The Sexual Politics of the Female Body in Contemporary Zimbabwean Youth Sociolects in Interpersonal Communicative Contexts

by

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Abstract

Verbal formatives describing the sexual script are often highly sexualized and gendered, perpetuating the patriarchal project. This article seeks to demonstrate how the gender politics of inequality are played in such highly sexualized everyday discourse within Zimbabwean youth sociolects. Largely viewed as apolitical and common sense, such descriptions of the sexual script are highly ideologically loaded, asserting male hegemony and 'othering' the female. This is achieved by conveniently appropriating applied and causative verbal extensions that deliberately and completely disregard or suppress reciprocal verbal extensions which recognise the female as an active participant to the sexual act. The paper interrogates theories and approaches in representation, (re)construction of gender identities, language and communication from Poststructural Feminist (Butler, 1990: 2004), Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalytic concerns, Saussurean linguistics approach and Bakhtinian politics of negotiated meaning (Bakhtin, 1981: 1986). It is argued here that the 'common sense' usage of these highly gendered and sexualized verbal formatives is not politically innocent but part of the culturally/socially ingrained and institutionalized construction of gendered subjectivities. Language usage thus becomes the superstuctural semiotic tool where the appearance of subjects in 'real life' is embedded in these gendered cultural codes which both shape their behaviour, not apolitical and transparent, but rather how they are constructions which encode particular patriarchal views.

Introduction

Language use is often a highly subjecting enterprise, a critical tool for asserting power and perpetuating hegemonic power dynamics. Language is a powerful superstructural semiotic tool through which hegemonies, gendered or otherwise, are created and sustained. Gendered descriptions of sexual relations and the sexual act, especially through applied and causative verbal formatives, for example, evince ways in which socially constructed and culturally learnt gendered power dynamics are espoused. Our perspicacity of gender relations and gender identity have traditionally been dictated to us as a universal set of convictions and ways of behaviour, largely learnt through socialisation. Traditionally, society had prescriptive ways of ascribing behaviour patterns based on gender. This did not just include social roles but also behaviour and linguistic patterns. Society believed that there was ways in which males and females behaved, not just in roles but even in the manner in which they speak, what they speak about and how they speak about it. This eventually would lead to the creation of a basic classification of how generally women or men must speak and what they talk about.

By extension, how males and females speak about sex, sexual relations and/or the sexual script therefore, may also be influenced by these socially learnt and ingrained constructed behaviour and linguistic patterns. Perceiving 'gender' as socially constructed within a people's living experiences, embedded in the base of their philosophy and manifested at theoretical and pragmatic levels of their polity, the article seeks to argue that the descriptions of the sexual script within the sociolects are not always innocent and apolitical. Because 'gender' encapsulates socially perceived differences in behaviour and role differentiation between sexes, it is never independent of other social systems and cultural codes. Infact, it would be futile to consider 'gender' as a fixed and immutable construct. Rather, it must that be perceived as a process. Furthermore, gender classifications must be seen to permeate through a culture's cosmic perceptions and can be discernible in its language, language use in practical and concrete situations, storehouse of wisdom, rituals, and philosophy. These learnt and shared social systems and cultural codes condition the ways in which as individuals we self-reference especially so in relation to 'others'. It also conditions how we create and perpetuate meanings – individually and collectively.

In line with this, Hall (2003) points out that there are, broadly speaking, three approaches to explaining how individual or collective representation of meaning through language works which include the reflexive, the intentional and the constructionist approach to meaning-making or sense making. In the reflexive approach, meaning is thought to lie in the object, person, idea or event in the real world, and language functions like a mirror to reflect the true meaning, as it already exists in the world. The second approach argues for the opposite case. It holds that it is the speaker, the author, who imposes his or her unique meaning on the world through language.

The third approach recognizes this public, social character of language. It acknowledges that neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language. According to this approach, we must not confuse the material world, where things and people exist, and the symbolic practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate.

The importance of the intentional and constructionist approaches in the current analysis is without question. Through the intentional approach we attempt at understanding how individual create and shape identities in relation to 'others', how they strive for difference. On the other hand, the constructionist approach offers us spectacles through which we can understand how socially constructed cultural practices, and by extension, linguistic practices inform ways in which as individuals we carve identities for ourselves – either individual or collective – in relation to 'others' within a similar social space. Constructionists thus, do not deny the existence of the material world, where things and people exist, and the symbolic practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate. They however contend that it is not the material world that conveys meaning but rather the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concepts. It is social actors who use the conceptual systems of their culture and especially so, the linguistic and other representational systems to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about that world meaningfully to others. It is social actors that (ab)use the linguistic and other resources to define reality, themselves and others – above all, themselves in relation to 'others'.

Theories: Negotiating 'Meaning' in Search of Meaning

With regards to the creation of meaning, Hall (2003) contends further that there is a need to look at the privileged meaning/preferred reading in a text. Utterances and by extension linguistic structures (lexical, lexicogrammatical, syntactic and syntagmatic) exude varied meanings depending on who determines the meaning making process. Hall (2003) provides theoretical arguments for the fascination with 'otherness'. The linguistics approach to this question is associated with Saussure whose view is that 'difference' matters because it is essential to meaning, without it, meaning could not exist. The criticism is however located in their somewhat crude and reductionist and over-simplified-swallowing up all distinctions in their rather rigid two-part structure.

The Bakhtinian approach argues that difference is desirable because we can only construct meaning through a dialogue with the 'other'. The argument here is that meaning is always being constantly negotiated. Human beings normally cast indications of this need for difference through speech. The anthropological approach contends that culture depends on giving things meaning, significance and worth by assigning them to different positions within a system of classification. The creation of gender identities and social positions and roles is not excluded from such taxonomy, often as in the current case resulting in the deliberate abandonment of the humanistic female subject.

Subsequently this expunging of the feminine culminates in the objectification of the feminine as well as the convenient 'rejection of any forms of female essentialism'. The marking of difference is thus the basis of that symbolic order which we call culture. Marking 'difference' leads us, symbolically, to close ranks, to stigmatize and expel anything, which is defined as impure, abnormal or inferior. However, paradoxically it also makes 'difference powerful', (strangely attractive), precisely because it is forbidden, taboo, threatening to cultural order. Thus, what is socially peripheral is often symbolically centered.

The psychoanalytic approach relates to the role of 'difference' in our psychic life. The argument here is that the 'other' if fundamental to the constitution of the self, to us as subjects, and to sexual identity. The consolidation of our definitions of 'self' and our sexual identities depends on the way we are formed as subjects. The Straussian approach constructs binary images contrasting the female other whose body is 'done' things while the male body 'does' things. The binary approach is not democratic in its approach but rather seeks to interpellate the other as the inferior other, 'the done other'. Through the analysis of the conditions of the human psyche, its desire for difference, we are able, in the current context to understand how power and hegemonic dynamics – be they political, cultural or gendered – are created and sustained. The importance of a psychoanalytical approach is in that our descriptions of the 'self' in relation to the 'other' are psychologically conceived. The notion of the 'other' becomes fundamental importance in our self-referencing endeavours. This is so because we construct our 'selves' in relation to us – through the positions and roles we assign 'us' and 'others'.

The Poststructuralist Feminist criticism borrowing largely from structural linguistics as propounded by the likes of M.A.K. Halliday, Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, is based on the analysis of language in the realisation of gender differences. Emphasis on language in this study comes from the observed fact that gender is socially constructed in everyday forms of interaction and communication: represented here through interpersonal communicative events. Poststructural Feminism assumes that gender identities are constructed in relation to each other, (i.e. masculinities and femininities) as essences which shape individual and collective gender identities. They help individuals define themselves in relation to 'others' in a subjective way. The conception of the theory arose through the realisation that feminism needed theoretical explications that enable us to articulate alternative ways of thinking about (and thus acting upon) gender without either simply reversing the old hierarchies or confirming them (Scott, 1988).

Poststructuralist feminism argues that it is popular discourses about gender and gender identities that influence and shape the creation and sustenance of gender identities. It is a theory that does not deny the existence of gender difference, but it does suggest that its meanings are always relative to particular constructions in specified contexts. Language (and the use of language), within this feminist framework, following the work of structuralist linguistics and anthropology, is used to mean not simply words or even a vocabulary and set of grammatical rules (as it would in mainstream linguistic studies) but, rather, a meaning-constituting system: that is, any system - strictly verbal or other - through which meaning is constructed and cultural practices organized and by which, accordingly, people represent and understand their world, including who they are and how they relate to others.

Thus, within structural linguistics as in within poststructuralist feminism, language is not assumed to be a representation of ideas that either cause material relations or from which such relations follow; indeed, the idealist/materialist opposition is a false one to impose on this approach. Rather, the analysis of language provides a crucial point of entry, a starting point for understanding how social relations are conceived, and therefore - because understanding how they are conceived means understanding how they work: how institutions are organized, how relations of production are experienced, and how individual and/or collective identities are established and sustained. This is so because language creates social realities, the social world in which gender and power relations and identities are conceived and (re)constructed in relation to each other.

Negotiating Meaning in the Politics of Sex[ualised] Language

Male interpersonal communication and group communication contexts on the sexual script within Zimbabwean youths sociolects make use of verbal extensions, which are highly patriarchal (largely applied and causative) and through which women are interpellated, at best, as subjects and at worst objects. Females themselves in their own reproduction of gender relations have also tended to further reinforce these highly sexualized stereotypes. The apparent recurrence of the applied verbal extension /-w-/ reflects a deliberate attempt to portray the woman as a victim of a penetration act. This recurrence we assume deliberately negates the possibilities of the female being a willing and active participant to the sexual act/script. The continuous portrayal of women as victims of the penetration act further reinforces the patriarchal reassertion of superiority. By expunging the female actor and objectifying her, the sexual scene/act is robbed of mutually enjoyed pleasures between both the male and female actors and in the process is cast as a battlefield in which the subdual of the female is almost always certain and guaranteed.

The most widely used term but expletive and revered among the Shona speech community */(ku)-svira/*, 'to fuck/*screw' has penetrative connotations of the man as an agent with the woman projected as the object of the act. The connotation is that of the rider and the ridden which is not a fair characterization of the sexual act. The applied verbal extension /-*w*-/ in the applicative verb */kusvirwa/* 'to be fucked' further signifies the objectification and disempowerment of the female participant. The existence of the word /*kusvirana*/ 'to fuck each other' (to make love) with the reciprocal verbal extension /-*n*-/ could be argued to be a pointer to the attempt by the language to redress or to correct such insensitive lingo. The prevalence of use of the applicative verb /*kusvira*/ 'to fuck' far outweighs the use of its reciprocal equivalent /*kusvirana*/ 'to make (love to each other)' in daily usage. Despite the language's flexibility in stylistic choice, offering several ways of saying the same thing discussed by Leech and Short (1981), we notice an apparent overwhelming usage of the gender insensitive applicative verb over and above the reciprocal one.

The verb /*akaiswa*/ *'she was put' (*she was screwed/fucked) is constituted of a subject prefix /*a-*/ which serves as a marker/pointer to the subject or object 'receiving an action', the aspect of modality/tense aspect /*-ka-*/, the verb radical /*-is-*/ and the verbal extension /*-w-*/ which is an applied extension and a pointer to the recipient who is the female subject/object. The verbal extension /*-w-*/ in the context that it is placed arguably exudes epithetic connotations of 'othering'. The 'othering' is not merely binary but is a deliberately implicated form of sub-alterning. The female in this case is depicted, not an active participant in the sexual script, and the verb structure demonstrates or projects the female's docility. Because it objectifies her, there is a complete disregard of the female as a participant to the sexual act – an active one for that matter.

There are other linguistic/ stylistic variants, which, from a linguistic choice point of view, evince the same import. For example the first person descriptive verb /*Ndakaisa*/ 'I fucked/screwed/*put' is macho and continues with the exclusionary strategies and disempowerment tactics that the previously discussed lexims represent. An epithetic variant /*Ndakakaisa*/ *'I fucked/screwed it' is even more chauvinistic and masochistic and further reinforces this 'patrolinguistic' trend. The constituents to the verb are the subject marker /*Nda-*/ 'I', aspect of modality/past tense /*-ka-*/ while the second /*-ka-*/ is arguably an *object prefix and used here as a stand in for the subject prefix referencing the female subject whose implications are epithetic, belittling and demeaning and could as well be substituted with /*-mu-*/ which almost parallels the participants equally. In the variants /*Akandiisa*/ 'He *put/fucked me/ and /*Ndakaiswa*/ 'I was *put/fucked' there is evidence of the embracing of the 'otheringness' by the females which shows the extent to which gender inequality is ingrained in various societal institutions including the vehicle of communication itself, language. These instances evince some form of social acceptance by the female member of a society/culture of the objectification of their kind.

In light of the argument that a people's culture is embedded in the language they use, that it to say tradition is encapsulated in the living museum of language, sexist language in contemporary Zimbabwean youth sociolects becomes part of the patriarchal cultural baggage and/or an inheritance bastardized by an appropriation of Victorian sexist values brought by a long history of trade relations and the colonial encounter and experience as well as popular discourse and culture is thus firmly justified. In terms of upping the deconstruction in all its variants I would propose that an apt and gender-neutral descriptive verbs would be /*Takaisana/ Takasvirana*/ 'we screwed/fucked (each other)', /*Vakaisana*/ 'they screwed/fucked' and /*Ndakaisana naye*/ *'we fucked each other'. For instance /*Takaisana/Takasvirana*/ is a plural inclusive first person verb with an inclusive subject marker /*Ta-*/ 'we'. The /*-n-*/ is a reciprocal extension which embraces the contribution of both parties to the act and thus depicts the female as an equally active participant to the sexual script.

The verb /*Akapinzwa*/ 'she was penetrated/inserted' (she was screwed) continues within the paradigm of objectifying females. There is the recurrence of the applied verbal extension /-*w*-/ that has complete and total disregard for the other participant and which reinforces the objectification of the female other. It has intonations of the female as victim or a vanquished other. It has a war metaphor image with the male actor being the victor in the 'sexual battle'. The image here is that of phallic dominance were the penis is perceived as a conquering foreign body. The variant /*Ndakamupinza*/ 'I immersed [her with it]' has the Class 1 subject object marker /-*mu*-/ which though seemingly attempting to dignify the 'other' only subtly does so as the whole descriptive verb still carries the victim (not actor) connotation. The verbal extension /-*zw*-/ depicts the woman as a non-participant but again as a recipient of an act – the act of penetration.

In the verb /*Ndakakapinza*/, 'I penetrated *'it'/her' the second /-*ka*-/ is a Class 12 object marker which defines littleness and a sense of powerlessness. In /*Akandipinda*/ ' he penetrated me' and /*Ndakapindwa*/ 'I was penetrated' there is a sense of powerlessness, resignation and surrender. In attempting to redress this stereotype we suggest the term /*Takapinzana*/ *'we penetrated each other' which demonstrates reciprocity. However, wish as we may to annote such kind of incorporating and inclusive language, the male member in this instance still resembles the arrow, the penetrator and thus the suggested term is exclusionist in that it deliberately seeks to elide the woman – who is not equipped with penetrating instruments and powers. But the patriarchal system has extra textual strategies to 'whip' women who seek to use this empowering language by labeling them as *nzenza* 'whore', or *Jeti* (borrowed from Jet), *Hure*, *Pfambi*, prostitute and ostracisation of 'deviant' and 'radical' feminists.

The descriptive dynamic verb /*akaboorwa*/ 'she was bored/perforated' is highly sexist and connotes a complete and painful act and disregards the capabilities of the female member to house the male member. The tone is macho and presents the woman in this case as an injured and defenseless victim. It literally implies a physical perforation of the female anatomy. It is a metaphorical extension of the 'victim' that the woman is presented to be. It serves to justify the patriarchal project of male domination. It is far removed from the sensual economy of sexual encounters. The pleasure of sexual encounters is strategically suppressed and sidelined in this discourse. We suggest that this term is too sexist and 'ultra vires'. There is an equivalent process that occurs in males were the foreskin is 'liberated' but is politically suppressed in discourse. /*Akatsemurwa*/ 'she was cut open' suggests literally chopping, some kind of splitting which is more or less similar to /*Akaboorwa*/ 'she was bored/perforated'.

Akaridzwa 'she was hit', *Akatsikwa* 'she was trampled on', *Akarohwa Nyoro* 'she was hit with a wet one' [unprotected sex], *Akainyikwa* *'she was immersed with it' (she was penetrated), *Akabviriswa* 'she was burnt/made to burn', *Akapiswa* 'she was burnt/made to burn' and *Akabayiwa* 'she was pricked', when decontextualised from the sexual discourse denote pain giving acts which are suggestive of victory on the part of the agent. Contextualised in the sexual scripts they denotes a sado-masochistic disposition in male sexual actors.

The 'other' is depicted as located at the receiving end of an act, in these cases supposedly depicted as painful ones .The male is the instigator of the pain. The sexual context is treated as a theatre of war far removed from the pleasure of sexual relations with women having 'inferior weaponry' in the war with their 'defeat' almost always certain. This I argue, is a result of Freudian, Jungian and Lacanian phallocentricism meant for ego and super ego gratification on the part of the male. It is used as a façade to legitimate perceived and oftentimes culturally assimilated notions of male dominance and supremacy. I suggest the terms *takabvirisana* 'we *lighted each other/set each other alight', *takapisana* 'we *burnt each other', *takarovana nyoro* 'we *hit each other wet ones' [we had unprotected sex], *takanyikana* 'we penetrated each other', *takabayana* *'we pricked each other'. The plural first person subject object marker /-ta-/ is non-discriminatory and treats both participants as equal performers. /-*an*-/ is a reciprocal verbal extension.

Akatsikwa 'she was trampled on' denotes defenselessness. The former is metaphorically equivalent to being run over by a vehicle or being stepped on [e.g. by an elephant]. These words are suggestive of powerlessness and lack of resistance and depict the other as passive and willing recipient of a painful act. It has connotations. In this form in which it is being used in the common lingo, linguistic rape is prevalent. Sex is depicted as a control element, a disciplining tactic inflicted upon women who are gutty enough to stand up to their men and whose character is characterised as *arikundijairira* 'she has no respect for me' in some scripts. This discriminatory tendency is also played in code switching and lexical borrowing. The examples of the former are *Akasexswa* 'she was fucked/*sexed' and *Akascrewa* 'he screwed' and *Akabhaudhiwa* 'she was baud/*screwed'.

/Akakwirwa/ 'she was *mounted/ridden' is another verb that also conceives images of the rider and the ridden. The male actor is projected as the ride and the female as the ridden. An interesting image to compare with would be that of the rider (who is the master) and his horse (the servant/object of pleasure). Symbolically, the male is the rider and the female the horse - the ridden – ridden for pleasure and as a duty to serve the master. Such choices of linguistic expression evince instances of female objectification and often conceive images of a mounted horse or donkey. Other variants of the same verb that also connote similar perceptions of the sexual act that evince the perpetuation of the patriarchal project include the verbs */Ndakamukwira/* 'I mounted/rode her' and the epithetic */Ndakakakwira/* 'I mounted/rode *it/her'.

Conclusion

The male project manifests itself in all facets of language use, even the smallest and very secretive level of interpersonal communication, the sexual act. The projection of the female participant to the sexual act as a mere recipient of an act, which at times is depicted as punitive and painful removes the images of sexual pleasure and satisfaction for both parties and casts it as a war zone on which the male has to conquer the 'other'. The imagery used to describe the sexual organs themselves is such that the penis is seen as the all-conquering weapon while the female is cast as the weaker opponent armed with weaker armory and who should always expect defeat. The worrying thing is in the females' acceptance of this, which also exhibits itself in the 'embracing' language they also use to describe the sexual act. The source of all this stereotyping however remains a mystery.

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