

EDUCATION AS A TOOL FOR EMPOWERING AFRICAN WOMEN: CONFRONTING OBJECTIFICATION AND SUPPORTING SURVIVORS IN *WOUNDING WORDS*

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Abstract

This study explores the transformative power of education in empowering African women to challenge objectification and support survivors of domestic violence in Evelyn Accad's *Wounding Words*. The study is grounded in a feminist approach and draws on Objectification Theory as articulated by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), which suggests that the societal objectification of women can lead to internalized oppression, self-objectification, and other negative outcomes. The study reveals that education can empower African women to recognize and resist objectification, develop critical thinking and self-awareness, and support survivors of domestic violence. Evelyn Accad's *Wounding Words* examines issues of identity and self-awareness, highlighting how women negotiate these challenges and are often portrayed as "outsiders." The study advocates the integration of gender-sensitive education, the provision of support services, and the promotion of community engagement. When women are empowered with knowledge, skills, and confidence, education becomes a catalyst for positive change, promoting women's self-worth and fostering a safer society for all.

Keywords: Education, Female Objectification, Domestic Violence, Accad's *Wounding Words*.

1.0 Introduction

For effectiveness in molding the individual, it is imperative that education starts very early in one's life. Individuals, who can read and acquire knowledge and skills, would at the end of the day, be in a better position to exploit the resources at her disposal for self and societal growth. Naila Kabeer (1999) suggests that "Education constitutes one of the key dimensions of women's empowerment, expanding their ability to make strategic life choices by providing access to knowledge, awareness of rights, and opportunities for participation in decision making". Stromquist 1995 on the other hand says "education is a process aimed at developing the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes in women to enable them to critically analyze their reality, gain self-confidence, and participate actively in social, economic and political spheres".

Surprisingly, women are often excluded as a result of certain societal norms. African women face numerous challenges, including objectification and domestic violence, which can erode their autonomy, dignity, and potential. Despite the importance of education in promoting empowerment and challenging harmful societal norms and stereotypes that perpetuate objectification, many African women lack access to education and support services that address these issues.

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Helen Chukwuma reveals: "women were left behind to mind the homes, the children and the farm. Their dependence on the men dependence... (while the) men had all the money and the power" (1). In most societies, the laws that govern and pattern human behavior are detrimental to women's progress, leaving them in a state of dejection and powerlessness. This is so because female suppression is still not regarded as illegal because the men in the African society are believed to be always right as women are trained and introduced into the world of endurance and acceptance.

The researchers believe that a traditional African man in the hope for a better lifestyle sees his daughter as a means of exchange with the dowry he receives from marrying her off rather than sending her to school. Women are looked upon as insecure and vulnerable people. Hence, they are married off; they automatically

become that man's property by ownership. Thus, he can afford to treat her as he so pleases. For Kant Immanuel, he questions: "what could evil be but this: the reduction of persons to things... where human beings are viewed as having a price, and not a dignity" (221).

This study seeks to address the limited understanding of how education can be used to empower African women to challenge objectification and support survivors of domestic violence. By examining the intersections of education, gender and violence, we can better understand how to harness education's potentials to promote women's critical thinking skills, empowerment and create a safer and just society. This study is significant in its contribution to the body of knowledge of existing literature and can inform policy and practice aimed at promoting education and support services for African women. This study also contributes to equipping African women by promoting their rights and empowering them to advocate for themselves and others. This is the reason Mariam Ba explains:

Women should no longer be decorative accessories, objects to be moved about and companions to be flattered, or claimed with promises. Women are the nation's primary, fundamental roots, from which all else grows and blossoms. Women must be encouraged to take a keener in the destiny of the country (61-62).

This knowledge creates power and gives voice to women just as money empowers her. Education can boost self-esteem and confidence, allowing women to recognize their worth and value beyond physical appearance. It leads to economic opportunities, enabling them to gain independence and make choices about their lives. In another instance, education can help survivors understand the dynamics of domestic violence, recognize signs of abuse and develop ways of avoidance and escape.

Violence as a tool is used to suppress women in traditional African societies. By sociologist John Galtung 1969 "distinguishes between direct violence, structural violence, and cultural violence. Direct violence refers to physical harm, structural violence refers to systematic ways in which social structures harm individuals, and cultural violence refers to aspects of culture that can be used to justify direct or structural violence". While domestic violence refers to a pattern of behaviour in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. It can take many forms, including physical violence, sexual violence, emotional abuse, and psychological abuse. The goal is often to create fear, to intimidate, or to control the victim. Gender-based violence (GBV) is a broader term that refers to any harmful act directed at an individual based on their gender. It includes acts that inflict physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering. Domestic violence is a form of gender-based violence, but GBV also includes violence in the public sphere, such as human trafficking, sexual harassment, and harmful traditional practices. The effects of domestic and gender-based violence can be quite profound. Physical effects include injuries; these can range from minor bruises and cuts to more serious injuries like broken bones or head trauma. Chronic Health problems: victims often experience chronic pain, gastrointestinal issues, and other long-term health issues. Reproductive health issues can include sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies, and complications related to pregnancy. Relating to psychosocial effects: Mental health issues; victims often suffer from anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental health conditions. Low self-esteem and self-worth: involves continuous abuse that can severely impact a person's self-esteem and sense of identity. Social Isolation: victims may become isolated from friends, family and social networks due to fear or control by the abuser. Impact on children: children who witness violence may experience emotional and psychological distress, affecting their development and future relationships.

Women are subjected to domestic violence and sometimes, corporal punishment as forms of discipline by the men who enforces them in families and the society. Violence occurs in rape, sexual assault and language abuses. Perp' St. Remy Asiegbu (2017) opines that:

The marginalization of women is still rife in many countries including the highly developed nations – physical and verbal assault, gender discrimination in job allocations, sexual harassment, objectification, denial of certain rights, misconception of the woman as inferior to man, preference of the boy child over the girl child, horrible womanhood rites – the list is endless. It is disturbing that with the volume of protests coming from feminists, womanhood is yet to experience a level of growth that is generally appreciable and commensurate with the outcry (29).

Violence survivors are people who have experienced physical, emotional or psychological abuse due to violence. To get these people back on track, practical help involving food supply, shelter, money, counseling therapy and empowerment should be made available.

The current research is rooted in feminism. Feminism as a concept captures the responses of women socially, politically and economically to the issues of subjugation and equality of gender. It is associated with a political, cultural and economic movement that demands equal rights and legal protection for women, through public statements, rallies, writing and programs. Feminism advocates and advances gender equity/equality for the females. As a social movement, it is geared towards the liberation of women from certain stereotypes and giving a voice to their issues. Onyemaechi Udumukwu (2015) adds that feminism is committed to righting the images against women, giving them a voice and redistributing political power in a way to make the woman speak

and act as a subject of action (230). Feminism is generally understood as a movement and ideology that advocates for the political, social, and economic equality of the sexes. According to Hooks (2000), feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression,” emphasizing that the struggle is not against men alone, but against patriarchal systems that sustain inequality. Similarly, Tong (2009) describes feminism as a set of theories and practices aimed at improving the status of women by challenging gender-based subordination and oppression. Consequently, Onuabuobi Oluchi & Abinye Titus-Green (2025), suggest that the pursuit of a certain status is a significant challenge for the African man. In his conscience to foster societal development, both men and women should have equal access to opportunities that will greatly enhance African progress (27).

2.0 Conceptualizing Evelyn Accad’s *Wounding Words*

Evelyn Accad is an author known for her thought-provoking work, particularly in the realm of women’s experience and cultural identity. Her novel *Wounding Words: A Woman’s journal in Tunisia*, offers a poignant exploration of her life as a woman in a patriarchal society.

Considering the prevalence of objectification, Evelyn Accad in her portraiture of women in *Wounding Words* portray an innovative compelling picture of educated and liberated women who are determined to rise and be heard in spite of daunting challenges. She narrates the challenges of Arab and Islamic women and feminism. *Wounding Words* navigates round Hayate, a young Lebanese woman. Her journals and records, over the period of a year of events are happenings to women in Tunisia. As friendships develop, she explores the choices available to women in that culture and discusses how they can work for a better society where women are free to exert themselves without fear of negative reprisals or attacks. Evelyn Accad’s *Wounding Words*, highlights Hayate a character used in the novel to achieve this role, a form of healing and revival in the women through voicing their experience rather than bottling up and suffering in silence. The novel emphatically symbolizes the bitterness and grief that characterize the life of the women in a traditional African society deeply rooted in devastating accounts of abusive husbands, activist’s tales of arrest, imprisonment and even torture for protesting sexist legislation. Hayate tries throughout the novel to inspire the Tunisian women to fight for their human and civil rights in the faces of resurgent Islamic fundamentalism that is determined to abolish even the little that Tunisian women have gained. Most of the Tunisian women Hayate encounters are highly educated and intellectual: they use their writing and their limited social pace to critique and subvert the dominant societal norms.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

Objectification theory, as proposed by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) suggests that societal objectification of women can lead to internalized oppression, self-objectification and negative outcomes. The idea of objectification has existed before feminism got hold of it. Kantian idea has gained new impetus in recent applications by feminist thinkers, who observed its relevance to oppression, and to the varied ways that women might have been treated as a means only and sometimes put up for sale.

Objectification is roughly, about some of the ways in which the world conforms to mind. Objectification is a process in which the social world comes to be shaped by perception, desire, and belief: a process in which women, for example are made objects because of men’s perceptions and desires and beliefs. Kurt Gray et al, remark that “objectification usually centers on women and is easy to spot in our culture” (1). The women are often at the receiving end of the blows and cruelty of the society, mainly because of her vulnerability. Objectification theory argues that in societies where women’s bodies are constantly evaluated through media, social expectations, or interpersonal interactions women can internalize this gaze and start to view themselves from an outsider’s perspective. This self-objectification often leads to consequences like body shame, appearance, anxiety, reduced awareness of internal bodily states, and even mental health challenges such as depression or eating disorders.

Now, when you bring in female empowerment, it’s almost like offering an antidote to those pressures. Empowerment can take many forms; Agency over the body: This means encouraging women to see their bodies as functional and powerful, not just decorative. Voice and visibility: on the other hand, means creating spaces where women’s contributions, skills, and ideas are valued beyond appearance. Education plays a crucial role in empowering women, enabling them to challenge societal norms that perpetuate inequality and gain for economic independence through the development of skills, and knowledge to secure better paying jobs, become financially independent. Education prepares women for leadership roles, enabling them to make a positive impact in their communities. By education and critical consciousness: is teaching how to recognize and resist objectifying messages in media and culture. Collective strength: solidarity with other women reduces isolation and builds resilience against objectifying standards. So empowerment does not sweep away objectification in society overnight, but it can shift the focus – from being seen as objects to being recognized as subjects with autonomy, intelligence, and authority. In the area of empowering African women through education, objectification theory can highlight the impact of societal objectification, where education can help women recognize and challenge societal norms that objectify and devalue them. It promotes critical thinking, self-awareness and self-worth in women. By challenging objectification and promoting self-empowerment, education can help women develop resilience and coping strategies to deal with violence and trauma.

4.0 Challenging Objectification and Domestic Violence in Accad's *Wounding Words*: Empowering African Women

In *Wounding Words* she portrays the responses of Tunisian women to invisibility and illustrates the discourse of Muslim women's identity reflecting the condition of female sexuality. Accad paints a picture of female segregation, abuse, and violence against women, who suffer oppressions through religion, traditional norms and sex.

Accad's novel is a graphic depiction or portrayal of the female identity as an object in the dynamism of the Muslim woman's sexuality and their visibility as against the principle of invisibility. The work is a vocal representation of female identity. Her heroines exhibit an independence that tends towards visibility of modern Western women. Accad writes against the domestic violence, and female objectification of Muslim and Arab women using the symbolism of nature. This is the symbolic element of nature as both an aesthetic tool and representation of the female vitality and sexuality. She depicts patriarchal destruction of the environment and female presence through religious and cultural domination. In order to express this, the aesthetic qualities of nature as free, regenerative and uninhibited are portrayed through the nudity of Aida immersed in the glory of the Sea and she takes a swim:

If they learned to love Nature, they would also love women better. They would encourage them to blossom. I'm becoming more and more aware of just how much the patriarchal system is built on the exploitation of Nature, Hayate adds her thoughts in unison with Aida. 'Men reinforce their strength by subjugating Nature just as they do women. Love for Nature works like a salve on wounds men inflict. If only we could communicate some of this love. (*Wounding Words*, 3).

It is true that man has conquered nature and in a similar fashion also dominates women with the same gravity of brutality and dexterity. The perception of nature and natural phenomenon as objects to be dominated and exploited has been transferred by the men to the women resulting in the invisibility and loss of identity of the Arab and Muslim female. The author therefore opines that men would love and care more for women if they love and care for nature. Unfortunately, this is not the case of women in the society of *Wounding Words* as illustrated by the deplorable and inhumane condition under which women textile workers slave for their masters. Nayla relates;

You must help me! I'm preparing an article on women textile workers in the area. Their working conditions are inhumane. They have to be talked about, even if it's dangerous. If we don't have the courage to reveal injustice, who will? People are apathetic! (*Wounding Words* 4).

Nayla reveals the need for seeking a just end to female objectification and their subsequent exploitation and commodification. She offered the following reasons for the need to speak up and speak out against the inhumane condition of women; the injustice of the act, the danger to be encountered from the perpetrators of the unjust act, and the general apathy towards matters of female objectification. Women like Hayate, Nayla, Aida, and the rest that Evelyn Accad portray in the novel *Wounding Words* have to devise means of having a voice, declaring their humanity and especially their identity as women in a world where it is forbidden to do so. For instance, when the women go to a restaurant for a good time they meet with hostile stares from men and women who have been objectified by their men. Rima and Samia recounts the critical looks.

They are used to asserting themselves in a society which does everything to exclude them, erase them, keep them silent. With their gracious walk, fluid movements and direct language, these women cut their own path, make a place for themselves in forbidden areas, affirm who they are, and that no one will displace them or send them back to the harem. (*Wounding Words* 13).

The author in the above narrative identifies two classes of people. The women representing the first class, who are the threatened with exclusion, erasure, and silence and the second class who are the men who threatening to exclude, erase and silent. However, the women in the passage are identified as those who have gained the advantage over the men by asserting themselves. These classes of women will not go back, will not be sent back and do not belong in the harem under the chaperone of patriarchal male dominance. The society does not pamper women who have not taken side in the contention for dominance by men that is going on. Through such fundamental institutions like religion, and culture (marriage) men continuously seek to dominate nature and women. Only women with feminist orientation and consciousness like Rima, Samia, Hayate, Nayla, Aida, and others are accepted from the brutality of the patriarchal system. Samia's cousin's fate in the hands of a monster of a husband illustrates domestic violence, and female objectification in practical terms.

Her husband had tied her to a chair to beat her, and struck her in the stomach, even though she was several months pregnant. Her cousin does not want to keep the child for whom she fears a similar fate, and refuses to return to her brutal man. Samia, who has also suffered greatly, has sworn to help her to the bitter end, despite all obstacles, her

own family accuses her of inciting her cousin to rebel...I'm used to fighting! I'll do it for her too! We will not give up the struggle because certain men have decided to take away the few rights we have won! (*Wounding Word* 14).

It is alarming that no one blames or accuses the 'brutal man' for tying up his pregnant wife to a chair like a doll and beating her in the stomach. Samia who delivers her from brutality and trauma is alleged to have incited her to rebel. The question should be asked, if someone escapes from Gestapo style torture, and excruciating physical pain, is it rebellion or redemption? The trans-generational impact of such horror is so unfortunate that when Samia's cousin considers it she decides it is safer not to bring another female child into such an unfriendly, inhumane and patriarchal world. It is a world where family members unwittingly take side with men who have committed criminal and punishable offences and accuses innocent women for speaking out against evil. Samia's cousin decision not to return to her brutal husband is a clear clarion call to women to come out of perilous and murderous relationships in the name of marriage or love and embrace life, liberty and freedom in the spirit of radical feminist devoid of masculine subjectivity and objectification. A female psychiatrist speaks on the nature of the male that is responsible for this dysfunctional behaviour.

The Arab male is afraid of the female orgasm, afraid of her bestiality, afraid she will be unfaithful to him. In a relationship, the man's stakes are higher than the woman's. For the man, a bad experience can drive him to a psychosis, whereas for a woman its neurosis. A psychosis is much more serious. Men are therefore very afraid, for in losing their sexual identity, they can lose everything. So they live with this anguish. (*Wounding Word* 16).

The effect of the above condition is that women are naturally not safe anymore with such men. Such men as described above are very likely to derail and begin to misbehave unfavourably towards the women under their influence. Such men are also more likely to take desperate measures to keep the women in their life perpetually subjugated and submissive to them even when such women have merited the rights to be free of any such shackles of patriarchy. Many such men get aggressive and brutal beyond reason. Aida confides in Hayate her ordeal in the hands of the men who have sworn to keep women in eternal servitude as objects of benevolent sexism and domestic violence for speaking up and out.

Her voice breaks. She is gripped with sobs and cannot go on. Hayate comes closer and consoles her, massaging her knotted neck. Aida smiles in the midst of her tears: it feels good to cry and to talk. Your fingers on my neck are undoing my suffering. This rain has a calming effect and takes away my tiredness. The disappointment of my personal life were nothing compared to what was waiting for me in the social arena when I tried to speak, to cry out, to write about the injustices I had seen, that I was studying and which disgusted me. I was arrested, imprisoned for my audacity...tortured...Does it shock you that this happened in the country one calls the most democratic in the Arab world. (*Wounding Words* 26).

Women suffer in every clime personally and corporately. Their gender is the primary reason they are segregated and discriminated against like a race or class that finds itself among another race that considers itself superior. However, when women like Aida speak out they do so with the risk of being beaten, tortured and jailed for the mere audacity of rising up against the established order of female objectification. The democracy of the Muslim and Arab world does not extend to giving their women the justice of equality with their menfolk in the eyes of the law. Male authority over the women are sacrosanct and beyond the reach of the law. Women who are like Aida should know that comfort and release can be found in the embrace of other feminists who understand, like Hayate, what a woman goes through to gain her liberty from domestic violence. Even Hayate is not spared the sexism as her landlord would see no reason for a woman who lives alone to need and request a larger bed when it is certain she would not be sleeping with a man in it. When we critically consider the tales of the various women in their revelation of how they came to feminism in the club where they meet to plan, socialize and work on the project of liberating other women we find out that feminism is a worthy cause for the salvation of women. Samia who was a victim of child marriage narrates her ordeal.

I was also born in a small village, Samia continues, where women are very oppressed. Very early in life, I was told that girls who were not virgins were killed. I was lucky to have a mother from outside the village; she had studied in Tunis. When she was fourteen, her brother decided to marry her to her uncle. She was moved to this very traditional village. Her husband, my father shut her in and beat her. She had her first child at the age of sixteen, two more at eighteen. She became severely depressed. Early on, I learned of my mother's trials and I swore that I would live like her...some of my illiterate cousins had died under the blows of husbands and I said that I would never accept that fate. (*Wounding Words* 43).

The entire catalogue of pain that drives women into feminism is outlined in Samia's ordeal above. Child marriage, wife battering, physical abuse, emotional trauma, and ultimately depression due to the emotional strangulation the women labour under. Imagine women dying as a result of blows from their supposed husbands. Imagine the cruelty of subjecting a young girl child of fourteen years to being shut up and beaten. The suffering of these women is not hidden from public view. Yet, nobody speaks up against the cruelty and inhumanity of such acts as mentioned above. One of the reasons is because the prevailing system of patriarchy relies on religious fundamentalism and fanaticism to uphold the absurd practices. Using the tool of religious obligations, the men oppress the women by the use of sanction and regulation. For instance, the conversation below ensues between a taxi driver and Hayate;

Other groups? Which ones? The Islamic fundamentalists, for instance, yes, yes, we're afraid of them too. They want to impose their way of praying, dressing, living; they want women to wear the veil again. But the Koran doesn't say that women have to be veiled. The veil was for the wife of the Prophet, peace be upon him! (*Wounding Word* 84).

The atrocities that women in the world over suffer daily is as overwhelming as that of the various women in the novel *Wounding Words*. There is no escape in the height of educational attainment, there is no escape in economic empowerment, and there is no escape in financial or political power. Women alone can offer other women some form of escape from the horror of women objectification and domestic violence.

Women in *Wounding Words* are very vivid portrayal of the absurdities, atrocities, and oddities that have characterized the lives of our women in our present democratic society where we boast of being civil. Gender based violence which is regarded as any act of physical gender-biased violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological or emotional harm or suffering to women, including in public or private life is common in the various examples drawn from the novels. It includes, traditional practices harmful to women like female genital cutting, sexual abuse of female children, child marriages, dowry related violence and rape (including marital rape). There is violence done to women at home, which are referred to as the act of domestic violence that involves the use of weapons, threats, dominance, intimidation, and humiliation to isolate victims from accessing freedom. It is a form of gender-based violence.

The novel, *Wounding Words* exposes the biased ideology of patriarchy and highlights the myriad forms oppression faced by women. The novel highlights the self-centeredness of patriarchy, the patriarchy that exploits women for the sole purpose of sexual gratification, reducing them to object rather than recognizing their agency and humanity. This system of patriarchy rejects women's freedom over themselves. Thus, it is the role of the father to negotiate his daughter's marriage and the role of the wife to instill obedience and compliance of her daughter to the arranged marriage. Based on our study, Accad depicts her characters in their pains, subjection, difference, creative talents and their struggle within the complex religious system. Samie reveals: "my father shut her in and beat her... Some of my illiterate cousins had died under the blows of husbands." (44)

The death of a loved person can provoke a potent mixture of grief and rage. Halima in Accad's *Wounding Words* speaks:

It was hard to take on the responsibility of raising my daughter alone and to deal with my husband's death... Feminism is a way of seeing, of being, of exchanging, at the club I learned to reflect with others that has stimulated my ideas a lot (45).

Hayate, the protagonists live in a patriarchal society, a societal structure where men often hold more power and influence than women. The novel tackles multiple complex themes: violence, oppression, subjugation, discrimination, exploitation and control within the family, at the work place and in society. There are different kinds of violence such as sexual abuse, female circumcision, wife beating, child marriage and domestic rape are used to control and subjugate the women always, the continual sense of insecurity instilled in women as a result keeps them bound to the home, economically and makes it possible for the men to exploit them and for women to be socially suppressed. Domestic violence is presented as part of female existence in the novel as Accad highlights the psychological and physical abuses through her protagonist, of which, the female child faces the problem of discrimination, this is owing to the fact that the African society has preference for the male child.

Conclusion

This study observes that the struggle for women's empowerment in Tunisia, as depicted through the lens of *empowering African women through education*, highlights education as a powerful tool for challenging objectification and supporting survivors of domestic violence. Education provides women with the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to challenge harmful societal norms and advocate for their rights. It can also serve as a catalyst for positive change by fostering economic growth, social progress, and healthier communities. By promoting education and support services for African women, society can move toward creating a safer and more equitable environment in which women can thrive.

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