



Education As “Voice” In Abi Dare’s *The Girl with The Louding Voice*

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Abstract

All children, particularly those born in low-income households, need to be empowered to fulfil their purpose in life. While there are many pathways to transformation, education remains the most reliable route out of illiteracy, poverty, destructive superstition, and other forms of limitation. This paper is a critical examination of Abi Dare’s *The Girl With the Louding Voice*, using the intersectionality theory. Intersectionality theory provides a framework for understanding how overlapping systems of oppression affect individuals. Specifically, the study focuses on the intersections of gender, age and class and how these categories intensify the marginalization of the protagonist, Adunni and other women in the text. The analysis reveals the devastating effects of abuse, domestic servitude, gender inequality, sexism and child marriage, while also highlighting the liberating power of education and resilience. The study finds that education empowers Adunni to find her voice, enables her to challenge oppressive structures and also advocate for others in her community. By foregrounding the interconnected nature of gender, age and class oppressions, this study contributes to broader discussion on the role of literature in revealing the experiences of marginalized groups and emphasizes the empowering role of education in challenging systemic inequalities.

Keywords: Education, Empowerment, Voice, Resilience, Feminism

Introduction

Society is usually structured along social and political lines and the currency used to navigate this is mostly education. Apart from the technical and formal definition of education, it could be regarded as the information that an individual has that they can use to improve their status and conditions. This improvement can be realized by the informed decisions they make to influence their world. *The Girl With the Louding Voice* is a painful yet victorious novel about the power of determination and fighting for your ambitions. It tells the story of a teenage girl growing up in a remote Nigerian community who longs to receive an education so she can find her “Louding voice” and speak up for self. Women empowerment is the process to empower women as individual or groups to have equal rights, to resist being oppressed and dominated by discovering the power within themselves. An individual woman with empowered mind can foster others through sharing the similar experiences and turn them into an empowered group of people. Empowerment as a form of resistance and the issues of oppression against women in Nigerian patriarchal society are depicted in the novel. Adunni a fourteen year old who lived and was raised in a fictional rural village of Ikati was denied her rights to acquire education in school and was forced to be a third wife of an old man by her father. Adunni with her bright mind attempts to change her life and other girls like herself. Her dreams to achieve education, to resist oppression and the struggle to empower herself and others are portrayed in this novel.

Patriarchy as a Tool of Disempowerment: Situating the Novel within Feminist Literary Scholarship There is a continually stimulating body of works that examines the lopsided representation of the two sexes, the male and the female. These works are informed under the assumption that male – female conversations and behavioral tendencies are socially or humanly constructed, usually without the consent of the affected parties and generally imposed by the instrumentation of social agencies.

It is noteworthy therefore that the preservation of cultural/ideas and legacies is enhanced by the unconscious accentuation of the victims and the one benefiting from the system.

Because of this anomaly in the social and cultural structure of the society, the female gender for example have been rendered sterile, weak and then submissive to the patriarchal structure that has diminished their capacity not by physically conquering them, but by a gradual sterilization of what they can naturally do. Reason some social critics like Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo is of the opinion that women are not naturally made weak rather it is the man – made socio-cultural structures that has weakened the women.

Hence in one for her works, she rejects the generally accepted description of women as the “weaker sex”. She rather describes women as the “weakened sex”. This sterilization occurs in forms of narratives that are used, for example, in the mental engineering of the children and the girl child, innocently oblivious of what danger is done to her psyche through some kind of narratives, embraces the second fiddle position when she settles for any or whatever is left for her by her mindlessly ambitious male counterpart for whose primary benefits patriarchy is meant for.

In essence, careers are socially predetermined for her, she has to be forced to accept socio-cultural definitions of womanhood, which in some cultures, subjects her to maltreatment, and where it is not maltreatment, they are instruments of seclusion from all what matters.

Black feminist thinkers, argue that gender never operates alone. It is usually accompanied by race, class and age (Crenshaw, 1989).

Postcolonial feminists further caution against homogenizing women’s experiences.

Abi Dare’s *The Girl with the Louding Voice* characterizes this dynamic through Adunni, a young girl forced into early marriage and domestic servitude, whose pursuit of education becomes a route from silence to “voice”. Recently, scholars have begun to engage with this tension. Gina Saputri identifies feminist resistance in the novel but limits discussion to categories of feminism. (Saputri, 2023).

Similarly, Arshad Fozia and Anna Salahuddin trace Adunni’s growth in female consciousness yet overlook the structural conditions like wage labour, family dynamics, access to education that shape her agency (Arshat & Salahuddin, 2024).

This study builds on these insights by explicitly stating how gender, age and class intersect to produce Adunni’s unique situation while emphasizing education as a tool of empowerment. In so doing, it addresses a gap in current scholarship by shifting the focus from symbolic resistance to the possibilities education allows for voice and advocacy.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis, a method well-suited for content analysis. Through close reading, the analysis focuses on language, narrative styles and themes in the novel with particular emphasis on how the novel depicts the intersection of oppression and resistance. Intersectionality theory applied here, enables an understanding of Adunni as a young girl whose vulnerabilities stem from the convergence of patriarchy, poverty and age-based marginalization. The choice of the *The Girl with the Louding Voice* is deliberate. The novel has gained scholarly attention for its representation of girlhood and gender inequality in Nigeria, yet a few studies explicitly apply intersectionality to examine the inter-play of gender, class and age in shaping Adunni’s trajectory.

Intersectionality Theory (Theoretical Framework)

Intersectionality has its origin in critical race theory and focuses on the intersection of gender and racial identity. The term intersectionality was coined by American civil rights advocate Kimberle Crenshaw in her 1989 essay “Demarginalizing the intersection of Race and sex: A Black Feminist critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, feminist theory and Antiracist politics”. In this essay, Crenshaw highlighted the problematic consequences of the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis. She discussed how

the focus of feminism on the most privileged group (white women) leads to the marginalization of those who are multiply – burdened by different types of oppression.

Intersectionality as a sociological theory highlights how people may find themselves disadvantaged by various and multiple sources of oppression. Social groupings such as race, identity, gender or equality are interconnected and every individual’s identity is impacted by their own unique combination of these social groupings. As a literary theory, intersectionality provides both a critical framework to understand how various strands of oppression can intersect to impart characters in the context of specific texts and an analytical framework to examine how different factors merge to form a character’s identity. In her 1991 paper Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality identity, and Politics and Violence against Women of Color, Crenshaw set out three types of intersectionality; structural, political and representational.

Intersectional feminism offers a lens through which we can better understand various forms of inequality that women experience. “All inequality is not created equal”. An intersectional approach shows the way that people’s social identities can overlap, creating compounding experiences of discrimination.

We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant status. What’s often missing is how some people are subject to all of these. Intersectional feminism centers the voices of those experiencing overlapping, concurrent forms of oppression in order to understand the depths of the inequalities and the relationship among them in any given context. Using an intersectional lens also means recognizing the historical contexts surrounding an issue long histories of violence and systematic discrimination have created deep inequalities that disadvantage some from the outset. These inequalities intersect with each other, for example, poverty, caste systems, racism, sexism, denying people their rights and equal opportunities. The impact extends across generations.

Author’s Bio Data

Abi Dare grew up in Lagos, Nigeria. She studied Law at the University of Wolverhampton and has an M.Sc in International project Management from Gaslow Caledonian University and an MA (Distinction) in Creative Writing at Birkbeck University of London.

Her first novel. *The Girl With The Louding Voice* was shortlisted for several awards including the Desmond Elliot prize and the British Book Awards (Debut).

In 2022, Abi was appointed as Board member for the BIC corporate Foundation. She lives in Essex with her husband and two children.

The Girl With The Louding Voice won the Bath Novel Award for unpublished manuscripts in 2018 and was also selected as a finalist in the 2018 literary consultancy Pen factor. According to Abi, her knowledge in Law shaped and cemented her love for the written word and justice and so she tends to write stories that give a voice to social injustices, especially against women.

Synopsis of *The Girl With The Louding Voice*

The book tells the story of Aduni, a 14 year girl who grew up in a village in Nigeria. Adunni is determined to have “a louding voice” – to be able to fight for herself, to be educated and to have a normal life.

Her journey starts from being sold as wife to a local taxi driver to becoming a housemaid and continuing her attempts to get educated. It only offers a glimpse of the hardships poor girls endure when they want to escape the vicious circle of poverty and slavery. Physical and verbal violence are daily routine and getting educated is only a dream for most of them.

The story is written using Adunni’s narrative voice, in a substandard broken English. Adunni’s English is an amazing reflection of her evolution.

The story also highlights how important it is to have support and she (Adunni) is lucky to have two people (Ms Tia and Koffi) who play a vital role in her fight to get an education.

While being married to Morufu, who already has two wives and four children (girls) that he refuses to educate, Adunni decided not to have a child and confided in her second senior wife Khadija who gave her some herbal concoction to prevent pregnancy.

Series of events that happened led to the death of Khadija, after confiding in Adunni the dangerous path she took in order to bear a male child for Morufu. To avoid being accused of Khadija’s death, Adunni fled from Morufu’s home to Iya’s home (one of beneficiaries of her mother’s good heart). Iya decided to help her by connecting her to Mr. Kola (Iya’s brother) who runs an agency that supplies househelps to influential people in the city of Lagos. That is how Adunni finds herself in Big Madam’s house, another prison where she is not guaranteed the education she seeks after so much. While she slaves away in Big Madam’s house, enduring child labour and physical abuse, she is lucky to meet Ms Tia Dada one of the members of (WRWA) hosted by Big Madam and Kofi Big Madam’s cook who both helped her achieve her dream of getting an education.

Kofi showed Adunni a Newspaper advertising an opening for School scholarship for female domestic workers and Ms Tia coaches her in writing the essay of no more than 1,000 words and stood as a guarantor for her.

Adunni eventually got the scholarship amidst so many trials and accidents on her way.

”The Metaphor of “Voice”

Adunni’s mother, Mama before her death, teaches Adunni that “your “ schooling is your voice”. As a result, Adunni spends the novel searching for a louding voice – through education. Her quest for education is challenged, though, as she’s forced to marry an abusive man and later tricked unto undentured servitude. But despite Adunni’s dismal circumstances and cruel people who belittle her, she refuses to stay silent and uncurious, finding little ways to educate herself and passing the power of a voice along to others. Through her journey, the novel suggests that education is uniquely empowering not only because it gives people better understanding of the world but it helps them develop a “Louding Voice” – a sense of self worth, confidence and independence that they can use to help others.

Focusing on educating girls and women can lead to more productive, healthier and more resilient communities. This Adunni recognizes the power of voice, her louding voice!

...My mama says education will give one a voice.
I want more than just a voice. Ms. Tia. I want a louding voice; I
say. I want to enter a room and people will hear me even before I open my mouth to
be speaking.. I want to live in this life and help many people so that when I
grow old and die, I will still be living through the people I am helping.

(Dare, 2020, p. 264).

“Louding” in this context refers to so many things. Adunni is witty and sharp – mouthed and refuses to be shut down by some of the people she comes across. Her greatest desire is for her voice (through her fight for education equality and justice) to be heard continually and in places far beyond her imagination, outliving her. She wants to have an outstanding legacy.

Armed with the self – advocacy that education gives her, Adunni can advocate for other people who have been silenced. When Adunni arrives at Big Madam’s house she learns about Rebecca, Big Madam’s former housemaid who disappeared under mysterious circumstances and who nobody in the house seems to want to talk about. But Adunni’s new found understanding of her circumstances and of her own value allows her to see that Rebecca, too, is “a person of value” and therefore she determined to find out what happened to her. She eventually discovered that Rebecca became pregnant with Big Daddy’s baby, suffered a miscarriage and left Lagos after Big Madam gave her money to get on a bus and never return. Rebecca’s class status and lack of education, is what led to her abuse and erasure. Near the end of the novel, before Adunni leaves Big Madam’s house to pursue a formal education, she writes “Adunni and Rebecca” on her bedroom wall, a symbolic gesture that demonstrates the importance of using one’s education and voice to empathize with and speak up for others. **Child Marriage in *The Girl With The Louding Voice***

In the opening passage of the novel, the narrator Adunni learns that her father is forcing her to marry a much older man, Morufu in exchange for food and rent money. Throughout the novel, it becomes clear that child marriage

and other forms of gendered oppression – such as sexual objectification, violence and lack of access to education are pervasive problems for Nigerian women and girls, particularly those like Adunni who grow up in rural communities.

In some communities in Nigeria like the Becheve tribe of Obanliku Local Government Area in Cross River State, practice what is called the Money wife tradition. Money wife is a custom in which a girl child in the community is sold out to a man by her parents as a wife in exchange for money as little as five thousand naira, food items or to pay a debt. A rich man in the village is approached for a loan that is to be repaid by handing over a daughter to him. In the case of the unavailability of a daughter, the lender waits till they have one. So most debts are incurred before the girl child is born. The girl child is considered dead by her family and must not return irrespective of how she is treated by her husband or his relative. The men in Becheve cherish this practice as status symbol as it earns them acclaim amongst their peers. For the innocent girls, their entire childhood is stolen from them and their existence reduced to being mere sex slaves.

This is close to the situation captured by Dare in the novel with the character of Adunni symbolizing the money wife. This was a documentation of a research carried out by a Nigerian Tunde Onakoya for his project for chess in slums an intervention program for rural areas in Nigeria.

Adunni’s experience as a child bride illustrates the oppression and objectification that many Nigerian women and girls face. Her opportunities are limited to marriage and motherhood while her two brothers are allowed to hold jobs outside the home.

Once Adunni was married to him, Morufu further objectifies her by raping her and affirming that her only purpose is to bear him a son.

Intersecting Domains of Oppression

The oppression of the female characters in the novel are constituted by age, gender and class. This intersecting oppression is organized through the matrix of dominating four domains of power i.e. structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal.

Oppression in this domain reflected in how many young girls like Adunni were deceived by the institution of slavery. This institution was a market created by the demand of wealthy people who seek cheap labour and the supply of domestic agents who want big profit by selling girls from the village. The structural domain maintains the unequal and unjust distribution of social resources. Adunni must work as a house maid to avoid being tortured by Big Madam Florence. The employers forbid domestics to be in the same space with them especially when there are visitors. For example, the segregation is depicted when Adunni was in the house “your job is to keep the house clean and tidy and do what I ask you to do, when you are not working, you stay in the boys’ quarters in your own room (Dare, 2020, p. 121). When she followed Big Madam to Church, Adunni was stopped and ordered to follow the guide to another church far behind the fancy one. There is no chair, no door, no windows on its walls, inside, she met other girls like her, but they look even more miserable and terrified.

I step aside, see about five girls

Sitting on the floor, their head down.

They all look the same age of me:

Fourteen, fifteen. All are wearing

Dirty dress of Ankara or plain

Material with shoes like wet toilet Paper tearing every

where..

They smell of stinking sweat, of a body

That needs serious washing and they

All look sad, lost, afraid like me (Dare, 2020, p. 125).

In the disciplinary domain, rules, surveillance and punishment are working to keep the oppressed stay oppressed (Collins, 2000). For instance in the domestic sphere of Adunni’s family, Adunni became the most oppressed one because of her gender and age. Her father was an idle man who held a strongly patriarchal culture. “When my Papa is in the house, everybody must be doing as a dead person. No talking, no laughing, no moving (Dare, 2020, p. 23). He intimidated his family and restricted them through his behavior. Under the domineering father and intersecting operation, Adunni was powerless to resist his force to stop school and marry Morufu. In the domestic sphere of Morufu’s family, he set rules and punishment for his house hold. He addressed himself as a king who must always be the first and be respected:

“Adunni this is your new house “Morufu say

“And in this house, I am having rule.

There is respect of me. I am the king in the

House. Nobody must talk back to me.

Not you, not... (Dare, 2020 ,p. 36).

As a woman is considered the property of the man, the husband has a right to beat the wife as a penalty for their disobedience or perceived wrong doing. Adunni’s father slapped her mother because she was talking back at him. However, oppression is not only between men and women but also among women.

Adunni’s young age as a third wife makes her a hatred target of the first wife Labake. “She is always looking for my trouble, that Labake, always findings a way to fight me ” (Dare, 2020, p.30). She hates to share a husband with a girl whose age is the same with her daughter like she tried to oppress Adunni, Khadija and Khadija’s children through surveillance, verbal abuse, and even physical abuse.

Tia, a rich woman who helps Adunni to be free, was oppressed by her mother and her mother-in-law. Tia’s mother was a strict disciplinarian who controlled her to be perfect and limited her freedom. Her unhappy childhood traumatized her and she was unable to have her own child. Her mother-in law demanded her to have not just a child but a male one. She visits frequently, asking disturbing questions and finally taking her to a spiritualist where she was given a flogging bath for cleansing in order for her to get pregnant. Adumi who went with Tia to the cleansing ground witnessed firsthand a physical assault on Tia, a whipping out of alleged demons that leaves her body bleeding. Adunni was filled with anger as she narrates thus:

...But there are so many things I
Want to say. I want to tell Ms Tia
I am sorry I made her come here
I want to ask why doctor didn’t come
Too? Why didn’t he come and get a
Beating like his wife? If it takes two
People to make a baby, why only one
Person, the woman, is suffering when
The baby is not come? Is it because
She is the one with breast and stomach
For being pregnant?...(Dare, 2020, p. 68).

Through her acts and thoughts, Adunni represented resistance against women’s oppression Collins P.H in his Black Feminist Thought said that empowerment is initiated in an individual’s mind who realize how her life changes (2000). Adunni realized how women are oppressed and that she must struggle to change others by starting with her life first. The empowerment process is defined by Collins as the journey to free mind. The main character now that in many ways, people around her tried to shape her thoughts and acts with their patriarchal values.

Therefore, her definition regarding herself is important to resist oppression. Self – valuation and respect is required to refuse internalized patriarchal values as represented by Adunni when she refused to marry. She knows that she deserves to pursue her education and dreams instead of being a third wife at fourteen – year old:

I am only fourteen years going fifteen
and I am not marrying any foolish stupid old
man because I am wanting to go back
to school and learn teacher work and become adult
woman and have moneys to be driving car and
living in fine house with cushion and ... (Dare,
2020, p. 19).

Unlike Tia and Big Madam who represent change for themselves, the main character represents the spirit of change for both herself and others. Adunni loves to share her knowledge to others. She taught the lessons she learned from school to the children in her village and her brother. She told them that learning will help them to have a bright future.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, *The Girl With The Louding Voice* is a feminist novel but it deemphasizes feminist theories and spotlights different issues that affect women. The oppression that Adunni suffers in the novel is with the complicity of both men and women and her emancipation is also assisted by both genders. Different issues confronted by women within the patriarchal domain are disaggregated; there are intersections between the experiences of women, from different levels of the society. While Adunni believes that education is her way out of poverty, the marriage to Morufu is Khadija’s way out of poverty and she negotiates her family’s survival within the confines of marriage. In addressing sensitive themes such as child marriage and domestic slavery, this study remains attentive to cultural contexts. The idea is for a respectful analysis that pushes for empathy and social justice rather than cultural denigration. This study contributes to feminist literacy scholarship by highlighting education as a source of voice for silenced women, while also offering insight into real-world struggles such as child marriage in Nigeria where education remains a key tool of empowerment.

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