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**FEMALE ENCHAINMENT AND THE QUEST FOR  
AUTONOMY IN EVELYNE ACCAD'S *WOUNDING WORDS*  
AND DANIEL MENGARA'S *MEMA*.**

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**Abstract**

This study investigates female enchainment and quest for autonomy in Evelyne Accad's *Wounding Words* and Daniel Mengara's *Mema*. The African nay Arab societies have been foul in dealing with issues relating to women; the millieux the reader observes in Accad's and Mengara's novels are such that exhibit antagonism and debasement in their treatment of women. The women wallow in their hopelessness and life of ennui. In the two novels, there is a portrayal of women who are deprived, excluded and exploited. One observes the writers' feelings and concern for these tormented women in Tunisia and Gabon. The two authors reveal the lives of women in different environments and periods but, their narratives reveal the same harrowing effects of patriarchal system on these helpless fellows. Worse still, Mengara who is a man presents his tale from a man's perspective. They recount vivid and detailed account of feminine squelching in their works. Accad presents the passive rural Arab women who cannot challenge their oppression as well as the few educated women in the city who speak against female subjugation. However, Mengara introduces the only one out of the women in his milieu whose treadmill remains her confrontation on masculinity; her audacious nature becomes her Achilles' heel. The study will be investigated using feminism as a theoretical framework.

**Key words:** Women, enchainment, patriarchy, autonomy.

## **Introduction**

The society holds the view that women are inferior beings, the patriarchal society disparages and looks down on women, as a result of that, there is unequal distribution of power and positions between men and women. Women are expected to be objects rather than subjects, dependent on the men, instead of leading, they are to be led, seen and never to be heard.

In our milieu, the woman is treated like a piece of acquired furniture rather than a companion to the man, women are subjected to such abhorrence like battering, rape, intimidation among others in order to subdue them and force them to be where they are wanted to be. It is pertinent for women to possess strength and audacity and shun vulnerability to weakness and fragility. According to Buchi Emecheta, “we are on the lowest rung men did not put us there, my sisters, I think sometimes we put ourselves there.... there should be more choices for women, certainly women who wish to be like Geraldine Ferrara... Indira Gandhis, we even need more Margaret Thatchers....” (556). This means that women need to work very hard to loosen themselves from servitude.

## **Theoretical Clarification**

Feminism as a theory of criticism upholds that women should be able to define their personhood and understand that they are not inferior but, equal to the men. They have to strive to get education and contribute positively in their society as the men. Women need economic empowerment in order to obtain political as well as sexual freedom. Since social mythology supports patriarchy, feminists advocate that education remains the only sinew for the women to transcend oppression. Also, feminists are of the view that women must be resolute in their bid to liberate themselves from the shackles of a stifling culture.

It is Elaine Showalter who postulates the three degrees of feminism: the feminine stage spanning from 1840-1880, when female writers wrote in imitation of “the literary tradition established by men” they were very careful not to use any vulgar language or motif. These female writers tried to write like famous authors who were men. Some of them used men’s names to conceal their identities. The second degree is the feminist stage (1880-1920) as postulated by Showalter which came into being when women “protested their lack of rights and worked to secure them,” the feminists deprecate the negative portrayal of

women by male writers. In the third degree (the female stage 1920-present) feminists are preoccupied in highlighting the experiences of women in literature and reflecting in a realistic manner, the issue of sexuality. In this phase, female critics reveal the misogyny, that is, the erroneous representation of women by male writers.

According to Showalter, the feminist critics are also interested in gynocriticism; this means the evaluation of works by female authors to determine the different ways they portray the female experience as against the depiction of women using the male canon (qtd. In Dobie 106-7).

As a result of the fact that the society is patriarchal, much importance is accorded to the men who occupy primary positions while women are seen as insignificant and low. Thus, women are advised through literary works to resist the ugly stereotyping by the men. Women are stereotyped as prostitutes, femme fatales, devils among others, therefore, the female writer of fiction sets out to represent in a realistic manner the authentic feminine experience and aesthetics.

Ann Dobie revealed that, “the growing strength of the feminist movement has also led to the establishment of women’s studies programs... women and men have different conceptions of self and different modes of interaction with others... ignoring them inevitably leads to a suppression of women’s understanding and acting” (108). The woman is expected to be a mother, a wife confined to the house which is her space, she is exploited in life as well as in fiction. Therefore, feminism strives to upturn the economic and social relevance of the woman. In L’écriture’ feminine, literature is perceived as a very strong platform to expose and influence the power structure hijacked by the men against the women.

### **Explication of Accad’s *Wounding Words***

Accad uses the medium of her novel to evolve the feminist debate and carefully weighs how women can achieve their worth and excellence in the Tunisian society where women are oppressed. Hayate and her educated friends see themselves as the voice and hope of other passive women in a male centred milieu. With great sanguinity, they pledge to work hard and fight for the actualization of a better society for the women. The writer’s profound concern for women in their helpless state

as well as her aversion for the manipulation of womanhood remain the thematic thrust of *Wounding Words*.

Women undergo series of activities on a daily basis which make them feel a lot of depression and anguish including the ritual of exorcism. The narrator is full of emotion when she observes that one of the women who has come for exorcism is tormented and stresses that,

The woman is talking about her life, unwanted pregnancies, her depression and illness. She looks forty years old, laden with worries and overwhelming problems... the woman is only twenty-six, already has four children, has aborted the fifth, which depressed her and made her violent. When she realized that she was no longer in full control of her actions, that she had even threatened her children with a knife. She decided to come to the hadra to obtain exorcism of the demon. She asked her oldest daughter to accompany her. Less than ten years old, the girl wears the serious look of adult. Being female in this society is already weighing heavily on her fragile shoulders. She watches her mother with uncertainty (63).

The above quotation shows the depth of quelling women are subjected to; they suffer from dementia which is inflicted by the men; it is still the men who “orchestra the hydra and pull the women in a trance” The narrator is bewildered that no woman is a part of the men’s orchestra and she remains shocked at such “social division”(64). It is intentional to exclude women from the group in order to prevent them from understanding their enslavement. Also, she is astonished by the depth of violence inflicted on the women as the man carrying out the exorcism spits saliva on the face of a woman, “forces her to stretch out on the ground, put one of his feet on her back, then on her arms and legs” (67), this is done with the bogus claim of driving out demons while it is the men that inflict the demons and the madness they pretend to fight.

Women’s freedom is stifled as they are marginalized and suppressed, the reader witnesses a patriarchal environment “which does not allow its creative voices to express their rebelliousness and anger”

(74). The author believes that the future is bleak since neither the relationships of power nor clan system can be changed, this depicts the apocalyptic nature of the feminine space. Men's projections of women are apocryphal and only aim at suppressing their growth and development. According to Molaria Ogundipe Leslie, in discussing feminism as a theory of liberation, "it is not opposed to African culture and heritage but argues that culture is dynamically evolving and certainly not static; that culture should not be immobilized in time to the advantage of men as most men in Africa want it to be" (547). The men have never wanted to be at par with the women and have never relented in relegating women to a debasing position.

Accad reveals an African society where young girls are forced into marriage at an early age without equipping them with financial and emotional strength to face the challenges ahead. The aftermath is that their mental health is trapped. For this reason, the patriarchal nature of the society and the Muslim religion become two inhibiting factors to the woman in her quest for survival, advancement and fulfillment. The women accept their fate with listless resignation. Correspondingly, the nature of this society offers us the framework to analyze some of the characters in the novel, for instance, the woman who runs away from an abusive husband and the one who threatens her children with a knife show how dehumanizing the society is. Itang Ede Egbung reiterates that, "patriarchy is one of the crippling limitations that women face today despite the effects of modernity. The belief that men are all powerful and that women are weak is at the foundation of patriarchal ideology" (1). As a result of this erroneous belief, women are stymied, exploited and deprived by the men.

Hayate reveals her sister's grief as well as hers; it is the story of suffering womanhood. She states that expressing such deep feelings offers her a form of escape from horrendous emotion. In all, there is the universality of themes in the women's experiences, the reader hears tales of "love and hate mixed together... alternating anger" (56). Hayate is a fascinating character, she is Accad's influential and inspirational character who propels others to action. The author delineates a society that looks down on women; the men want them to be confined to the courtyards, according to the narrator, as Hayate and Ahlame walk home,

they climb the streets which ascend and descend, open to squares and pass cafes filled with men smoking narguileh, men with insistent gaze, who scrutinize them so closely that the women lower their heads. They are measured aggressively, making them feel that this space is not theirs, that they should return home, or hide under a veil.

The above quote shows that irksome superiority men attach to themselves as they look down on women, they suffer much humiliation and degradation from these masochists as one sees from the excerpt above. This feeling of low self-esteem leaves the woman distraught as she struggles to redefine her identity in order to redeem her battered image. Everything surrounding the African woman is fraught with abuse, repression and debasement. Hayate and Ahlame have gone to watch the women's dance and they notice that, as they foxtrot to the rhythm of the songs, a sense of "frustration, disappointment, anger, bitterness and suffering are released from these bodies... wait for deliverance... lyrics evoke sad love stories, the anguish of life... underline the violence of stifled passions"(59-60). Most of the stories told by women in fiction and other genres of literature revolve around oppression.

In a similar fashion, a woman who takes part in the dance is seen like one in a trance, as she gazes at the crowd and releases "cries of sorrow". Her dance is likened to a spell which she uses as a means of deriving temporary succor from her frustrations. The novelist notes that, for the dancer, hers is an "attempt to forget... Having lost the memory of all that hurt her and kept her from healing... She recreates herself in the absence of consciousness" (60). Thus, the patriarchal society hinders the woman's advancement and inflicts much strain on her. In the women's songs cum poetry, they reflect their conquest, subjugation and optimism as the reader sees in the poem juxtaposed in the narrative below.

Women with vibrant grey hair  
Women with marked faces telling a story  
... comforting, renewing confidence,  
exasperating also, too much solicitude

too much anguished attention...  
In search of autonomy without limits  
discovering a new path,  
thirsting for emancipation, seeking admiration  
a husband, vehement, intransigent, the voice  
of authority.  
strict, severe in his criticism...  
a society repressing desire (61-2).

Women vigorously desire their freedom, it is this autonomy that can assert their personhood in the society. Accad unfolds an African landscape that is sublime and petrifying but debases women under the guise of cultural dictates. It becomes ridiculous that when the protagonist tries to establish a journal that will fight for the rights of women, she is given the tag of “a loose woman, a lesbian and a husband snatcher”. This is aimed at subduing her dissenting voice and willingness to continue in the struggle for female freedom. The novelist laments that female journalists are influenced by the male journalists on what to write. She stresses that “there’s an internal censorship, a self-imposed way of thinking... to please and be accepted by society and the men who judge us” (80). The preceding quote corroborates Chinyere Grace Okafor’s assertion that, “men constitute the centre and the standard... it clarifies the predicament of women in the social, political and cultural life in terms of their marginalization and construction as inferior reflections of the standard”(58). Thus, the writer uses the medium of her work to bring to the fore the predicament of women and helps to contribute positively in their quest for freedom.

Hayate organizes a conference while the women using elixir of words describe their pains and sufferings, some of them use wounding words to narrate their experiences. Undistinguishably, Samia remarks that at her early age, she is “told that girls who were not virgins were killed” and, witnessing her mother’s depression who marries at the age of fourteen and how her husband batters her, she vows never to be like her. She further emphasizes that:

I learned to demystify the world of men at a very young age. I told my mother I didn’t want to marry: I wanted to study. Some of my illiterate

cousins had died under the blows of husbands and I said that I would never accept that fate. But, in one sense, I did the opposite of what I wanted. I was living an ambiguous lifestyle. I married at the age of twenty two... it didn't work. However, I stayed married for ten years! That blocked me intellectually and kept me from finishing my studies... I always saw the socio-economic element as the most determining factor.... (44).

The excerpt above is revealing and exposes the horrendous devaluation women undergo and its devastating effects. The writer states that one of the problems facing women emancipation is linked to the Islamists' propaganda. She records that in Tunisia, no woman has reached the level of a university professor, or the post of a general manager or a secretary general in public service and, for a woman who asks for a divorce on her own, "cannot find independent housing, she is penalized by the divorce" (100). This shows that women are discouraged from leaving their marital homes no matter how traumatic their experiences are. In the same vein, a husband sees a wife who works outside her home as relegating the conjugal home while "women find themselves slighted by the system"(101). Therefore, such laws are enacted to destroy women's economic growth. This underlying code becomes a ploy to suppress women's financial expansionism which is perceived as a threat to the patriarchal society. So, women live a life of ennui and are committed in working to please their husbands rather than themselves. The protagonist organizes a conference to sensitize other women; they try to situate the ideological currents of Tunisian feminism and place it in the context of world feminist struggle and opine that much remains to be done. According to Breyten Breytenbach, a writer has at least two roles to the society, "he is the questioner and the implacable critic of the mores and attitude and myths of his society, but he is also the exponent of the aspirations of his people"(166). So, Accad uses her novel as a network to link not only the women in Tunisia but has stirred the consciousness and sensibilities of the women across the globe.

Homogeneously, the author reveals that education is very pertinent for the development of women and their upward mobility.

Ifeoma Okoye corroborates to this assertion when she posits that to optimize the condition of women, “education is not only about money, it’s also about being able to stand on your own, about believing in yourself, about having choices, about having a measure of control over your life” (207). The writer situates the woman in the centre of her analysis, highlighting their experiences and expectations, she reveals the reason why some women prefer lesbianism to marriage:

Lesbians declare that their preference is more than sexual, it is political. A woman who no longer needs masculine approval is no longer his hostage... lesbians are free to seek their emotional nourishment from other women rather than from men... Heterosexuality is instilled by all sorts of mechanism tied to male power, physical violence, sexual slavery, rape.... (161).

From the foregoing, the reader observes that female domination and oppression tend to force the woman into societal abhorrence like lesbianism, such option has its devastating effects which include the likely extinction of the human race if it comes to stay in our society. Likewise, the author examines the polemics of social conditioning of sexual roles and reiterates that women “are expected to be non-aggressive, dependent, to feel the need to be led, be affectionate, doubt themselves, be incapable of being robust and having an autonomous existence. These stereotypes lead women to failure, to victimization and insanity”(161). The preceding quotation exposes sexual fascism, however, today’s woman acquiring education, sets out to reverse these oddities entrenched around her. The narrator argues that if the issue of motherhood is de-emphasized, women who are subjugated because of reproduction will be free to excel in other areas (162). The truth is that most women who go into marriage do so purposely for the sake of having children.

Accad’s portrayal of her educated female characters is positive and commendable; they are resilient and ready to confront their oppression. Unlike the rural Arab women who are passive and unassertive, the educated female characters like Hayate, Halima, Aida, Rania, Rima, Sihame, Ahlame among others set out to confront the

oppression of women. Therefore, the writer delineates dynamic and dogged women who are indefatigable in their quest to oppose feminine enchainment. Conversely, Accad subtly shows that education is the prerogative and vehicle for growth in the actualization of female independence.

### **Explication of Daniel Mengara's *Mema***

Mengara's milieu like all African society is a mannish one where only men are expected to make decisions and attend important gatherings. With this delineation, the reader understands the reality of the exclusive dignity and the social situation of the man. On the other hand, the women are to remain in the homefront, care for their families and, dwell in passivity; they are only to be seen and never to be heard. But, Mema violates this stipulation and attends every important deliberation and equally contributes meaningfully. Instead of seeing her participation as her own way of contributing to her society, she is damned.

The men try as much as they can to stifle her ascent and assertiveness. Their effort to depress Mema crashes with abject failure. According to the narrator, "She would accompany her husband at every gathering and miss no opportunity to open her mouth. Even in the mud-walled church that the white man had come to build in our village in order to save souls from the demon, my mother would impose her presence... she would interrupt the village catechist and take over the sermon" (34). Owing to the fact that she refuses to be subdued, there is the feeling of repugnance towards her by the catechist and other men alike. To the men, she plays archetypal preacher and imbues herself with masculine prerogatives. Therefore, Mema's audacious nature becomes her Achilles' heel. She is seen as a non-conformist whose treadmill is her confrontation on masculinity.

Sima who is her husband often batters her and their neighbors are fascinated seeing him beat her because he is showing her "who carries an *nkon* between his legs in that hut" (46). Sima is not the kind of man Mema wants to marry, nevertheless, she rebukes him to bring out the man in him since she hates his "soft, placid and subdued nature"(44). To show that Sima is imposed on her, she laments, "What kind of man are you?... what kind of man are you to stand like a dead tree... stands there like a bull whose penis has been cut off, an impotent bull... is this the kind of man that my parents gave me?" (45).

Consequently, to forestall her affront, her husband quells her. Mengara subtly shows through Mema that women should challenge their oppression. The protagonist is accused of being a sorceress and a witch, who has used witchcraft to quieten her husband. According to the narrator, women use such means to,

Control their husbands' will in order to prevent them from looking at other women or marrying themselves a second wife. They would, for example, put strange things in their foods and under the conjugal bed. These things would slowly take over the manhood and will of the husband, who would become very docile. If the husband dared to go to another woman, his manhood would refuse to stand only used with the woman who controlled it with witchcraft (33).

Thus, Mema is accused of turning Sima into an empty calabash. The quote above shows one of the pointless cultural beliefs of the Gabonese nay African people which oppresses a woman. Such asinity suppresses feminine ascension and vehemence. The people believe so much in witchcraft and the destructive power of a woman that they assert that, "a man once thought to be untamable... after taking a new wife becomes as docile as a baby lion" (33). It is a suffocating and embarrassing experience for some women who can be accused unjustly.

Mema is disconsolate the way she is treated by her husband and his people. In her forlorn and depressed state, she laments: "I have had enough of your family beating me up and violating me... I have had enough of your people treating me like a goatshit" (478). The aforementioned quotation depicts her crestfallen, heartsick and helpless condition. Her lamentation is the squall of an enraged woman exposing her oppression in a patriarchal society. During the early years of her marriage, because she has no child of her own, she is scorned, tormented and compared with her younger sister who "was able to lay children quickly as a hen would lay eggs" (52). Sima's people threaten to get another wife to replace and spite her.

The writer shows that the African society oppresses and devalues a woman and sets out to satirize. He reveals that a woman's status

should be defined by a man, according to Aduke Adebayo, “social transformation including women of Africa... is not about warring with the men, the reversal of role, or doing to men whatever women think that men have been doing for centuries, but it is trying to build a harmonious society” (qtd in Adie and Yusuf 137). Also, it is portrayed that a woman who has no child is worthless because “children were the best thing that could happen to a woman, children were a promise of grandness... and reaped the fruits of the social respect that was attached to the status of mother”(52-3). Mema’s case points to the predicament of some barren women in the society, before having her first child, she says her prayers in the night and day, “She had said them in the forest as she walked to her farming fields, as she bathed in the forest stream and as she covered her body with special creams made out of sacred leaves that were destined to render her fertile like the earth after rainy season”(61). The quotation reveals her lack of peace of mind; it means that there is so much contempt and distress for a woman who gets married and can not have children.

Mema’s wish to use the brideprice of her daughters to get wives for her sons when they become of age is short-lived when her two daughters died on the same day with Sima. Likewise, it becomes more traumatizing as she is accused of killing them with witchcraft. As a result of such false belief, she is alienated and no member of the community will speak to her for two years. The reader notices the intensity of her devastation and anguish. Grace Eche Okereke remarks that the “ubiquitous man-made impediments cripple woman and delay her journey of growth”(95). Patriarchy wants the women to be in the doldrums except in the domestic affairs, even in the modern civilized era, the men want the women to live the way out great grandmothers lived. Women are expected to live in a row of huts, probably, five women married and answerable to a man, taking their turns to serve him food and sleep with him as his appetite stipulates, where one refuses to adhere to this regulation, she is seen as an iconoclast or a rebel.

The men do not realize that the progress of any society lies in the reciprocity of the two sexes and not on the one sided male world. In the same manner, Ezenwa Ohaeto opines that, “Women must feel a senses of belonging and can only do so by participating fully in the powerful, controlling position from which the destiny of the society is

determined”(193). Mema is tagged a defier because she refuses to be quelled like the other women in her environment.

### **Conclusion**

This study has been able to examine female conquest in Evelyne Accad's *Wounding Words* and Daniel Mengara's *Mema*. Accad and Mengara use their novels as the point of view to describe the harrowing pains and debasement women undergo in their societies. The two writers capture the suffocating effects of patriarchal system in the lives of women. However, Accad and Mengara contend that women are exploited and the contemptuous way they are treated should be re-examined in order to promote their economic and social relevance. Also, the two novelists stress the need for women to challenge their enchainment and contribute meaningfully to their society. On the other hand, Accad posits that education remains a veritable tool for women to transcend their predicament.

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