

Re-Appraising Women to Women Discrimination towards Attaining Gender Equality

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Abstract-Gender critics have deployed patriarchy as the major source of the challenges faced by women in Nigeria. This perception has only narrowed gender discourse to male chauvinism. There is therefore an urgent need to interrogate patriarchy alongside other challenges encountered by women in Nigeria. The notion of gender bias by men against women is not new and men are usually the main perpetrator while often not considering the existence of the situation the other way round. This study posits that challenges of women raging from discrimination, widowhood rites, polygamy, inheritance rights, divorce, to almost all other areas of life are directly or indirectly also caused by other women. It is already a challenging world with men holding sway in virtually all fields of human endeavours and women do not have to make things even more challenging for one another. The objectives of the study were to locate the challenges encountered by women by their contemporaries in selected literary texts and society and proffer ways to confront and overcome these challenges. The study recommends love, unity, support, and collaboration which engender peaceful co-existence and social emancipation among women and are also necessary for a balanced society and the sustainable development of the nation.

Keywords-challenges, gender issues, humanities, national development, re-appraisal

I. INTRODUCTION

The Humanities as the branches of knowledge that deals with human beings and their culture also include the study of certain disciplines like languages, literatures, the arts, history and philosophy. Literature in the different genres of drama, prose and poetry is the mirror of the society. According to Kolawole (1), it is an advantageous means of warring against every opposition to the socio-political projection of the African woman.

Male literary writers like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, who examined women in their later writings, endorse a stereotyped and one-sided opinion of female heroism in African

fiction. Female writers like Flora Nwapa, Mariama Ba, Mary Kolawole, Buchi Emecheta, among others express the salient nature of the female character through a different consideration of the theme of female self-assurance in the diverse societal features that oppress the female. The focus of their message is that the female should endeavour to maintain her stand despite the daunting oppressive patriarchal situation she finds herself.

When it comes to raising a voice and rising against injustice from men, women have a common front and will with one accord, struggle and fight against every form of societal, financial and cultural oppression. However, it is intriguing to be aware that it is not only the male gender that is responsible for the marginalization, humiliation and oppression of the female gender. Many women also perpetrate and maintain some of these oppressive behaviours to hurt their female counterpart (2). While male violence has been linked to issues of power, control or concerns about abandonment (3), violence among women is often attributed to indirect social/relational aggression and power relations (4-7).

Hirschinger et al (8) conducted a case-control investigation among women who lived in urban, low-income community and found out that most women were typically victimised by women they knew. Also, Brownlee (9) examined gossip and social aggression as tactics used by women to hinder the progress of their female counterparts. Some of those tactics include "avoidance, teasing, gossiping, and exclusion to negatively impact a target's face and self-concept." (9 pp4) This situation is supported by Ogbonna (10 pp391)

Regrettably, it is women who practice certain negative socio-cultural! misgivings against themselves. They compete with themselves. A mother learns that another woman's daughter married a rich man at 18 years and she incites her own daughter to abort her education and do the same. Another woman snatches her female counterpart's husband, frustrates another one out of her job, and builds hostility and spirit of

competition amongst others... Mothers are quick to agree to cultural values, even against their daughters.

Such practices are regarded as detrimental to not just the development of the person of the woman but to the sustainable development of communities and in a way constitute the challenges of nation-building which are halted and impeded by the treatment of the female gender. Practices like widowhood, polygamy, succession rites, incest, tribal conflicts, discrimination against the girl child, forced marriages, occultism, etc. require a stronger interrogation and by now should be things of the past.

Despite all these assertions, anyone who cares to believe the creation story would agree that women were created to meet the need of men and so men would always need women. Behind any successful man is a woman is a familiar cliché. But also behind every tear any woman has ever shed is another woman somehow, somewhere. This paper will examine the different areas mentioned earlier to highlight these facts.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Gender studies have repeatedly shown the injustices women experience through men, the governments, policies and the society at large. Rarely do we have the injustices women mete out to women by their female counterpart either purposely or ignorantly. The statement of the problem of this paper is addressing some of the ways/areas women have been against women and proffers way women can consciously unite and collaborate to overcome their various challenges.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the descriptive and content analysis method for the selected texts while the theoretical framework used is the feminist standpoint theory which is considered appropriate because it allows the recognition of both similarities and differences among women as advocated by feminist standpoint theorists such as O'Brien Hallstein (11). Litwin and Hallstein (12). Intemann (13) and Hundleby (14). The non-numerical data for this paper are derived mainly from *So Long a Letter* (15) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (16). Analysis of all of the above reveal hidden, unused and untapped potentials in women that a little adjustment and shift in mentality and thinking patterns and a united front/stand with one another will unleash ripples of positive advancement in families, health, nations and the world at large.

Mariama Ba's feminist denunciation (15), *So long a letter* seems appropriate for this study. In the epistolary, Ba gives an account of the travails of an abandoned wife, single mother and widow and in a way, able to encapsulate the areas this paper seeks to re-appraise. Men as long as they would not persecute one another for a presumed, assumed and baseless ideologies and unnecessary bickering, will always be dominant in all aspects of life as they even see it as their God-given right. Through her writings, Ba envisions a world where women will no longer be relegated and degraded, and where monogamy would be the norm. This world can only become a reality when

women re-examine their relationships with each other and with that of their men. Mariama Ba's novels, thus, present women to be the active agents of change advocated in the society. Her novels display a certain formal and thematic coherence. These themes include marriage, motherhood, emotional and economic independence, women's education, political and economic marginalization, and their resistance to oppression and role in the nation.

IV. THEMES FOR GENDER RE-APPRAISAL

A. Discrimination

Discrimination begins as soon as a baby is born depending on the sex. While a woman who gives birth to a male child rejoices and holds her head high with all sense of accomplishment accompanied by pomp and heavy feasting, the same woman on the other hand if it is a female child especially if it is not the first time, will be emasculated, demeaned and demoralized. This is due to the male-dominated tradition and culture that women have come to accept as the norm.

Emecheta (16) in *The Joy of Motherhood* opines that a mother does not only have to procreate, but she must produce a male child so as to be regarded as a complete woman. In the text, the Igbo community is portrayed as one which determines the status of a woman more importantly by the sex rather than by the number of her children, therefore, every woman desires to have a son. This is illustrated by Nnu Ego's words when she gives birth to a son: (pp, 55) "Girls are love babies, but, you see, only now with this son am I going to start loving this man. He has made me into a real woman—all I want to be, a woman and a mother". This clearly demonstrates how happy and fulfilled she is when she gives birth to a son.

The importance accorded to a male child is also noticeable in the manner a mother is called by her name. In the novel, Nnu Ego is called "Mama Oshia" in the traditional manner for a woman with a male child, thus, by means of social opinion, a woman obtains her own identity from her son. On the other hand, a woman who fails to bear male children may become bitter, as portrayed in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (17). In the novel, Beatrice's mother's bitterness resulted to hatred for her daughter. She had "so desperately prayed for a boy that, when she bears a girl child she names her "Nwanyibuife: a female is also something" (pp 87). One would wonder why in the world a woman would be unhappy for giving birth to a female child. The reason is that she has been brain-washed into believing that having a male child secures her place with her husband.

Strong-Leek (18) postulates that women are brainwashed to visualise the world from a patriarchal perspective. This position is echoed by Cornwall (19) who identifies "contradictory sets of images at the core of arguments in Africanist gender studies: 'women as victim' and 'women as heroine'. The woman as victim of conceptualization situates African women as powerless and voiceless victims of ever deepening oppression rooted in layers of male-supremacist 'tradition', colonialism and development."

This concern is emphasised by Ogundipe-Leslie (20) who identifies "traditional structures as one of the mountains on the back of an African woman. It is fostered through the gender

socialization process which connects macho strength and heroism to males and associates the traditional roles of wife and mother to females. The ensuing gender asymmetry conceived, internalized and borne out of this need not be over emphasized. "Most of the most successful women in the world are 98% criticised, abused and ridiculed by other women. Little wonder, the first Nigeria woman, Patricia Etteh, to rise to the position of the Honourable Speaker of the House of Assembly was disgraced out of office with the connivance of other female members of the house. This does not in any way support the allegations levelled against her but her male counterparts did worst things and were not impeached. If the few women had stood their ground and empathized with her, she may not have been impeached. And even if she was, because women are in the minority, it would have been on record that women stood with and for their own. Another historic and unfortunate situation is that of Sarah Jubril, a female presidential aspirant in 2011. After a very impressive speech and wonderful demonstration of actions at the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) Primaries at the Eagle Square in Abuja, she had just one vote which most likely was hers, that means she was the only person that voted for herself. There were many female delegates that night, but obviously, they did not like or cannot comprehend the fact that a woman wanted to be the president.

For women to get what they truly deserve in this world, they must unite in love, purpose and determination. In situations and circumstances where there is a need to cast stones especially against another woman; women should not be there at all not to talk of being the first to cast such stones. If women all over the world could spend 80% of the time spent on being little demons in other women's lives and affairs and be more productive and supportive, they will be more respected and valued by men and the issue of gender inequality will be settled once and for all.

B. Polygamy

Polygamy is generally seen as the practice of having more than one spouse at the same time (21). The online Dictionary.com (22) has made the definition of polygamy even more specific when it defines it as "the practice or condition of having more than one spouse, especially wife, at one time". Polygamy functions as a male preserve to subjugate, abuse and control women's sexuality. Polygamy is portrayed in the novel when Ramatoulaye's husband Modou, married a second wife after thirty years of a blissful marriage that produced twelve children. This subsequently leads to the breakdown of the duo's marriage for the following reasons: Ramatoulaye loved Modou and that is the first reason a polygamous marriage would not work for them. Genuine love does not exist in a polygamous structure. Bickering, anger and jealousy will occur if love is involved in polygamy. Ramatoulaye's hope of growing old and grey together with her husband was dashed when Modou married Binetou and this made her to be completely devastated particularly because her generation was the first that could marry because of love. They were also the first to see that love and polygamy do not go together. Polygamy can erode the possibility of women-to-women support; and women may be deprived of their support structures in many ways.

Finding a woman with more than one husband is an aberration in African society but in the same society, polygamy

is the norm for men, turning women to mere properties that can be owned and disposed of at will. Men actually are not to blame; it is the women who allowed themselves to become tools in the hands of men to 'deal' with other women. It's an obvious fact that once a man is not contented with one woman (wife), he will never be satisfied with two to indefinite infinity number. If every lady will place value on herself and refuse to be second fiddle by being second, third or whatever indefinite number wife to men, then, we would directly and indirectly limit if not completely stop the violence and abuse against the women folk. Men maltreat their wives at home knowing full well that they will get what they could from mistresses and girlfriends (who unfortunately are also women). This can actually stop when women make and take conscious effort not to go out or marry other women's husbands.

Ba condeinns polygamy as an aberration to the qualities of a real marriage. She portrays this in the text through Aissatou who rejects polygamy out rightly "I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only garment, I go my way". Consequently, Aissatou suffers criticism from relatives and the society when she abandons her marriage. On the other hand, Ramatoulaye who stays in the so-called marriage suffers more. This is an indication that neither of the two options of staying or leaving really sets a woman free. Women can never be free as long as some cultural and religious values are in place and those values are not re-examined and reviewed by considering women's plights. Polygamy has and will always be in the best interest of men. They know women are very emotional and so work on their psyche and turn them one against another. But when women wise up and make up their minds not to be any man's second wife, girlfriends and concubines, then the men would in turn treat their wives, daughters and women generally better. The dignity and respect women deserve will then be restored in a globalising world context..

C. Widowhood

The agony of losing one's husband is a blow some women may never recover from but in Africa, it is not enough to stop other women from ganging up to wreck more havoc on the poor widow. It is women in most cultures that give another woman problems despite losing her husband. It is most unlikely that other men will gang up against another man who has just lost his wife even when the man is directly or indirectly responsible for his wife's death. All he gets is sympathy, genuine concerns and supports from men and even women. But for a woman, the story is quite different. Apart from accusing her of killing the husband, she is subjected to various dehumanising treatments such as scrapping all parts of her body where hair grows; to sleeping in the same room alone with the corpse; to wearing only one cloth (black from head to toe) throughout the mourning period; to taking her children from her; and denying her the late husband's assets, all these coming from women to another woman. Such women are supposed to be her greatest sympathizers in her moment of grief. Until this wicked widowhood practice is kicked against in all ramifications, women will continue to be at the mercy of the men.

D. Succession Rites

Male relatives of a deceased man may inherit his surviving wife/wives due to the inheritance and succession rites practiced in African culture. For instance, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, another wife was brought into Nnu Ego's marriage as her husband's inheritance from his dead brother. This is nothing but echoing the commodification of African women which is so annoying and frustrating. But annoyance and frustration are not the solution. Women must arise with one voice to say no to this insult. A woman should not allow herself to be forced into marrying someone she hardly knows just because the man is related to her late husband. She can vehemently object to this and gain her freedom successfully with the support and co-operation of her female counterparts.

E. Incest

The victims of incest anywhere in the world based on research findings, interviews and observations are mostly girls. The news of different categories of incest is on the increase; a man sleeping with his underage daughter or step daughters, brothers sleeping with their young sisters and threatening to kill them if they speak, teachers and principals of schools sleeping with young girls, to drivers sleeping with their masters' daughters' right in the vehicle before taking them to school, etc. These girls are traumatized emotionally and psychologically as they are in turn blamed for being seductresses tempting the men into raping them. Women have consciously, subconsciously and unconsciously supported incest to continue till this day by keeping quiet and or silencing the cries of these young girls because most often the culprits are their husbands, brothers and sons. Women should not be sentimental to or aid and abet such offences because of their relationship with the offender. Whosoever they might be to them, once they are caught in this abnormal and abominable crime, they should be made to face the music of the law.

F. Forced Marriages

It is well known in Africa that it is only girls that are forced into arranged and early marriages. Hardly would a young boy be forced into an unwanted or early marriage. Emecheta (16) in *The Joys of Motherhood* traces gender inequality in the Igbo society as hinging on the tenets of the gender socialization process, customary and traditional practices. Oshia the son of Nnu Ego refuses to fetch water for his step mother emphasizing that he is a boy "why should I help in cooking? That is a woman's job" (196). In that society, it was customary for girls to be forced into early marriage and the bride price used in sending boys to school.

Nnu Ego tells her daughters to give up their lives by being forced into early marriage, in order to generate income for their brothers. "But you are girls! They are boys. You have to sell to put them in a good position in life, so that they will be able to look after the family. When your husbands are nasty to you, they will defend you." (197). Boys and girls born of the same woman being discriminated against with such impunity by their father and their mother looks on even supports her husband against her female children. Women should take a stance that no child whether male or female is superior or inferior to the other. Boys should be trained right from infancy to carry out house chores and learn how to cook as well. Such chores are not meant for the

female gender only. Things should be balanced appropriately for effective gender collaboration.

V. CONCLUSION

Women are the architects of their own happiness and misery, the choice of what they want is theirs. There will never be equal rights for women if there is no re-appraisal of the way they perceive, relate and judge one another unjustifiably negatively, in work places, political positions, religious, social, educational and cultural sectors. Women should love, unite, support and be less judgemental of one another. These will help to build a nation where justice, equity and equality reign.

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