

Literacy as a Tool For Cultural Independence

LITERATURE



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Literacy as a Tool for Cultural Independence: Female Aspirations and Achievements in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde*

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ABSTRACT

Through the acquisition and internalization of formal education, Nettie, Celie and Shug Avery, among other females, in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and *Kehinde* with her friend, Moriammo, in Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde* are able to grapple with, and challenge their predominantly male prone cultures and societies which connive to oppress and suppress them for the mere fact that they are women. In the societies portrayed, illiterate women are literally and sexually abused, exploited and silenced by the men, but educated females like those mentioned above regularly strive to negate these abuses, exploitation and the attendant invisibility. Educated females in the Walker's and Emecheta's novels cited here succeed in actively impacting on the lives of other members, males and females alike, of their families and communities. Thus, they become role models for other females aspiring to free themselves from gender and other socio-cultural oppressions that manifest regularly in their societies and which are often taken for granted by the men.

INTRODUCTION

What are aspirations and what are achievements? A person's goal, ambition or desire is said to be his or her aspiration. It is a target he or she has set at a point in his or her life to attain. Achievement refers to a person's accomplishment or realization of his or her set objective(s). A most veritable weapon for the attainment of aspirations in life is the acquisition of good quality education. Literacy is thus the key that banishes ignorance and unlocks knowledge and wisdom that guide and guard us in life. A common catchphrase in many neighbourhoods affirms that, "knowledge is power". This statement is absolutely true and enduring! A society or community that

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embraces sound and humane education attains lofty heights within a short span of time. The benefits of good education are therefore immense and priceless.

In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde*, the acquisition and internalisation of literacy by some women and its resulting awareness catapults them into a different and higher realm of reality as they begin to claim and assert their individual and cultural independence. The knowledge or enlightenment that characters in the two selected novels acquire is not always from a formal classroom or school setting, but it alters their world views or perception of issues. Prior to their enlightenment, these female characters were inhibited and restricted by social norms and cultural taboos within their vicinities. A key factor that regularly negated the dreams and aspirations of women in the two texts is male domination or the patriarchal nature of the two societies portrayed by Walker and Emecheta in the two texts. Moreover, with their acquisition of education and awareness, the female characters in the two settings begin to liberate themselves effectively from the shackles of male domination.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* opens with a youthful and ignorant female character, Celie. She is the protagonist and is shown lamenting her predicament and addressing her grievances in form of a letter she writes in African-American slang and addresses to GOD. She is overwhelmed by the conundrum of obstacles afflicting her and is completely at a loss on how to go about resolving them. Therefore, she writes a letter to GOD in the hope of finding solutions to her problems. As the story begins, she is barely literate and naïve. She therefore defies standard formats of grammar and speech in her letter writing. Her childhood and innocence are immediately obvious even to unsuspecting or casual readers in her opening letter. Most of the letter is rendered in slang since Celie is semi literate. Through a series of letters addressed to God by way of diary entries, she reveals her psychological trauma as she recounts her rough, inhumane experiences in her step father's hands. These range from physical to psychological abuses. Celie cannot confide her harrowing experiences to anyone except God. Her step father's sexual abuse of her is too gory and bizarre for her to grasp. Her step father, Alfonso exacerbates the situation by threatening Celie and making her to feel that a revelation of his sexual abuse of her to his wife (Celie's mother), would kill her.

In the mean time, Alfonso, who is married to Celie's mother, gives us the impression that he is the biological father to Celie and Nettie, alongside other children. However, he is merely Celie and Nettie's step father:

You better never tell anybody but God. It'd kill your mammy.

Dear God,

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I am fourteen years old. I have always been a good girl.
May be you can give me a sign letting me know what is
happening to me.

Last spring after little Lucious come I heard them fussing.
He was pulling on her arm. She say It too soon, Fonso, I
ain't well. Finally he leave her alone. A week goes by, he
pulling on her arm again. She say Naw, I ain't gonna. Can't
you see I'm already half dead, an all of these children.

She went to visit her sister doctor over Macon. Left me to
see after the others. He never had a kine word to say to me.
Just say you gonna do what your mammy wouldn't. First
he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it
around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he pushes his
thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to
choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it.

But Ido never git used to it. And now I feel sick every time
I am the one to cook. My mama she fusses at me a look at
me. She happy, cause he good to her now. But too sick to
last long (Alice Walker 1982: 1-2).

Thrust

The crux of Celie's predicament is the sexual harassment of her by her step father (her so called father) and other men within the neighbourhood. Life is especially made harrowing and unbearable to Celie by her mother's husband and her presumed father, Alfonso, who repeatedly rapes and impregnates her, but avoids responsibility for the children she bears and actually sneaks away with them to his Christian missionary friends for adoption. He later gives Celie the gruesome impression that the kids had been killed in the nearby wood. In addition, later as she is given in marriage to a man she did not choose, her so called husband, Mr. _____ (Albert), exacerbates her situation by further abusing her sexually.

Celie has had a bad and inhumane experience from her childhood. She is acutely aware of the wrongs done to her – even in her mother's presence, by her presumed father. Her so called father repeatedly rapes and impregnates her and as soon as she delivers her babies, he disposes them off in a mysterious way by giving them up for adoption by Christian missionaries or by 'killing them in the woods,' as he tells Celie. He thus lies to Celie. He disposes of the babies in a bid to have continued and regular sexual access to 'his daughter'. Celie increasingly becomes concerned about her siblings, especially her younger sister, Nettie and what would likely be her fate unless some unforeseen event occurs to thwart their lustful step father's evil schemes. She however vows to protect her sister by preventing him, from also raping her:

Dear God,

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My mama dead. She dies screaming and cussing. She screams at me. She cusses at me. I'm big. I can't move fast enough. By time I git back from the well, the water be warm. By the time I git the tray ready, the food be cold. By the time I git all the children ready for school it be dinner time. He don't say anything. He set there by the bed holding her hand and cryin, talking bout don't leave me, don't go (3).

Here, Alice Walker vividly reveals the bizarre and helpless circumstances surrounding the girl cum child protagonist, Celie who is forced to assume additional responsibilities in her prime as mother, 'wife' and caretaker. She is therefore denied her childhood. Furthermore, she is deprived of the chance to remain in school since she falls pregnant and stays home (Futhie Nokulunga Mabuza 2009:13).

Eventually, Celie's step father marries her off to Mr. ----- (Albert) a man she does not know or love. This is done largely to avoid a scandal in the family. It is equally done to possibly allow him to also have sexual access to Celie's younger sister, Nettie, whom Celie had so far protected and prevented from their presumed father's sexual onslaughts.

As soon as Celie is married off to Mr. -----, Nettie runs away from their step father's place and seeks solace and security from Celie in her new home. However, Celie's husband, Mr. ----- begins to entice Nettie in a bid to sleep with her. He complements her frequently, but Nettie eventually embarks on a missionary journey to Africa with a Christian family (Mabuza 2009: 16). This action does not please Mr. ----- (Albert) at all. However, Nettie's foray into Christian missionary activities enables her to acquire sound and veritable education which empowers and sensitizes her for the future and upon her return to the United States after her missionary journey to Africa; she enlightens her elder sister, Celie and ensures that she too is truly literate.

Tellingly, Nettie successfully escapes her step father's and brother-in-law's sexual harassment by proceeding on a missionary journey with members of an American Christian family to Africa where she receives good quality education and enlightenment through the missionary work. Upon her return to the United States and to her family, Nettie brings her enlightenment to bear on Celie and things take a turn for the better in their family as she and Celie successfully wrest the family estate including the house and other possessions from their step father, Alfonso. These family possessions are afterwards legally restored to them and they both become fully liberated from the shackles of men. Their abuser and step father, Alfonso, is found to be an impostor and therefore expelled from their household and estate.

However, it is not only Nettie that enlightens Celie. Celie's husband, Mr. _____ (Albert) does not really love or care for her feelings as he dates and brings other women to their matrimonial home for sexual purposes. One of such women is Shug Avery who later bonds with Celie to the detriment of

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her husband, Mr. _____ (Albert). Upon an evening, Mr. ----- goes out to carouse and subsequently returns home with his mistress, Shug, who is very ill. He does not confide in Celie or care about her feelings before bringing his girl friend to their matrimonial home. Celie however takes good care of Shug and nurses her back to sound health. She does not allow jealousy or rivalry to colour her relationship with both her husband and his girl friend. Instead, a strong bond of affection and friendship develops between her and her husband's mistress. The bond between Celie and Shug Avery grows and strengthens with time. Meanwhile, Celie's father in law (Albert's father) appears on the scene soon after to express concern over his son's evil behaviour and to empathize with her:

Mr. ----- daddy show up this evening. ...

He comes right to the point.

Just couldn't rest till you got her in your house, could you? He say, coming up the step.

Mr. ----- don't say anything. ...

Old Mr. ----- say to Mr. -----, Just hat is it bout this Shug Avery anyway, he say. She black as tar, she nappy headed. She got legs like baseball bats. ...

Why, say old Mr. -----, she ain't even clean. I hear she got the nasty woman disease. ...

Mr. ----- turn his head slow, watch his daddy drink. Then say, real sad, you ain't got it in you to understand, he say. I love Shug Avery. Always have, always will. I should have married her when I had the chance.

Yeah, say old Mr. ----- . And throwed your life away. (mr. ----- grunt right there.) And a right smart of my money with it. Old Mr. ----- clear his throat. Nobody even sure who her daddy is. ... (Walker, 1982: 56-57).

Eventually, the growing bond between Celie and Shug facilitates enlightenment between the two women. Shug actively enlightens Celie and partners with her around the house. She also begins to discern Mr. -----'s mistreatment or abuse of women through Celie's experience. Furthermore, through Shug Avery's revelation, Celie becomes more aware of her husband's evil nature and insincerity towards her. Through Shug also, Celie learns to regard her husband as merely another human being. She no longer cowers before him. Hitherto, she had been intimidated by him and made to feel like his servant or maid. Moreover, through Shug also, Celie discovers letters written and sent to her by her sister, Nettie, during her missionary stint in Africa but hidden by her husband to prevent her from contact with her younger sister. Subsequently, Shug dumps Mr. ----- and opts for another boy friend, Grady, much to Mr. -----'s displeasure, embarrassment and frustration. The awareness and enlightenment imbibed through literacy and female camaraderie subsequently saves the situation for Celie, Nettie, Shug and other females in Alice Walker's celebrated novel, *The Color Purple*.

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In addition, Albert's first child and son by another woman, Harpo begins to oppress his wife, Sofia, and it is through a similar process of awareness that she confronts and surmounts the inherent male domination and oppression. Contrary to Celie, Sofia is assertive and takes no nonsense from Harpo. Indeed, when Harpo behaves reasonably and respectably towards Sofia, love and understanding prevail in their family, but when he tries to implement his father's philosophy of wife hammering, an unprecedented outcome regularly manifests as Sofia regularly gets the upper hand by beating the hell out of Harpo. Sofia subsequently makes it clear to Harpo and to Celie that she married her husband purely from the motive of love and that she would not tolerate oppression from him or from any man or woman. According to Futhie Mabuza (2009: 16),

As Walker develops Harpo's character from a loving and caring husband to a wife beater, she shows the negative attitudes men have towards their wives. Harpo starts to get worried that Sofia (blatantly)* speaks her mind and also talks back (to him)*, which is something Celie does not do to his father. With his father's help, Harpo decides to start beating his wife so as to stop her from talking back and also to limit her independence as a woman altogether.

Harpo had ignorantly imbibed his father's philosophy of wife hammering and is consequently frustrated with his marriage to Sofia. He expects his Sofia not only to be his wife, but also a docile slave to him as Celie appears to be to his father, Mr. ----- (Albert). Harpo wants Sofia to be wholly submissive to him and for her to regularly take and implement his instructions:

Harpo want to know what to do to make Sofia mind. He sit out on the porch with Mr. ----- . He says, I tell her one thing, she do another. Never do what I say. Always backtalk.

To tell the truth, he sounds a little proud of this to me.

Mr. ----- don't say anything. Blow smoke.

I tell her she can't be all the time going to visit her sister. Us married now, I tell her. Your place is here with the children. She say, I'll take the children with me. I say, your place is with me. She say, You want to come? She keep primping in front of the glass, getting the children ready at the same time.

You ever hit her? Mr.----- ast.

Harpo look down at his hands. Naw suh, he say low, embarrass.

Well how you spect to make her mind? Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating (Walker 1982:37).

To his utter disappointment and frustration however, Harpo found Sofia to be his match and ended up as the sore loser in the ensuing family contest.

In Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde*, the protagonist, Kehinde also contends with male domination and exploitation by her husband, Albert, her son, Joshua and the Arabian merchant in the hotel she later works in among other men. Like Celie's husband in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Kehinde's husband is equally referred to as Albert and this is not a coincidence since

both men turn out to be horrible husbands in the two stories. In Emecheta's novel, the protagonist, Kehinde is initially self effacing and pliable. She sacrifices her, time, leisure and liberty in order to sustain her husband, her son and her daughter. In line with the patriarchal scheme of things in the story, Bimpe, her daughter, is mentioned only in passing and as a pointer to her son, Joshua and her husband, Albert – the presumed real heirs to the family possessions. Despite her education and commensurate employment in the bank, Kehinde is initially acquiescent and content to remain the humble, pliable and dedicated housewife. She sacrifices her time and interests to the pleasure and desire of her family and does not care about her individual needs as a person and as a woman. Her whole world revolves around her husband and their two children. At the outset of the story, she is timid, self effacing and inarticulate. She thus loses her individuality or identity and will to her husband's identity and will and seemed to be content with that.

For instance, the situation becomes so sordid that when Kehinde gets pregnant, hopefully for their third child, Albert, her husband unilaterally decides that the family cannot cope with the addition of another child. He thus mounts intense pressure on his wife to abort the pregnancy and she does so in a bid to please him even though, as a true and caring mother, she is very uncomfortable and opposes that action. Indeed, Albert goes to the sordid extent of employing the services of an abortion doctor and schedules an appointment for the termination of wife's pregnancy without firstly obtaining her consent or confiding in her. According to Oyegoke and Mogu (2004):

Kehinde, assisted by (her) cannier mythological self... discovers that the gallant, kind and considerate Albert of her early marriage had not been any of those epithets but rather the opposite and more. Her husband was ungallant, unkind and inconsiderate. He was moreover greedy, selfish and chauvinistic. She finds to her surprise that the chauvinistically driven ego trips and the relentless assault on her dignity and freedom did not begin and end with her husband. Equally virulent are relatives and in-laws brought up on a mind set shaped by an unfair discriminatory patriarchal ethos (72).

However, gradually Kehinde subsequently realizes with shock and unbelief her husband's lack of loyalty in his betrayal of her through his abrupt and unilateral relocation to Nigeria and his subsequent involvement with another woman, Rike, whom he eventually marries as a second wife without even bothering to confer with or confide in her. Indeed, to further complicate matters, Albert proceeds to marry a third wife later! When Kehinde's inner self comes to the fore, she becomes furious and dominant. Thus:

Kehinde understands herself better and in so doing understands others even better. She boldly takes steps to extricate herself from the mindless cultural chains that she had allowed to bind her to her husband and in-laws such as Auntie Selina and the 'other' woman, Rike, her husband's concubine and rather surprisingly, even her own son, Joshua (73).

Clearly, from being an acquiescent person, dutiful housewife, mother and womanist, Kehinde becomes a feminist and vehemently begins to oppose

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male domination in female affairs or patriarchy in the society, especially as it relates to women, their unique sensibilities and well being.

Kehinde's friend and confidante, Moriammo equally gains enlightenment and is able to overcome male prejudices and domination of females in Emecheta's novel. The trials and tribulations faced by Kehinde in the story act as a tonic to energise Moriammo to wake up and face reality as a female in a male ordered setting. In a letter written by Kehinde upon her return to Lagos, Nigeria and mailed to Moriammo in London, England, the protagonist reminds her friend of many years about their joint experiences in the hands of men – mainly their husbands. Among other things, Kehinde briefs Moriammo about the state of affairs in their home country, Nigeria, especially with regards to family matters. Apparently, she is shocked to the marrow about her husband, Albert's behaviour and strives to relate these experiences to Moriammo:

Things are happening here which, as I said earlier, I would never have believed if could happen: Albert – oh, I forgot, I' m not allowed to call him that-o, because I didn't give the name to him. (He didn't give me the name Kehinde, yet he is free to shout my name even in the market place.) I have to say 'Joshua's father' or 'our father' or 'our husband'. He didn't come to my room until three days after my arrival, when he came in the middle of the night, and half-heartedly made as if to demand his marital rights. Of course, I refused, as I think he expected. He only came to my room to do his duty, not to be intimate or loving. He left all that in England.

My sister, Ifeyinwa, told me not to behave badly. She told me to lower my voice and accept his apologies, whenever he gave them. ... He didn't make any. Why should he? After all, he did not commit a crime against humanity, all he did was to marry Rike and have a baby boy, with another on the way, without my knowing anything about it. Yes, Moriammo, he has another wife. She is a lecturer. She had a PhD. She has a maid. She has a Peugeot. She has a son twelve months old. And I am sure the one she is carrying will be another son. You know my husband p- our husband – cannot sit down and read a book to save his life, but now he is married to a young woman with a doctorate degree in literature!

I have been for several interviews...

This is making life unbearable. ...Honestly, Moriammo, Albert has humiliated me, and the worst is, that I have to depend on him financially. He gave me the first house keeping money in over eighteen years of our marriage, and I had to take it. When I refused to kneel to take it, his sisters levied a fine of one cock. Paying the fine took half the house keeping. It is a man's world here. ...

Raising children is no longer enough. The saving grace for us women is the big 'E' of education (Buchi Emecheta 1994:93-95).

As Kehinde returns to England, she does not get a well paying job in the bank as was previously the case. After a painstaking search, she gets a job in a London hotel as a maid. In the hotel, she encounters and Arab merchant

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who attempts to sexually exploit her by making her pose in the nude under the pretext that he has never seen a naked black woman. The hotel she worked in was partly owned by Arab merchants. However, with her enlightenment, Kehinde refuses to oblige the Arab merchant's request for her to undress for his carnal pleasure (Emecheta 1994: 131-133). However, her bitter encounter with the rich Arab merchant made her disconsolate and she pondered who to be angry with for being a woman and for encountering men like Albert and the Arab merchant in her life's journey on earth.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing discussion, it is amply evident that literacy – especially through formal education, guides, guards and empowers females and even male characters in the two selected novels by Alice Walker and Buchi Emecheta. Prior to their enlightenment in the two stories, women were in a worse shape since the men in their lives toyed with their lives and took them for granted. However, with the resulting enlightenment, the women began to bond together and ward off male domination, abuses and exploitation. The experiences of the characters – males and females alike – in the two stories, reveals the goodness in education and the usefulness in enlightenment and literacy for all and sundry as a way to tame our baser nature as human beings. In this regard, the acquisition of sound and humane education is decidedly the best tonic for everyone as it inculcates discipline, unravels mysteries, unlocks and then develops our minds which are tellingly our greatest endowments as human beings on earth. The experiences of Celie, Nettie, Shug, Sofia, Kehinde and Moriammo in Walker's and Emecheta's texts above are regular universal occurrences and these could be mitigated with a healthy dose of sound literacy which in turn produces overwhelming enlightenment.

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