

BEYOND THIS MOMENT IN AFRICA

Womanism as an Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism: the conditions of its possibility

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ABSTRACT

Since after the Second World War, perceptions about a good number of things began to change, this includes and not limited to the rise, wake and consciousness of the concept of feminism. Today, the crusade on feminism has permeated Africa, such that African Feminist scholars are now at the front burners of this argument using activism, knowledge and creativity to challenge situations that affect women negatively in a bid to protect the African women against African socio-cultural and religious events that marginalize women on the basis of gender and to liberate women from the limited notion of womanhood in reshaping the narrative of African womanhood. Employing the method of analysis in philosophy, this work provided a virtuous middle ground for a better discussion and placement of the female gender in the scheme of things in Africa. It arrived at the fact that the Western socio- cultural and religious background varies from that of the African woman and concluded that one cannot merge all African women under an unrealistic expectations of Western feminist theory, but instead to recognize and respect the differences that exist as a result of these diversities. In African culture, feminism has a better replacement with concepts like womanism and gender role division.

INTRODUCTION

The Second World War changed many principles of the world-cultures including Africa. Soon after the war, many new emerging principles began to play out at the world's fore-field. Among these were the feminist theories which have become a trending discussion among scholars, activists and creative media. This climate of change gave an impulse to women's activism all over the globe. A number of factors played here. The new states' nationalism went hand in hand with a fair amount of activism. Their renewed "élan" saw some major day dreaming about women's independence.

Today, African feminists' scholars¹ are at the front position of using activism, knowledge and creativity to challenge situations that affect women negatively. Their claimed responsibility includes, protecting the African woman against African socio-religious cultures that marginalise women on the bases of gender; to liberate women from the limited notions of womanhood in reshaping the narrative of African womanhood.

No matter how one sees it, the truth is that feminism has continued to be a tool of choice for many feminists and it has continued to be an emerging global discuss today. But the question for us Africans is this: was feminism part of African cultures or is it a uni-causal effect of globalisation and westernization of African cultures? Can we as Africans talk of feminism or womanism in terms of gender species or gender role division? And is it possible that there is a way feminism is un-Africa?

In this chapter therefore, we will be examining the African socio-political and religious society and the way we understand and treat women in terms of their gender role responsibilities. It is our argument that in many of the African

¹ Africa feminists scholars such as Leymah Gbowee, Joyce Banda, Simphiwe Dana and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as well as feminist organisations such as the African Feminist Forum and the African Gender Institute

communities, we do not talk about feminism as a negation of womanhood or as an inferior member of the community, rather we display an attitude of gender role division in terms of assigning responsibilities to woman with regard to their nature as embodied in the community role division; this is what we call womanism principles.

Africa is not a monolith, there exist differences regionally, ethnically, politically, and in religion, which all work to impact how women conceptualize what their role should be in a given community. While African women from, for example, Egypt, Kenya, South Africa and Senegal will have some commonalities, there will be variations in the way they understand gender and gender struggles and responsibilities. Therefore, these varying cultures alter the way these African women experience the world. Thus, one cannot simply merge all African women under an unrealistic expectation of Western feminist theory, but instead to recognize and respect the differences that exist as a result of these diversities. There is a commonality to the struggles women face across the world since the common factor is male privilege. The real African woman is strong, smart, and resilient and is up to the options she has. She is not satisfied with the options created for her, but seeks to create new options and choices for the generation of other African women that will come after her. African woman is the mother of the earth!

FEMINISM TOWARDS A DEFINITION AND ITS IMPACT

Feminism is defined as the belief and theories in consideration to women's rights and women's position in culture and society. The term gained prominence during the women's rights movement in the late 18th century and has continued to campaign for complete political, social, and economic equality between women and men. Feminists are basically united by the idea that women's position in society is unequal to that of men, and that the society has been structured in a way that men are naturally favoured in the political, social, and economic flow to the detriment of women. Feminists have used different theories to explain their position on the perceived inequalities and have advocated different ways of redressing them, and there are marked geographic and historical variations in the nature of feminism. The implication of the above definitions is that talking about feminism as a general social phenomenon poses a number of problems. One of the implications of the above concept is that it leaves one with the option of seeing feminism as being anti-male, anti-culture and anti-religion in its theoretical framework. It becomes challenging for a person who shares none of these ideologies to take a feminist stance. It is either one accepts feminism with all its implications, many of which may be opposed to the cultural beliefs of the person or place, or reject feminism completely. So feminism as many Western actors project it does not give room for cultural appropriation. It is women, women, women all the way!

Feminist thinkers claimed to have succeeded in drawing public attention to inequality between women and men and to the structures within society that belittle and work against women. They praised the movement as to have led to a reconsideration of women's role in the workplace, resulting in policies that promote equal pay and equal opportunities. And it has identified and tackled the problem of sexual harassment at work. Feminists have also claimed to have succeeded in challenging perceptions of women's skills, with the result that some women are entering non-traditional areas of female employment such as the construction industry.

Feminism has influenced culture, resulting in greater coverage of women's interests and concerns, particularly by the mass media. Feminist thinking has had a powerful influence upon many academic disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, psychology, literary criticism, history, theology, and the sciences. Feminist scholars are undertaking research that draws attention to neglected female concerns, and they claim to be exposing the patriarchal traditional approaches that underline many cultures.

THE SUPPOSED AFRICAN FEMINISM

African feminists are claiming to be addressing African cultural issues that are confronting African women. African feminism places the experiences and realities of the African women at the centre of the discourse. It is championed by African women that protest the conditions and needs of African women. This feminism sets off in the early twentieth century with women like Adelaide Casely-Hayford, the Sierra Leonian women's rights activist referred to as the "*African Victorian Feminist*" who contributed widely to both pan-African and feminist goals, Charlotte Maxeke who in 1918 founded the *Bantu Women's League* in South Africa and Huda Sharaawi who in 1923 established the *Egyptian Feminist Union*. Other African feminist icons are women like the Mau-Mau rebel, Wambui Otieno, the freedom-fighters Lilian Ngoyi, Albertina Sisulu, Margaret Ekpo and Funmilayo Anikulapo-Kuti, and others who fought against colonialism as well as patriarchy. African feminism as a movement is motivated from the liberation

struggles beginning with those in Algeria, Mozambique, Guinea, Kenya, etc., where many women fought alongside their male counterparts for state autonomy and women's rights.

The very recent feminism in Africa began in 1975 during the United Nations meeting on women which resulted in feminist activism and scholarship spreading widely across the continent and diaspora. From this period, African feminist movement has continued to expand both in policy, legislation, scholarship and in cultural realm. It has to do with grassroots activism as well as intellectual activism, 'bread and butter' issues such as poverty reduction, violence prevention and reproductive rights as well as with lifestyle, popular culture, media, art and culture. It claims to be confronting the African cultural patriarchy.

They argue that feminism has been part of African culture only that African women do not feel the same urgency or need to be liberated from their traditional gender roles and that African rank lowest in the global gender equality index. Africa has the highest numbers of domestic violence and the highest number of female circumcision and other harmful traditions. They argue that there were opposing patriarchy, the *raison d'être* of feminism in African culture.

This is not true assessment of African culture. The concept of feminism is already an uncomfortable stance for many Africans. In our Africa, we do not talk of feminism; we talk of womanism, gender role division. It is true that many African rural communities are often held back by cultural practices, but it is not part of African culture to tolerate violence against women like wife beating as claimed by many feminists. Yes, many African women are also exposed to violence because of poverty and diseases which make African women in rural communities vulnerable and susceptible to forced labour and sexual abuse. It becomes necessary therefore that we negotiate between 'feminism', 'womanism', and motherism for a better African humanism as appropriate terms for the interpretation of African gender role division as an instrument for the empowerment of African women.

It is a known fact that over the decades, Africa continent has been confronted with a succession of crises: the failure of male multiparty politics or state nationalism after the independence, coups and military dictatorships, economic instability, the pushing of western-steered development programs and pressure to install democracy, rethinking geographical borders as they were put up during colonial reign, pressure from the technologically advanced West and the development of new states in a global world (economy). Women especially have been paying the price for this. The consequences are clearly visible in the living conditions of African women today.

Generally, they have a lower level of education and are primarily active in agricultural or other rural activities. A large number of women suffer from malnutrition; mortality rate of infants and children is very high. Because of these pitiful living conditions for women, the West has lately exerted more pressure to increase women's participation in more areas - this is often done by stating it as a condition for investments or development aid. The effect is two-faced. On the one hand it creates an opportunity for women to be on the decision making side when new states and institutions are being organised and structured. On the other hand, this western pressure is greatly resisted by those in power. The participation of women is experienced as being 'imposed by the West' and not stemming from own culture or experience. African activists are constantly performing a wire act between devoting themselves to women's rights and supporting the right of African states to make autonomous decisions. They are faced with the difficult task of finding an activism that turns the existing gender hierarchy into something that is at the same time liberating for women, and offers a valid political alternative.

THE DIFFERENT DYNAMICS

Feminism grew from a different dynamics of culture, Western culture. It does not put African cultural views about women's role into consideration. It imposes itself on Africa and as a result has met resistance in many African communities. African women have a different starting point. African women's roles grew from a long tradition of female integration in collective structures. This is completely different from the West, where feminism grew from middle class individualism and struggle to overcome the patriarchal structure. These differences have in past and present caused much friction between Western and African actors. African and western women's movements often have a wide gap to bridge. For instance, on the subject of genital mutilation. Until very recently the African women's movement was quite averse towards the Western feminist attack on genital mutilation. Now there is a growing conviction that genital mutilation is indeed in breach of human rights and needs to be curbed. Western and African actors on the political level usually disagree about the implementation of a policy to improve the situation of women.

Western and African NGO's tend to find it difficult to cooperate with one another for the same reasons. Generally speaking Western activists take women's autonomy as their starting point, whereas in our African, we start out from culturally linked forms of participation.

WOMANISM IN AFRICAN CULTURE

As we stated, it is difficult to talk about feminism in African society. Feminism connotes women struggle for a space within the society. But in African community, there is already a space for women to be women. Women's place in African community for instance is non-contestable. They are the mothers! The homecare takers; the hope for the continuity of the family generation.

Womanism as a scholarly discuss was coined by Alice Walker. It is a reaction to the realization that "feminism" does not encompass the perspectives of Black women. It is a feminism that is "stronger in colour", nearly identical to "Black Feminism". However, womanism does not need to be prefaced by the word "Black", the word automatically concerns black women. A womanist is a woman who loves women and appreciates women's culture and power as something that is incorporated into the world as a whole. Womanism addresses the racist and classist aspects of white feminism and actively opposes separatist ideologies. It includes the word "man", recognizing that Black men are an integral part of Black women's lives as their children, lovers, and family members. Womanism accounts for the ways in which African women support and empower African men, and serves as a tool for understanding the African woman's relationship to men as different from the white woman's.

Womanism is unique because it does not necessarily imply any political position or value system other than the honouring of women's strength and experiences; it marks the place where race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect. Because it recognizes that women are survivors in a world that is oppressive on multiple platforms, it seeks to celebrate the ways in which women negotiate these oppressions in their individual lives.

Womanism is important because it places the feminist vision within African women's experiences with culture, colonialism and many other forms of domination and subjugation that impact African women's lives. Womanism in African aims at identifying the problems relating to male dominance in society while seeking solutions to women's marginalization by looking inward and outward.

A variant of Womanism put forth by Clenora Hudson-Weems is Africana Womanism, terminology which she coined in the mid-1980s. Her use of the term "Africana" indicates that women-focused activism should be inclusive of women on the African continent and women in the African Diaspora. She argues a complete break from white feminism, a movement which was created by and for white women without any incorporation of the African experience. She also argues that Africana men and women have more in common than Africana women do with white women, further reason to develop a new kind of activism.

Womanism is a culture of female duty negotiation and structured by cultural imperatives and modulated by ever shifting local and global exigencies. Most African cultures have a culture of negotiation and compromise when it comes to reaching agreements. In African womanism, negotiation plays an important role. For Africans, in order to win challenges, one must negotiate and sometimes compromise enough in order to gain freedom. This means that it knows how to utilize the culture of negotiation in order to meet women's need yet maintaining the positive patriarchy of the African culture.

Womanism differs from feminism because womanists support feminist efforts, but add the African perspective that is missing in the Feminist theories. It focuses on aspects of African families as well, not just African women. Because womanism combats racism, African men and children are included as well. It recognizes African women for their capabilities and contributions to society.

African womanism is not an exclusivist movement but a desire to create an avenue that embraced their backgrounds and experiences in the socio-cultural milieu. Womanism voices the realities of women in varying African countries. It suggests that women empowerment is best addressed by having an inclusive and accommodating understanding of the generic and more general issues as well as the peculiarities and group attitude to self-definition as women. It strives to create a new, liberal, productive and self-reliant African woman within the heterogeneous cultures of Africa.

WOMAN IN IGBO CULTURAL ORIENTATION FOR INSTANCE

It is our believe that we can do better at explicating the topic by narrating the experience of a particular African community, let say Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria in West Africa. This is because treating African as a single community will lead us to what in logic is called 'fallacy of illicit generalization.'² The Igbo socio-cultural and religious setting urges the inclusion of women in discussions, advocacy and bringing forth the experiences of the Igbo woman as a bona-fide member of the community. The Igbo society creates necessary tools needed to incorporate women in the community and in performing the necessary task of nurturing society. It incorporates "gender inclusion, collaboration and accommodation to ensure that both women and men contribute even if not equally to improving the material conditions of the community.

The variety in role is never displayed in the Igbo community as a sign of supremacy rather each gender role is seen as in keeping to nature of each creature; women to their own role and men to their own responsibilities. Womanism as we understand it, shows woman's active engagement with gender responsibility of each person in a given community. For instance, it was never part of the Igbo culture to under pay women for work done simply because she is a woman. Again, women are asked not to climb palm tree not because they cannot, but in many of the Igbo community, it is simply not the responsibility of women to do so. Its role division and not inequalities or feminism as the west puts it.

Traditionally, Igbo women are associated more with homecare spheres, while the men are more seen in connection with public life, the ensuing social roles. The Igbo community shows the acceptance of certain social roles for women. For this, the acceptance of a certain social role does not exclude a rejection of women's place in the community. Igbo do not start out from the nature-culture divide. The two are linked and hold no conflict. This link structures the roles of men and women both domestically and in politics and economy. This point of view brought to life feminism completely different from the western version.

In Igbo models of society, the emphasis is usually more on the community than on the individual. From this perspective, the biological role of women is not perceived as being in conflict with taking up political or economic responsibilities. Igbo women fulfil a greater multitude of roles. Apart from the care for their children, women are also responsible for the care of the community. Care in the broadest meaning of the word. Igbo women have complementary responsibilities with the men in Igbo community. Women's roles are determined by membership of a collective group (family or tribe). As a member of certain families, men and women get certain responsibilities and privileges. Economic and political relations are therefore collective and not individual.

THE SUNSET OF OUR ARGUMENT

We have tried to examine the concept of feminism in African society narrowing it down with the example of the Igbo people of West Africa. We must conclude by noting that one of the basic disruptive effects on women's roles and position in Africa is the colonisation process, which started in the 19th century, either by instituting western and Christian models, or by radicalising traditional African structures through resistance. The three influential colonial spheres church/mission, governance and trade each had their own disruptive influence on traditional power and gender roles. Four factors were detrimental in the institution of a new gender inequality. Firstly *Catholicism* with the introduction of monogamy, "woman's place is in the home' attitude and the suppression of women; secondly *western education* giving more opportunities to men; thirdly *western marital law* according rights of ownership to women which the traditional rituals could not guarantee, such that traditional matters of ascendancy were threatened; and lastly the *new legal systems* which force the independence of women.

These bring about the harmony and well-being of the community and makes the community a prevalent aspect of the peoples' lives. In Igbo community, women are important political actors based on their membership of a particular group, let say the *Umuada* or *Umuokpu* group. Many Igbo communities have a long and unique tradition of female leaders: queens, chiefs, and religious leaders. It is a fact that men dominated most spheres of Igbo society, but the

² Fallacy in logic is an error or a mistake in reasoning made in the process of moving from the premises of an argument to the conclusion. As a result of the fallacy, the premises do not justify the conclusion. Illicit generalization therefore is using one premise to judge an entire process.

double gender and community organisation created a façade of equality by letting women participate politically mainly as a group.

For the African understanding of it, the biggest difference is the importance that Western feminists attach to the reproductive role of women and the tendency to put the individual before the community. Sure, reproductive tasks are very important to African women and they are never inferior to any other role but to place the individual against the community as feminism does is un-African. To African women, motherhood is an inherent aspect of being a woman, it is the joy of motherhood. Being a woman implies being a mother. This does not stop them, however, from striving to play active roles economically.

Endnotes

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