Speak out: Teaching Domestic Violence in Your Literature Classroom

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Abstract

Every day, women around the world are devastated by violence within the four walls of their homes. This violence may be experienced by a relative, a friend, a co-worker or even a student. The question that needs to be asked and answered here is what we as teachers/educators (are doing or) can do to help increase awareness on the impacts of physical, verbal, sexual and emotional abuse. This paper will provide and discuss conceptual framework(s) that can be used using books you are already teaching in your literature classrooms. Domestic violence is a fairly sensitive issue and can be a challenging topic to teach. As such, the paper will explore strategies of teaching in the classroom and more specifically challenges that may emerge in one’s class. The paper will conclude highlight the importance of raising awareness about domestic violence in the classroom.

Keywords: domestic violence; literature classroom; teaching strategies; types of abuses

1. Introduction

Every day, women around the world are devastated by violence within the four walls of their homes. This violence may be experienced by a relative, a friend, a co-worker or even a student. The question that needs to be asked and answered here is what we as teachers/educators (are doing or) can do to help increase awareness on the
impacts of physical, verbal, sexual and emotional abuse. This paper explores the ways in which domestic violence may be taught in the classroom to create awareness among students. As teachers, it is important not only to plan the lesson but also keep in mind how to teach the lesson effectively. Domestic violence is a fairly sensitive issue and can be a challenging topic to teach. This paper seeks to discuss frameworks that can be used in literary analysis when teaching domestic violence in the classroom. Then, the paper will discuss activities that can be carried out in the classroom to teach about domestic violence. The paper will conclude by discussing the importance of teaching domestic violence in the classroom. Firstly, as teachers, it is important to understand the concept of domestic violence.

1.1. What is domestic violence?

Domestic violence has many names: violence against women, sexual violence, intimate violence, partner abuse and many more. Despite these various names, the terms mentioned above share the same meaning which is assault or abuse against women by someone known to her. Domestic violence, as the term itself suggests, is the assault against women behind closed doors. Many consider domestic violence as a private affair. Nevertheless, it is and always will be a public concern as it traumatizes the women involved, entails medical leave and involves medical claims.

1.2. Types of abuse

Domestic violence can be typically seen in the form of physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse. Physical abuse involves various methods used by the batterer to inflict physical pain on his victim. Physical abuse can include simple gestures such as, ‘pinches and squeezes in a painful way, pushes and shoves, jerks, pulls or shakes, hits, punches or kicks’ (McCue, 2008). Some of the description above may be taken lightly by the victim but they nevertheless may contribute to serious aggression in the future. The effects of physical abuse are obvious as it sometimes leaves scars on the victim’s body.

Emotional abuse, on the other hand, does not involve inflicting direct pain to the victim and thus can be easily overlooked. Emotional abuse may be as severe as physical abuse as it confuses the victim. When abused emotionally, victim may be influenced into thinking that she was not assaulted as actual beating never took place. However, emotional abuse can be devastating to the victim as in actual fact she is suffering silently feeling manipulated and controlled. Emotional abuse include ‘making hostile jokes about the habits and faults of women in general, directing insults at the victim, ignoring victim’s feelings, yelling at the victim, calling the victim insulting terms like “crazy” or “bitch”, repeatedly humiliating the victim in front of family members and others, blaming the victim for all of the abuser’s troubles and failure, threatening to abuse the children or get custody of them and threatening physical violence’ (McCue, 2008). Unlike physical violence, ‘the wounds of emotionally abusive relationships are not repaired, and their damage accumulates over time’ (Thompson & Walker, 1989).

Sexual abuse is the abuse on women that involves activities pertaining sex. Sexual abuse include ‘looking at women as sex objects, criticizing the victim in sexual terms, and touching the victim in uncomfortable ways’ (McCue, 2008).

2. Framework for reading texts from a domestic violence perspective

Domestic violence deals mainly with oppression, silencing of women and gender roles. As such, feminist theory can provide the basis to understanding and reading domestic violence as it explores the notions of femaleness and maleness. Feminist interpretations can prompt students to consider the literary representations of
women and link it to their own lives and environment. Using the feminist theory to read literary texts will allow students a better understanding of women’s suffering and domestic violence.

2.1. Feminist Theory

Feminist criticism ‘examines the way in which literature reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social and psychological oppression of women’ (Tyson, 1999). As such, using this framework will not only help students explore the physical abuse of women but also help them evaluate a woman’s environment and ways this may contribute to domestic violence.

‘Feminism has often focused upon what is absent than rather what is present, reflecting concern with the silencing and marginalization of women in a patriarchal culture, a culture organized in favor of men’ (Guerin, Labor, Morgan & John, 2005). This short definition captures the reality of women in present day. The silencing and marginalizing of women is indeed a huge concern and this can be widely explored when reading a literary text. Some of the issues teachers and students can explore in the classroom on silencing of women characters are:

- Comparing dialogue exchange (control of language) between male characters and female characters
- Comparing levels of education between the male characters and female characters
- Comparing social status of male characters and women characters

By comparing male and female characters as well as their environment, students may easily come up with the conclusion of the silenced female and voiced male characters.

Another key aspect of feminist theory is traditional gender roles. Gender roles define how a man and woman should behave. Gender roles ‘cast men as rational, strong, decisive and protective’ and women’s roles are cast sharply in contrast as ‘emotional, weak, nurturing and submissive’ (Tyson, 1999). From here, students can also understand how these gender roles encourage domestic violence. Women and men were not born in these roles but rather they were brought up in environments that expose them to these roles. Being a strong man encourages or even allows a man to be violent and oppressive whereas the weak woman as oppressed and assaulted.

One other aspect of feminist theory I believe is very important and should be taught to students is resistance. Resistance ‘is most readily thought to refer to social movements or even broader categories of protests’ (Jasper, 1997 in Hollander and Einwohner, 2004). When discussing about domestic violence, resistance can then refer to the act of responding to the assault overtly or covertly. By discussing the concept of resistance, students will be aware of the ways one can prevent or even end the violence.

2.2. The analysis

In the demonstration of domestic violence analysis, I will employ two texts: “Polishing” and “The Many Chains Around Me”. “Polishing” by Charlene Rajendran (published in Nineteen: A Collection of Stories by Women) is a short play that opens and ends in the kitchen. Two women, Savithri and Rekha, are preparing for a party while exchanging dialogues about male hegemony. Rekha, while polishing the brass, detests male dominance and expresses her feelings about her auntie’s hard work in preparing for the party. Savithri, the auntie, explains that it is completely acceptable. The two debate until the readers are revealed to the real secret, that is, both characters have been abused.

“The Many Chains Around Me” by K.R Pramila (published in Young Women Speak Out) talks about the conflict between individual aspirations and societal expectations. The character of the story has many factors that control her from being who she really is. She suffers to achieve her aspiration due to society’s expectation.

At the beginning of the play “Polishing”, gender roles are already highlighted by the playwright. As the play opens, we see Rekha dressed for an evening function but with an apron on top. She is seen polishing an Indian brass oil lamp. Here, we can see that although Rekha is dressed for a function, she is expected to play the role of
a female, that is, to tend to the house chores. Likewise, Savithri is seen dressed in silk saree with her hair neatly tied in a bun. She is also wearing an apron and making flower arrangements. Both female characters are dressed in grandeur but the grandness in their clothing is covered with an apron. The apron here symbolizes their gender roles (the nurturing female) that nevertheless come first.

As the play continues, we see Rekha asking Savithri why she agrees to these parties as she gets tired each time. Savithri explains that her husband likes having his people over and they have a good time when they come. Her reply here clearly shows her acceptance of her gender roles unlike the outspoken Rekha. Savithri accepts her role and makes sure she tends to the necessities of her husband’s party and his people.

Besides that, Savithri is also portrayed as a weak character. This can be seen when Rekha points out the behavior of her uncle and his friends and Savithri supports their behavior by saying that they’re just having a bit of fun and that can’t be harmful. It is then evident here that Savithri plays the role of the passive female character who accepts her gender role of a nurturing and weak female.

The second literary text also highlights this issue. As the title suggests, the story illustrates the many chains or rather roles that confine the character. One important chain the character talks about is the chain of expectations. As a woman, she was deprived from doing things and making her own decisions as she had certain roles that she needed to succumb to. Her roles as mentioned in the text are the roles of a mother, wife, daughter-in-law, and woman. Her individual aspirations are suppressed due to society’s expectations and the many roles she is expected to play.

Therefore, it is evident that both literary texts highlight violence against women. The discussion on gender roles suggests more subtle oppression against women. Here, however, I will discuss the analysis of physical abuse as seen in Polishing. In Polishing, the audiences learn that Rekha has been physically abuse by her bother. Her brother roams at night throwing things and boiling water at her. This clearly portrays violent acts as discussed earlier in the paper. Savithri is also oppressed physically as there bruises on her legs.

When analyzing texts for evidence of domestic violence, it is also important to trace resistance as portrayed in the literary texts. In Polishing, for example, the two characters are first thought to be accepting their roles and violence. However, towards the end of the play, audiences know that both characters are aware of the injustice done to them. Savithri says that they need to do something when she catches a glimpse of Rekha’s wound. This shows that she has the agency to respond to the violence. Savithri volunteers to be Rekha’s witness and further suggests that they should sought help from her sister. The play ends wonderfully as Rekha and Savithri both remove their apron. This marks the end of their oppression in one way as it symbolically shows that they reject their roles as the weak and nurturing female.

To facilitate an easier understanding of the literary texts, students can draw diagrams or charts by exploring the characters (both male and female), their roles, their environment and resistance, if any. This way, the reactions to the environments and violence can be seen more clearly and comparison can be made easily.

3. Classroom activities

When students have gone through and discussed their analysis and findings in class, it is imperative that some activities take place not only to assess their understanding but also to enhance the discussion. It is important to note that the activities suggested below can be adapted according to the topic that was discussed in class.

3.1. Poster presentation

A very interesting activity that I personally enjoyed as a student is poster presentation. In this activity, students use pictures to highlight key concerns of their analysis. For example, students can create a poster that illustrates gender roles as portrayed by the two literary texts discussed above. This can be a fun activity as pictures speak a
thousand words. Besides that, students also explore how colors can contribute or highlight certain issue. Dark colors can be used to portray violence and lighter colors to symbolize resistance and freedom. Alternatively, students can also create pamphlets describing domestic violence as seen in the texts. Students may use Microsoft PowerPoint to design their poster. Students can also include excerpts from the text that they think is important and explain it significance to the class.

3.2. Short acting/ improvisation

Next, students can have a short acting session based on the play or short story or do an improvisation. Improvisation will allow students to rewrite the dialogues and here they will be able to express themselves more freely as opposed to scripted dialogues. The teacher may also prompt students to change events of stories they do not like and at the end of the activity discuss why they changed it. This will allow students to express their true feelings about the texts and more importantly the issue at hand, that is, domestic violence.

3.3. Group discussions

In addition, students (in groups) can select a voiceless female character from the story. Get the students to discuss the reasons for her silence. Next ask students to compare the chosen female character from the text to another female character. For example, students can compare Rekha and Savithri. When students discuss the reasons for Savithri’s voiceless (in the initial stages of the play), they may then explore reasons women are oppressed or even stay in an abusive relationship.

3.4. Using the media

This is another interesting activity where students can compare characters they have read about in literary texts with characters they watch on TV. Desperate Housewives is a good example, as it highlights the notion of gender roles. The character Lynette, for example, had to give up her job and aspirations to care for her family. A similar character as discussed earlier can be seen in the text The Many Chains Around Me. Likewise, students can pick a character, not necessarily weak but even an empowered character from their favorite TV show or movie and compare it with a weak/empowered female character from the texts that they have read and discussed.

Alternatively, students can also cut out newspaper or magazine articles which focus on domestic violence issue. For a more advanced activity, student can use the stylistic approach to compare the conventions of literary writings.

3.5. Letter writing

Students can write a letter to the batterer on behalf of the victim. In their letter, they can display their concerns towards the victim and by voicing out on behalf of the victim, students in a way are actually empowering themselves in speaking out and expressing their disapprovals to violence against women. In this activity, students are given the opportunity to express themselves and their viewpoints on domestic violence. Besides that, students may get a sense of empowerment by writing a letter and standing up for the characters in the text. This may build their confidence and prepare them to stand up to against violence on them, their friends or relatives.

3.6. Forum discussion

Forum discussion is a fairly important activity as it can contribute richly to the analysis. Students can pick a character and discuss her characterization in detail. This activity, in my view, is essential and should be
conducted at the end of every literary discussion/analysis. With even a brief forum discussion, students can take turns exchanging essential details about the characters in the texts. By discussing details of characterization, students will have a better understanding of the character, his or her environment and challenges faced by the character.

3.7. Campaigns

This is of course a more ambitious and time consuming activity. Students may (as a class) conduct a campaign to promote awareness of domestic violence. Students can have mini talks or distribute flyers containing information about domestic violence to students of other faculties or classes. Alternatively, this can also be a follow up activity for the Poster Presentation or Using the Media. Once students have completed the above-mentioned activity, the teacher can display their works on the notice board of the faculty. This will not only give students credit for their creative work but also create awareness among other students of the faculty.

4. Conclusion

The paper has shown essential concepts that can be used in class when teaching about domestic violence. Three major forms of violence were also discussed in the paper, that is, physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse. The paper then demonstrated briefly how these concepts can be used while analyzing a literary text. The paper also suggested some activities that can be conducted in class after their discussions/findings from text. As a teacher, it is important to educate and create awareness among our students on domestic violence as it is a worrying issue and many victims out there suffer silently. Our job as teachers goes beyond completing the syllabus to raising awareness on domestic violence and equipping students with tools for choosing alternatives to violence.

References