

# Using Literature to create Awareness of Domestic Violence for Secondary School Students

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## ABSTRACT

Some 7468 domestic violence cases were reported in 2021, which was an increase of 42% from 5260 cases in 2020, as stated by the Malaysian Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development. This informs us that this type of violence is becoming more rampant every year. As such, as educators and teachers, we must help to create awareness of domestic violence among our students. This paper aims to explore strategies for teaching the topic and also present the challenges that may emerge in the classroom. This paper will also focus on the importance of raising awareness about domestic violence among secondary school students.

**Keywords:** domestic violence, feminism, postcolonial literature

## INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to explore how domestic violence may be taught in the classroom to create awareness among students. Teachers hold the responsibility of planning the lesson properly and also of how to teach the lesson effectively. The topic can be a sensitive and challenging topic for teachers to teach. Some suggestions are given regarding the activities to be carried out in the classroom for teaching about domestic violence. To conclude, a section is provided on the importance of teaching domestic violence in the classroom.

The Women's Aid Organisation defines domestic violence as 'a pattern of violence, abuse, or intimidation used to control or maintain power over a partner who is or has been in an intimate relationship (Povera, 2022).' For many people, domestic violence is considered a private affair as it is an assault or abuse on women behind closed doors. However, society needs to stop treating this matter as something private as it would mean that we are allowing the problem to get worse, perhaps ending with deaths.

Domestic abuse can be categorized into physical abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse. WHO defines acts of physical abuse to include slapping, kicking, and hitting. The second type, which is emotional abuse, would include behavior such as making insults, making acts of humiliation and intimidation, such as destroying things, as well as making threats of harm, etc. The third type, which is sexual abuse, includes behavior such as forced sexual intercourse and other forms of sexual coercion (Garcie-Moreno et al, 2013).

## METHOD

As this particular text deals with the silencing of women and male domination, we chose feminist criticism as the framework for reading such a text.



As stated by Copeland (2000), feminist criticism focuses on the various ways women have been oppressed, suppressed, and repressed. Additionally, it analyzes women writers and their works from the perspective of female readers. Using this particular framework, readers would be able to explore the physical abuse experienced by women as well as determine the environment that may have contributed to the abuse.

According to Cixous, in Western cultures, women have been traditionally placed on the side of negativity, passivity, and powerlessness. In her view, the only way for women to break free from these repressive structures is ‘to affirm their difference, and to challenge phallogocentric discourse.’ (101-16). The silencing and marginalizing of women is a huge concern and this can be widely explored when reading a literary text.

Similarly, Bell Hooks calls for the articulation of marginalized voices and the self-affirmation of the oppressed groups: Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is the act of speech, of ‘talking back’, that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice. (211)

The following are some ways in which teachers and students can examine the silencing of female characters:

- a) Focusing on the dialogue exchange (control of language) between male characters and female characters
- b) Focusing on the levels of education between the male characters and female characters
- c) Focusing on the social status of male characters and women characters

By comparing male and female characters as well as their environment, students may come up with a conclusion about the silenced female and voiced male characters. An important aspect of feminist theory is traditional gender roles. According to Suarez et al. (2021), gender roles (GRs) are instilled from childhood via the differential socialization and education of boys and girls, which takes place within the family environment, among friends and peers, and is conveyed by cultural conceptions in the arts, media, and religion. As stated by Sanjel (2013), in a patriarchal society, pressure is exerted to maintain a system where men remain in power in the most valued spheres of life, whereas women are typically relegated to inferior positions.

When we talk about feminist theory, there is also a need to talk about resistance. As stated by Selmon, the first level of resistance is defined as ‘an act or set of acts designed to release the people of its tyrants, and it so thoroughly introduces the experience of living under domination and pressure that it turns to be an almost autonomous principle’(Selmon 1997, pp. 77-78). According to Gordan and Almutairi (2013), this indicates that the element of the resistance level is portrayed through the connection of the oppressors and the masculine dominator and the oppressed as the female subject. The act of level of resistance is determined through the growth of the female characters in the novel as in the actions, behavior, and ideas as their responses to the situation of being physically or mentally oppressed. As such, by discussing the concept of resistance, students will be aware of the ways one can prevent or even end the violence.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

To demonstrate the instances of domestic violence, we will utilize a short story written by an Asian American writer, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The author has written extensively on women’s issues and her works include short stories and novels. She is also a co-founder and former president of Maitri, a helpline founded in 1991 for South Asian women dealing with domestic abuse. Common themes in her stories are the experiences of South Asian women, immigration, history, magical realism, and mythology.

Divakaruni stated in an online interview in 1998 that she grew up reading ancient Indian epics and she enjoyed reading about the male warriors and their friendships with other

heroes. However, she noticed that there was no mention of the epic heroines having 'important female friends'. As such, she decided to focus on writing about female friendships in her stories, and she also included the 'conflicting passions and demands' that women face in their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers.

According to Dimor (2015), the short stories in the 'Arranged Marriage' anthology focus on marital relationships and the transition of diasporic South Asian women questioning their duties as mothers, wives, daughters, and professionals. This insight makes them reconsider their life as women and gives them confidence and strength. Mishra (2020) reiterates that the short stories not only address the diasporic reality but also the experiences of women immigrants and their battle against cultural and gender norms in varied cultural settings. Furthermore, Rana and Reddy (2018) also agree that Divakaruni has given voice to diasporic Indian women in her works. These women, shaped by their Indian childhood, have exceeded traditional boundaries, leaving them conflicted between old and new attributes.

The short story which is titled 'The Bats' is featured in an anthology of short stories titled "Arranged Marriage", written by Divakaruni in 1995. It is a tale about a small family. The story utilizes the first-person narrative from the viewpoint of the family's 8-year-old female child. As stated by Haugen (2018) the purpose of a child narrator is to teach children about sympathy and moral estimates. The other characters are the father, mother, and grandpa-uncle. They are all nameless in the story

This short story was chosen as it is relatively short just 8 pages, and the vocabulary utilized throughout the story is simple. The events that occur in the story are direct and straight to the point, and the author clearly describes the father's violent actions and the reactions of the mother and the child toward the violence.

Gender issues of violence against women such as insinuation, molestation, and raping are prevalent in the short story. Women are depicted to undergo social abuse which is initiated by their employers and close relatives such as their mothers and husbands (Tiwari & Khan, 2016). Similarly, Mufidah and Roifah (2020) also pointed out that women experience domestic violence and psychological pressure from their spouses and families. Their roles in the collection of short stories are primarily to be housewives and serve their husbands.

Kaur (2015) contends that the suffering of the protagonists in the collection of short stories is mainly caused by gender discrimination as the female characters' identity and resistance are defined by their gender. Sharma and Gupta (2016) state that the short story exposes the hypocrisy of men. The husband in the story comes from a respectable, upper-class background who, in the absence of his wife, tries to molest the maidservant. He assures the maid that 'no one would know about it.' Here we can ascertain an instance of male dominance and power over women.

The study by Bai (2017) asserts that the characters' conflicts in the anthology of short stories stem from a hostile environment as their husbands are disinterested and uncommunicative. The wives perceive this failure as a result of the men's insensitivity leading to their seclusion and introspection.

The 'Bats' short story begins with the child character's description of how her mother 'cried a lot' on most nights (CBD,1995). She also describes how things would fall a lot when her father 'was around' and how her mother would have 'purple' bruises on her face and dark circles around her eyes. One day, her mother decided to run away with the child by train. They were going to stay with 'grandpa-uncle' in the village. The child seemed to enjoy spending days with the grandpa-uncle on the fruit farm. The child noticed that there were a lot of bats on the farm, which ruined the fruits. Grandpa-uncle had to use poison to get rid of the bats. The next few days, he had to go around the farm with a jute sack to collect the dead bats. He muttered as he went collecting the dead bats: 'I guess they just don't realize what's happening. They don't realize that by flying somewhere else they will be safe. Or maybe they

do, but there's something that keeps pulling them back here.' This speech is certainly symbolic of the plight faced by the child's mother, who decides to return to town the following week after receiving her husband's letter. The child was angry that her mother wanted to go back to her father. However 'grandpa-uncle assured her that things would be alright by giving her the silver ring that they had found in a fish. When they returned to town, it was not very long when Father started to beat Mother again. The child looked for the silver ring, but it seemed to have disappeared.

To analyze this short story, we are going to refer to a list of constructs compiled by Davis and Ogundipe-Leslie (1995) to illustrate the plight of African-American women. This list is significant to understanding the worldview of feminism. Some examples of the constructs are provided below:

Women are silenced by:

- Male dominance
- Male control of language
- Informal training at home
- Training in schools to be silent
- Physical intimidation and threat

Using these attributes, the students will be instructed to find evidence in the text which are related to the attributes. The information gathered from the text can be filled in the table below.

Table 1. Character analysis

Character	Attributes	Evidence
Father	Male dominance	And don't make so much noise, or you'll wake your father."
	Male dominance	Father always slept late in the mornings. Because he worked so hard at the Rashbihari Printing Press where he was a foreman, earning food and rent money for us, Mother had explained.
	Physical intimidation and threat	'It was high up on her cheek, a yellow blotch with its edges turning purple.' (father had beaten mother)
Mother	Male dominance	"I wrote to him. I couldn't stand it, the stares and whispers of the women, down in the marketplace. The loneliness of being without him
	Informal training at home	Nothing. It's nothing. Now hurry up or you'll miss the bus. And don't make so much noise, or you'll wake your father.!
Child	Physical intimidation and threat	'He used to pick me up suddenly and throw me all the way up to the ceiling, up and down, up and down...'
	Physical intimidation and threat	'I pulled at her hand to hurry her along, my own shoulder still throbbing from when father had flung me against the wall as I tried to stop him...'
	Male control of language	' I heard him, though, shouts that shook the walls of my bedroom like they were paper, the sounds of falling dishes.'

The teacher could also instruct the students to look for ways in which the mother and the child appeared to show resistance towards the perpetrator of violence i.e. the father. This can be in the form of listing down the acts of resistance such as running away, trying to find help from others, etc. This helps to create awareness among the students on what they or their friends could do if they are faced with a similar situation.

Some of the activities which could be conducted afterward are listed below.

#### *Short-acting session*

The teacher will lead a short discussion with students on the themes/characters/moral values inherent in the short story. Then the students are instructed to work in groups and they have to write short scripts based on the scenes in the story. Later, the students could act out the scenes in class.

#### *Letter Writing*

In groups, the students have to write a letter to the Woman's Act Organisation, informing them about the female character's situation. By doing this activity, the students may get a sense of empowerment by standing up for the character. This would help to build up their confidence and prepare them to become more empowered individuals.

#### *Forum discussion*

Working in groups, the students each choose a character from the short story. They exchange details of each character using evidence from the text. This is a very useful activity as the students would have a deeper understanding of each character and the environment or issues that influence or affect the characters.

#### *Poster/pamphlet presentation*

The students are required to work in groups to create a poster/pamphlet about some of the issues that are related to domestic violence, such as gender roles, avoidance and awareness of violence, and important information about agencies that can help victims of domestic violence. For this task, they may need to brainstorm find relevant information, and discuss how their posters/pamphlets should look like. They may also need to use the facilities in the computer lab to produce their posters/pamphlets. Later on, the teacher can display their posters on the class notice board, and each group would be invited to give marks on the other group's posters.

## **CONCLUSION**

The paper has discussed some essential concepts that could be used in class when teaching about domestic violence. There are three types of domestic violence mentioned in the paper, such as physical abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse. A description of how these concepts could be used while analyzing a literary text was also provided. The researcher also suggested some activities that could be conducted in class after their discussions/ findings from the text. As teachers, we must aim to educate and create awareness about domestic abuse among our students. The number of domestic violence cases is increasing every year and some victims are suffering in silence. Teachers should go all out to create awareness about this issue and advise students on what they should do if they witness or become victims of domestic violence.

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