RECONSTRUCTING AFRICAN GENDERED CULTURE THROUGH CRITICAL LITERACY AND LANGUAGE USE

Anyanwu, Edith Ada, PhD
Department of Languages and Linguistics,
Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Nigeria
eanyanwu44@gmail.com
Ubi, Veronica Onwanyi, PhD
Department of Art and Social Science Education,
Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Nigeria
ubiveronica@gmail.com
Eze, Edith Evelyn, PhD
Department of Language Studies,
Enugu State College of Education (Technical), Enugu
editheze55@gmail.com

Abstract
Critical literacy (CL, henceforth) empowers individuals to redefine themselves and enables society to reconstruct its systems and structures. Concerned with the negative portrayal of women embedded in Africa's gendered culture and language use, this study advocates for the sustained and widespread application of CL to challenge and transform long-standing gendered customs, traditions, and linguistic practices in contemporary Africa. The study is grounded in Freire's Theory of Critical Literacy, which equips individuals and groups with critical consciousness, referred to as conscientisation, to overcome socio-political indoctrination within society. Drawing on this theoretical framework, the study argues that CL can awaken both individual and collective awareness, leading to the reconstruction of entrenched gendered norms in cultural and linguistic contexts. The research employs a systematic review, descriptive survey, content analysis, and interpretive tools to analyze secondary data, which the study relies on exclusively. The analysis reveals that CL is a viable and sustainable problem-solving tool capable of challenging and reconstructing negative representations of women perpetuated through gendered cultural and linguistic practices. The study concludes that, with critical consciousness and a willingness to embrace innovation, deeply rooted gendered constructions, both cultural and linguistic, can be effectively transformed. Among its recommendations, the study emphasizes the need to popularize CL as a means of challenging negative social constructs, regardless of their historical persistence. In addition, teachers and other agents of socialization should equip individuals and groups with CL skills and guide them in applying these skills to reconstruct harmful narratives within society.
Keywords: Critical literacy, Reconstruction, Gendered, Culture, Language use

Introduction
Critical literacy (CL) is a problem-solving intellectual, linguistic and literary framework. It is capable of helping individuals to redefine themselves and society to reconstruct itself and its systems. All human endeavours rely on language, thereby using language for various purposes (Mbah, 2018; Robert, 2022 & 2018; Emeka-Nwobia, 2015; Dibie & Robert, 2014; Uche, 1994). In the same vein, constructions, such as negative gender constructs, are done, institutionalised, popularised and transmitted across generations using language.

This study argues that CL should be utilized to reconstruct African gendered culture and language use (AGCALU), which upholds patriarchy and silences women and disregards their gender-based plights. This argument is given credence by some extant studies, such as Osuchukwu and Robert (2024), Anyanwu (2024 & 2023), Danjuma (2023), Besong (2021), Robert (2016). This study motivated by the prevailing gender ills against the African woman even in this contemporary era. In other words, worried about the negative constructions of women by African society's gendered culture and language use, this study makes a case for sustained and wide use of CL to reconstruct the age-long gendered customs, traditions and language use in contemporary Africa, with a view to affecting the desired change and attaining a new world order in that regard.

The Rise and Thrust of Critical Literacy
CL is traced to Freire and Macedo (1987), who championed critical literacy discourse (CLD). They discuss CL in relation to critical pedagogy (CP). The Freirian pedagogy (FP) refers to the concept and practice of CP. Exponents of CL argue that critically literate persons do not only understand how meanings are socially constructed in texts, but also understand the political and economic contexts of the created texts. These contexts ground the meanings of the social constructions created in texts. Thus, CL can be utilized for reconstruction of African gendered culture

and language use (AGCALU– short form), because CL makes it possible for individuals to understand how gendered culture is created society, upon which gendered language is constructed and sustained in society to use for gendered references to women.

With CL, the individual understands the political, economic and social constructions created in society and texts. Leaning on the above noted view held by the CL exponents, this study argues that the political and socio-economic contexts of gender constructs in society lay the foundation for gendered language. CL is noted to be the most distinct of all the four major approaches to literacy, inclusive of critical teaching and learning. It is noted to be addressing socio-cultural issues without engaging in participatory politics (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993). The other approaches "are functional literacy and the rhetoric of objectivism; interpretive literacy and the politics of nostalgia; expressivism as literacy for personal growth" (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993, p. 152). That is, Knoblauch and Brannon (1993) identify four major approaches to critical teaching and literacy learning viz: "critical literacy; functional literacy and the rhetoric of objectivism; interpretive literacy and the politics of nostalgia; expressivism as literacy for personal growth" (p. 152).

CL is the only category of literacy that shows the complexity of a socio-political framework that grounds "the relationships of language and power with practical knowledge of how to use language for advocacy, social critique, and cultural transformation" (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993, p. 152). Anderson and Irvine (1993) aver that "the pedagogic relevance of critical literacy is the peak of its importance" (p. 82). As such, CL is a viable means of deconstructing gender wrongs. CL locates where learners are positioned to operate beyond the confine of the traditional practice of teacher-to-student alone flow of knowledge, whereby the teacher used to be the monopolist of knowledge in teaching-learning activities (Anderson & Irvine, 1993). This point underscores the place of CL in reconstructing negative notions about and against women.

Using Critical Literacy and Language for Reconstruction
CL is described by Bishop (2014) as "a kind of literacy about structures, structural violence, and power systems" (p. 51). This definition highlights the fact CL can create awareness about structural imbalances, domestic violence against women, misconceptions, negative gender constructs about women, and gendered structures or systems of society, which are orchestrated and institutionalised by systems of power. In addition, Bishop (2014) adds that CL involves "the use of texts and print skills in ways that enable learners to examine the politics of daily life in the contemporary society" (p. 51). This means that CL is a framework for arming learners with the skills to understand, examine, criticise gender politics in textual and verbal forms. The quotation also highlights how CL can be used to reconstruct AGCAL.

Also, Anderson and Irvine (1993) have described CL as "learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations" (p. 82). This means that CL can be used to teach individuals in Africa and beyond about gendered power relations and rouse their consciousness to the age-long gender experiences and constructs on the African continent. Language is described as a systematic means of communication by the use of sounds or conventional symbols, and the means of human communication through which knowledge, beliefs, and behaviour can be experienced, explained and shared with one another (Robert, 2022 & 2018). This definition captures that commonly offered by linguists. Language is described as the most powerful and distinct way humans express their thoughts, articulate their rationality, interact and conduct effective communication within a society, community and nation (Mbah, 2018). The problem-solving potentials of Nigerian indigenous languages are affirmed in the literature (Mbah, 2018; Oyedeji, 2018; Emeka-Nwobia, 2015). Just as all human activities depend on language for survival, sustenance and continuity (Emeka-Nwobia, 2015; Emeka-Nwobia, 2007; Uche, 1994), surviving the storms of pandemic as well as the attendant challenges depends on language in some regards. The use of language for various purposes and to find solutions to different problems is also affirmed by scholars outside the field of linguistics. Franz and Murphy (2018) emphasise the unreserved place of language in medicine, as both a field and practice. They state that language is 'a process of knowledge creation,' but also what is used for 'looking for the world' (Franz & Murphy, 2018, p. 5).

The study done by Franz and Murphy (2018) shows 'how paying close attention to the role of language in medicine provides a philosophical foundation for supporting recent changes in doctor-patient communication' (p. 1). McLuhan (1964) has maintained that language 'tells the media student of the power of the media, with which they could transform societal structures alongside the society and the lives the media touch' (p. 52). Osuagwu and Chimakonam (2018) argue that language-based techniques have the capacity of tackling various issues in society. They stress the need to evolve, use and sustain language-based techniques to pursue and attain meaningful

solutions to problems, such for attaining decolonisation, development, new orders and innovations (Osuagwu & Chimakonam, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Freire's Theory of Critical Literacy, which arms individuals and groups with critical consciousness as 'conscientisation' that gets rid of socio-political constructions of indoctrination in society. Conscientisation is a prime gesture to undertake in massive critical literacy on gender constructs, practices, relations, perceptions, orientations, and socialisation. On conscientisation, Robert and Peter (2021) note that indigenous ideologies, theories, measures and so on can be deployed to get individuals and groups conscientised on, and made perpetually conscious of doing all that is right, just and the for the common good of all. They advise that conscientisation should be done consciously by individuals and groups pursuing meaningful goals and "common good' agenda. It is by doing so that the goals of conscientisation can be realised" (Robert & Peter, 2021, p. 124). CL is apt here in that the relationship between language and power.

Leaning on the theory, the study argues that CL would rouse individual and group consciousness towards reconstructing extant gendered constructions in culture and language use. CL engages with socio-political practices in relation to language use. Freire (1970), a pioneer theorist of CL, describes CL in relation to critical pedagogy (CP). He informs that CL and CP are characterised by socio-political constructions of indoctrination and the development of critical consciousness. The age-long socio-political constructions that indoctrinate members of the (African) society about gender, using language, ought to be reconstructed using language in the reverse matter. In doing so, CL is a good mechanism for achieving the goal of gender reconstruction in contemporary times.

CL is the most distinct of all the four major approaches to critical teaching and literacy learning, inclusive of critical teaching and learning (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993). It remains politically neutral while at the same time addressing socio-cultural issues. Other approaches are "functional literacy and the rhetoric of objectivism; interpretive literacy and the politics of nostalgia; expressivism as literacy for personal growth" (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993, p. 152). Knoblauch and Brannon (1993) have captured the place of language in power relations and the imperative of using CL to affect viz: "the relationships of language and power with practical knowledge of how to use language for advocacy, social critique, and cultural transformation" (p. 152). As such, FP is theory is apt here and thereby serves as a valuable theoretical framework. Seidel (1985) has noted that all kinds of discourse are political, because "each discourse serves as a site of struggle, whereby there is a 'semantic space in which meanings are produced and/or challenged'" (p. 45).

Lankshear and McLaren (1993) are of the view that Critical literacy differs from cultural literacy. Cultural literacy dictates a given knowledge corpus (Hirsch, 1988), unlike critical literacy. Taking a different approach and standpoint, critical literacy seeks epistemic independence or freedom for learners, whereby learners are not confined to getting, accepting and holding on to only whatever comes from the teacher. That is, the restrictive, rigid and teacher-centred traditional system of teaching and learning is discouraged by advocates and theorists of critical literacy and thinking. This rigid system is seen as the tyranny of academic literacy by Street (1984), Knoblauch and Brannon (1993) and Lankshear and McLaren (1993), among others. According to Street (1984), this tyranny could serve the purpose of socially reproducing dominant ideologies, such as racism, sexism, classism, homophobia and xenophobia, which perpetuate different forms of injustice in society.

Also, Lankshear and McLaren (1993) noted that the traditional system is 'colonisation culture' pedagogy (p. 17). Lankshear and McLaren (1993) are of the view that critical literacy seeks to question both historical and contemporary imbalance or inequality and the politics of exclusion among groups from the angle of mainstream narratives. They identify three educational practices that demonstrate critical literacy, which are liberal education, pluralism, and transformative praxis (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993, p. 17). Transformative praxis refers to the process of naming the conditions of oppression and struggling collectively with others in a cycle of action-reflection-action against such oppression (Freirian, 1970; Bishop, 2014).

Lankshear and McLaren (1993) maintain that there is "a guiding principle behind the processes of transformative critical literacy praxis," which concerns making analysis to understand how agents functioning within the confine of "established structures of power participate in the social construction of literacies" (p. 7). Lankshear and McLaren (1993, p. 7) call critical literacy praxis "political and social literacies" involving "textual studies that are analysed at the discursive level, in which the texts were created and sustained. Given the foregoing, it is quite clear that the adopted theory is apt for the study. Indeed, the postulations of CL are quite realisable in practical contexts. The theory suits this study and aptly serves as its theoretical framework.

Critical Literacy: A Problem-Solving Mechanism for Gender Reconstruction

The problem-solving potential of CL is affirmed by scholars in the literature. Shor (1999) has noted that individuals redefine themselves and remake society through critical literacy in form of alternative rhetoric and dissident projects. This means that CL is a viable mechanism for reconstructing gender notions. According to Shor (1999), in an effort to discover alternative paths for self and social development, critical literacy challenges the status quo. Also, as Shor (1999) notes, CL interrogates power relations, discourses and identities in a world that is yet to be just, humane and finished. This means that CL has the potential to gender wrongs against women in the African society.

Shor (1999) states that critical literacy "connects the political and the personal, the public and the private, the global and the local, the economic and the pedagogical, for rethinking our lives and for promoting justice in place of inequity" (p. 2). Blackburn and Clark (2007) show a nexus between critical literacy and activism, as in advocating the entrenchment of democratisation. Morrell (2008) also affirms that CL is a method of social enquiry involving activism and refined education. Thus, CL can be used to refine gender education and change mentality of many about gender myths and tales. Norton (2007) agrees that CL concerns the 'connections between literacy, power and educational change,' (p. 6).

Also, Norton (2007) shows elaborately that critical literacy is a mechanism for international development. Thus, CL can serve as a mechanism for reconstructing negative notions in Africa at both international and national levels. Street (2001) and Canagarajah (1999) also show elaborately that critical literacy is a mechanism for development at all levels, not at the international level alone. It is to that end that Canagarajah (1999) emphasises that understanding the 'politics of location' is paramount to understanding the literacy practices of a given community.' Critical literacy is also affirmed to play a crucial role in education, linguistics, development and health, among other fields (Kwesiga, 1994; Makoni & Meinhof, 2003; Openjuru, 2003; Parry, 2003).

Critical literacy is a strong factor in cultural studies, education (pedagogic context), identities and differentiations, consciousness, broadened knowledge and intellectuality, diversity and cohesiveness, power relations, and socio-historical constructions, among others. Singer's (2006) study shows that critical literacy is a viable means of changing the world. That is why the present study advocates to attainment of gender reconstruction through the instrument of CL. It is observed that "identity construction in visual culture is a complex and ongoing process" (Stokes & Price, 2017, p. 162). Olick (2014) states viz: "distinctions among kinds of culture are matters of social relations, not intrinsic aspects of the works themselves" (p. 4). Again, in the realm of culture, threatened elites developed qualitative distinctions to dramatise and defend their exalted status (Olick, 2014).

Conclusion

The various negative notions about and against women are rooted in patriarchy, gendered cultural practices, and language use. To address this, the study argues that the negative gender constructions of women in Africa can be reconstructed through the application of critical literacy (CL). Drawing on relevant existing studies and the adopted theory of CL, the study demonstrates that the persistent culture of gender exclusivity in Africa is largely orchestrated by patriarchal systems and gendered language that marginalize women, assign them subordinate roles, and reinforce negative stereotypes. Overall, the study concludes that with the development of critical consciousness and a willingness to embrace innovation, gendered cultural and linguistic constructions about women, and by extension, broader society, can be effectively reconstructed.

Recommendations

The study recommends that:
   (i)   CL should be popularised and used to reconstruct negative constructions in society, regardless of how long they have been in use.
   (ii)   Teachers and other agents of socialisation should equip individuals and groups with CL skills and teach them how to use CL to reconstruct whatever needs to be reconstructed in society.

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