

# A WOMANIST PERSPECTIVE ON GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION AS THE CROSSROAD FOR ATTAINING SELF ACTUALIZATION BY WOMEN IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

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**Abstract:** The thrust of this paper is to show that education is the only crossroad for attaining self-actualization. In doing this, the paper adopts womanism as its theoretical framework. By adopting this theory, therefore, this paper is set to show that women especially in northern Nigeria are not volatile in their quest for space. They only seek a more accommodating atmosphere; one that would allow them the opportunity to realise themselves and by so doing, contribute to nation building. The paper finds among other things, that if given the enabling environment, women would not only realise their full potentials, but would enable them to contribute to nation building.

**Key Words:** Women, Gender studies, Child Education,

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

The girl-child in northern Nigeria, in the context of Africa, is enslaved in several ways. This enslavement which ranges from their denial to the rights to education, religious fundamentalism, forced marriages, bride-price, and polygamy among others have placed hindrances to the actualization of their potentials and hence, their inability to contribute maximally to nation building. In a revealing article titled: “Getting the Girl-Child Back to School” published in *The Punch*, Segun summarized the shocking statistics provided by United Nations (UNICEF). The report reveals the high percentage of girls of primary school age who were not in school. This situation can be seen as conspiracy against the women folk which aims at wasting their potentials and talents, and as a result, keep them within the whims and caprices of their male counterparts, perpetually. This scenario is especially worst within the northern axis of Nigeria where girls’ enrolment in school has been extremely low.

The neglect of girl-child education, Akachi emphasizes, retards the emancipation of women in Nigeria especially in the northern part. According to her, it is difficult to see how women can participate fully in national development and in cultural production if they continue to lay behind and if a majority of them remain in a state of “blissful” ignorance (108). Education of women as the cliché goes is power – the crossroad to sustainable development. And hence, the power of liberation can be achieved if the girl-child is exposed and allowed to receive quality education.

This paper is therefore; set to show ways through which various writers especially in northern Nigeria project female characters that were able to develop themselves through education. And by so doing, they not only realise their potentials but are also able to contribute to their societies. The position here is to argue that women, like their male counterparts can provide sustainable development if given the right education.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

This paper draws its theoretical frame from Womanism. This term is coined by Alice Walker, a black American who argues that feminism did not encompass the perspective of black women. According to Walker, “the concept Womanism, itself, is derived from the adjective “womanist” which means having respect and belief in the abilities and talents of women. Advocates of Womanism identify it as the totality of identifying with women issues and aspirations in its entire ramification (qtd in Jeremiah 11-12).

Another strand of womanism holds that it provides an avenue which fosters a stronger relationship between black men and women. Consequent upon this, Walker notes that womanists are committed to the

survival and wholeness of the entire people of Africa, male and female (xi). To corroborate this, Mezu argues that:

Womanist criticism is a term that will reflect the situation of the African and that of the other Diasporan black women. She therefore comes up with her coinage of the term “womanist relativism”. Her explanation is that this requires constructing a suitable female frame work using history, themes, rhetorical tropes, other structures and approaches of literature both traditional and post modern (232).

For many adherents of this theory such as Acholonu Catherine, Africa feminism, a part of womanism is the solution to emancipating the women folks from assorted forms of repression (Morolake 17). This is why the womanists link racial, gender, caste, and societal forms of repression to construct a more all encompassing classification of feminism through which women are considered as individuals, rather than sexual objects. In other words, the proponents of this approach emphasize that African feminism is a dogma which calls for emancipation from subjugation and injustices that emanate from the educational, economic, social-political and habitual manifestations of racial, cultural, sexual and class biases (103).

In the context of Nigeria, Chikwenye Ogunyemi, one of the most important literary critics and theoreticians of female emancipation, gives many reasons for preferring womanism to feminism. According to her feminism which is a smacks of rebellious, fearlessness, political awareness of sexism and unpardonable (from the male point of view) drive for equality and equity between the sexes. The radical feminist can go as far as doing without the macho male to enjoy her liberty (61).

She further states that the Nigerian woman writer is constantly aware of the negative connotations of feminism. According to her, the fear of being accused by the male of allying with the white outsider has turned most Nigerian women writers toward Womanism. This theoretical frame is set to quarrel the prevalence of literary productions written by men that have presented women in relation to their male protagonist rather than independent individuals. By doing so, male authors usually fail to provide a realistic solutions to common female problems. In light of this, Nwapa reports that:

Nigerian male writers such as Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwesi, Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clark, Ola Rotimi and Elechi Amadi, have all in their earlier works played down the powerful role of women. Unlike Peter Abraham and Ousmane Sambene, who knew and projected the worth of women, the Nigeria writers have in many instances portrayed women negatively or in their subordination to men. In Ekwensi, *Jagua Nana* the woman is presented as prostitute; Wole Soyinka’s Amope in *The Trials of Brother Jero* is a ceaselessly nagging woman who makes life intolerable for her husband. Achebe’s Miss Mark does not hesitate to put her sex appeal to work in order to attain desired objectives. In J. P. Clark’s *Song of a Goat*, Ebiere entices her husband’s younger brother into sexual relationship. The focus has always been on the physical, prurient negative nature of women (528). In protesting the ongoing degraded portraiture of women, Omolara Ogundipe admonishes women to struggle and ensure that they are not left behind by men in humanity’s effort to change society.

Nevertheless, the emergence of female writers in the Nigerian literary space clearly signified the need for closer attention to be paid to some of these gender issues that were taken for granted in the discussion of Nigeria literature. Writers like Tess Onwueme in *The Reign of Wazobia*, Stella Oyedepo in *On His Demise*, Tracy Utoh Ezeajugh in *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again*, Zulu Sofola in *Wedlock of the Gods* among many others have paved the way for a positive portraiture of the images of women in contemporary Nigeria literature.

These works, among other reasons, are set to change the wrong notion on women. In this vein, women writers have come out to bring to the fore the feelings, sufferings, the natural indignation and thinking of their fellow women in their literary productions. By adopting this theory, therefore, this paper is set to show that women especially in northern Nigeria are not volatile in their quest for space. They only seek a more accommodating atmosphere; one that would allow them the opportunity to realise themselves and by so doing, contribute to nation building.

### 3. EDUCATIONAL DEFICIT AMONG WOMEN: The Result of Male-Child Preference

Gender studies, was introduced into Africa as a means of decrying gender imbalance. This imbalance is traced to pre-colonial and colonial days in Africa when women are almost always relegated to the background. It is in light of this that gender studies emerged as a means of advocating vocations for women so as to make them economically independent. Women like Flora Nwapa for instance, opine that “the society is changing and women must try to be economically independent” (102). It is in view of this that Omode posits that ‘under the patriarchal system, men because of their supremacy over women were in total control of the economy; they dominated all aspect of economy of the society’ (181). This dominance is seen in ways through which women are deliberately deprived from acquiring formal education. This they did knowing that education is key to economic liberation.

Genderism in Africa pronounces the removal of the educational, social and religious impediments on African women. According to Omode:

African girls in the past were deprived education at all levels. Their belief being that they would end up in their husbands’ kitchen. Males were allowed to go to school at the expense of females as males were seen as backbone of the society and far worthy than females. Even those few girls that were allowed to go to school dropped on to get married (182).

This is to show that the African tradition holds strongly to the male gender over the female. In the novel *Dizzy Angel* by Gracie Usifo, Ogbanje, the protagonist, a young girl in the Igbo community was betrothed to the native doctor (who was by far older than her) that saved her life from the recurrent illness which they saw as supernatural. It was arranged that after her primary education, she would get married to him. Her father was so eager to send her off to be married but she ran away to realize her own self. This is just one of the numerous Nigerian ethnic communities that strongly believe that education is not for women.

The reason for this is that female children in most societies in Nigeria are seen as unified assets. They are seen as “properties of someone or other, either your parents or your husband” (Farah 80). While the male children, on the other hand, are seen as fixed assets that contribute to the family’s heritage. Farah, frowning at this reality asserts that “...even a moron-male cost twice as much as two women in terms of blood-compensation” (13). Being seen as an unfixed asset, the female child wouldn’t be allowed to go to another family without returning a token amount to her parents in form of a dowry (6).

Ebla, a character in the novel above wonders why a girl child is so inferior to the male child. She wonders why it is only the male children that are counted (84); while camels were to be tended by boys and goats by girls. In this regard, the society places men far above women as boys are given inheritance while girls are married off. Kinrin in her argument seems to share Farah’s view with regards to the male child preference. She argues that: “The cultural discrimination against women taking them as second class citizens in the African setting especially, even globally is responsible for some denials suffered by women” (5).

Similarly, the denial of human freedom and social inequality is seen in Alkali’s *The Virtuous Woman* (19-23). In the novel, Musa Dogo’s ability to give birth to only female children is considered as a “misfortune” in his own community. The society as the one seen in Okoh’s *Edewede* considers giving birth to female children as not given birth at all for there will be no one to inherit his fortune and to extent his family’s name through generation unborn. In the case of Ada in Emecheta’s *Second Class Citizen*, she was considered a misfortune to her family. Emecheta puts it thus: Ada was a girl who arrived when everyone was expecting and predicting a boy. So since she was a disappointment to her parents, to her immediate family, to her tribe, nobody thought of recording her birth.

The stereotypical disposition about the girl-child has led to the refusal by most fathers to empower their female children especially educationally. This conspiracy against the girl-child is succinctly captured in Idegu’s *Six and Half a Dozen*.

**Adamu:** Can you imagine? How can I spend a kobo  
On a girl-child? Am I mad? (To Baba) My  
Friend, don’t give them face o-o- Don’t (18)

**Adamu:** Let me advice you as a good friend. Even  
If it means going naked to train your son,  
Do so. But any father that spends time and  
Money on a girl-child needs his twisted  
Brain properly realigned (19).

This attitude is largely hinged on the fact that the girl-child is seen as a “worthless thing” (Idegu 18) and educating her is “like giving a sumptuous meal to a pig” (Idegu 24) and hence, “a wasted labour” (Idegu 24). To others, it is because they will eventually get married off and hence, having little to contribute to the family.

As cited in Kure, discrimination against women (which manifests in terms of male-child preference) is defined by Article I of the United Nations convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women as:

Any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the bases of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, ... on a basis of equality of men and women, of human right and fundamental freedoms in political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field (20).

In the context of this discourse, Kure explains that discrimination “is symptomatic of situations where patterns of structural inequalities are maintained by rules, norms and procedure which dictate a subordinate role for women in all spheres of societal existence” (26). In the context of our discourse, the structure of inequalities is the denial of or rejection to give the girl-child a quality formal education.

In the play *Six and Half Dozen*, we see that Ladi is the first lady to go to school in the entire family in this 21<sup>st</sup> century:

**Mama:** To think that Ladi will be the very first  
Female graduate in this village make me  
Feel like shading tears... (36).

The implication here is that most of the female children are denied equal opportunities with their male counterpart. As a result, they are socially, economically and politically disadvantaged.

#### 4. GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION: An Instrument of Self Realization and Emancipation

Examples abound in the writings of African female authors, of women who have transcended limitations by virtue of their education. These women have used that precious weapon to secure their individual empowerment at critical periods in their lives. In Flora Nwapa’s *One is Not Enough*, Amaka’s education helps to propel her to achieve financial independence. In Buchi Emecheta’s *Second Class Citizen*, Adah’s education thrusts her in a position of strength and helps her to outsmart her in-laws by formulating a strategy that enables her to join her husband in England. In Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter*, Aissatou’s education becomes her only weapon against the emotional onslaught waged by her husband and mother -in-law. Pointedly, her education becomes instrumental that finally facilitated her relocation to North America, an experience that brought her face to face with limitless opportunities.

In similar vein, we see in *Six and Half a Dozen* how Ladi’s education places her in a social position that eventually elevated her and gave her relevance in the home; the position that makes Baba (and the society) to allot her respect. This is captured in the following discourse:

**Baba:** Come and sit down here. Sit very close to  
Me (she does so. To Adamu) Adamu my  
Friend, help me thank my daughter. Were it  
Not for her I would have died. (Ladi sits  
Quietly and with all modesty) I am very  
Proud of her. Look at the house and  
Everything here, (Pause) fixed by Ladi. I  
Thank God for Ladi. Wallahi, I thank God  
For her (55).

The importance of education for the girl in northern Nigeria cannot be overstated. This is why Segun warns the female writer to guard against the type of literature that ignores or degrades women or, even worse, praises them:

For such virtues as obedience, meekness and humility. It is difficult for a woman to struggle against male domination when her mind has been conditioned into thinking that she is inferior. Ideas that a person carries in her head have a force that propels her in certain directions for good or ill” (301).

The task of the writer must be to focus on raising the consciousness of women to the depth of their subjugation and to those aspects of the culture that militate against their interests and development. The writer must strive to save women from succumbing further to cultural rape by constantly reminding them of the human rights violations perpetrated against them in the name of culture and tradition, a culture that has conditioned them to actually believe that they are uneducable and that education is the sole reserve of the male child.

## 5. GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION: A Crossroad for Self Actualization by Women in Northern Nigeria

In light of the issues raised above, Bilqisu proffers some modest strategies on the need for women to believe in themselves and their capacities, knowing that their destinies lie in their hands and that life would be better through acquisition of education. The cardinal example in the novel is Uwani’s unwavering decision to denounce all social, political religious, economic and cultural structures to embrace education as a panacea to all the onuses that bestrode her life before the divorce. She eventually believes that she has the capacity to achieve lasting fulfilment if only she follows her dreams of acquiring western education. This means surmounting all of the barriers before her by the aforementioned forces to plunge herself into uncertainty by proceeding to acquire an education, the seed of which was sown by the Ghanaian widow, Nana.

In the first place, her decision to marry Ahmad is akin to a voyage to uncertainty, so her desire to acquire further education is a continuous journey to come face to face with that uncertainty, except that this effort is worth the effort. Nana and all the friends she interacts with in the university and the law school make her aware that educating a woman, apart from providing her with a profession which translate into economic, social and political independence, makes her eventually self-reliant, giving her self-fulfilment and the opportunity to contribute to society.

She gets married but after eleven years of that marriage, she realises that a woman who depends on a husband or on lovers for her livelihood is doomed to suffer perpetually already. So, after eleven years of marriage, she does not only proceed to complete her university education by earning a degree but also proceeds for and passes the law school examination to practice as a Barrister. At this point, because of her ugly past experience, she is sceptical of the love overtures of Umar even when he means well.

Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Right of Women* challenged the idea that women exist only to please men and proposed that women should have the same opportunities as men in education and politics. On the other hand, Chimamanda Adechie’s novel *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* stand for the educated women who can fight for themselves earn her money and enjoy mutual relationship with men and where love, respect and opinion count.

Alkali, in her novel *The Stillborn* asserts that a woman can indeed disentangle herself from the snares of cultural and religious conventions in society by hanging her fortunes on education. Education is presented by Alkali as one sure way for female empowerment and a means of improving her image in society at large. She believes that only education can guarantee the independence of women from the domineering tendencies of men (85).

## 6. CONCLUSION:

The paper concluded that some modest strategies should be introduce on the need for women education in order to believe in themselves and their capacities, knowing that their destinies lie in their hands and that life would be better through acquisition of education and by so doing, women would contribute to nation building and the world in general



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