Chapter 3

Critiquing Dominant Patriarchalised African Languages Through Feminist Approaches

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Autoethnographically based African languages and patriarchalised discourses

Language is power and is central to learning and social interactions. The African language discourses dealt with in this chapter are based on an autoethnographic, evocative research method, which is centred on the researcher's personal experience and point of view. In this research, the researcher is a full member of the group or social group studied (Wall 2008; Gobo and Marciniak 2011), which is the African language isiZulu. Patriarchal language examples applied are thus drawn from the author's personal experience, and some are supported by existing studies (Mathonsi and Mpungose 2015) and used as a form of secondary data. This section also applies practical discourse thinking regarding African-language dissemination of knowledge, especially in educational scenarios. An instructor or speaker is central to practical discourse, applied language discourse and learning, and the language instructions propagated are sustained by their practical experience (Ellis and Shintani 2013). In this case, language knowledge is shaped more by the speaker's experience than by text or recipients' knowledge. There is no shared experience or sharing of knowledge leading to an imposed construction and diffusion of knowledge. Because of its subjective, technically based knowledge, practical discourse becomes a relevant tool to utilise in this autoethnographically based critique of patriarchalised epistemologies in some African languages, exemplified by the isiZulu language. In no way does this chapter critique African languages in their entirety. African languages are a prodigious part of knowledge and a way of preserving the cultures of African people and societies at large. The chapter focuses mainly on questioning some patriarchalised tendencies embedded in African languages. Patriarchal biases remain dominant in African languages and are passed from one generation to the next, thus creating problems for the combat against gender inequities.

Although progress has been made—globally, as well as in Africa and South Africa—in fighting

gender inequities, gender gaps and inequalities still remain. Tenacious gender issues are evident in gender-based violence and crimes (for example, hate crimes), as well as in patriarchal-dominant cultures, religions, leadership and corporations. Ridgeway (2011) and Aterido, Beck and Lacovone (2013) contend that gender inequalities persist globally in contemporary societies and institutions. Moreover, research undertaken in South Africa indicates existing gender gaps and inequalities in education, with examples that include career paths (Moorosi 2010), reading literacy (Zuze and Reddy 2014) and science and mathematics (Dickerson, McIntosh and Valente 2015). Specifically, research highlights patriarchically driven gender inequalities and stereotyping across African languages (Mukama 1995; Mwangi 2010; Wa Mberia 2015). For instance, Ademowo and Balogun (2015) found sexism and public defamation of women's sexuality and bodies in Yoruba proverbs. The authors argued that even though African proverbs impart wisdom, they often also promote men's dominant sexuality and the objectification of African women's bodies, making sexuality the property of and a commodity for African men (Ademowo and Balogun 2015). While investing in and embracing African languages (Zeleza 2006; Ndimande-Hlongwa and Ndebele 2017), which this chapter supports, it is imperative to confront gender gaps in the use of language to combat all forms of patriarchally controlled approaches in education and society at large. Hence, in the African context, the argument is that the depatriarchalisation of education is as important as its decolonisation and Africanisation. It is against this background that this chapter questions and attempts to address some forms of patriarchally biased knowledge perpetuated in African languages.

In most African societies, proverbs constitute a vital tool for education, that is, the transmission of knowledge and the preservation of culture. They are, therefore, essential contributors to African language and cultural learning and comprehension. Proverbs help to promote creativity and oral art (Nyembezi 1963;[5] Magwaza 2004; Mathonsi 2004; Hussein 2005; Malunga 2013). However, African proverbs are mostly patriarchally biased, reinforcing ideas of male superiority and female inferiority. Proverbs are among the language arts that make it possible for African languages to play a part in the normalisation of the heteronormative and hegemonic patriarchal dominance that continues to undermine feminine bodies and roles (Mkhize and Njawala 2016). In the learning environment, learners of African languages are highly likely to assimilate patriarchalised knowledge that promotes the idea that women are subordinate to men (Mkhize 2015). Examples of conversant male-dominant proverbs that promote patriarchalised knowledge, also cited by Mathonsi and

5 This study may be considered outdated but is included as a sign of respect for African scholars such as Nyembezi (1963) who, despite colonial pressures, contributed to the promotion and preservation of African epistemologies, philosophies, languages and cultures.

Mpungose (2015), include:

> *Okuhlul 'amadoda kuyabikwa* (What men cannot handle should be reported, meaning that men are knowledgeable and can resolve all problems.)
> *Ikhand'elixegayo lofulel 'abafazi* (The weak head will be used by women for thatching, meaning that men should not be weaker than women/women have power over weak men.)
> *Indoda ayibuzwa* (A man is not questioned, meaning that a man is always right.)
> *Izwi le ndoda aliphikiswa* (A man's word is final, meaning that a man's orders should be obeyed without question.)

Such gendered proverbs, widely used by isiZulu speakers, reinforce gender-based norms that promote men's control, particularly over women. Unfortunately, such patriarchalised proverbs are part of the language used daily in homes and educational institutions. This is an example of how African languages publicly contribute to the construction of gender imbalances and patriarchal structures, which are generally accepted by members of society as part of their languages and cultures. Home is the main foundational education space where language and culture are socialised and adopted. In addition to proverbs, some African language expressions stereotype women as deviant on account of their behaviour, while praising men for the same behaviour. The isiZulu language has well-known patriarchally biased labels for men and women with multiple sexual partners. Examples include:

> A man with multiple sexual partners is called *isoka* (a sensual, artistic man who knows how to win a woman's heart).
> A woman with multiple sexual partners is referred to as *isifebe* (a loose woman).

Magwaza (2006: 4) views such patriarchalised practices as a divergent cultural script that reduces women's behaviour to their bodies and 'equates them to prostitutes'. Such gendered normative culture embedded in an African language encompasses a violation of women's reproductive rights and autonomous control of their bodies while promoting sexism. In this context, the language, to a certain extent, promotes gender-based power relations that uphold a socially constructed culture of subordination for women and authority for men (Mkhize 2015). African languages and cultures mostly portray men as knowledgeable and powerful and women as 'the other'. Practical discourse

helps unveil patriarchal biases that can be dangerously embedded in educators' ingrained, unquestioned gender norms through language and practical knowledge-based teaching methods. Since language is part of a culture, identifying one's socialised and ingrained gender norms and attitudes may be problematic. It is in this context that one might benefit from utilising feminist approaches, which also promote practical-centred epistemology, but in the form of interaction and conscience-raising approaches, where one teaches another.

Feminist approaches: Conceptualisation and theoretical frameworks

This chapter draws from post-structuralist, consciousness-raising and postcolonial feminist thinking. Post-structuralist feminist theorising, which argues against the objectification of women's knowledge in social, economic and political institutions, including education, helps to unveil gender gaps that foster silence and the omission of women's voices and narratives (Barrett 2005). Feminist post-structuralist thinking is relevant to the critiquing of patriarchalised knowledge produced in African language discourses as it depicts socially constructed identities and power relations that feminists must contest and thwart. Such theoretical thinking can help gender-specific power dynamics in African language educational spaces. Depatriarchalised knowledge dissemination can help develop a form of shared knowledge. Smith (2013) connects colonised knowledge to postcolonial feminist arguments about the colonial impact on the construction of culture, history, race, gender, individuals and knowledge (Mohanty 2003; Mkhize 2015). In African languages, patriarchal dominance can be drawn from a colonial understanding that extended the male-dominated mindset and 'othered' female brainpower. In African languages, arguably, women are positioned as subalterns (Spivak and Riach 2016) and portrayed as passive recipients of knowledge, in contrast to men, who are seen as knowledge producers. Colonial discourses contribute immensely to patriarchalised knowledge, and the effects are still clearly visible in most postcolonial nations' institutional structures and practices—for example, in South African education. Postcolonial consciousness-raising feminist theorising resists all forms of oppression and encourages the sharing of knowledge based on lived experiences (Dalmiya and Alcoff 1993) to promote non-hierarchal knowledge production and dissemination. Feminist consciousness-raising group approaches create opportunities for individuals to share their specific experiences, as also advocated in postcolonial feminism—and these experiences are practically based and can even be emotional in nature. Hence, feminist theoretical thinking can create an opportunity for alternative narratives (Mkhize 2015), negotiated power (Nnaemeka 2004) and a transformed African male

domain (Zondi 2007) to address the gender gaps and inequalities that continue to exist in African languages. Such African feminist rationale finds women's experiences located in negotiated power to be significant in the African context. African feminist thinking subscribes to an interactive and reflective society in which negotiated space can allow the oppressed to influence and possibly transform the oppressor. It is in this context that feminist theoretical thinking and epistemologies can be used as an alternative tool to reveal gender power dynamics to depatriarchalise dominant knowledge.

Gender power dynamics are not always visible but are always present in African languages

Gender dynamics are not visible but are always related, attached and embedded in most languages, including African ones. Gender and gender roles are social contrasts (Lorber 2018; Mkhize 2015) in social constructionism. Social constructionism eminence refers to interpreting what society constructs and upholds as accurate and meaningful. Language is central to evolving socially constructed meanings influenced by families and cultures. Subsequently, the constructive power of language plays an integral role in the normalisation of gender-based power dynamics in social relations and institutionalised practices. Patriarchal language is habitually normalised and is an agent for female inferiority in society. Patriarchally dominant language and knowledge add to compulsory heterosexuality and the patronising of other gender identities' agency, power and abilities. In most societies, including African societies, languages have become vehicles of socialisation through which cultural values and norms are learned, adopted and passed on. African languages, for instance, tend to internalise patriarchy as dominant, which is normalised in gender dynamics where men are viewed as powerful and women as mediocre. Patriarchal dominance, extended by colonialism, limits women's abilities and agency and places men and women in the oppressor/knower and oppressed/'other' dichotomies, respectively. Such dominant patriarchal language is made compulsory and internalised in acquiring and comprehending African languages and cultures. Women are always placed in a subordinate position to men. This could be because African languages, especially isiZulu, express gender mainly in binary opposition: man and woman (*umfazi nendoda*), ignoring the existence of other gender forms, even though homosexuality has always existed in the Zulu culture and is referred to as *inkonkoni*. However, homosexuality is still not acknowledged in everyday language usage as it is regarded as taboo or an unAfrican gender (Dlamini 2006). Normalised gender binary opposition does not only uphold heteronormativity but

also enacts heterosexuality as compulsory in most African languages and cultures. When a woman is powerful, she is not seen as a powerful woman in her own right but is compared to a man. Some common examples embedded in the isiZulu language include:

> When a woman has a strong physical stature, she is labelled a man—*uyindoda* (she is a man)—not a woman.
> When a woman knows how to fight or throw a punch, she is labelled a man—*uyindoda* (she is a man)—not a woman.
> When a woman can lift heavy objects, she is labelled a man—*uyindoda* (she is a man) —not a woman.
> Competition—*ukuqhudelana* (derived from *iqhude*—a rooster/male chicken)—is used even when only women are involved. This suggests that competition is for men and not for women.
> *Izinkunzi ezimbili azibusi kwisibaya sinye*—two bulls cannot be in the same kraal, meaning that two men cannot run the same household. This proverb means that only a man can be the head of a household.

This normative binary approach to gender is transferred to the learning of African languages, where the relationship between men and women is often used with reference to patriarchally biased power relations. A woman, therefore, always assumes a subservient position. Most African cultures and languages celebrate and endorse male supremacy and leadership over citizens and men's dominance over women. As the above examples demonstrate, men are often regarded as sovereign, powerful and in control. Women are habitually regarded as dependants. One isiZulu proverb that is reflected in economic, social and political leadership structures is *Okuhlul 'amadoda kuyabikwa* (Whatever men cannot handle should be reported) (Mathonsi and Mpungose 2015). This gives the impression that men can handle anything and everything. It indicates a society dominated by men and in which men take leadership positions, as is apparent in many African and world societies. Another proverb states *Ihlonipha la ingayikwendela khona* (She respects where she will not marry, which means that respect is expected only from a woman and not from a man) (Mathonsi and Mpungose 2015).

In this patriarchal context, the *hlonipha* culture often places women in needy and submissive positions. In fact, *hlonipha* also includes children, which is problematic as it equates women to children. In its literal meaning, *hlonipha* refers to respect in the Zulu culture. Zungu (1985) explains

hlonipha as a cultural tool that is used to show appropriate respect for authority. Thus, *hlonipha* becomes a social custom that reinforces 'proper' behaviour in the family and community (Mkhize 2012). Further, *hlonipha* culture is viewed as regulating and controlling the rules of conduct regarding language, dress code and other behavioural patterns based on gender, age and social status (Mkhize 2012). *Hlonipha* also confirms the authority of men over women, reinforcing male domination in general. The Zulu culture of *hlonipha* is intended to maintain *ubuntu* (humanity) in the community but, either intentionally or unintentionally, ends up promoting gender inequalities (Mkhize 2012). Such normative gendered binary opposition, manifested in most African cultures and societies, is covertly carried on in teaching and learning African languages as the languages borrow their practical examples from cultural practices and oral arts, including proverbs. This chapter, therefore, proposes feminist pedagogical teaching methods to help address culturally rooted gendered discourses and avoid promoting patriarchalised epistemologies and knowledge production.

Addressing gendered African language discourse

In educational spaces, language ought to be utilised to facilitate, produce, disseminate and evaluate knowledge. Also, language, as a subject, ought to be learned in a managerial but non-hierarchical gender-specific controlled approach. In the African context, decolonisation and Africanisation of education is central and should be an obligatory objective of teaching and learning. The unheeded 'other' in the transformative discourse of education is depatriarchalising education. Reddy and Butler (2004) criticise existing narratives in the postcolonial African context that accentuate the concept of gender as inapt. African language discourse promotes the same impression. It is necessary to expose and remove gender-based power relations entrenched in education. Based on feminist views, there is no absolute truth or reality, and everything, including language and culture, is constructed by humans. Butler (2004), for instance, is one of the post-structuralist feminist scholars who reject objectivity, reality and all categories as social constructs. For this reason, every paradigm is subjected to construction, deconstruction by shifts and new developments and reconstruction. Knowledge production in all languages, including African languages, should be progressive in every field and not a definitive static objective. African languages and cultures are gendered, mainly favouring men (Gqola 2001; Mama 2001). This results in African languages and cultures privileging men and tending to exclude and silence other genders, including women.

Freire (1996) conceptualises the banking system as a non-hierarchal knowledge production

and dissemination method. In Freire's banking system, learners and educators are all role players in knowledge production. This conceptual framework can be pragmatic in African language discourses. African languages can be used to 'disseminate information' that does not acquaint learners with patriarchally dominant ideas and views but instead opens up avenues for non-gendered critical thinking and sharing of African-based epistemological systems. This is in agreement with feminist pedagogic approaches and with theoretical thinking that is critical of power structures and inequalities (Crabtree, Sapp and Licona 2009). Hence the proposal to dismantle patriarchally dominant knowledge systems such as those entrenched in African languages and cultures. Based on the researcher's grounded experience in feminist studies and African languages, feminist approaches are considered useful for encouraging a disruption of power asymmetries and inequalities and can be of value in teaching and learning African languages. The use of multiple and divergent strategies in learning not only accommodates and accounts for diverse abilities but also allows everyone to be represented in their own specific identities, including gender identities, and to be accepted. Furthermore, it is a fundamental facet of feminist philosophy to consider the importance of diversity as a counter to the simplistic binaries of superiority and inferiority implicit in patriarchal schemas, and feminist approaches are relevant to African language education. The dispersal of power and hierarchies entrenched in African languages by applying feminist approaches can help deconstruct and resist gender-based norms to introduce an Africanised education in which colonialised and patriarchalised mindsets and knowledge are renovated. The use of feminist strategies for the dissemination of knowledge may mean that African language practitioners can expose silenced, obscured, slurred and tabooed gender issues.

Conclusion

This chapter argued that patriarchalised knowledge is mainstreamed in most African languages and cultures (Gqola 2001) and is reproduced and maintained in formal education through unacknowledged instructive practices. It further argued that feminist approaches could help identify and critique African language comprehension of marginalised epistemologies to promote non-hierarchal knowledge production and dissemination. Through shared narratives and negotiated power, a collective knowledge can be built around the similar dynamics of varied experiences, dismantling identity power dynamics and those that are specifically patriarchally controlled. In critiquing African languages—by accessing the implicit dominant and mainstream knowledge they produce and sustain—feminist epistemologies can help transcend normalised and engrained

African-language gender-specific experiential knowledge. Arguments in this chapter are based on autoethnographic research methods and secondary data. The aim is not to impose feminist approaches but to refer to them as tools to help contest and resist gender inequalities contributing to depatriarchalising and Africanising education. African philosophy promotes the principles of negotiation, sharing and respect irrespective of gender identity, as African languages ought to.

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