Feminist Literature across Religious Divide

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1.0 Introduction
The article “Abuse of Women by Religion” states that “women are suppressed, disregarded and abused by every religion in the world”. The assertion attracts research and feminist literature can provide an appropriate instrument for the investigation: Arp and Johnson (2002:52-56) claim that literature can change people’s attitudes and Senesie’s, Samuel M. B. (2014) research supports the claim. If feminist literature has the capability to change attitudes derived from religion, this would amount to discovering possible solutions towards religion-driven suppressions of women. Practical conditions in the background country of Sierra Leone can highlight the issue.

1.1 The view of women within religions in Sierra Leone
According to the article “Sierra Leone: Religion and Ethnic Groups”, the major religious groups in Sierra Leone are Islam (71.3% of the population), Christianity (21%) and African Traditional Religion (ATR, 2%); each one directs its followers according to its own doctrine and practice; each one exerts its own influence on women. While religious identity is clearly observable in Sierra Leone, other aspects of life such as politics and education seem to override religious identity and great harmony exists among the various believers: Muslims and Christians mutually share in religious celebrations and rituals; Christian political candidates commonly attend prayers with Muslims in their mosques (and the other way round) in order to attract votes. Christians commonly engage Muslim spiritualists to spiritually promote their domestic, political and economic ventures; Muslims also often attend at “spiritual churches” to heal mental sickness and other maladies; the majority of members of the two religions randomly educate their children at schools, without reference to whether the schools were under Christian or Muslim proprietorship. Similarly, worshipers of indigenous traditional religions (ATR forms) of Sierra Leone do intermingle with Christians and Muslims. However, there are certain peculiar ways in which the various religions affect the wellbeing of women.

Muslims practice the suppression of women on the bases of available scriptures. According to Amely, Ibraheem Serhan (2015), the logic of Islamic law holds that an Islamic law that leads to harms is perfectly legal and morally acceptable as long as the number of benefits that arise for the law out-way the harms. For example, “They ask thee concerning wine and gambling. Say: ‘In them is great harm (sin) and some benefits for people; but the harm (sin) is greater than the benefits” (Quran 2:219). The logical conclusion drawn from this regarding polygamy, for example, is that although polygamy causes much harm to wives and children, it is legally and morally acceptable since it has more benefits (mainly for the husband) than harms.

Accordingly, Muslims wives in Sierra Leone generally live in polygamous marriages, enduring the harms also listed by Amely: sharing and getting less of the husband’s spare time, money and attention; arousal of their jealousy; favouring the husband with more partners while the wife is restricted to one; etc. On this account, apparently, Muslim wives are observed to suffer the following: wife-beating, separation and divorce, infidelity of wives and chaotic family life, under-education of children.

Similarly, Most Christian denominations in Sierra Leone practise what the article “Abuse of Women by Religion” (2015) interprets to be against the aspirations of feminist organisations: disallowing personal decision-making by the women of the church; women should follow what the men-folk decide; women should take no leadership positions in the church.

However, certain denominations such as the United Methodist Church and the Sierra Leone Church (the Anglican Communion), now ordain women into clergy positions.

The ATR type of religion in Sierra Leone is generally in the form of secret societies or cults; some are women’s cults and most of them for men. In most rural districts the political authority of a community...
is designed at the secret society gatherings of men. The Poro is the men’s secret society among several ethnic groups – the Mende, Temne, Sherbro and Loko; the Wonde is specifically for the Kpaa Mende men; the Soko Bana for Temne men; the Batorma for Limba men, the Yaa for Kono men, and so on. The major Women’s cult is known as the Sande (among the Mende) and Bondo (among the Temne). The key activity of this cult is the female genital mutilation (FGM); until recently, the practice remained the sacred secret of the cult. For the purpose of stopping FGM, this secret society of women is now under attack by women activists of the liberation struggle.

Apart from the secret societies, ATR includes ancestral worship and the leader of the rituals is often the eldest woman of the household or the community. Aged men can also play the role. However, the assigning of honour to the men-folk by the humble women-folk is common policy.

**Note:** While international and local organisations are in on-going action to liberate women, the universities in Sierra Leone have special opportunities to learn gender-inclusive skills. For example, the University of Sierra Leone offers postgraduate degrees in gender studies; at both the Njala University and the University of Sierra Leone the literature students study courses in feminist literature; gender equity is in practice with respect to many student activities that take place on the campuses.

### 2.0 Attitudes and the difficulty to change them

Gale Encyclopaedia of Psychology, states that “An attitude is a predisposition to respond cognitively, emotionally, or behaviourally to a particular object, person, or situation in a particular way”. Similarly, Alport’s definition (in Bordens, Kenneth S. and Irwin A. Horowitz 2002) explains that ‘attitude’ describes a state of mental or neural readiness, which the individual accumulates through experience, which then influences him/her, directing him/her into action with respect to all objects, issues and situations he/she encounters. These definitions clearly include those practices of prejudice, discrimination and violence against women, developed from religions. Attention is limited here to the negative attitudes which make the central problem the research sets out to address.

The article “Personal Values, Belief and Attitudes” explains that attitudes develop over time, become deep rooted, enduring and hard to change. For example, people tend to be oblivious to and disagreeable with what is not consistent with their attitudes. In particular, religions usually influence their followers through effortful teaching, to help them conform to the faith and resist whatever goes counter to the faith. A review of literature on the religions in this research - Christianity and Islam – thus becomes necessary.

### 2.1 Attitudes of Christians and Muslims in Relation to Women’s Liberation

From established sources, both Christianity and Islam cause discriminatory attitudes against women, but with important differences between these effects of the two religions. A clarification can be sought through research, as to whether one of the religions can cause its followers to resist the influence of feminist literature, while the followers of the other show to be susceptible to the influence. Hunter, Lori M. and Michael B. Toney (2004) make the generalizing claim, “Religion has shown to influence attitude toward an array of issues”.

Similarly, findings by Engs, Ruth C. and Kenneth Mullen (2015) as well as by Tom Friedman (2006) strongly imply that “change of attitude” should differentiate between religious groups. The former source finds correlation between religiosity and rejection of substance use, in an experiment in which he controlled for differences in personality. The latter holds that just as different countries have different values, so do different religions have different values.

### 2.2 Feminist efforts in Christianity and Islam

In order to liberate women from religion-guided suppression, there have developed Islamic feminism and Christian feminism.

**Islamic feminism:** Badran, Margot (2002) discusses Islamic feminism implying that it could have originated in the writings of Muslims in the Teheran women’s journal “Zanan” which was founded by Shahla Sherkat in 1992. According to Badran,
The basic teaching of Islamic feminism is that the Qur’an affirms the principle of equality of all human beings but that the practice of equality of women and men (and other categories of people) has been impeded or subverted by patriarchal ideas (ideology) and practices. On this basis, Islamic feminists argue that deep-rooted acts of impediment and subversion continually obstruct the equality of men and women in Islamic tradition; that the impediment and subversion have come about by falsification, misinterpretation and misapplication of the types of religious literature: Islamic jurisprudence (“Fiqh”); the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Mohamed (the “Hadith”). All these, in turn, have come about through patriarchal interference. In this way, Islamic law (the Shari’a) formulated from the falsified Islamic jurisprudence, and teachings of Islamic codes of conduct formulated from the similarly falsified “Hadith”, have all imposed deprivation, discrimination and other forms of unfair treatment upon Muslim women throughout history. Therefore, Islamic feminism endeavours to read, interpret and apply the Qur’an, the Fiqh and the Hadith with a view to revealing their true teachings about the equality of men and women, and demanding that society treat women and men in accordance with these true teachings.

With the growth of feminist ideas and practices in the background environment of this research, it was necessary to consider how teachings of Islamic feminism might influence the attitudes of women and men in the study population. The inclusion of issues concerning the religions of the study sample as a variable in the instrument of the research – comparing the measures of attitude of Muslims with Christians, for example - could reveal such information.

Christian feminism: In a similar tune with Islamic feminism, “Women’s Rights World” explains Christian feminism as in the following quotation:

Christian feminism, a branch of feminist theology, seeks to interpret and understand Christianity in the scope of the equality of men and women morally, socially, spiritually, and in leadership. Christian feminists believe their contributions are necessary for a complete understanding of Christianity. On the basis of feminist theology, feminist advocates have proceeded to produce translations inclusive of the equality of men and women. These translations argue strongly that God had no sex description and gender inclusive language should be used to re-write numerous texts of the Holy Bible. The feminist translations include the following: the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV 1989); the New International Version (NIV); the New Living Translation (NLT 1996); the Today’s New International Version (TNIV 1996).

Following the trend that both of the religions are in the target of feminist advocacy, it would be interesting to find out whether the followers of one or both of them have remained resistant to the arguments of feminist literature as a consequence of adherence to the religion.

### 3.0 Research procedure and results

The central concern in this research was to find out whether followers of religions would show change of attitude due to the application of feminist literature. The work is limited here to Islam and Christianity because the sample lacked members of the ATR or other religious categories. Recalling the idea that different religions teach different values, mentioned by Tom Friedman (2006), the research set out to discover if the difference in the values taught by Christianity and Islam would lead to difference in attitudinal-change outcomes following the exposure of Christians and Muslims to feminist literature.

### 3.1 Objectives

The objectives of the research designed to find out

- whether exposure to feminist literature could lead to change of attitudes on the parts of religious people; i.e. the attitudes of Christians and/or of Muslims.
- whether **only one** and **not both** the Christian Group and Muslim Group would show change of attitude on account of their getting exposed to feminist literature.

The **Null hypotheses** of the research are as follows:

**H01:**
Members of religious groups will not change their attitudes on account of their getting exposed to feminist literature from attitudes they held prior to exposure and adopt attitudes projected in the feminist literature (at p = 0.05).

Ho2:
In case change of attitudes results from the exposure of a group of Christians and a group of Muslims to feminist literature, both the groups and not only one of them will show the change of attitudes in favour of the feminist argument of the text (at p = 0.05).

3.2 Selection of the treatment material
Mariama Ba’s “So Long a Letter”, set in the largely Muslim country of Senegal in West Africa, and was found to be particularly suitable as treatment material from among other novels. It is a piece of literature purposefully designed as a feminist novel. The novel is close to real life, being autobiographic, in that it reproduces through fictional characters, the real-life story of Mariama Ba, a religious person, a practising Muslim woman, learned in the Quran and living her life accordingly to the faith. The religion permitted her Muslim husband, a parliamentarian named Obeye Diop, to abandoned her with their nine children, whom she brought up as a single mother (in Gale Encyclopaedia of Biography).

Her concern with the feminist struggle arose from her frustration with such religion-based conditions of inequality which she and other women suffered in relation to men. She therefore joined the feminist struggle and advocated for urgent change in that condition. She contributed by writing articles about their suffering, making speeches about it, and used her personal practical experiences in these undertakings as resource material for the novel “So Long a Letter”.

The novel tells the story of Ramatoulaye, an abandoned Muslim wife, single mother of sons and daughters, later widowed by the death of that husband. She recounts her experiences to her friend Aissatou. Her husband marries a school friend of their own daughter; her dignity as a wife and her property are shared with this second wife, and so on.

The novel also exhibits the key properties of the persuasive message spelt out in Lahey, Benjamin B. (203:216): attractive, tactful and emotional. The issues projected in the novel as shown in Senesie, Samuel M. B. (2014) are equally pertinent to a research on the real-life oppression of women through Islam: extended family relationships; polygamous husbands; relationships between wives and husbands’ family members; the practice of selecting wives for grown up sons; the custody of children after a divorce or after the death of the father; inheritance of widows by members of the husbands family.

3.3 The design of the research
Guided by literature review, the research was designed as follows:

- Year II undergraduate literature students selected on the basis of guidance from social psychology, which recommends such a sample in order to get generalisable results. The classes were located on campuses in different cities.
- The students answered a questionnaire of 40 questions on feminist arguments drawn on the novel, assessing their attitudes to women’s liberation.
- The questionnaire was administered in three sessions of pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test. This facilitated estimation of any change of attitude the students might exhibit on account of their reading the novel.
- That is, the pre-test results in each of the religious groups – obtained before exposure to the novel - was the base-line to test whether change of attitude occurred at the post-test and then at the delayed post-test.

3.4 Report and discussion of the findings
The findings are reported here using descriptive statistics (shown in the figure) and inferential statistics (shown in the table).
Christian: 1 = pre-test; 2 = post-test; 3 = delayed post-test
Muslim: 4 = pre-test; 5 = post-test; 6 = delayed post-test

Figure 5: pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test scores of religious groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious group</th>
<th>test</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>mean</th>
<th>S. D.</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Null Hypothesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>121.44</td>
<td>10.601</td>
<td>-4.236</td>
<td>.000*</td>
<td>H01 was rejected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>131.40</td>
<td>15.055</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>120.69</td>
<td>10.895</td>
<td>-3.088</td>
<td>.005*</td>
<td>H01 was rejected</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Delayed Post-test</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>129.35</td>
<td>16.453</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post-test</td>
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<td>131.46</td>
<td>15.222</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Delayed Post-test</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>129.35</td>
<td>16.453</td>
<td>1.097</td>
<td>.283 ns</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>121.22</td>
<td>11.372</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>123.49</td>
<td>12.075</td>
<td>-1.405</td>
<td>.167 ns</td>
<td>H02 was retained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>119.07</td>
<td>10.579</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Delayed Post-test</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>122.64</td>
<td>13.846</td>
<td>-1.568</td>
<td>.128 ns</td>
<td>H02 was retained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post-test</td>
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<td>120.79</td>
<td>12.282</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Delayed Post-test</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>122.64</td>
<td>13.846</td>
<td>-.827</td>
<td>.416 ns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* = p < .05
sn = not significant

Note: The lack of significant difference between the Christian post-test and delayed post-test shows a tendency for the change of attitude attained to be stable or permanent.

3.4.1 Objective A and Null Hypothesis H₀₁

Objective A was set to find out whether exposure to feminist literature would lead to change of attitudes on the parts of religious people (a groups of Christian and/or a groups of Muslims) so that they would accept attitudes projected in the feminist literature, to which attitude they were hitherto opposed.

The pyramids in the figure provided show the results with respect to Objective A. That is, Pyramid 1 and Pyramid 4 form the base-lines for the Christian Group and the Muslim Group respectively. In the Christian Group, both Pyramid 2 (post-test) and Pyramid 3 (delayed post-test) measure higher than...
Pyramid 1: this indicates a tendency towards change of attitude in favour of the attitudes projected in the novel.

Similarly, in the Muslim Group, both Pyramid 5 (post-test) and Pyramid 6 (delayed post-test) are higher scores than Pyramid 4, indicating a tendency to change the attitudes of Muslims in favour of the attitudes projected in the feminist novel.

However, it is the t-test results in the Table that show whether these changes are significant; the table as well shows the test results of Null Hypothesis H₀₁ and Null Hypothesis H₀₂.

**Null Hypothesis H₀₁**: Members of religious groups will not change their attitudes on account of their getting exposed to feminist literature from attitudes they held prior to exposure and adopt attitudes projected in the feminist literature.

Following up from the pyramids in the graph, the Christian Group exhibits significant change of attitudes in favour of the attitudes projected in the novel:

- 131.40 (posttest score) > 121.44 (pretest), with p = .000*
- 129.35 (delayed posttest) > 120.69 (pretest), with p = .005*

On the other hand, the Muslim Group shows no significant change of attitude:

- 123.49 (posttest score) > 121.22 (pretest), the value of p = .167^sn
- 122.64 (delayed posttest) > 119.07 (pretest), the value of p = .128^sn

Therefore, according to the meaning of “change of attitude used in the objectives – either the change of attitude is shown by both the religious groups or by anyone of them - the Null Hypothesis H₀₁ was rejected.

3.4.2 Objective B and Null Hypothesis H₀₂

**Objective B**: to find out whether after exposure to the feminist novel, both the Christian Group and the Muslim Group, not just one of the two, would show change of attitude from attitudes they held hitherto, in favour of attitudes projected in the feminist novel.

Pyramids 4, 5, and 6, in the figure provide the results in respect of the Muslim Group: both Pyramid 5 (post-test) and Pyramid 6 (delayed post-test) measure apparently higher than Pyramid 4: this indicates a tendency to change of attitude in favour of the attitudes projected in the novel.

However, it is the t-test results in the Table that show whether these changes are significant, as well as show the test results of Null Hypothesis Null Hypothesis H₀₂, as for H₀₁.

With respect to **Null Hypothesis H₀₂** however, the pared t-test in the table does not indicate significance in the change of attitude shown in the pyramids in respect of the Muslim Group. According to the Table, the Muslim Group does not show significant change in favour of the attitudes projected in the novel.

That is, although

- 123.49 (posttest score) > 121.22 (pretest), the value of p = .167^sn
- 122.64 (delayed posttest) > 119.07 (pretest), the value of p = .128^sn

The differences are not significant.

Therefore, **Null Hypothesis H₀₂ was retained** since only one of the religious groups (the Christian Group) showed to have significantly changed their attitudes on account of their exposure to the feminist novel; the other group (the Muslim Group) did not.

The nearly identical pre-test scores - 121.44 for the Christian Group and 121.22 for the Muslim Group - indicate that both religious groups are in opposition to feminist principles, in agreement with the quotation at the introduction of this paper: “women are suppressed, disregarded and abused by every religion in the world”. That is, the university education of the sample of undergraduate students notwithstanding. This implies that the anti-feminist attitudes which the religions build in their followers can be deep seated and can resist the apparently unfocused exposition of students to women’s issues. It may be interesting to find out whether a sample of illiterate respondents would have scored less a measure of attitude than the sample of Year II undergraduates students of literature used in this research.
The results in the Christian Group indicate that feminist literature can be quite forceful as an instrument for changing negative attitudes (against women) into positive ones. Yet, this may not be generalisable to people of all religions. The Muslim group in this experiment, for example, showed no significant change of attitude after their exposure to feminist literature. The variance in this case could be due to a number of reasons. First, we may recall the idea of Friedman: “just as different countries have different values, so do different religions have different values”. The variance in response to feminist literature may thus arise from the variance in values learned from Christianity and from Islam. For example, Christianity advocates monogamy, which may be more appealing to the self-fulfilment of the single wife, while Islam advocates polygamy which may arouse jealousy and stress in the wives; Christianity encourages Western standards and the nuclear family concentrating family love to wife, husband and children, while Islam, which is both Asian and African in orientation, encourages the extended family system in which the love of the husband is shared among different wives and with children of other wives. That is, Christian values seem to be less anti-feminist and Islamic values, more anti-feminist. Accordingly, anti-feminist attitudes regarding family life seem to be stronger and deeper in Islamic teaching and practice than in Christian teaching and practice. This could have led to the higher resistance shown by the Muslim Group, to feminist arguments presented in the novel, than by the the Christian Group.

Again, the author's autobiographic experiences of suffering, expressed in the novel, were specifically on account of her Muslim religion. The setting of the story is the Muslim state of Senegal. The characters and plot all personify the author’s real-life experiences, all based on Islam. It is the criticism of these real-life teachings and practices of Islam that comprise the contents of the novel in the main. The author is confrontational with Islamic teaching and practice. The quality of non-confrontational, which is an important quality of the persuasive message, as explained in Lahey, Benjamin B. (2003:216) gets reduced in respect of the Muslim group. Thus, the effectiveness of the message gets correspondingly reduced with respect to the Muslim Group. This rather confrontational criticism of their religion could have challenged the religious integrity of the Muslim group, pressurising them to cling to the prescriptions of their religious faith, thus resisting the feminist arguments of the novel.

3.5 Conclusions

- Anti-feminist teaching and practice in Islam and Christianity seem to deeply affect their followers, general Western education of these followers notwithstanding.
- Therefore, it may be wrong to assume that university education by itself can get religious people to overcome the anti-feminist influences their religion can have on them. In support, the author of So Long a Letter, Mariama Ba, was subjected to painful experiences in family life by her very educated Muslim husband, a parliamentarian. This husband is the real-life person metaphorically represented by the character Madou Fall, the husband of Ramatoulaye, the protagonist, who represents Mariama Ba, the author.
- While feminist literature can change the attitudes of religious people in favour of its argument for the equality of men and women, it is possible for religious people to resist its influences depending on whether the message is confrontational (causing the audience to resist it) or subtle (helping the audience to accept it).

References


http://www.islamology.com/Overview/Women/Polygamy-%20in%20Islam.htm


