
CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING AS A FEMINIST METHOD IN FEMINIST WRITINGS

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ABSTRACT

One of the objectives of feminism, especially in the African context, is the need for women to come to terms with themselves in order to engage in actions for their collective good. This paper seeks to examine the level of women's awareness of their plight in a society that is male-controlled; the extent of their participation and the need to re-educate and liberate them from obnoxious patriarchal conceptions. It is an overview of what women have been teaching themselves with respect to the *patriarchal society which often depicts them as passive, emotionally unstable, psychologically infantile, masochistic, penis-envying, which many female writers have criticized and rejected*. Through the method of consciousness raising, some of the matrixes of male domination and the objectification of women are brought to the fore, and the platform upon which women can resist such cultural practices established by society against them has also been created. Furthermore, through the assertiveness of the characters portrayed in the novels under review: Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* and Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike*, women can view themselves differently and defend themselves against the societal assumptions that women are relatively weak and dependent individuals. The paper working within the accommodationist strand of African feminism, recommends that women should persist in the process of educating themselves on strategies for self-defence against patriarchal excesses but that they should also explore the possibilities of a harmonious relationship between them and their male counterparts. It concludes that no matter how nagging some of the issues confronting the woman could assume; if the woman is properly guided, these issues would become avenues through which their latent strength can be activated so as to maximize life's opportunities better.

Keywords: *Consciousness, Women, Sexuality, Bonding.*

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INTRODUCTION:

WHAT IS CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING?

Consciousness raising is the process of developing awareness in a person or group; of a situation regarded as wrong or unjust, with the aim of producing active participation in changing it. It is a feminist method which constitutes the generality of women's experience in a society that is predominantly male-centred. It deals with the collective social being or conditions of women, the inequality they face in the social arena and the pursuit by women for social and political equilibrium.

Consciousness raising is the process through which feminists shape and share the situation of women. It can be carried out as a method of analysis, as a mode of organising, a form of practice, a technique of political intervention and a way of knowing. Consciousness raising can be viewed as any method for increasing interpersonal awareness or sensitivity by teaching people to experience a situation or perspective differently from their own point of view.

In 1961, the United States President, John F. Kennedy established the first Presidential Commission on the Status of Women. In 1963, the commission issued a report citing employment, discrimination, unequal pay, legal inequality and insufficient support services for working women. Thereafter, young women who had been active in the civil rights and other protest movements began to form small "consciousness-raising" groups, which rapidly expanded in number. In these groups, black women met to discuss issues such as inequity, sexism, and racism. These gatherings fostered women's liberation, and they moved steps further to set up projects, such as health centres or rape crisis centres. Through consciousness raising, the first and second wave of feminism caused society to feel the pains and impact of women as well as respond to their plea, bargain and agitations. What is often referred to as 'women movement' in Europe and America, birthed such feminist's classics like Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). These works were significant echoes of women at that time, and years after, a thousand or more dealing with same subject-matter have since been churned out.

Consciousness raising can also occur spontaneously among women in the context of friendship (female bonding), colleges and universities, neighborhood, churches, shared work or workplaces. Aside the above, the uniformity could be based on race and ethnicity, class, political views, occupation or education. The information they share could be on any of the above or could take on subject matters like earlier sexual experiences, marital experiences intended "to orient discussion" [1].

Consciousness Raising: Matters Arising:

Over time, women have used their sexual character, sexual structure to raise sexually related matters against men in their favour. Such issues as rape, sexual harassments, wife battering, sexual abuse of children, the denial of access to education and a few other issues have preoccupied the subject matter of many women's writings. To quote Mackinnon:

The male sexual role...centres on aggressive intrusion on those with less power. Such acts of dominance are experienced as sexually arousing...the new knowledge on the sexual violation of women by men thus frames an inquiry into the place of sexuality gender and gender in sexuality" (129).

Mackinnon is of the view that the male gender seeks power and control, including sexual control over women and that "masculinity is having it", but femininity is "not having it" (131). A woman is defined by what male desire requires for arousal and satisfaction and this is not same with the female. This difference has given rise to what Mackinnon calls "the sexuality of (male) dominance and (female) submission" (131). Therefore, many women writers like Mackinnon have continued to raise an outcry that, "sexuality (for them) is not a discrete sphere of interaction or feeling or sensation or behaviour...it is a pervasive dimension of social life" (130). They have also expressed disapproval of the derogatory stereotypes of women, about alternative and subversive representations, and about the politics women face in society. By 'politics', feminist thinkers refer to the mechanism which enforce the relationship of power in society; those covert ways of manipulating power so as to establish and perpetuate the dominance of men and the subordination of women, those ways in which male authors and male characters inclusive, aggrandize their aggressive selves, degrading women as submissive sexual objects. Thus sexual differences become a key motivation for sexual dominance. Women writers have raised much outcry as it relates to their plight in society. Specifically among those women who have encountered some form of enlightenment and liberation, the urge to speak out, the urge to inform and re-orientate their sisters, to give an eye-opener on how to sail through the storms of womanhood and other nagging issues associated with the loss or disability of a woman's spouse. This orientation has continued, some of which have been documented in literary and non-literary works.

The Declaration of Independence which states, "We hold these truth to be self-evident that all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," can be rephrased or interpreted to mean that all humans were endowed with the same rights. But this is not true taking into consideration many disadvantages and denials women have suffered in history. A look at education, globally, or specifically in Africa, as one of the essentials of life, will ascertain the claim that women are universally-disadvantaged educationally. This situation has produced many stories in fictional and non-fictional formats. By education, we simply refer not to the general or informal education which is commonplace, but to formal education, which the female child in some sections of the world is denied access to in comparison with her brothers.

In the 15th century, to cite a historical reference, the establishment of some grammar schools for children of less privilege background provided access to education for both girls and boys; but in these schools, as in others for poor children in Britain and the United States, up until the 19th century, girls who got admitted into these schools were restricted to learn only the rudiments of singing, reading numbers and religion, while the boys, even of poorer classes, could have scholarship opportunities to further their education, since girl-child education ended at the elementary level [2].

Obviously, this marginalization did not begin in Africa, but the challenge is that while many parts of the world have jettisoned this practice, a few ethnic groups in Africa still perceive girl-child education as unnecessary. Regrettably, one can find a few Nigerian parents who still argue and dispute over the relevance of sending their daughters to acquire university education. Female authors, especially those from regions or countries where girl-child education is not a priority, have continued to urge policymakers and parents, especially mothers to strive and ensure that their daughters acquire female education regardless of its cost. Their argument hinges on the notion that giving education to the girl-child is a necessity and not an option; it is not a waste of resources or time. They contend that arming girl-child with education will make her formidable and ready for future responsibilities, as she exudes confidence that will make her think deeply, independently, creatively and productively. When a girl-child is allowed equal or even more access to education as it is with her male counterpart, she becomes better equipped to positively explore and impart her world.

Another issue which has engaged the thought and analysis of female writers is the fate of motherhood. While one side of the divide perceive motherhood as an experience, the other sees it as fate. With all the rituals involved in being a mother, many female writers have bemoaned that the world dominated by men have not adequately compensated women for their rare singular role of motherhood. But that the male populace have rewarded women with nothing but a "cycle of tribulation" [3]. The fate of motherhood exposes women to such painful life experiences as frequent pregnancies, miscarriages, births, deaths of children and birth-induced disabilities. In any of these, the cross is left for the woman to bear, more often, alone.

Pregnancy, for instance, is one phase which puts women through an array of reactions, some of which are negative. Essentially, a woman's reaction during pregnancy can be excitement or worry. Whatever be the case, depends on such factors as whether the pregnancy was planned, her current economic status and the state of her relationship with the baby's father.

The subject of sexual harassment has featured prominently in many female writings, in their task of raising the female consciousness. Sexual harassment is the unwarranted gender-related behaviour, such as sexual coercion, offensive sexual attention, and hostile behaviour that focuses on gender [4]. Often, sexual harassment situations occur in either the workplace or in school. Put in other words, it is unwelcome sexual advances or suggestions, unwelcome requests for sexual favours, revenge after those suggestions are rejected, or any other unwanted sexual attention. Two key characteristics of sexual harassment are that sexual harassment is unwanted and the other is that it involves threats or promise.

But as a response to the rising problem of sexual harassment, women writers usually counsel their sisters through their works to do any of these if they are being harassed:

- Never feel guilty or display any hint of self-pity
- Never accept the harassment as normal
- Take right actions as soon as you experience sexual harassment. One of the wise actions would be to do a letter to the person harassing you, rejecting the harassment firmly and clearly so that nothing is misunderstood. In the circumstance where you cannot rightly put your words together in writing to address the problem, then seek legal aid, which is available at low or no cost to people who cannot afford to pay for legal services.

Consciousness raising entails a concerted attempt by women to re-constitute the woman's essence, her social experience and her continuous relevance in human society. The whole idea of consciousness raising in African women history is what literary critic, Onyemaechi Udumukwu conceptualizes as "the recognition of the need to place the woman at the centre rather than at the periphery" (Signature 5). This understanding corroborates with Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's estimation which holds that "it is simply placing women at the centre of history by recognizing their peculiar roles and contributions in the shaping of history" (29). In trying to answer some of the woman's questions in society, women have over time transformed themselves into guides, mentors and counsellors to their less-advantaged sisters. These "counsellors" could be professionals ranging from lawyers, teachers, preachers, writers, physicians, paramedics, even everyday women without any recognized stamp of formal education. Beyond just enlightening and speaking for the woman, these "counsellors" are often non-partisan, speaking the truth to women even when it hurts; they do not engage in consciousness raising that is laced with lies, bias and sentiments, but are quick to correct erring women and reject unhealthy conducts or decisions of women against men.

Two African novelists and the changing face of Consciousness Raising:

Changes: A Love Story is a novel published by award-winning Ghanaian writer, Ama Ata Aidoo [5]; from a feminist's perspective, the novel chronicles Esi's personal life as a woman in a modern African society. The narrative explicates a brand of feminist theory which advances women's rights and privileges that are primarily motivated by experiences of women in the Ghanaian society and Africa in general. It depicts the challenges which the female character in a typical African marriage must grapple with if she must remain as a wife.

In Aidoo's *Changes*, the narrator tells the story of Esi, a young, educated woman, who works with the State's Department of Urban Statistics. Esi is married to Oko and the marriage is blessed with a daughter. Esi feels in her a strong passion for career excellence above the passion to make more babies, but her husband has an opposite view. Tension began to grow as Oko regularly makes a demand on his wife for more children and this generates arguments between them.

Changes is a story built around friendship, the challenges of a troubled marriage, as well as how people respond to unresolved household issues. It dramatizes the clash of authority, power and interests between patriarchy and "the real woman" [6]. Esi, stands tall as the real woman in direct contrast to the legendary good woman in African literary imagination. She represents the female voice resisting patriarchal excesses, the deliverer striving to liberate not only herself, but other women from voicelessness. Her strength is drawn from her physical beauty, education, employment and the long-established friendship (bonding) with Opokuya, a registered nurse.

A friend is a gift a person gives self, and friendship is connecting in love with people who add value to and make your life richer. Understandably, consciousness raising enhances the woman's self-awareness and sets the platform for her to clearly identify co-travellers in her journey of life, it also enhances her ability to channel friendship in the right direction. These two friends, Esi and Opukuya exemplifies friendship; however, beyond friendship, they epitomize the effectiveness of education in the journey to self-awareness. This relationship is a clear demonstration of the strong bond they share, from where they draw strength in times of need. It is this bond that saved Esi from further emotional relapse after her second marriage loses its flavor. Apparently, one can say that Esi represents the emergence of a new feminine identity, resisting sexual violence, even within the scope of marriage. But Esi is infamous for rejecting the counsel of two women who were supposed to be her guide or counsellor in matters pertaining to marriage.

Significantly, two women played the role of "counsellors" satisfactorily. They are Esi's mother and grandmother; these women as custodians of tradition, wondered at Esi's alien behavior of separating from her husband on grounds that "her husband wanted too much of her and her time" (*Changes* 47). When Esi's grandmother heard her implausible excuse for separating from her husband and contemplating a divorce, the aged woman remarked that "the matter sounded too much for her ears" (*Changes* 47). From Esi's lenses and those of her mother and grandmother, we can apprehend the changes—from generational to behavioural of women with regards to their responses to patriarchal actions or practices. As far as one can see, the responses of women differ from one generation to the other. Esi is emblematic of a different kind of woman; she epitomizes Udumukwu's "real woman" as opposed to her mother and grandmother who fall into the group of "good women". In his investigation into this classification of women in postcolonial African women studies, Udumukwu submits:

There is a sharp contrast between the legendary good woman and the real woman in postcolonial Africa. Far from being the source of comfort and rest (the sweet mother as she is perceived in popular imagination), the "good woman" In sub-Saharan Africa happens to be that woman who suffers the effects of oppression and neglect; and who must maintain a silence and passivity in order to remain good. Silence and passivity are two principal features of the good woman...The real woman, by contrast, is that woman who even in the face of tyranny will not remain silent...In this they exemplified a desire for subjectivity rather than objectivity (*Signature* 3).

These two worlds of women underscore the fundamental difference in our perception of the woman.

The Beggar's Strike [7] is set in an unstated country in West Africa, a city known only as The Capital. Clearly, this Senegalese author, Aminata Sow Fall, writes of her own experiences. *The Beggar's Strike* is a satiric and ironic novel which raises a number of thematic concerns from political leadership, the institution of begging, the privileged and the underprivileged, how the underprivileged can mobilize strength through teamwork as well as the position and role of women in a traditional African society. Through this narrative, Sow Fall portrays herself as a defender of the masses, represented by the beggars, but more prominently, as an advocate for equal rights for women and the girl child.

In Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike*, Raabi, represents the emerging feminine identity poised to challenge and correct the misconceptions surrounding women, such misconceptions that have placed a limit on not only her mother but other African woman too numerous to count. Aside being a Law student and a vocal female voice in the narrative, she represents a radical departure from the traditional, less-informed good woman, to the modern, well-informed real woman. Raabi is consciousness raising personified, and the voice for those "women battling centuries of male-facient slavery" (Osundare45); she invites these battered women one of whom is her mother, to look inwards and then promptly mobilise themselves in order to make a case for their rights and privileges even in the face of patriarchal inhibitions and stereotypes. Through dialogue, she offers her own mother an orientation different from what tradition teaches and expects women to do, an orientation required to boost Lolli's courage to face up to some of her husband's excesses. Raabi reminds Lolli of how obsolete and uncivilized polygamy has become in recent times. This was against the backdrop that her father had hinted on his intention to get a second wife. She speaks: "Polygamy must be done away with; there's no justification for this practice nowadays" (*The Beggars' Strike* 30).

Thus, Lolli is encouraged to resist this by putting up a fight in order to "prevent the intruder" (*The Beggars' Strike* 33). For Rabbi, many women accept polygamy "out of cowardice because they couldn't assume their own responsibilities. Then they try to find excuses for remaining in a situation which they really hate" (33). Armed with a new consciousness through her daughter, Lolli rises to challenge her husband's plan with these words:

What! And you tell me to keep quiet, into the bargain! You ungrateful wretch! You bastard, you liar! You want me to shut up, do you! Twenty-four years of marriage! You were nothing, nothing but a miserable beggar! And I backed you up, I put up with everything patiently, I worked my fingers to the bone, and now you want to share everything you've got with another woman (*The Beggars' Strike* 31).

Raabireasoned that such decision of bringing in a second wife, would inevitably amount to an “ambiguous situation” (*The Beggars’ Strike*33) for her mother. But old Sanou Cisse (Lolli’s aged mother), thinks differently. As a custodian of tradition, SanouCisse cautions her daughter against resisting her husband’s decision, warning her of the consequences:

Do you want to be responsible for my death, Lolli? You must know that if Mour divorces you you will be covered with shame. When a woman has got eight children, some of them old enough to be married, she can’t allow herself to behave like a child; Mour is your husband. He is free(*The Beggars’ Strike*33).

With the above expression coming from a female voice, we can apprehend the feminist ideological praxis of Aminata Sow Fall, which fits well into the accommodationist “school” in nature and in content. Like a thread, the accommodationist strand of feminism is fully domiciled in many African female writings and advanced by such authors as Ifeoma Okoye, Zaynab Alkali, Helen Ovbiagele and Mariama Ba. As accommodationists, these African feminists advocate some measure of equality, yet they concede the leadership role to the man and resist the temptation to contest his headship of the family. In his essay, “A House Divided: Feminism in African Literature” renowned literary critic, Charles Nnolim[8] examined the accommodationist posture of some African feminists thus:

...they stress as womanists do, the unity of man and woman despite bickering, misunderstanding and the jostling for power. Reconciliation not separation; convergence not divergence; love not hatred; affection not mere passion; a pooling together of resources, not a scattering; a building together, not destruction of latent love between sexes; an establishment of family under patriarchy, not advocacy for a new arrangement (138).

Understandably, the accommodationist “school” champions the cause of a harmonious relationship between the man and the woman under a mutually acknowledged leadership of the man. Even the most uncompromising feminist traces her origins, her genealogy from the male line; this explains why the last name or surname of every female is patronymic.

Consciousness Raising through Female Bonding:

An English proverb states that, “Birds of a (same) feather flock together.” The simple interpretation is that people of same sort are found together. People who share same qualities, say morals, often tend to group. An Ornithologist would explain that birds of a single species do frequently form flocks. This action can be explained as their understanding of “safety in numbers,” an approach they have employed for the purpose of defense and the reduction of risk of predation.

To explain this concept, female bonding is simply the coming together of two or more women or girls to form a group or a circle of friendship, with a view to strengthening and lending helping hands to one another. Many African female authors engage this bonding motif as a reminder to all women that all women were a single class bearing same yoke or identity and sharing common experiences. It is an approach adopted by African female writers like Ama Ata Aidoo, Aminata Sow Fall and an array of others. This bonding rests on the deep sympathy women have for one another, offering women new avenues to unwind, ventilate and liberate one another from suffocating conditions and emerge as new beings.

Since patriarchy and the writings of many male authors have delisted women from some rights and privileges, denied the woman’s claim to individuality and identity, women therefore have chosen to exhale through the avenue of bonding. Women who have lived before this contemporary time have resorted to bonding in order to express the quality of their relations with one another and to endure or resist oppression. In her book, *Feminism without Illusions* [9], Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argued that female bonding is the female model which must replace the male model of individualism. For her, “men have wreaked havoc and death out of “domination” but women with their politics of partnership will bring renewed commitment to life” (12). Female bonding enhances the woman’s social consciousness. Through bonding, she finds her flock in times of joy and happiness and in times of dire need, pain and troubling situations. As they engage in this, “politics of partnership”, Women receive from one another some of what they have been denied by their male counterparts.

Conclusion:

The social contradictions which women and girls find themselves in most societies, or perhaps, globally, is not an accident, but a conditioning; however, no matter how challenging tradition has made the woman’s condition to be, the condition of the woman can also be improved upon through proper enlightenment, awareness and the right application of knowledge. No matter how relegated a woman could feel during and after marital crisis, if properly mentored, she could develop the right consciousness and discover other latent and relevant skills resident in her. Through these discoveries, she can begin the process of transitioning from being a broken and battered female character into a well-developed and strong female personality with so much to contribute to society.

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