Women’s Liberation Efforts through Feminist Literature

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ABSTRACT
This article reports the gender-difference aspect of an earlier discovery that literature can be an effective instrument for changing people’s attitudes. The question of men and women having real differences on the grounds of different sex was researched. That is, the existence of no real differences in attitude between men and women, versus the existence of differences in attitude that are deeply rooted in their biological and psychological compositions. To find out whether an instrument such as feminist literature could harmonise the attitudes of men and women in this respect would mean to address major social issues such as marriage, family relationships and even social harmony at community and national levels. The test-retest quasi experiment exposed male and female undergraduate students to an appropriate feminist novel. It was discovered that on account of their exposure to the novel, men showed change in their attitudes to agree with women’s liberation arguments to which they had been hitherto opposed. Also, both men and women, not just one of the categories, did show significant improvement of attitude. It was concluded that by the use of feminist literature as an instrument, the attitudes of men and women may be harmonised on the great issue of women’s liberation, against the existing male chauvinism. This achievement may extend to the common wellbeing of society, addressing such problems as divorce and violence against women.

1.0 Introduction
The sex categories aspect of Samuel M.B. Senesie’s (2015) findings – that literature can change people’s attitudes – seems to be of great value in its own rights. That is, the use of “Feminist literature” as a means to liberate women from the oppression and abuse they claim to suffer in a male-dominated world. Popular reports of harm to women expressed through public media suggest clear evidence to the claim: BBC reports of rape cases in India and South Africa; the abduction of school girls by Boko Haram in Nigeria; the twenty-four-year abuse of a daughter by her own father in Amstatten, Austria; the shooting of Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani school girl who advocated education for girls; and so on. This claim may also be an undercurrent to the frequency of separation and divorce of marriages. A fundamental question to answer is whether feminist literature can harmonise the attitudes of men and women in favour of women. Converging attention to the Sierra Leone situation to exemplify male-dominated societies, the following background issues are discussed here: (i) the need for women’s liberation efforts (ii) evidence of efforts to liberate women from male domination.

1.1 The need for women’s liberation efforts
Evidence of discrimination and suppression of women in Sierra Leonean is apparent in both public and domestic life. Amnesty International (May 17, 2006) and the International Bureau of Democracy Human Rights and Labour (2011) trace the roots of this condition to constitutional law and the system of customary laws of the country. For example, “a male juror must be over the age of 21, while a woman juror must be over the age of 39 (FID March, 2010)”. In private life, a woman is hardly trusted to let a house or a bedroom by herself without the accompaniment of her husband or a male relative. Amnesty International (May 17, 2006) states in this regard that “Inequality and discrimination affect their . . . right to housing for themselves and their children”. The popular propaganda forwarded for this position in Sierra Leone is the fear that men competing for the woman’s love may cause damage to the property or burden the landlord or landlady with the additional responsibilities of the protective care for such an unaccompanied woman tenant. In most rural and urban communities, a woman can also not directly inherit her father’s property where she has brothers or paternal uncles.
These cultural prescriptions are also enforced by the general argument that a woman should be submissive to her husband, who in turn, shares the authority of his own household with his parents and other relatives. The condition reduces the wife to a secondary position, and she is soothed with the common religious rationalisation that the blessedness and success of a wife’s children depend upon her humility and submissiveness towards her husband’s authority.

In the mix of all of these, wife-beating and the divorce of women by men is very common; the rape of young women and girls by men is familiar, and the Sierra Leone Police has had to establish the organ called Family Support Unit to address such issues; the compulsion of young girls to get married to much older men is also quite common.

1.2 Efforts to liberate women from male domination
Numerous endeavours have been undertaken by individuals as well as by local and international organizations in the defence of women in Sierra Leone. Amnesty International (17 May, 2006) expresses that Article 16 of the Women’s Convention and Article 23 of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights place Sierra Leone “under obligation, among other things, to enforce equality in marriage between husband and wife, upholding her rights both during his lifetime and after his death”.

At the local level, the source “Women’s Organisations Sierra Leone” mentions examples of women’s organisations targeting liberation of the nation’s women. They include Sierra Leone Association on Women’s Welfare (SLAWW); Women’s Association for National Development (WAND); Sierra Leone Association of University Women (SLAUW); Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE); Grassroots Gender Empowerment Movement (GGEM).

2.0 Attitude differences and similarities between men and women
The controversial difference-and-no-difference debate about the attitudes of men and women makes strong appeal for research into the subject. Janet Shibley Hyde’s (2005) “gender similarities hypothesis” asserts that “gender differences had either no or a very small effect on most of the psychological variables examined” in research outputs conducted between 1980 and 2000. She argues that claims of difference between men and women are mythical rather than real.

On the other hand, Michael G. Corrner (2014) observes that at least women and men are as different psychologically as they are physically. He points out a wide range of properties in which the sexes are different, showing strongly that they must be different in diverse matters of attitude: their reaction to problems; the common subjects and efficiency of their thinking; their ability to recall and the emotional quality of their memory; their sensitivity and alarm response to danger or threat; the difficulties each sex faces in living and dealing with the other.

These opposing similarities and differences recommend research for a verification of the issues.

2.1 Feminist literature and its philosophical basis of feminism
Roberts, Edgar V. and Henry E. Jacobs (2004:1920) imply from their explanation of feminist criticism that feminist literature is literature that is pre-occupied with the following, among others: upholding the importance of women; exposing the mistreatments and discrimination that women suffer in male chauvinistic society; inspiring them to project their capability as human beings; arguing their case for equality in status with men in all relevant aspects of life.

Feminism, the philosophical root of feminist literature is, according to Lewis, Jone Johnson (retrieved January 1, 2015), the argument, belief or organized activity for “the economic, social and political equality of the sexes”.

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Amidst diverse challenging types of feminism, Gwendolyne Mikell, upholds \textit{African feminism} (as opposed to Western feminism), teaching that the suffering of African women is different from the suffering of European women or women in other parts of the world. This type showed to be preferable for the research, especially on the grounds of the African setting of the research. 

For example, vastly different from Western feminism, African feminism is concerned with key issues such as the following: access to land; the right to own property; control of food distribution; living wages and safe working conditions; health care; election reform; the strength “to protest when forced to undergo clitoridectomy” (female genital mutilation).

3.0 Research procedure and results
Guided by the conflicting arguments in the above sections, the research was carried out as explained in the following sections and the results it yielded are presented in the next sections.

3.1 Objectives and hypotheses of the research
The objectives of the research were set to discover,

\begin{itemize}
  \item A. Whether exposing men to feminist literature could lead to change of attitude on their parts, in favour of women's liberation as presented in the piece of literature.
  \item B. Whether any change of attitude resulting from exposure to feminist literature would be shown by only one and not both of the sex categories.
\end{itemize}

The Null hypotheses of the research are as follows:

\textbf{H}_{01}:
Exposure to feminist literature will not lead to change of attitude on the parts of the men who get so exposed.

\textbf{H}_{02}:
Any change of attitude resulting from exposure to feminist literature will not be shown by both of the sex categories but by only one of them.

\textbf{Assumption}: The research assumed that if feminist literature in the \textit{novel genre} yields a certain outcome with respect to the objectives and hypotheses set above, then other genres of literature may yield similar results. That is, stage drama of feminist literature; oral feminist literary forms such as storytelling, singing to music; feminist literature on screen, etc.

3.2 Selection of the piece of literature as treatment material
Assessed alongside other feminist novels of African authorship, and compared to the qualities of a persuasive message discussed from social psychology, \textit{Mariama Ba's So Long a Letter} was selected as treatment material. Those qualities (in Baron, Robert 2002:562) require that the novel be assessed for the persuasive qualities of its message: its emotional force; the attractiveness and subtlety of the message; the competence of the author; the ability of the audience to understand the message on the basis of their interest in it and their understanding of it.

Importantly too, the contents of the message in \textit{So Long a Letter} carry various arguments on the relevant issue of man-woman relationship which is fundamental to the research. The text is an epistolary novel in which an abandoned wife, Ramatoulaye, with several sons and daughters under her single parenthood, has been also widowed by the death of the husband who has abandoned her. She writes a letter to her friend, Aissatou, who has abandoned her own marriage because of discrimination against her by her husband’s family, and taken refuge in career success. Ramatoulaye recounts her experiences: the infidelity of the now deceased husband; the husband’s second marriage of a friend of her own daughter, a school girl; her single-mother upbringing of the children; the waste of her hard-earned stock of property by her husband’s family members during the funeral of the deceased husband; her getting leveled (during the funeral rites) to the same status as the
young woman who took her husband away from her, and many more exposures of the pains inflicted upon herself and other women in the story.

Michael J. Mazza (2003) and Akanimo, Akpan (2004) point out the main issues and topics covered in the novel – all of the implications suitable to be organized under three main topics: (i) extended family relationships (ii) women’s movements (iv) other traditional practices. These topics and the points in their details were central in drawing the questionnaire administered.

3.3 The design of the research and validity measures
- The research was designed on the pattern of pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test.
- A questionnaire of 40 questions on women’s liberation and based on the novel, was used to test the possible effects of the novel on the attitudes of the respondents.
- The sample comprised male and female Year II literature students
- The two classes were located on university campuses in two different cities: Njala University in Bo and Fourah Bay College in Freetown.
- The same questionnaire was administered after one week of reading and the attitude levels were taken. They answered the questionnaire the third time and the third level of attitudes was also taken. All of the data were filled into the SPSS and analysed, yielding the results which are shown in the next section.

3.4 Report and discussion of findings
The findings for the two objectives as well as their corresponding hypothesis are presented in the following Figure and in the Table.

![Average pretest, posttest and delayed post-test scores of the sex groups](image)

Table: Average pretest, posttest and delayed post-test scores of the sex groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex groups and tests</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 = pretest</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>4 = pretest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 = posttest</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>5 = posttest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 = delayed posttest</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>6 = delayed posttest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Averages used in this graph were rounded up to the nearest whole number.
Table: paired t-test comparison of pretest, posttest and delayed posttest scores of sex groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex 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>men</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>120.25</td>
<td>11.193</td>
<td>-3.291</td>
<td>.002*</td>
<td>H01 rejected; H02 retained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>125.77</td>
<td>14.121</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>116.86</td>
<td>10.120</td>
<td>-2.598</td>
<td>.014*</td>
<td>H01 rejected; H02 retained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Delayed Posttest</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>123.25</td>
<td>16.801</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>123.03</td>
<td>14.475</td>
<td>-0.119</td>
<td>.906ns</td>
<td>Attained attitude tends to be permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Delayed Posttest</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>123.25</td>
<td>16.809</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>women</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>126.62</td>
<td>8.682</td>
<td>-2.747</td>
<td>.011*</td>
<td>H02 retained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>133.21</td>
<td>13.273</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>125.83</td>
<td>9.313</td>
<td>-2.212</td>
<td>.041*</td>
<td>H02 retained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Delayed Posttest</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>131.11</td>
<td>10.627</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>131.72</td>
<td>13.637</td>
<td>.236</td>
<td>.816ns</td>
<td>Attained attitude tends to be permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Delayed Posttest</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>131.11</td>
<td>10.627</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* = p < .05   sn = not significant

3.4.1 Objective A and Null Hypothesis H01

Objective A was used to discover whether exposing men to feminist literature can lead to change of attitude on their part in favour of women’s liberation arguments as presented in the piece of literature, and to which arguments they were hitherto opposed.

The “Figure” presents the descriptive statistics with respect to Objective A. According to the figure, the posttest level of attitude of the men (after their first exposure to the novel) was higher than their pretest measure (before exposure to the novel). Also, the delayed/second posttest level was higher than the pretest level. These outcomes are shown by bars 1 (pretest), 2 (posttest) and 3 (delayed posttest).

Null Hypothesis H01

The corresponding scores in the men category of “Table” corroborate the scores in the figure. They also provide the results of Hypotheses H01. That is,

- 125.77 (posttest score) > 120.25 (pretest), with p = .002*
- 123.25 (delayed posttest) > 116.86 (pretest), with p = .014*

Therefore, Null Hypothesis H01 was rejected since men changed their attitudes on account of their exposure to the feminist novel.

Note: In both the men category and the women category, there is no significant difference between the posttest and the delayed posttest scores: the change of attitude attained in each case tends to be permanent.

The results show that despite the enzyme-based biological differences and the psychological differences which influence the attitudes of men in comparison with women (Cornner, Michael G. 2014), feminist literature show to be capable of persuading men in favour of women’s liberation.
This feminist-literature method of persuading men in favour of women would be certainly superior to coercive methods such as legislation and punishment against men who suppress or discriminate against women. This is because the method is pedagogic and penetrates the mind of the individual man, getting him to accept to be positive towards women; he can then practice this without coercion or supervision.

3.4.2 Objective B and Null Hypothesis \( H_0 \)

**Objective B:** whether exposing men and women to feminist literature would lead to change of attitude on the part of only one of the two categories (and not both) in favour of women’s liberation as presented in the piece of literature.

The posttest and delayed posttest levels of attitude of the women (as for men in Objective A) category were both higher than the pretest level. This is observable in bars 4 (pretest), 5 (posttest) and 6 (delayed posttest). Hence, both sexes showed change of attitude. That is, treatment with feminist literature led to change of attitudes of men as well as of women.

**Null Hypothesis \( H_0 \)**

Again, in the women category,

- 133.21 (posttest score) > 126.62 (pretest), with p = .011*
- 131.11 (delayed posttest) > 125.83 (pretest), with p = .041*

Therefore, considering the men category and the women category together, **Null Hypothesis \( H_0 \) was retained** since both the men and women categories (and not just one of them) showed significant change of attitude on account of their exposure to the feminist novel.

This harmonious outcome between the attitude scores of the men and the women, on the matter of women’s liberation, indicates that the similarities and differences between men and women (discussed in 2.0), might not play into the issue when feminist literature is applied. Apparently, the author’s way of presenting the case for women showed to be forceful enough to penetrate the prejudices of both men and women in favour of the liberation of women. Apparently, it is this force of the novel that matters and not the gender of the people in society.

3.5 Conclusions

- The use of feminist literature can be one of the best ways to advocate women’s rights, negotiating equality between men and women in society. Since it shows to be influential both to men and women, it is for this purpose useful for all persons who are generally involved in the gender-prejudice against women – married and unmarried persons, in-laws, chiefs, employers and employees. On the basis of the assumption, it does not matter whether these persons are literate as well as illiterate.

- The particular channels of transmission - theatre, television, oral storytelling and singing, reading - can transmit this value of literature to its entire catchment of literate and illiterate persons.

- Using feminist literature for this purpose may forcefully draw the attention of listeners, readers and viewers to the issue of women’s liberation, since male and female characters in literature may now be more likely analysed and meditated upon from this point of view.

- By rewriting the importance of the subject in this way, it may awaken society to the now declining reading culture.
• It may improve the market for authors who may take to specialist feminist writing, by drawing in women’s liberation participants and sympathisers.

• The efforts to liberate women need not limit attention to the improvement of the attitudes of men towards women. Society also has women who are in opposition to women in the struggle against men. This could result from the condition that African women generally accept the discrimination or suppression inflicted on them by the male-dominated society. It could be on this account that the women in the research showed significant change of attitude – they did not start off, at pre-reading, to be in agreement with the argument their fellow woman, the author, presents in the novel. In particular, the African feminism issues discussed in Section 2 draws to mind that unlike European women, African women (in the absence of such an impact as the novel provided) seem to prioritise their attachment to the male figure – a husband – with whom they hope to reach the grand achievement of having children.

• Accordingly, women’s liberation efforts in African communities need to be approached with great caution in order to avoid attacking the long-term hopes of the women.

3.6 Recommendations

Certain recommendations for further research would be pertinent. That is,

• Conducting a similar experiment as this one with the following genres: oral literary forms of feminist literature – oral stories, songs, etc. This may provide information to classify the genres for effect.

• Conducting a similar experiment with the following channels for transmitting feminist literature apart for reading: television, stage drama, etc. This can contribute to selecting preferable channels for transmission of feminist defence through literature.

• Conducting a similar experiment with the following age groups of people: 5 to 10 years; 11 to 15 years; 16 to 20 years; 21 to 25 years; 26 to 30 years; 30 to 35 years; above 35 years, or otherwise. This may reveal when it would be necessary to start, intensify, stop, select certain methods of using the feminist literature, etc.

• Conducting a similar experiment with literate and illiterate respondents: for example, a novel may be used with the contents told orally to both literate and illiterate respondents.

For the purpose of possible application, the following is recommended:

• For lasting effect, focusing the women’s liberation subject in the teaching of literature in all classes of school may produce a society in which men and women are mutually respectful, empathetic as well as responsible.

• Teacher training should including teaching skills for women’s liberation goals in the methodology work for teachers of literature in training for all levels of schooling.

• Undergraduate and postgraduate students may include the special skills needed to produce effective feminist literature texts in their creative writing work. They may also do production of the equivalent oral literature in the study of such courses as traditional oral literature and cross-cultural literary studies.
REFERENCES


