EDUCATION, FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS AND FEMALE EMPOWERMENT IN SELECTED AFRICAN NOVELS

By

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Abstract

From time immemorial, women have not been accorded their place in society especially in the educational sphere due to the overbearing influence of patriarchy. The introduction of the Victorian ethos portrayed the woman as the angel in the house whose role in the family was restricted to child-bearing, home-keeping, marriage etc. They were thus denied education because their place was in the home, the private domain while the man's place was in the public sphere. This fragmentation and gender preference has greatly affected women, hence the need for change. Today, women, literate and illiterate recognize the transforming power of education and are determined to key into this option in order to improve their lot. This paper interrogates the essence of women education and its relevance in society. The paper also seeks to proffer solutions/make recommendations as to how women can empower themselves through education.

Knowledge is power and it can be gleaned through education. It is therefore imperative for girls/women to embrace this life-line if they are to free themselves from subordination, marginalization and dependence in their society. Prior to this period, women were relegated to the backburner. Jegede (1990:36) argues that both European colonialism and traditional attitudes of and to women combined to exclude women from the process of education. Emenyi (2006) agrees that colonial education fragmented African society. It also introduced the Victorian ethos of the woman as the angel in the house into African life.

Again, Ebo (1999:15) notes that Fredrick Hegels used the sacred womanhood ploy and he was positive that family piety was the lot of women. Thus their activities should be restricted to the informal sector (family) of the society. Hegels adds that governance and the study of the exalted sciences are not for women. This patriarchal notion of women and women education also prompted Jean Jacques Rousseau to
corroborate the above phallocentric assertion, when he opines “that the education of women should always be relative to that of men. To please, to be useful to us, to make us love and esteem them…” (Wollstonecraft, 1975:88). Rousseau’s assertion and others like him seek to place women in perpetual bondage and deny them intellectual growth. The low status of women according to Yakubu (2004:76) is as a result of men seeing women as sexual objects, either as concubines or lover or mothers. As mothers, Ogundipe-Leslie (1987:513) opines that they are to be self-giving, sacrificial, strong, humble in their relationship with their husbands and children.

When women deviate from the stereotypical labels, they are branded witches, sorceresses etc. Ojo-Ade (1983:159) reiterates this fact when he deftly states that “…woman is woman, mother, child-bearer, supporter of man. If woman talks too much, she is considered uncouth, uncivilized. If she is educated, she is classified as a weird specimen”. It is therefore against these backdrop that women are late-comers in the educational domain as well as in politics, economics and the “literacy sphere” to borrow Okereke’s (1996:156) expression. Wollstonecraft (1975) attacked Rousseau’s treatise on women and advocated co-education, insisting that young women must as a matter of exigency receive an education that would enable them to be “rational, competent and independent” (Bates, 1983: 409).

Wollstonecraft’s advocacy for equity and women’s education, blazed the trail for feminist struggle. Other women in this category include Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan Anthony, Margaret Fuller, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir etc. In Africa, Adebayo (1999:28) avers that feminism started with the efforts of Women in Nigeria (WIN) and academics such as Bolanle Awe, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, etc. Chukwuma (2000:105) adds that:

The single impetus to female upliftment is the international decade for women 1975-1985 instituted by the United Nations. This put women in the fore and attracted government attention and aid. It also gave rise to the formation of Women Agencies and Commission throughout the continent. It indeed gave rise in Nigeria to Women Education, Women in Development and latter in 1987, the Better Life for Rural Women Programme. These are therefore the antecedents of African feminism; these gave the much needed edge to the African women’s quest for opportunity in education, economic enterprise, jobs and status.

**Education and Feminine Consciousness**

Bray (1986:7) views “education as a vehicle for change rather than an independent force and the direction which the vehicle takes depends very strongly on who is driving and where the driver wants to go”. Literacy, which is a first step towards reshaping individual lives in society, has a lower rate among women than
among men throughout the world. Opara (2004:118) contends that female education is important because it is projected as the fillip to economic empowerment, which is starkly contrasted with poverty and deprivation.

Weiner (1994:53) opines that feminine consciousness is the concern to understand what has caused women’s subjugation in order to campaign for struggle against it. It is therefore left for women to transcend these limitations through conscious self awareness in order to be free. It is against this assertion that Chukwuma (1994) quoted by Okeke (2004:141) reiterated the fact that women in their varied search for recognition should not pursue equality with men as their main objective. Rather, they should strive to identify areas they are best fitted for and then pursue them to a conclusive end so that complementality between the sexes would be achieved.

**Female Empowerment through Education: Examples from Literature**

Literature mirrors life and society and provides veritable tools for learning and educating the masses. It is therefore replete with various examples of education and the empowerment of women, young and old, which have served as panacea for female growth. For instance in Kaine Agary’s debut novel *Yellow Yellow* which is an expose of environmental degradation, poverty, female powerlessness, chauvinism etc, the author depicts the effects of these anomalies on the educational growth of women. It is common knowledge that the people of the Niger Delta region live in “the middle of death” to borrow Ken Saro-Wiwa’s (1995) expression. Exposed to the toxic environment—pollution, destruction of the ecosystem, acid rain, lack of social amenities like electricity, pipe-borne water, schools, roads, hospitals etc, young girls who should be in school learning are forced into prostitution in order to earn a living. Agary’s novel therefore is a kind of “protest literature that arises when the socio-political conditions in a particular community are found to be oppressive by certain members of that community…” (Nwahununya, 2011: 37)

Binaebi, the mother of the protagonist of *Yellow Yellow* had developed her consciousness very early in life, having been impregnated and abandoned by a Greek sailor. Her education is truncated and she resorts to fishing and farming, traditional occupations which she could not excel in due to environmental degradation and pollution of aquatic life in her community. She did not want her daughter Zilayefa to end up like her. She wanted her to be educated. Agary (2006:8) writes “she would make sure that I accomplished what she had not. She had inherited a small piece of land from her family, which she farmed and sometimes, she would go fishing… she took care of my needs and sometimes went without…” Ebo (1999: 18) agrees that critical education is the surest way out of the quagmire of unjustifiable subordination of women, the
paternalistic attitude of men, and the entanglements of taboos and retrogressive customs which bog women down.

Zilayefa had imbibed the reading culture because “reading took me to other worlds and made me forget my own reality…” (Yellow Yellow, Pp. 31). Her mother repeatedly stressed the importance of education: “your books should be your best friend. Spend more time with them than any other friend” (Pp 78). Yet for the Niger Deltans, good education can only be attained outside the traditional milieu, hence Zilayefa relocates to Port Harcourt, first to secure a job, save for her University education and at the same time send money to her mother for her up-keep.

Due to the peculiar terrain of the Niger Delta, some children out of poverty and ecological degradation of the region drop out of school. Zilayefa recalls that “the school year had started out with twelve girls and thirty boys in my class, but some of the boys dropped out to take on responsibility for their families. Others dropped out to join the growing army who claimed they were fighting for justice in the Niger Delta” (Yellow Yellow, Pp. 34). From the foregoing, it is clear that female enrolment in schools in the region is low. The young boys who would have been educated to lead their society in future, drop out of school to join the ever growing “gun-wielding category of advocates demonized as “militants” by the government-favoured media…” (Darab, 2010: 114) These boys are fighting for justice and neglect of the region.

In Port Harcourt, Zilayefa is fascinated by Lolo’s education. She affirms that “being around her made me want to continue my education and not just because I wanted to please my mother. I wanted to carry myself with same confidence as Lolo” (Pp.83). However, Zilayefa’s educational advancement is truncated when she becomes pregnant. She lacked focus and allowed the trappings of capitalism and peer-group influence to overwhelm and destroy her. Having failed herself, her mother and her benevolent friends, Sisi and Lolo, she restrategizes for the future resolving to go back to school because education is the hallmark for a better life.

In The Stillborn, also a debut novel written by Zaynab Alkali, women education not only empowers the protagonist, Li but it is beneficial to her immediate and extended families. The setting of the novel is a Moslem community in northern Nigeria where most young girls are denied early education in preference for early marriage and a life of self effacement and docility. Chukwuma (1994:177) opines that Alkali’s stand is that the Muslim society in Northern Nigeria tries to stifle the growth of personal identity in the female by a process of socialization which restricts personal awareness and freedom. Li’s desire for education is borne from the fact that her father’s compound is stifling, she feels trapped and unhappy as if she were in prison. School life on the other hand offers her freedom because it is “free and gay” (The Stillborn, Pp 3).
Li’s marital dreams are shattered when she is first abandoned in the village by her irresponsible husband, Habu Adams and later maltreated in the city where she goes to live with him. It is here that she develops her consciousness and instead of pining away and wallowing in self pity like her sister Awa, Li decides to pursue her ambition by going back to school. Koroye (1989:49) writes that: “this is the turning point for Li. The point at which the spirit of independence she has shown since her childhood assumes the form of a steely, feminist determination to rely, not on a husband, but on herself for the fulfillment of her dreams”. Li’s ambitions are to get an Advanced Teachers’ Certificate and to erect “a mighty building to house everyone, old and young…” (*The Stillborn* Pp. 82).

Li accomplishes all these dreams through sound education. Again Chukwuma (1994:81) quips: “enhanced education, economic independence and responsibility are attributes by which a man is usually defined. Alkali makes her protagonist have these attributes so that later she becomes “the man of the house”. Opara (2004:127) observes that inspite of the deafening whiplash of her husband, Li assumes the lofty role of a she-man and assists the crippled Habu in his tottering steps. Woman becomes “a transsexual in the expression, “the man of the house” by virtue of her education and position in society” to borrow Opara’s (2004:121) words. This is perhaps why Arum (2010: 272) contends that women empowerment involves the transformation of economic, social, psychological, political, legal circumstances of women.

In *Dizzy Angel*, a novel set in the eastern part of Nigeria, the author debunks the myth of female powerlessness and superstition which underpins the life of women. *Dizzy Angel* explores the Ogbanje/Abiku myth which is at the heart of the anti-female superstition and traditional beliefs. Ogbanje, according to Palmer (1976:52) refers to “those wicked children who having died enter their mothers’ womb to be born again only to die again”. The novel explores other issues especially “the low premium given to women’s education and the agony of a child-bride being forced into a loveless marriage” (Acholonu, 1995:250).

Ogbanje is the twelve year heroine of *Dizzy Angel*. Her father is Dolise Agu, who like Li’s father, Baba in *The Stillborn* endorsed women education. As an Ogbanje, the only way the heroine can stay alive is to marry the Olokun priest in the person of Uloji Kokwundu. By so doing also Obiageli, Ogbanje’s mother can bear other children. Ogbanje’s grandmother, Odede explains to her thus:

> When you were born, a renowned oraculist said we must name you Ogbanje. We did that as you know…the second part of his injunction…is that you must be married to the native doctor who helped us to keep you alive (*Dizzy Angel*, Pp. 82-83).
Moses, Uloji’s son and heir apparent to the juju priest challenges his father for wanting to marry a girl young enough to be his daughter. He is cursed and ostracized. He (Moses) is in love with Ogbanje.

Meanwhile, Dolise encouraged Ogbanje’s education because the latter is smart and resourceful. Dolise’s community kicks against women education, his neighbor, Nkwo tells him

Dolise, I feel that I must warn you of the danger of the path you intend to tread …We love you, we do not want you to make any mistakes. It is alright to train a boy who will answer your name until he dies, but a girl-who has heard of a girl who didn’t become another man’s slave as soon as she was sixteen. Nobody. All the neighbours chorused. *(Dizzy Angel, Pp. 146)*.

In highlighting Ogbanje’s educational abilities, Osifo justaposes her with her half brother thus:

Ekele is in primary five and had read the class for two years now. He had started school much earlier than Ogbanje; but he has failed many times and has failed yet again. His mark ranged from zero and 20%, nothing more than that *(Dizzy Angel, Pp 51)*.

The author emphasizes Ekele’s failure and writes that Ogbanje was eleven years old and in primary four. Nneboy, one of Dolise’ wives reasons: “How can a girl do better than a boy in book work?” *(Pp 57)*. Acholonu (1995:253) writes that

This is one of the many myths the work aims at debunking. For the traditionalist maleness is synonymous with superior intelligence, irrespective of the scientific fact that natural intelligence is not sex-determined. There are stupid women as well as men, just as there are men of genius as well as women of genius..

Dolise resolves to spend money educating Ogbanje for “his hope of exaltation lay in that unpredictable star, Ogbanje” *(Pp. 54)*. She leaves home for secondary school in Ghenero, which will last for just three years to enable her marry. She makes new friends, joins the Scripture Union. She tells her friend Lizzy that in her village, lack of education was the major cause of children’s death among others like ignorance, fear etc. The education and religious teaching she acquires, frees her from ignorance, thereby liberating her.

On the appointed day for Ogbanje to be escorted to her husband’s house she runs away under the pretext of going to buy APC for headache. Through a dramatic twist of luck and divine intervention, she meets her former teacher Miss Bricks who informed her about the scholarship offered her by the Anglican mission in Wanoni. She
therefore goes to live with Miss Bricks who encouraged her and helped procure all the items she will take to her new school. This is an example of female bonding. Ojukwu (1999:120) opined that female bonding among women is necessary inorder for them to fight a common cause. Lizzy, Ogbanje’s friend learns proper etiquette and morals from her. She becomes focused in her academic work unlike Zilayefa in *Yellow Yellow* who allowed Emem to corrupt her mind.

Dolise is happy to know that his daughter is alive and back in school. He endures Uloji and Atiti’s (Uloji’s wicked sister) threat and afflictions. He was prepared to support his daughter in her flight and fight against superstition. He even admired her courage because “Ogbanje, though a girl was quenching his thirst for education for him” (Pp. 247). She completed her secondary education and proceeded to Teachers Training College like Li, in *The Stillborn*. Thus superstition, female subordination, fear and marginalization are laid to rest.

**Conclusion**

Since men have always dismissed women education and empowerment as inconsequential, women on their part have taken the cudgel to redefine and reposition themselves through sound educational pursuit. Kaine Agary, Zaynab Alkali and Gracy Osifo have demonstrated in their literary works that the place of the woman is no longer in the kitchen, if she is educationally empowered. This paper concludes that the neglect of the Niger Delta region should be re-considered and properly addressed to stem the tide of youth restiveness and lack of educational opportunities for the people of the region. It is heart-warming to know that the Amnesty programme is addressing this critical matter. The issue of early pregnancy can be tackled by creating awareness of its danger and implication for young girls. Marriage and pregnancy should not deter women from furthering their education. The society should recognize women’s worth and accord them their place in society. Women education have empowered them and they can contribute to the family welfare, the society and indeed the world at large.

**References**


