

ANDROCENTRIC WEB AND GYNIST PHILOSOPHY

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Introduction

The philosopher, Protagoras, made an existential assertion when he declared that “man is the measure of all things”. No doubt, he used the term ‘man’ in the generic sense. However, experience, the best teacher, has proved that “the measure of all things” is not the generic man but rather the gendered man (male), to the exclusion of woman. Indeed, man is not just the parameter for every kind of appraisal, especially job proficiency and physical prowess, but also a reference point for word invention.

This work is out to do three things (i) formulate gynist theory and render literary analysis and hermeneutics of some concepts in order to prove that words are often constructed from a male perspective, (ii) expose the views of an African man, who strongly believes that the woman question has nothing to do with African women, and (iii) explain the quiddity of gynism.

Gynist Theory Man is paradoxically a generous but despotic donor. In fact, he is Donatus, and all other creatures are but beneficiaries of his “liberality”. Donatus so donated his ideas and manhood that the donations have become an entrapping intricate web for the recipients. For his Trojan gifts were well spread out from the conceptual to the more concrete physical realms. For instance, his bestowal on ‘the second sex’ is such that woman can only be defined in terms of man given that she is named after him: Wo/man, Fe/male. The man in woman and the male in female are part of his conceptual donations. The natural consequence of these notional conferrals is that woman is knowable only in function of him. He covered his tracks so well that his ideational network can hardly be faulted. Sequel to his performance in the physical realm, he aptly named himself fat/her, for he fattens her up with pregnancy by means of his spermatic donations. Of course, “there is no free lunch”, and “to whom much is given, much is also expected”. That is the rationale for calling the woman m/other. She is to be “other”-oriented: think more of the welfare of the “other” and act it out. That is, show more concern for, and give more preference to, the “other” to her detriment. Donatus assigned to her this self-effacing role - to spend herself and be spent in the service of the “other”, in return for all his conceptual and physical “gifts”.

However, woman did not capitulate without putting up a fight. Even after she was conquered, she was not easy to bend. In fact, in Igbo woman is called *nwanyi* (O nyiri nwoke): that which man could not really overcome, while husband is called *di* : that which has to be borne with patience. Woman

rebelled uncountable times, but whenever she did so she was punished with domestic violence. As Donatus is physically the stronger of the two, he used constant coercion to domesticate mother over a long period of time till she grudgingly came to accept subservience as her lot.

Over the years, her progeny individually protested against this sub-human condition, but Donatus consistently quelled such protests through intimidation. "After all", he said, "I fathered you; I can do and undo". Agog with collective fury, they began to forcefully question the status quo and to reject victimization and domesticity. This was the birth of gynism. They vowed to study and document the aetiology of the dehumanizing treatment given to Mother by Father, and to fight for emancipation and equal opportunity for both man and woman as well as fight against foreign racial repressive and exploitative hegemony.

Conceptual Network

Epistemological reflections show that words and concepts are male-insulated from within and male-coated from without. This is an entangling mesh. The more women try to get out of this androcentric draconian dragnet the more they meet with surprises. The literary analysis and hermeneutics of father and mother, *nwanyi* and *di done* above reveal that words are gendered from male perspectives. Even the term female originated from "earlier femelle" meaning "influenced by male". In lexical meaning or grammatical function, feminine ending is an unstressed syllable at the end of a line or verse, and a feminine rhyme is a rhyme between words in which one, two, or more unstressed syllables follow a stressed one. A female flower is one "lacking, or having non-functional, stamens". These imply passivity as opposed to masculine activity. To be a female means, "having an internal cavity into which a projecting male counterpart can be fitted"¹. This is all that is to it. Men not only name, but they also man the affairs of women to suit themselves.

Polemics

The issue at stake is not just language. We pick on language only because it reflects societal *modus operandi*, and gives an insight into the mind of men, because thinking and acting are but two facets of the same reality. Action is only the actualization of the ideas conceived in the mind. It is, therefore, unfortunate that Mbachu should conclude that because some African languages do not have pronouns to designate he or she, gender problem is a peculiarly Western/American problem. Hence the gender controversy does not and should not arise in African vocabulary, and "the worst of it is to make such an

ideological parody a universal problem. This is because there would be no moral justification to such an arrogant claim, since many nations do not have the same cultural background with the protagonists”².

Fortunately, Mbachu comes from Igboland where it is a great insult to call a man a woman, whereas it is an honour to call a woman a man. Which means that the absence of the pronouns he/she notwithstanding, man and woman are definitely not at par in Africa. Gender inequality is the same everywhere. So, the problem arising from the subjugation of women is necessarily a universal one. Besides, if Africans speak and transact business with the language of the colonial masters, then they must have imbibed Western androcentric philosophies, gendered ontologies and concepts. Therefore, feminist emancipatory politics should apply in Africa. However, sexism is historically prior to colonialism, for gender politics was here in African nations long before colonial invasion, given that women were in the polity but not of it. The Igbos, for instance, operated gerontocracy and consensus democracy was practised, but women were not part of the elders’ forum. Which means that they were excluded from the decision-making body. This sexist segregation amounts to marginalisation and infringement of their human rights and fundamental freedoms. Only two days ago, Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) interviewed men on wife-battery, and of all the men interrogated, only one had not beaten his wife before. For the rest, domestic violence is a normal process of bringing the woman back to her senses. African men’s attitude towards women is discriminatory and exploitative. “White male observers of African culture in the 18th and 19th centuries were astounded and impressed by the African male’s subjugation of the African female. They were not accustomed to a patriarchal social order that demanded not only that women accept an inferior status, but that they participate actively in the community labour force”³. Consequently, the suppression and exploitation of women is more African than Western. So, what is Mbachu talking about? Is he also ignorant of the assault of pornography on the dignity of women worldwide and the exploitation of women in advertising?

Mbachu traced the origin of the word ‘man’ in various languages as he tried to prove the obvious. Everybody knows that the term ‘man’ can be used in the generic sense, in addition to the gender sense, but whenever man is used as opposed to woman it is understood as the latter. There is no point reducing the problem of the marginalisation of women to purely linguistic antinomy or to abstract polemics and mere semantics. The problem is real. It cannot be wished away.

Mbachu made a mockery of the modern usage of chairperson in place of chairman. As he puts it, The term chairperson is coined to replace “chairman” because of its “conceived exclusiveness”. The term chairman is coined “from the word man”. To “man an occasion”, means to take care of, to

oversee, and or to control. Now if we removed “chair” the meaning remains the same. If we say: “Who is to man the gate?” We will be saying the same thing. But if we say “chairperson” and remove the prefix, only “person” remains. Now can we say, “Who will person” the gate or the position? It will be absurd to say such. Therefore, “chairperson” is derogatory to our intelligible thoughts⁴. Poor chair! If you had been masculine, Mbachu would have fought for you, but like woman, you are an underdog. People, therefore, sit on you. That is probably why it did not occur to him that to chair an occasion is to preside over it, and to take the chair is to preside as chairman. Mbachu’s rhapsodic conclusion gives him away as a male chauvinist. He writes: The whole argument advanced by these feminists on this topic could be properly called a linguistic fallacy. This is so because their arguments failed to take into consideration the comprehension and extension of the idea of man. Although their reasons sound plausible, still they reveal a much more porous, much less substantial in fact than it looks in principle. Besides, there is a painful irony in the new image of man they present to us. A man whose historical identity and or affinity is denied. In this they created a degrading image in the development of mankind⁵ [emphasis mine] He finds “painful” the “new image of man”, “a man whose historical identity ... is denied”, “a degrading image”. This is welcome news, because this mental agony is what women have been going through, and estrangement is the very thing they are fighting against. As it were, when it concerns women it is okay, natural, traditional and God-made, but when it touches men it is “painful”. Which means that two different parameters are being used for the two genders. Why is that which is considered good for the goose, not also good for the gander? It follows that African women are discriminated against. Mbachu nailed himself with those very expressions. However, it is good that men are beginning to feel the pinch of, loss of identity, negative image, and what it takes to be a persona non grata. This is a steppingstone towards curing them of male solipsism, the thinking, talking and acting as if men represent the entire universe.

Continuing his conclusion, Mbachu wrote that a congregation of sisters substituted the term man in the psalms with daughter because they are not men, thereby altering christological implications as the image of man in the Old Testament prefigures Christ. Citing Ps 8:4 “What are human beings that you spare a thought for them, a child of Adam that you care for him?” Mbachu comments: “in this text, “man” is replaced by “human being” and “son” by child.

Ironically the pronoun “him” is retained. But who is this “child” who is not a man but at the same time “he”? We appreciate the translator’s predicament. It serves as a good example of what we mean by intricate androcentric web. Those who are in this netting realise that they are unduly entangled, but there seems to be no sure and easy escape route. However, a

child can be a “he” (male) without necessarily being a man. Besides, the translation can equally read “... a child of Adam that you care for him/her?” Or “... children of Adam that you care for them”. Mbachu had been stressing that man is a synecdoche – a figure of speech in which a part of one thing is used to represent the whole or the whole is used for the part – and he is quite correct. Why then is he not happy that “child”, and “humanity“(the whole) are used to represent the parts? If “son” is a valid synecdoche, why can “daughter” not be a synecdoche too? In his fragmentary theology, he forgot that Christ means “the anointed one of God”, and the Church has been anointing women in the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and extreme unction as well as consecrating Reverend Sisters. The essence of the Eucharist is for the recipient to achieve oneness with Christ and women are not denied participation in it. A curious question arises. What image does Christ wear in the women who achieve union with him? Does the Christ that people see in Sisters wear a male look? It is even written that Jesus Christ became a subject of the law in order to save the subjects of the law. St. Paul “became all things to all men” in order to save them. If it is necessary to identify with the people one wants to save, and if women are in God’s salvation plan of action, can anyone really prove that Christ would abhor to assume the image of daughters in order to save them? Did he not condescend to assume the form of bread and wine - transubstantiation? We should appreciate the fact that the sisters in question were praying reflectively, not mechanically. They realised that they are daughters not sons, and their prayers would be more personal, meaningful and more authentic when they go to God the way they are, and not the way they are not. It is all to His glory, because He created them that way. “God has no favourites” , and He has nothing against women.

This polemic may seem diversionary, but it is a very significant part of the discuss, because it represents the mind of the generality of African men, especially the philosopher and erstwhile President of Senegal, L. S. Senghor, and the powerful literary writer, Chinwizu. African men find it difficult to admit that the African woman is oppressed, because they probably wish to avoid being tagged “oppressors”.

Gynist Philosophy

“Male ethnocentric stance – the belief in the intrinsic superiority of man often accompanied by feelings of contempt for women – led the human society to the ethic of divide and rule, the ethic of might is right, and of winner-take all, the ethic of domination and subjugation.” “Women all over the world seem to be saying that the exploitation of women has reached its climax and something drastic should be done to stop it. This is the reason for the century’s

outburst of women's liberation theories and movements... These are directed towards the removal of attitudes and practices that preserve inequalities based upon the assumption that men are superior to women."

So many theories and differing positions have emerged in the course of the struggle. In a nutshell, here is the gist of some of them. Radical feminism prefers to boycott men completely in preference to lesbianism given that having an affair with a man degrades the woman. The bed becomes a metaphor symbolizing an altar where women are sacrificed. So, a radical feminist would reject marriage to maintain her freedom and dignity. Liberal feminism is not antagonistic towards men and marriage, but it is against bad principles.

Liberal feminists fight for an egalitarian society, wherein there will be equal rights for both man and woman. For gynism, the woman question is a complex problem, and it is beyond feminism. Gynists seek liberation not only from male domination, but also from foreign rule and neo-colonialism. To them, the so-called post-colonial era is an illusion; it does not exist, because colonialism is an on-going process. The evils of neo-colonialism are as biting as the ills of the colonial period. Flag independence without economic independence is a farce. Given an option, they would prefer to put on hold sexism to tackle Western hegemony and racism first, for so long as Africa remains in bondage, African women's liberation will never be total.

We entitled this work "gynist philosophy" instead of "feminist philosophy" precisely because, African women, do not like to be associated with the radicalism and man-hating that characterise Western feminism. Besides, Western women are white supremacists. They do not suffer from the racism that drains off the African marrow. On the contrary, as bell hooks rightly pointed out, they join their men to perpetrate race hatred, class bias, and to exploit and oppress the black race, just as African women unite with their own men in the fight against Western imperialism, capitalism and racism. We, African women, regard sexism and capitalist racism as two sides of the same coin. Head or tail, we lose, whereas our Western counterpart loses in sexism, but wins in racism and shares in the gains of capitalism. Thus, parity is lacking between African and Western women.

The white woman's double stance as both friend and foe, comrade and oppressor also makes her feminism unacceptable to the African woman. African women, therefore, prefer to be identified as womanists or femalists, for want of a better term, for even in womanism, "man" is still there, and in femalism, "male" is there too. For this very reason, I coined the term "gynism".

Who, then, is a gynist? A gynist is an African womanist on the continent. A gynist is a womanist but a womanist is not necessarily a gynist. A womanist, according to Alice Walter, is a black feminist, a feminist of colour committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and

female, but who loves herself nonetheless. In other words, womanism cuts across continents to embrace not just black Africans on the continent, but also black women in the African Diaspora as well as other non-whites.

Experience is not synonymous with colour, and the black women in the African Diaspora have peculiarly bitter experience of betrayal, estrangement, the whip and chains, soup kitchen, etc. Black women in the Diaspora may face crude racism on a daily basis, whereas it is an occasional encounter for their sisters on the continent. Except for structural racism built into educational, religious, political and economic structures, an African woman, who does not travel to the West or to South Africa, may not experience racism in its raw form. The life experience of the black women in the African Diaspora makes them a category on their own. They have their own history to write, their own story to tell. Some of them even resent people from the continent on account of the assistance, which some unscrupulous Africans gave the white colonizers during the Trans Atlantic slave trade. Some Africans who travel to America find rapprochement with white men and women easier than with some black Americans. The latter has every right to be resentful, for once betrayed thrice cautious.

Perhaps, the continent owes them an apology for that historical atrocity. They might be thinking: "Why should our brethren who, helped to alienate us now follow us to this place to scramble for the crumbs that fall from the master's table?"⁶ We, therefore, think it inappropriate to lump together all black women, hence, the term "gynism" for African women residing in the continent.

Gynandrism sympathises with women, because from all indications, the earth is a man's world, and women are not receiving fair treatment in it. Even though gynandrists are men, they throw their weight behind women, and they try to help in the struggle at least through literary criticisms.

Other women's liberation movements like Better Life, Family Support, Poverty Alleviation, Programmes frown at the way Nigerian men treat their women, but being Government aided programmes, initiated by wives of Nigerian Heads of State, they would not want to rock the boat. They take to female bonding, economic empowerment, enlightenment campaigns, and political galvanization of women, while the most resent womanist movement, WRAPA, sees to legal aspects. However, all women's movements: feminism, womanism, gynism, femalism, gynandrism, Women on the Move, Better Life For Rural Women Programme, Family Support Programme (FSP), Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP), Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP), WRAPA, etc., are but speaking with a polyphony of voices. They are transmitting the same message using different channels, frequencies, and expressions. They have one central theme.

The question is "Woman, who are you?" Self-clarification is the central issue in all these "isms". Self-clarification is necessary because

“unexamined life is not worth living”, says the wise Socrates. An appropriate self-identity and a positive self-image are necessary for a meaningful life. Therefore, it is only reasonable that woman should be solicitous about her ultimate intelligibility or ultimate meaning. Meaning is existential; the woman cannot continue to live as if she has no intrinsic worth, i.e. that she lacks value in herself. In other words, she has utilitarian value, and her purpose in life is just to service the “other”. Culture or long-standing tradition makes it difficult for her to define herself independently of ascribed roles and notions. She needs to emancipate not only herself but also the male folk, because man’s inability to let go is a sign of psychological immaturity, insecurity, pride and prejudice.

In her work, *The Grounding of Modern feminism*, Nancy F. Cott, articulated the problem this way: “My definition of feminism has three components. First is the belief in what is referred to as sex equality but which might be more clearly expressed in the negative, as opposition to sex hierarchy. Second, feminism presupposes that women’s condition is socially constructed, that is, historically shaped by human social usage rather than simply predestined by God or nature. Third, the conviction that women’s socially constructed position situates us on shared ground enables the consciousness and the community of action among women to impel change.” This is the crux of the matter. Gender hierarchy does not give the girl child enough breath for social and upward mobility. Power has been concentrated in masculine hands for too long and it is now seen as natural and God-given right to dominate and conquer the rest of creation including woman. Men are so used to it that anything that suggests otherwise is not viewed kindly. But the leitmotif of gynism is to review the subordinate position of women in the scheme of things and to fight side by side with African men for the liberation of the continent from the shackles of Western hegemony. Above all, gynists have the task to prove that social conditioning, ascribed roles and mannerisms largely account for what is generally known as the nature of women.

Conclusion

It is not easy to re-educate the long indoctrinated human society, but we have to reflect the times. It is a fact of life that many people resist change owing to the fear of the unknown. But then, injustice is not good for anybody, and “justice delayed is justice denied”. Many may even fail to perceive the injustice in question, because it is built into the structure of our social institutions and long usage has tended to make them customary. Structural injustice is difficult to eradicate, because it means dismantling some of the coveted institutions. But then, whenever a house is rebuilt it becomes more aesthetic

and more modern. Therefore, we should not be afraid to modernize human institutions.

Notes

- ¹ P. Hanks (ed.), Collins English Dictionary, Collins, London & Glasgow, 1979, p. 534
- ² Anaclet Uche Mbachu, "Feminism: The Gender Controversy" in *Skepticos*, Vol. 1 No 5, Ibadan, 1995, p. 40
- ³ B.C. Okolo, "The Igbo Church and Liberation Motif" In *The Igbo Church and Quest for God*. Ed. Chukwudum B. Okolo. Obosi: Pacific College Press Ltd., 1985, pp. 89-115
- ⁴ Anaclet Uche Mbachu, op. cit., p.40
- ⁵ Ibid, p. 41
- ⁶ However, anger, bitterness and resentment do not solve problems