The Complex Realities from It's a Girl to Infertility in Marriage in Selected Texts

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Abstract

Some of the assigned gender roles are shaped by history, ideology, culture, religion and economic development. This paper aims to give insight into the negative cultural practices that hinder human development and progress, especially regarding the roles ascribed to the feminine gender. Social Constructionism is introduced in examining the discrimination of girls from the pink blanket to the absence of children in marriage. Thérèse Kouh Moukoury's-Rencontres Essentielles and Buchi Emecheta's- Second-Class Citizen has been selected to review the woman's status in the society better. The selected texts point out the African cultural conception of childlessness as a catalyst to marriage crisis as the woman's identity is equally related to her capacity to give birth to a boy who is considered a higher human being than a girl. In conclusion, this article includes an enquiry into how oppressive traditional norms and practices manifest themselves, how they are sustained and the effect they have on African women's lives. Over and above these issues, the paper seeks to draw attention to the fact that both men and women need to come together and contribute to the ways in which gender bias can be eliminated.

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Introduction

This ideology of motherhood is so widely spread that what is natural, the capability to procreate, takes a cultural dimension (Meijiers, 2020). In fact, for Africans, a woman must not be "unproductive" or "childless", be it naturally or voluntarily (Kwame Gyekye 1996). The often-cited issues faced by the female population include the lack of access to education, commercial sexual exploitation, and harmful cultural practices such as female genital mutilation and forced marriage (Berhane, 2006). When a boy is born, he is considered a higher human being than a girl, the ordinary reaction against the baby girl is a big frown, unless it is a couple that has been eager to have a girl. The female gender is surrounded by gender lore from birth, and it is ever-present in conversation, humour, and conflict. It explains everything from driving styles to food preference (Akujobi, 2011). Gender is embedded so thoroughly in our institutions, our actions, our beliefs, and our desires that it appears to be completely natural (Eckert and Sally, 2003). As scholars and researchers, it is our job to look beyond what appears to be common sense to find not simply what truth might be behind it, but how it came to be common sense, the beliefs about gender seem to be obvious truths, that we need to step back and examine gender from a new perspective. Doing this requires that what we are used to and what feels comfortable, the question of our most fundamental beliefs for gender which is so central to the understanding of ourselves and of the world that it is difficult to pull back and examine it from new perspectives should be re-examined.

The challenge to uncover the process of construction that creates what we have so long thought of as natural: the study of gender as an accomplishment; not simply as cause, but as effect; and not just as individual, but as social. The living conditions, survival and discrimination of girl children is embedded in having access to good education, job opportunities and the heavy burden of house chores from childhood up until they become wives/mother, these are deeply rooted in social constructionism (Anyanwu, 1995). Girl children are pressured or forced to get married at an early age which interferes with her education or acquisition of skills needed for survival (Buchanan 2019). These beliefs about the value of girl children must be changed as the rapid economic development is dependent upon elimination of gender bias which involves legal, developmental, political, and administrative measures, also, public awareness needs to be created to protect the survival of the girl-child and practice safe motherhood; to develop the girl-child (United Nations 2009).

Review of Literature
In the famous words of Simone de Beauvoir (1949), "Women are not born, they are made." The same is true of men. The making of a man or a woman is a never-ending process that begins before birth – from the moment someone begins to wonder if the pending child will be a boy or a girl, and the ritual announcement at birth that it is in fact one or the other instantly transforms an "it" into a "he" or a "she" Butler (1993).

Mbiti (1970) recognizes the importance of children to the African family and says a childless couple may take steps to ensure that they have offspring, such as an additional wife or another bed partner. In traditional Africa, the number of children a man has indicates how rich the man is as children run errands when couples are old and they help in some works.

Sex (male or female) is a biological categorisation based primarily on reproductive potential, whereas gender is the social elaboration of biological sex. (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Ballara (2002) The girls child mostly helps with the household chores and look after the younger ones which relieves the parents of employing paid house helps. This therefore reduces the financial burden on the family. In addition, poverty compels many parents to marry off their daughters to wealthy men instead of sending them to school. This is because education is so expensive that parents do not consider the returns for girls' education. Instead, parents would rather prefer the returns of marriage in terms of bride price. Many parents believe that when girls are educated, the benefits go to their family of procreation instead of the family of orientation.

But and Asad (2017) The social belief is that after marriage, a girl leaves and enter into another home while a son for ever help the parents and give support to them in every corner of life. Also, a son is considered the real owner of the houses/properties while daughters are considered as temporary owners. This however puts the male gender in a more superior state than the female gender.

Eguwuonwu (1986), posits that frustration and divorce are the ultimate consequences of a childless marriage as children are regarded as possessions that cannot be shared with anybody. In literary works, writers such as Flora Nwapa, Myriam Warner-Vieyra and Buchi Emecheta have discussed the theme of infertility in their novels. These authors have highlighted the issue of infertility depicting their society's reaction to the problem of infertility and stressing the ills it causes in marriages which affect women generally. Proactive as writers are, they reassure victims, especially women in the African society that life can be worth enjoying even when there are no children to show for the marriage.

Methodology

This qualitative research is conducted using two selected texts: Thérèse Kouh Moukoury's-*Rencontres Essentielles* and Buchi Emecheta's- *Second-Class Citizen,* these are used to project the struggles of the girl-child and Woman in African society and to review the woman's status in society better.

Theoretical Framework

The social construction of gender comes out of the general school of thought entitled social constructionism. Social constructionism proposes that everything people "know" or see as "reality" is partially, if not entirely, socially situated (Butler, 1999)

A Social constructionism approach can be central to a feminist interpretive research, both in terms of deconstructing cultural beliefs about women and generating new knowledge about women's lives (Smith, 2000). Therefore, feminist research approaches support the process of telling sensitive human stories as research. Adopting a social constructionist view offers useful ideas about how power, knowledge, and 'truth' are negotiated in families and larger cultural aggregation like the favouritism toward boys encompassing both wanting to have sons more than daughters and choosing to invest more in sons than daughters.

Social constructionist orientations provide useful understandings of the politics of making meaning about individuals' interactions and experiences with the society (Gergen 1985). According to social constructionist epistemologies, the process of negotiating social identities occurs through socially constructed meaning, evolving through shared discourse. Crossley (2000) recognises that social constructionist approaches have encouraged the deconstruction of personal accounts as a means of explicating the social and cultural processes involved in the constitution of personal experience.

Realities are socially constructed, people together, construct their realities as they live them. Although the girl-child and infertile women individually construct a model of reality from their own individual experiences of being female, these realities or experiences are influenced by their interactions with their parents, siblings, husbands, families and society because within these interactions, their experiences are constantly constructed and modified into what society holds to be true, real and meaningful. Since women, more than men, have been identified with their reproductive organs, the historical material that discusses the issue of infertility and the causes of infertility is almost exclusively centered on the female experiences.

Also, realities are constituted through language, (Rabiah 2011) an understanding of language is essential for any understanding of the reality of everyday life. Language is used to represent external reality, and our internal representations are accurate reflections of external reality. Therefore, for the girl-child, her internal representations of her experiences may be a reflection of her external reality; she may use the language used by those around her in order to build her identity and give an account of her own experience. However, realities are organized and maintained through a social view. In striving to make sense of their lives, women are faced with the task of arranging their experiences of events in sequences across time in such a way as to arrive at a coherent account of themselves and the world around them, telling their own self-narratives being able to relate their experiences as well as the events that took place in their lives regarding their journey from the girl-child through the journey of infertility. There are many possibilities for how any given experience may be interpreted, but no interpretation is 'really' true.

Thus, the experiences or ideas that the women may have about themselves, as daughters, mothers and wives about their gender or their lack of conceiving, may not be essential truths. Instead, like other constructions, they may have been formed through their social interaction with the people around them and within their respective cultural contexts.

According to Terre-Blanche and Durrheim (1999), the social constructionist approach assumes that reality consists of people's subjective experiences of the external world and that such subjective experiences can be understood through interacting with and listening to their stories. Thus, by employing a social constructionist approach, this paper intends to show the hurdles of being a girl from birth and down to womanhood and through the journey infertility. (Upton, 2001). Through social constructionism, we try to make sense of how things have come to pass and how our actions and the actions of others have helped shape our history by making meaning out of socially constructed life experiences.

Romero and Steward (1999) articulate the empowering benefits constructing women's individual identities against patriarchal hegemonic master narratives. In many situations there are social ideas or norms that develop and effectively define the rights and duties of those subordinated by their narrative. Thus, the social view regarding the sex of a girl-child is that she will not bear her father's name forever neither does her future benefit the family unlike the boy-child. While the notion of a couple's fertility is that the woman is expected to bear children for her husband and should the couple fail to reproduce, the woman is usually held responsible, regardless of who the infertile person is within the marriage. Another social view is that women are expected to be able to do house-chores, cook, clean and to reproduce and therefore failure to do so is a reflection of their failure as women and they in turn suffer a lot of psychosocial problems as a result.

Analysis

In the African society, a major problem that a woman face in marriage is infertility. In such situation, she encounters so many challenges and rough times even from her husband. This is why the theme of barrenness is explored by many African writers, particularly the female ones. Published in 1969, Therese Kouh-Moukoury's *Recontres Essentielles* is the first novel by a woman of sub-Saharan francophone Africa. It is a story of love, infertility, a failed marriage, and adultery. The novel tells the story of Flo's childhood, courting, marriage and the fateful day she finds out she has secondary infertility after a miscarriage. The bliss of her marriage quickly dissipates due to this issue and when she asks her husband about his indifference towards her, he proposes divorce while having an affair with Flo's childhood friend Doris.

Je me sens incapable de le séduire à nouveau. Je fais tous les jours des efforts surhumains. Il y a tellement longtemps que je ne suis plus belle. Joël pourrait encore être fier de moi, alors j'essaie de mieux me coiffer. Je me parfume, je me maquille, je cherche tous les canons de la beauté, toutes les armes de séduction que le monde n'ait jamais imaginées pour une femme. Je n'y parviens pas. (85-86)

I feel incapable of attracting him again. I make super-human efforts everyday. The beauty I once had disappeared long ago. Joel could still be proud of me; thus, I attempt to style my hair. I wear makeup and perfume; I try all the beauty secrets and makeover tips that anyone ever invented for women. This doesn't work however. (85-86)

The above shows how Flo tries to win back Joel's heart in order to make their marriage work but Joel no longer has emotion for his wife because she cannot get pregnant again. Joel no longer cares

for her and he therefore deprives her of her matrimonial rights when they are together in bed. He no longer holds conversation with her. She feels so ashamed and inferior, compared to all other women who experience motherhood.

L'enfant ne vient pas. Lui seul pet consolider mon ménage. J'en fais une idée fixe, un complexe. (55)

The child doesn't come. Only a baby can solidify my marriage. I continue to be obsessed with the idea, to the point where I developed a complex. (55)

The role of the woman is mostly consigned to childbearing and child rearing in the African society and in a situation where women are child hungry, so many marriages have gone awry and collapsed because tradition and the society have perceive women as less woman or human in the absence of children in marriage. The construct of motherhood as physical, psychological, social completeness and fulfillment for women, consequently making experiencing infertility as guilt, inadequacy and failure, reinforced by the language used to describe infertility is the prevalence of social constructionists who have made the discrimination of the female gender embedded in customary norms, and social conventions that diminishes how a woman views, protects and fight for herself.

In literary works, so many writers have highlighted the issue of gender bias. Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class-Citizen* narrates the poignant story of a resourceful Nigerian woman who overcomes strict tribal domination of women and countless setbacks to achieve an independent life for herself and her children. The novel depicts a Nigerian girl, determined to overcome limitations placed upon her gender as she fights to be sent to school, as education is seen as unnecessary for girls as the girl children are often discriminated against when it comes to parents' decision to fund their wards education.

School, the Igbos never played with that! They were realising fast that one's saviour from poverty and disease was education. So even though Adah was about eight, there were still discussions whether it would be wise to send her to school. (03)

While some women battle with the issue of infertility, some women who bear children battle with the issue of having a son as daughters aren't considered children enough for the society. Also, the success of a marriage is mostly considered the burden of a woman as the blame for having a bad marriage, infertility, raising bad kids and lack of tolerance is mostly fixed on the women's shoulders regardless of the role played by the man.

If Francis wanted to hold respect of his two sons, he'd better know what he was doing. Okpara did not mention Titi, she was only a girl, a second-class human being; it did not matter whether she respected her father or not. She was going to grow into an ordinary woman, not a complete human like a man. (168)

In Igbo society, the girl child is viewed as a liability and the male child as a reliable investment. The social conditioning arising from perspectives of this nature affects women from childhood onwards. As we have already seen, a mother does not only have to produce children, but she also has to bear sons in order to be perceived as a "complete" woman.

After a long and painful ordeal, she had come home to Francis bearing a girl. Everybody looked at her with an 'is that all?' look. She had the audacity to keep everyone waiting for nine months and four sleepless nights only to tell them she had nothing but a girl, it was nine good months wasted. (116)

Gendered oppositions are ubiquitous, permeating experiences by appearing in all kinds of sites and in all kinds of forms.

Ma was inherited by Pa's brother, Adah's schooling would have stopped, but somebody pointed out that the longer she stayed at school, the bigger the dowry her future husband would pay. (12)

However, inadequate impact of investment and achievement in overall development of the child, and the adverse influence of negative social attitudes towards women and girls have left girl children disadvantaged.

She was not quite sure that she was exactly eight, because, you see, she was a girl. She was a girl who had arrived when everyone was expecting a boy. So, since she was such a disappointment to her parents, to her tribe, nobody thought of recording her birth. She was so insignificant. (01)

Girl-child life is a constant fight for survival, respect, growth and development from the time she is birthed up until adulthood. Indeed, gender is at the centre of our social world. As we understand that perspective, the basic capabilities, rights, and responsibilities of women and men are far less different than is commonly thought. At the same time, that perspective also suggests that the social treatment of women, their experiences, theirs and others' expectations for them, is far more different than is usually assumed. In this work, we offered evidence that these differences in what happens to women derive in considerable measure from people's mutually developed beliefs about sexual difference, their interpretations of its significance and their reliance on those beliefs and interpretations to justify the unequal treatment of women.

Conclusion

Gender inequality damages the physical and mental health of millions across the globe, both male and female gender despite the many tangible benefits it gives men through resources, power, authority and control. Therefore, there is need to transform and deepen the normative framework for women's human rights through effective implementation of laws and effective policies and also the establishment of programmes to further empower the women and girls who function as the 'shock absorbers' for families and societies. This is through their responsibilities in 'caring' for people, and while investing in transformative programmes to change harmful masculinist norms, high risk behaviours, and violent practices that might have been absorbed by the male gender due to the social constructionism.

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