

**TOWARDS CHANGING THE NEGATIVE PATRIARCHAL PERCEPTION OF
GIRL CHILD EDUCATION IN *ADA, THE STORY OF AN ORPHAN* BY STELLA
OMONIGHO.**

PAR

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Abstract

The study examined the negative patriarchal ideology and its effect on the education of a girl child in the patriarchal traditional African society with particular emphasis on Nigerian. The study revealed that there is no significant interest in the formal training of young women whose major role according to the society is to bear and raise children. It is also discovered that even some of the young girls geared their minds towards marriage because to them, that is the faith of a girl child. However, in the book of discourse, *Ada*, the protagonist of the play is optimistic that she will finish her education before marriage. She believes that she will succeed despite resistance and traditional threats meted on her and other girls. It is recommended among others that since patriarchy is not gender sensitive, continuous awareness campaigns should be staged from time to time as a reminder. Both male and female children should be given equal opportunities in their educational progression. It is essential that the society moves away from this traditional idea in order to train both male and female children who will in one way or the other contribute to growth and development of the society.

Keywords: changing, negative patriarchal ideology, girl child, education, literature

Introduction

The education of citizens of any nation should be for all devoid of gender. It is supposed to be a right for everybody. No country can prosper when its people are not educated. Education which is the process of facilitating learning, or the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, beliefs, and habits is crucial in the life of every individual.

According to Ochio (2005):

Education is the process of providing information to an inexperienced person to help him/her develop physically, mentally, socially, emotionally, spiritually, politically and economically. Education is the process through which individuals are made functional members of their society. It is a process through which an individual acquires knowledge and realizes his/her potentialities and uses them for self-actualization, to be useful to him/herself and others.

In rural areas, many teenage girls up till today do not have adequate education beyond a certain age. The native traditional philosophy is that a woman's place is in the kitchen. That is to say, all her daily activities are centered in her home. Therefore, these beliefs have kept many teenage girls away from being positive, productive and focus on their education pursuits because they cannot change the narrative. This is the kind of challenge Omonigho tries to demonstrate where the young girls are removed from school to go to their husband's houses. Most young women in Nigeria have had various challenges in order to obtain equal education in all forms of formal education. It is a basic human right and has been enshrined in Article 26 of the 1948 adoption of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights which provides that every child has the right to education. Just as it also includes the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work. However, Africa continent is faced with grave challenges because it is a patriarchal society that is divided along gender lines. There is an emphasis on the difference between masculinity and femininity. Men are still seen as the dominant and women as weak or inferior.

Patriarchy

Patriarchy is a social and ideological construct which considers men (who are the patriarchs) as superior to women.

Craig Lockard (2007:111-114) defines patriarchy as:

A social system in which men hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property. Some patriarchal societies are also patrilineal, meaning that property and title are inherited by the male lineage. Historically, patriarchy has manifested itself in the social, legal, political, religious, and economic organization of a range of different cultures.

Even if not explicitly defined to be by their own constitutions and laws, most contemporary societies are, still in practice of patriarchy. Most times, one hears this comment by both men and women, young and old, say that “He! Remember that you are a girl or woman, you are not supposed to do this or that”. Today, just as it was in the past, men generally hold political, economic, and religious powers in most societies. This system is a strong force in African societies in general and in Nigerian traditional societies in particular.

Girl child education

When a girl is given out in marriage at a very tender age, her right as human is abused, her right to education is deprived of and she will be doomed to be an illiterate forever if her husband does not give her the opportunity to school. It has been established by researchers that enabling female education is crucial for the role of women in national development which cannot be over-emphasized. The role of women cannot be underestimated for national development. The general belief is that “when you educate a man, you educate one, but when you educate a woman, you educate a nation.” This is so because the education of every child starts from the family and mother is the first teacher. Educating the girl child produces mothers who are educated and will in return educate their children, care for their families and provide for their children. In view of this, agitations came up against the belief that women have less value than men under the group called feminism.

According to Preeti Rawat, (2014), feminist theory is an awareness of patriarchal control, exploitation, and oppression at the material and ideological levels of women's labour, fertility, and sexuality, in the family, at the place of work, and in the society in general. Consciously men and women should transform the present situation to favour girl child education all over the world.

Feminist theorists have written extensively about patriarchy either as a primary cause of women's oppression, or as part of an interactive system. Shulamith Firestone (1970), quoted by Victoria Margree (2018), a radical-libertarian feminist, who defines patriarchy as a system put in place to oppress women. She believes that patriarchy is caused by the biological inequalities between women and men where women bear children, while men do not.

Summary of the book

The drama piece titled, *Ada, the story of an orphan* is the author's first play. The author, Stella Omonigho is an Associate Professor at University of Benin, Nigeria in the Department of Foreign Languages; she specializes in Francophone African Literature with particular interest in Drama. She has passion for education of a girl child in Nigeria which is what has led her to write this drama piece.

The drama piece is a translated copy of the French language version. In the book, Omonigho brings out the features of a talented young girl who suffered all the pains of being an orphan under the guidance of her grandmother to become a successful young woman. Contrary to the expectation of traditional African culture that a young girl of a certain age always has to abandon her education to get married because her education as a woman plays a secondary role. The primary role is child bearing. Ada, being different from her friends; Chioma and Ndudi refused to give up her education to marry early even when the king proposed to marry her. Her resistance to get married to the Igwe, supposed the age mate of her grandfather, later got married to the king's son, prince Enueze. The most important thing is that she achieved her dream by becoming a medical doctor and a princess by marriage.

Patriarchal negative perceptions as regards girls' schooling

- **Marriage and procreation**

Ada, the main character of the play is the positive portray of young women who undergo all sort of sufferings and difficulties to make it in life. The author presents the Nigerian traditional society where it decides the faith of young girls especially when it has to do with marriage and their education. One finds out that most people support this idea of early marriage to whoever not even minding fate of the young school girl. The tradition must always be maintained. No wonder, the protagonist's friend, Chioma confirms this traditional African life when Ada broke the news that the Igwe desires her: "He! I told you people just this afternoon and you girls were busy preaching and telling thrash..... I told you that sooner or later, we all shall be given out in marriage whether we like it or not. I never knew you will be the first victim among three of us" (Omonigho, 2017:21). All the efforts of women concerning their lives and marriage are still dependent on the male dominated society and the latter has to give approval. Chioma observes that all the young girls at their tender ages shall be given out in marriage whether they affirm of it or not. Ada wept and lamented the cruelty of life to girls and more particularly orphan girls go through. However, Ada is not ready to give up her dream of becoming a medical doctor. The girl child education also prepares her to face realities in society and teaches her to be a good wife and mother. When she is educated, she realises the full potentials endowed in her; she discovers to be whoever and whatever she wants to be. When finally Ada saw light at the end of the tunnel, she became useful not only to herself but to all in the society in general.

It is reechoed again in the speech of Chioma concerning male education. The tradition is never against the formal education of boys. The male child can attend the highest level of education as he desires which is not the case with a female child. Take for instance the king's son was sent to the city to study without compelling him to get married before furthering his education knowing fully well that education is paramount in the life of children. The traditional belief does not guarantee this opportunity to young girls. Hence, Ada is under threat to marry the king in which her education certainly will end. Ada's friend, Chioma reiterated that in a male dominated society, the interest of male children is considered over and above that of the girl child.

- **Disrespect**

The traditional society believes that educated girls may not be that respectful as compared to those who have not gone to school. In the play piece (2017:27), the outright refusal of Ada to accept the king's proposal of marriage is termed as an act of disrespect by the entire community. One of the villagers comments, "Hmm Ada, the gods might be angry with you for disobeying the Igwe. I think you are going to bring calamity not only to your grandmother but to the entire village". Patriarchy sees the exposure of girls to western education will bring about stubbornness and disobedience by most of if not all the young school girls.

- **Encourage caste system- exposure to prostitution**

There is this mentality that schooling girls are liable to become wayward morally. They might be engaging in immoral acts by sleeping around with men since they mingle with these men. The traditional belief is that when young girls come into constant contact with men, they hardly can maintain their virginity. However, it is noted that Ada who is strongly interested in school does not even have time for men while Chioma, her friend on the other hand has little or no interest in school except for the Biology teacher. Contrary to these speculations, we learned from the play that it is even Ada who is counseling her friends to keep themselves pure till marriage. "My grandmother tells me that a girl's purity before marriage is the most important gift she can give to her husband in life apart from children" (13). Therefore, girl child cannot be denied education based on the traditional patriarchal beliefs that are harmful to the future of young girls.

Changing patriarchy ideology regarding education of girls, the way forward

Patriarchy is the main agent of poor education of girls. It nurses all forms of violations and discrimination against women. The earlier this ideology is discarded from the minds of the young ones for the progress of our society the better. Educating the girl child translates to better achievement for sustainable development goals particularly in Nigeria.

- **Various campaigns groups**

Despite current legislation prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of inter alia gender, it appears that little has been achieved to facilitate equality of the sexes in most African societies especially in education. It seems that this can be attributed to a deep-rooted patriarchal society. This article consequently investigates the ideological nature of patriarchy and illustrates strategies that are applied to perpetuate relations of domination that serve this ideology. Despite attempts at transformation of education in South Africa, and legislation prohibiting inter alia discrimination on the basis of gender, it seems that concerns about gender relations have merely scratched the surface, which implies that discrimination remains embedded in the new educational dispensation (Daniella Coetzee, 2001: 216). Since patriarchy is regarded as a fully-fledged ideology, it appears that the current pursuit of gender equality in South African education is up against a powerful enemy, as indicated by the Commission on Gender Equality (1998:10). “It is a sad fact that one of the few profoundly non-racial institutions in South Africa is patriarchy ... indeed, it is so firmly rooted that it is given a cultural halo and identified with customs and personalities of different communities. Thus to challenge patriarchy, to dispute the idea that it is men who should be dominant figures in the family and society, is to be seen not as fighting against the male privilege, but as attempting to destroy African tradition, or to subvert Afrikaner ideals’’. This idea applies to most African countries and Nigeria is not an exception.

Persistence by school girls

Ada in her speech remains resolute as long as her education is concerned and then calling on all her counterparts to persist and resist to the end hopefully, things may not remain same forever:

Why are you girls talking like this? Of course, education is power. With our knowledge, we can change the society and her beliefs about the girl child. Don’t see the daily chores at home as punishment, they are simply building us and making us the responsible African women that we should be. Never compare yourself with male children because you know the African tradition indulges them not to do certain duties. Thank God we have the privilege of going to

school; at least. I am sure that with knowledge, we can attain the power to change this village, if not the entire African mentality (9-10).

- **Free education**

Patriarchy should join the campaign of getting rid of hindrances to girl-child education in the society, noting that the role of women in nation-building is paramount. Efforts should be geared towards moving away from traditional beliefs about female education for the betterment of the communities.

The prince's return from his study saved Ada from being forcefully married to the King or banished without completing her secondary education. Prince Enueze tries to convince his father, the king, that girl child education is as important as that of the male child. The king then made a pronouncement that is favorable to young girls starting with Ada., He decreed that "From this day, no girl child shall be compelled to marry any person against her will and choice even if the person is Igwe . . . From this day, Igwe Kala Agadaga, the king of the community, decreed that this kingdom shall be responsible for Ada's education" (Omonigho, 2017:55-56). Omonigho makes it clear to the reader that, it is pertinent that teenage girls should pursue their dreams to the end just as is the case with protagonist. With the promulgation of free formal training for Ada, it will entice more young girls to go to school and Ndudi primitive idea about tradition will also be erased: "How do you intend to change the tradition and practice that has been on ground since the inception of this village? What was practised by our ancestors? Please be realistic and don't be carried away by those tales our literature teacher tells us" (10).

- **Appointment into positions**

Chigbu, Uchendu Eugene (2015: 334-350) is of the opinion that changes can be done as far as repositioning of patriarchal traditional society is concerned. He opines that: "Many feminists (especially scholars and activists) have called for culture repositioning as a method for deconstructing patriarchy. Culture repositioning relates to culture change. It involves the reconstruction of the cultural concept of a society". When more women are appointed to public

positions, it will help them carry out more advocacies to ginger the young girls to appreciate western education.

Increasing women's representation in the government can empower women and is necessary to achieve gender parity. Female representatives not only advance women's rights, but also advance the rights of children in national legislatures,

Conclusion

It is an undisputed fact that there is disparity between male and female children as long as education is concerned. The exposition of the ideological nature of patriarchy can be regarded as an earnest attempt to put a finger on the cause of a serious "societal backwardness. Efforts towards changing the perception of patriarchy regarding women school age cannot be overemphasized because the needful has to be done. This drama piece serves as a continuous process for the improvement of the condition of school girls.

Recommendations

For complete change of mind without lingering skepticism concerning girl child education, the following recommendations have been proffered.

The child's right act should be strengthened and implemented in all States of the federation. This will go a long way in checkmating indiscriminate child abuse. Especially girl child abuse like; rape, health challenge (VVF) resulting from early marriage and prostitution due to economic backwardness of women.

Policy makers should also create an enabling environment for increasing gender participation in providing a valuable pipeline for the education and the "educated girl child" to be transformed into women that will be agents of national transformation.

Governments at all levels should enact a strong law that makes education for girls compulsory though some states have implemented theirs general take-off.

Awareness should be given to traditional rulers on the importance of girl-child education.

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