson: 1987),

3.2 Speech Acts

The theory of speech acts as propounded by Austin [1962] and Searle [1969] states that the meaning of a sentence goes beyond what the sentence expresses to performing an action. This means that when an utterance is expressed, an action is performed simultaneously. Speech acts theory recognizes three acts which include locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. The study will concern itself with only the illocutionary acts contained in the data. An illocutionary act is the act performed in saying something. It refers to the intended meaning of the speaker.

4. Power/ powerlessness

Power is a complex and abstract system embedded in language that affords speakers the ability to intentionally control, manipulate or dominate other individual(s). According to Bullock and Trombley. (1999), power is the “ability of its holders to exact compliance or obedience of other individuals to their will”. Edelman (1977) opines that the power-holder is a person who can “exercise influence outside the context of formal proceedings, thus wielding real power”. As a matter of fact, power and language work together. Language plays a major role in the creation of power, (values in social life) and can transform such power into rights. Thus, social values and beliefs are created and shared through language, hence, language use embodies views, behaviours and social status of language users which go far beyond language itself.

Powerlessness on the other hand refers to an attitude or state of being imposed on, manipulated, controlled, disrespectfully treated, denial of ones right, helplessness etc. Young (1990) posits that powerlessness is reinforced by a lack of decision-making power, the inability to enact choices, and

exposure to the disrespectful treatment that results from occupying a marginal status. Thus, language is a frame upon which socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-political assumptions and behaviours hang. As a matter of fact, the social and cultural frames of the childless are made more explicit through language use.

5. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis is concerned with how power and ideology embedded in language are manifested in interactions which in turn, designate social relationships and practices.

It encompasses a wider range of reasoning and argumentation in its study of a texts as it draws from both discursive and non-discursive elements in the interpretation of texts. It uses social and cultural theories in determining the associations between language use and social practices. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) assert that the discursive elements of texts are a kind of device that works in combination with other devices around the interlocutors and within the context of their interaction to underscore the social practice that is taking place. In other words, critical discourse analysis unravels the specific structures or frames in language use in particular social events and their relative out-puts as social practices.

Fairclough (1995) opts that discursive relations are sites of social struggle and conflict and that every social situation is a potential domain of class/cultural hegemony, with dominant groups struggling to assert and maintain particular structuring within and between them. Thus, social behaviours are power behaviours expressed mostly through language and this, this study will x-rays from the data for this study using the face and illocutionary tools of pragmatics.

6. Data Presentation and Analysis

The analysis of the data will employ the tools of negative face and illocutionary force to unravel social and structural power relations of aggression and oppression embedded in the language used against childless or infertile men in Nigerian home videos.

6.1 My Wife Knew She Cannot Get Pregnant and She Married Me

Social/ Emotional Power/ Powerlessness

This movie portrays the experiences of some men that are certified infertile, in the hands of their wives. From the movie, these men are treated as worthless, useless and valueless human beings on the premise that they can't get them pregnant. In order words, the worth and usefulness of these men are attached to their making their wives pregnant which poses back a challenge to the feminists over their assertion that a woman is a human being whether she bears children or not because she has other values apart from child-bearing. The question here becomes- has the infertile man other values that makes him a human being apart from impregnating a woman?

The movie has a twist as captured by the title. At the long run, it was discovered that the woman had lost her womb through abortion which the doctor was aware of and she went behind the husband to meet the doctor, who requested she pays in cash and kind to cover up her past and put the blame on the husband.

The following excerpts are gathered from the situations of concern on childlessness by the couples from the movie.

Wife: What's the problem?

Husband: I'm worried

At home.

Wife: Worried about what?

Husband: Honey I don't know what is happening. It's been 3 years of marriage and nothing to show for it, not even a miscarriage.

Wife: You think I am not worried as well? My mates that wedded same time with me are nursing their second baby. Or do you think I am the cause of this?

Husband: I am confused, I don't know what to think of, I'm sorry. Can we see a doctor to know what's going on? I have a good doctor friend that I trust can be of help.

Wife: Okay, tomorrow
(meeting the doctor, at the point of introduction, she walks away)

Husband: *(at home)* Why did you do that?

Wife: I had a business meeting to attend; that meeting with the doctor could wait

Husband: When then do we see him then?

Wife: Maybe next week
Couple meets the doctor for some analysis

Husband: Doctor what's the issue? we can handle it. Is it fibroid or....?

Doctor: No. the problem is not with the woman she is perfectly okay. You are the cause. A man with low sperm count will find it difficult to get a woman pregnant.

The wife turns to him

Wife: Wait! Do you mean he is impotent? You mean I have been wasting my life with this useless, shameless impotent man.

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	humiliation

How did I end up with a vegetable like you? You impotent idiot

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	Dehumanisation

I picked you up from the gutters and cleaned you up in the name of marriage and love.

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	Dehumanization

Look at your useless life; shameless impotent bastard

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	Humiliation

You are the reason for my frustration. You are half vegetable man, and that's all you are.

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	humiliation

The husband runs to his doctor- friend

My wife has become the worst nightmare I've ever had. This woman is killing me slowly, she's becoming so nasty, bossy, and domineering

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	powerlessness

This movies shows the dehumanizing and humiliating experiences of the infertile man in the hand of the wife.

6.2 How My Mother Sent My Poor Childless Wife Away

Socio-Cultural/ Traditional Power

Embedded in this movie are social and systemic power relations that humiliate and subordinate the so called childless or infertile man. Some of the social and cultural norms that subordinate the childless man as expressed in this movie include: kinsmen poke-nosing into the man’s private life and marriage, which is considered, a way of helping to keep up the man’s lineage. Next is the traditional power mothers weld over their sons’ marriage affairs. In most African societies, mothers have this power of marrying wives for their sons without their consent and imposing such on them. This is especially, if their sons made the choice of the first wives who may have been unfortunate to bear children. Any act of resistance by the childless man is met with serious consequences mated out by the elders of the land. So was the case of Chialuamogu, the childless character from the movie as expressed in the excerpts below.

Kinsman: Your name is Chilua, that is, my God will fight for me but there are wars we have been empowered to wage as men

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	Humiliation/ taunting

Chilua: And what does that mean?

Kinsman: See Chilua, it is going to be a sacrilage for a good looking man like you to return

to Olisa without a child. Your childless, I can stop it

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	humiliation

Chilua: What are you up to?

Kinsman: The problem is not with your wife. I want you to back off and allow me to plant the seed of progress in her.

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	Humiliation / power

Chilua: Are you telling me to my face that you want to sleep with my wife?

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	powerlessness

Kinsman: It is a way to continue the existence of the family and the village of your fathers

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	Power / humiliation

The mother meets with his uncles on the issue of the son’s childlessness

Elders: Barrenness does not run in our family.

Mother: That's why 'am making arrangements to bring in a new wife for him, and I want you his uncles to know my plans and give me your support

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	Power / humiliation

He runs to the Elders to report the mother

Elders: Go ahead and bring in the second wife; you have our support

Elder: You appear to be very angry but you have no reasons to be.

Mother takes off to marry a wife single handedly without the son's consent.

Chilua: Uncle I don't understand you, my mother went and married another girl as a wife without my consent, uncle you just have to caution her.

She arrives home with the new wife to meet the son and his wife sitting together discussing

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	Powerlessness

Son: Mama welcome

Daughter-in law: Mama welcome

Mother: See, this is not what my son needs, he needs a child and that is why I have gone to Umuebide to get him a fruitful wife.

Elder: You are talking like a child, of course, you're a child. Your mother does not need your consent at all to present you with a wife.

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	Power

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	Humiliation/ Power

Son: You mean you went to Umuebide to get a wife for me? Did I tell you I needed a wife?

Chilua: I have a wife I married with my money

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	Powerlessness

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	Powerlessness

Mother: You don't need to tell me because I know. Listen! bareness does not run in my family nor in your own family. So we can't dwell in bareness just because you made a mistake and ended up with this man.

Elders: See son, a woman that has lived with a man for four years without a child, can be invited to men's meeting because she's a man. You should be thanking your mother for the steps she took. Needless to tell you that in this kingdom it is a taboo for any man to reject a woman or wife married for

him by his own mother, the consequences can be so devastating. (*he goes home helpless*)

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	Taunting/ Power

A man is taunted, insulted, humiliated, dominated and subordinated because of his childless state.

6.3 Childless king

Traditional/ Structural Power

This movie expresses structural oppression embedded in tradition. A young prince, an heir to the throne, is denied coronation and threatened with taking away of his dynasty and giving it to another on the basis that he has no child. This tradition, made by man, axes its power on childless men as if the presence of a child is all that it takes for a man to be a man, and have his rights exercised. The fact that the prince's wife had several known miscarriages and deaths of children does not attract mercy from this tradition, rather, it seeks to inflict more pains through denial of Prince's rights. Against his wish (powerlessness), the prince is forced to take another wife in search of a son.

The excerpts speaks:

Elder 1: The prince cannot be crowned unless he has a son. He must present an heir.

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	Power

Elder 2: Our tradition states that, if a successor fails to present a son or an heir before his ascension to the dynasty, the dynasty falls on another family. That's our tradition and everyone must abide by it. Go and marry another wife

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	Power

Prince: I love my wife, why should everyone tell me to go take another wife?

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	Powerlessness

Elder 1: (to the priest).We cannot give him another chance, because the people are complaining that they don't have a king. Advice the prince to give the dynasty to another family

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	Power

The Priest: The Prince just lost a child, we should give him time to recover!

Face	Illocutionary force
Positive face	consideration

Prince' friend: Take another wife, soon other rivals we start making attempt on your throne, if they have not even started.

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	power

Elder 2: We need a king we have to move the dynasty to another family

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	Power/ subjugation

Wife: Please to save the family, the throne and for the good of your people, take another wife (powerlessness)

At the birth of a son by the second wife, the Prince speaks

Prince: I went through a lot: the trauma, the insult and even my people said I am not fit to be a king because I have no child

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	powerlessness

This movie exposes a structural oppression embedded in tradition against a man without a child.

6.4 No Joy in a Childless Marriage

Social/Cultural Power

This movie stresses that social expectations takes away the joy of couples who have no child. A sick father and the son engages in an exchange which reveals to the son that the reason for the father's ailment is their childless situation. This in turn, affects the son's attitude towards his marriage and finally got him manipulated into extramarital affairs in order to give his sick father a grandchild; thereby bringing healing to the man. By this singular step, the love and joy of the home got dried up and the man's life became shattered as he couldn't get what he wanted.

Son: Father I have never seen you this sad before, what's going on?

You've always been a strong man!

Face	Illocutionary force
Positive face	concern

Father: Son, I was brought up to love hard work and legacy. It is through this education that your mother and I worked hard to build this company you're managing today, so that our children will never work for anyone but for themselves. And I hope that you and Vivian will come up to have your own kids. That your mom and I doesn't talk about this all the time does not mean we don't care. The earlier you and Vivian make a conscience decision to give us grandchildren the better. If I know I will be a grandfather tomorrow I will register in the next marathon race and you will see me running.

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	Power/ taunting

In the office with his personal assistance he becomes absent minded

P.A: What's wrong? You seem troubled

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	concern

Son: I am not that kind of person that cry over what's going on in my personal life, I just want to be left alone.

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	Lack of agreement

He shares with his PA as he persists. The friend arranges a woman who will carry a baby for him so as to make him and his parents happy

PA How do you see the lady? She's good abi?

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	manipulation

Son: That lady is good but the problem is that I've never cheated on my wife before

Face	Illocutionary force
	force

Negative face	Powerlessness /manipulated
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Friends: There is always a beginning to everything, you're doing that to make her give you a child, so your dying father will be happy.

Face	Illocutionary force
Positive face	Power/ manipulation

Son: Instead of that I can adopt a child

Face	Illocutionary force
Positive face	Power/ ability

Friend: Adopting a child isn't your blood. Do you think your parent does not know what they're asking for?

Face	Illocutionary force
Negative face	Bias/ predisposition/mind control

The mistress announces carrying his baby and he becomes very happy.

Son: Soon am gonna have a baby, how excited I am, I think am floating in the air, my parents will be happy that we are about giving them a grandchild, this is the news they are waiting to hear

Face	Illocutionary force
positive face	Powerlessness/ manipulated

7. Discussion/ Conclusion

From the four movies, it is obvious that childless men are not left out of the social and structural oppressions of denial, humiliation, dehumanisation, subordination, abuse, and other aggressive behaviours that characterise childless women experiences in African societies. Literary texts, documentations, movies and most titles have continued to throw in their voices on the plights of childless women in the different societies. Feminists of variant backgrounds have put up fights to stop the aggressive and oppressive behaviours mated out on childless women with emphasis on the fact that apart from childbearing, a woman has other values and roles she can play in a family and the society at large. And for this reason, a woman must have her rights and privileges as a member of a society and must be respected as regards her choices.

On the contrary, the plights of childless men who are in the same boat with the childless women seem to have eluded the attention of the literary and non-literary writers and activists. If there should be equity and equality in the way citizens are to be treated in a society, how come these powerless men are flanked into the powerful group as if their voices are the same. This study concludes that there has been a serious inequality in the representations and presentations in discourses and texts as regards the childless situation experiences of the two genders. Childless men experiences are left in obscurity while the men remain under the heavy arms of oppression and aggression from both sexes. Moreover, there are social and structural systems of oppression in the African societies that subordinate, subjugate, humiliate and dominate childless men as portrayed in the movies.

8. Recommendations

This study recommends that these men that are suffering under the cloak of childlessness be fought for and retrieved from the oppressive powers of both men and women in African societies. Equality and equality should characterise the behavioural attitudes of men and women in dealing with such men because they are also humans with equal rights and privileges as every other citizens. There should be a revisit to some of such traditions that tie the worth of the childless to having or not having children because they have other valuable roles in the society. After all, tradition is man-made.

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