

Theorizing African Feminism(s)

the 'Colonial' Question

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Abstract. Theorizing African Feminism(s): the 'Colonial' Question. This paper has arisen from a recognition that while the development of African Literature over the past four decades presents itself as an overt exercise in decolonization, adopting as it does an anti-colonial, anti-'father' stance, the development of African feminism becomes propelled towards being anti-Western feminism. This is manifested in an approach that while it seeks difference from the West, is anti-'difference'; while anti-gender-separatism and pro-male, yet seeks female agency and autonomy. It is this fluid character of African feminism that this paper seeks to explore. The paper sets out to demonstrate the impact that 'Africanity' and the decolonisation project has had in shaping debates on African feminism firstly, by highlighting the intricate relationship enjoyed by postcolonialism and feminism in African literature. I then link this relationship to the paradoxical, often ambivalent stance that theories of African feminism have adopted over time, resulting in an apparent stasis in theorizing African Feminism. Such stasis, as I shall argue, emanates from the 'double bind' lent to the meaning of 'Africa' as tied to the colonial experience.

Key words: Africa, feminism, gender, philosophy, post-colonial

*Colonialism returns at the moment of its disappearance.*¹

Introduction

This paper has arisen from a recognition that while the development of African Literature over the past four decades presents itself as an overt

¹ Anne McClintock, 'The Angel of Progress', in: Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds. *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) p. 293.

exercise in decolonization, adopting as it does an anti-colonial, anti-'father' stance, the development of African feminism becomes propelled towards being anti-Western feminism. This is manifested in an approach that while it seeks difference from the West, is anti-'difference'; while anti-gender-separatism and pro-male, yet seeks female agency and autonomy. It is this fluid character of African feminism that this paper seeks to explore.

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Postcolonializing

Debates on theorizing 'the postcolonial' have been and continue to be vigorous. Deriving from these are different espousals of what post-colonialism is and/or seeks to do. Such theorizing has lent itself to different formulations such as 'post-colonialism', 'the post-colonial condition', 'the post-colonial scene', 'the post-colonial intellectual', 'the emerging disciplinary space of postcolonialism', 'postcolonializing' (McClintock, 1993: 293; Quayson, 2000: 156). These formulations attest to the varied directions subsumed under 'postcolonial studies' and the associated problematic of defining and mapping out succinct 'postcolonial borders'. Each formulation also denotes 'multiplicity' which, as I argue after McClintock, inscribes history as the single issue in postcolonial enquiry.²

² *Ibid.*

Emphasizing the centrality of history for postcolonial literature, the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* state that postcolonial literature expresses ‘the rationale of the grouping in a common past’. Further, the authors note that ‘feminist and post-colonial discourses both seek to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant.’³ Such assertions underline the colonial past and its derivatives in the present as a defining point for the espousal of postcolonial theories with the result that ‘colonialism’ remains, as denoted in the epigraph to this paper, an enduring force as a perpetual reference point even as ‘postcolonializing’ seeks to subvert it. In the different developments pertaining to the theorizing of African feminism(s), we are presented with a case in point.

African Feminism(s)

African women’s writing when it emerged in the 1970s mainly set out to dispel mal-representations of African womanhood that proliferated African literature at the time. Feminist practitioners, in writing and in activism, sought to demonstrate that they were relevant to the African context and in particular, that they did not simply seek to emulate their western feminist counterparts.

Feminism, both as an activist movement and as a body of ideas that underline the need for a positive transformation of society such that women are not marginalized but are treated as full citizens in all spheres of life, has received extensive theoretical treatment. It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a comprehensive survey of these debates, but I will focus on those that are most pertinent to my project. In the past three decades, seeking to define feminism has proven to be anything but simple. In a recent enquiry into the character of contemporary western feminism, Chris Beasley notes that:

The notion of ‘defining’ feminism is controversial. In addition to problems as-

³ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).

sociated with a complex, shifting and sometimes inaccessible field, defining feminism also involves considering whether it is in any sense distinguishable from 'other' forms of thought. [...] the issue of feminism's 'borders' is a matter of debate.⁴

The issue of borders that pertain to the definition of feminism goes beyond distinguishing feminism from 'other forms of thought'. The border problem is discernible *within* the general body of feminist thought. Whereas contemporary western feminism broadly divides into such categories as Liberal, Radical, Marxist and Socialist Feminism, there is a general tendency amongst theorists to speak of feminism and western feminism in particular, as though it were monolithic. The past three decades have also been characterized by a marked presence of those 'feminisms' that are widely regarded as addressing the needs of those who have for a long time been marginalized and unrepresented by mainstream feminism. Such 'feminisms' have tended to be theorized against what is loosely termed western feminism.

*Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*⁵ is the seminal work of editors Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres which engages with the issue of defining 'other', 'emerging' feminisms against the canonized feminism of the 'first' world. The body of essays delineates the problematic not only of defining terms, but also of defining the constituency and context that are posed by cross-cultural studies. In her essay, Mohanty questions the application of western feminist theories onto the writings of 'the Third world' woman. She argues that such theories, which are *authored* in the West and therefore bear the authority of the West, perpetuate the self/other divide whereby discourses of developing nations are considered 'politically immature' and 'underdeveloped'.⁶ Mohanty observes that western feminist theory presents

⁴ Chris Beasley, *What Is Feminism?* (London: SAGE, 1999) p. xi.

⁵ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres, eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991).

⁶ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes' in Mohanty, Russo and Torres, *op. cit.*, pp. 53 and 57.

itself as a universal phenomenon in ways which disguise its profoundly western concerns and biases.

The issue of the problematic of ‘universalizing’ feminist experience is also the focus of a recent essay by Oyeronke Oyewumi.⁷ Echoing earlier concerns about the globalization of sisterhood,⁸ Oyewumi interrogates the adoption of the term ‘sisterhood’ as a model for feminist relations and posits that:

‘Sisterhood’, just like the term ‘feminism’ demands theorization because, although its origins are very much tied to a specific culture, its intended application is ultimately transglobal. What meaning does it carry as it crosses boundaries, if indeed it ever does cross boundaries? Should it carry the same meaning? Can it carry the same meaning, given that words are informed by specific cultural assumptions and histories? What exactly are the implications of the cross-cultural use of ‘sisterhood’, given that the meaning shifts depending on a host of factors. [...] It is also pertinent to question whether the desired relationship apparent in the use of ‘sisterhood’ by white women is matched by the desire of other women to relate to them and others in that way.⁹

In Oyewumi’s view, the notion of ‘sisterhood’ which she ascribes to ‘white culture’ is alien to ‘other’ cultures, notably Chicano, African and African-American cultures which, following Patricia Collins,¹⁰ she identifies as emphasizing mothering over sisterhood. Collins’s view of feminism is that it is predominantly a white westernized experience that too often sidelines issues of racial difference, hence the imperative in her work to develop a Black feminist perspective which would more accurately reflect the realities and culture of Black women. In my view, Collins and Oyewumi too easily assign distinct cultural difference to the racial categories ‘black’ and ‘white’. While both critics’ discourses are

⁷ Oyeronke Oyewumi, ‘Ties that (Un)Bind: Feminism, Sisterhood and Other Foreign Relations’ in *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*, 1, 1 2001.

⁸ These were particularly debated following the publication of Robin Morgan’s volume, See: Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood is Global*, New York: Doubleday, 1984.

⁹ Oyewumi, op. cit., p. 3.

¹⁰ Patricia Hill Collins discusses the tradition of ‘Other Mothers’ amongst African Americans in her work, *Black Feminist Thought. Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).

engaging and offer an insight into 'other' feminisms, they tend to simplify constructs that are otherwise rather complex. Oyewumi's view that 'sisterhood' is a marker of the white nuclear family and that 'mothering' is essentially an African concept, for instance, is questionable. In Southern Africa, the notion of sisterhood amongst women is of such importance that it is carried across the extended family. It is also understood as an important marker of friendship ties.

The issues discussed above relating to racial difference, power dimensions between the west and 'others', with Africa subsumed under the latter category, as well as the crucial issue of 'redefining' feminism to ensure its relevance to the African context were and still are crucial to theorizing African feminism. This is reflected in the different directions feminist debates in Africa have taken.

In her much cited work, Filomina Chioma Steady¹¹ defines African feminism as emphasizing female autonomy and co-operation; nature over culture; the centrality of children, multiple mothering and kinship.¹² African feminist literature, she posits, concerns itself with the liberty of all African people. Although indebted to the global feminist movement, African feminist discourse takes care to delineate those concerns that are peculiar to the African situation. It also questions features of traditional African cultures without denigrating them, understanding that these might be viewed differently by the different classes of woman. One sphere that has increasingly held the attention of theorists like Steady has been the question of the involvement of men. The rationale is that, if African feminism is to succeed as a humane reformation project, it cannot accept separatism from the opposite sex. Eschewing male exclusion then, becomes one defining feature of African feminism that differentiates it from feminism as it is conceptualized in the west.

Following on Steady's work, Boyce Davies and Graves posit that African feminism

¹¹ Filomina Chioma Steady, *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1981).

¹² Filomina Chioma Steady, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

‘recognizes a common struggle with African men for the removal of the yokes of foreign domination and European/American exploitation’.¹³

African feminism is not antagonistic to men but challenges them to be aware of those aspects of women’s subjugation which differ from the generalized oppression of all African people.

Although agreeing with the politics of feminism, most women writers in Africa have rejected the feminist label while others have vacillated between endorsing the label and refuting it. On being asked why she does not want to be called a feminist, acclaimed Nigerian London-based writer Buchi Emecheta has asserted:

I did not start as a feminist. I do not think I am one now. Most of my readers would take this to be the statement of a coward. But it is not. I thought before that I would like to be one but after my recent visit to the United States, when I talked to real ‘Feminists’ with a capital ‘F’, I think we women of African background still have a very very long way to go before we can really rub shoulders with such women... So my sisters in America, I am not shunning your advanced help, in fact I still think women of Africa need your contribution, and at the same time we need our men.¹⁴

And also:

I will not be called feminist here, because it is European. It is as simple as that. I just resent that... I don’t like being defined by them... It is just that it comes from outside and I don’t like people dictating to me. I do believe in the African type of feminism. They call it womanism, because, you see, you Europeans don’t worry about water, you don’t worry about schooling, you are so well off. Now, I buy land, and I say, ‘Okay, I can’t build on it, I have no money, so I give it to some women to start planting.’ That is my brand of feminism.¹⁵

Emecheta’s answers capture the difficulties both of ‘naming’ and contextual relevance that ‘feminists’ from/in Africa are faced with. She particularly emphasizes the importance of activism for the African woman

¹³ Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Graves, eds., *Ngambika. Studies of Women in African Literature* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1986), p. 8.

¹⁴ Buchi Emecheta, ‘A Nigerian Writer Living in London.’ In *Kunapipi* 4 (1), 1982. pp. 116-117.

¹⁵ Buchi Emecheta in a 1989 interview. Cited in Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, *Gender In African Women’s Writing. Identity, Sexuality and Difference* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997) p. 7.

whose problems are still largely concerned with access to the basic amenities of life. Organisations such as WIN (Women in Nigeria), WAND (Women's Association for National Development) (Sierra Leone), African National Congress Women's League (South Africa) among others, have been established by women in various African countries to address the problems of the African woman's social inequality in these varied contexts.

Outlining the need for African feminists to be self-defined, African feminist and critic Omolara Ogundipe Leslie makes the assertion that the African woman needs to be conscious not only of the fact that she is a woman but that she is both an African and a third world person.¹⁶ As an African, the woman needs to be conscious of the context in which her feminist stance is made. This means that she should, while pointing out the flaws of her culture, be careful not to be seen to be aspiring to westernisation at the expense of her own African customs. Ogundipe Leslie offers STIWANISM¹⁷ (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) as a viable alternative to western feminism, placing as it does emphasis on social equality with men in Africa. The model offered by Ogundipe Leslie is particularly attractive as an effort to redress current economic inequality between men and women in Africa. It also moves away from the problem posed by the term 'feminism'.

Whereas Emecheta is strongly against 'being named from outside', particularly by her 'Americans sisters', she nevertheless endorses the term 'womanism'. Womanism is a term coined by African American writer and feminist activist Alice Walker to denote: A black feminist or feminist of color... who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually.

Appreciates and prefers women's culture... sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire

¹⁶ See Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, 'The Female Writer and her Commitment' In Jones, E.D., Palmer, E. and Jones, M., *Women in African Literature Today* 15, London and New York: James Currey, 1987.

¹⁷ See Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-Creating Ourselves. African Women and Critical Transformations*, Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1994.

people, male and female... Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.¹⁸

Womanism has been adopted by other 'African feminists' like Ogunyemi¹⁹ in order

'to avoid the distractions attendant with [the term feminism].'²⁰

It is the preferable term, in Ogunyemi's opinion, because it addresses the otherwise separatist nature of feminism by recognizing men as partners rather than foes.

The inclusive nature of womanism appears to be most relevant for feminists in Africa such as Ama Ata Aidoo who has posited that:

When people ask me rather bluntly every now and then whether I am a feminist, I not only answer yes, but I go on to insist that every woman and every man should be a feminist – especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of African land, African wealth, African lives and the burden of African development.²¹

Aidoo's stance, however, differs from that of African-American critic and espouser of 'Africana womanism' Clenora Hudson-Weems.²² In Hudson-Weems's view, 'terminology is critical to definition' and so there is a need to identify and 'refine an African-centered paradigm for women of African descent' as society, she argues, has 'chosen to name and define Africana women within the constructs of a Eurocentric perspective – feminism – indeed, a reality outside of Africana women's historical and

¹⁸ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*, (San Diego: Harcourt, 1983) p. xii.

¹⁹ Ogunyemi discusses the implications of womanism in her essay, 'Womanism: The Dynamics of black Female Writing in English' (1985).

²⁰ C. O. Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996) p. 116.

²¹ Ama Ata Aidoo, 'The African Woman Today' in Obioma Nnaemeka, ed., *Sisterhood, Feminisms and Power. From Africa to the Diaspora*, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998) p. 47.

²² Clenora Hudson-Weems, Self-Naming and Self-Definition: An Agenda for Survival, in Obioma Nnaemeka, *Sisterhood, Feminisms and Power*, op. cit., pp. 449-450.

cultural context.’²³ ‘Africanans’ are identified as ‘Continental Africans and Africans in the diaspora’²⁴. The terms Black Feminism and African Feminism, fail to address Africanans’ plight because, in her view, they are aligned with ‘feminism’, which she identifies as rooted in western history. At the same time, womanism fails to make a clear distinction between a ‘womanist’ and a ‘feminist’. Africana womanism, Hudson-Weems suggests, corrects the anomalies of Black Feminism, African Womanism and African Feminism in that:

Africana womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture and, therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and the conflict between the mainstream feminist, the black feminist, the African feminist, and the Africana womanist. The conclusion is that Africana womanism and its agenda are unique and separate from both white feminism and Black feminism; moreover to the extent of naming in particular, Africana womanism differs from African feminism.²⁵ [Emphasis in the original].

For Aidoo, whose belief is that feminism has been practised by African women for a long time ‘as part of our heritage’, any attempt to assign feminism to the west is defeatist: ‘*It is not new and I really refuse to be told I am learning feminism from abroad*’²⁶ (emphasis in the original), she asserts. Whilst Anne McClintock, unlike Ifi Amadiume²⁷, believes that African women have always been subject to forms of inequality with men in so far as ascendancy to power is concerned, McClintock nevertheless concurs with Aidoo on the notion that feminism is not alien to the

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Clenora Hudson-Weems, ‘Africana Womanism’, in Obioma Nnaemeka, ed., *Sisterhood, Feminisms and Power. From Africa to the Diaspora*, op. cit., p. 149.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 154-155.

²⁶ Ama Ata Aidoo, quoted in Nfah-Abbenyi, op. cit., p. 10.

²⁷ See Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands. Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1987). Amadiume’s work is based on an anthropological study of the Nnobi of Nigeria. One of her main findings is that pre-colonial Nnobi society accorded men and women equal power opportunities and the gender construct was flexible, allowing for the possibility of having ‘male daughters’ and ‘female husbands’.

African context. The importance of acknowledging this point, in her view, is that ‘denouncing all feminisms as imperialist ... erases from memory the long histories of women’s resistance to local and imperialist patriarchies. ... Many women’s mutinies around the world predated Western feminism or occurred without any contact with Western feminists.’²⁸

Post Africa(n) Feminism?

The importance of the discussion of the varied view points with regard to the origin, character and naming of African feminism(s), I suggest, lies in the recognition of various and varied ‘femininities’ where women do not easily fall into neat categories such as ‘the oppressed’ as against ‘empowered men’; ‘marginalized third world women as against imperialist western women.’ The crucial point this raises for theorizing African feminism is the need to espouse a theoretical model that is able to contain the varied positions; a model that will be fluid without being so pluralistic as to defy definition. In my view, for as long as theories of African feminism remain ‘reactionary’ and definable ‘against’ Western feminism, they are not likely to go beyond ‘hinting the vision of a more liberated future’²⁹ because they are primarily tied to an elusive notion of a common history of colonialism for definition. Further, what many theorists of African feminism have failed to identify as paradoxically both definer and obstacle is the term ‘Africa(n)’ itself. An interrogation of this term as it has been used in feminist discourse and activism pertaining to the African woman is salient for developing feminist theory that is neither stagnant nor parochial but crucially, relevant, not to an Africa denoted by prepositional time (postcolonial), but to present-day Africa. While Africa still defines

²⁸ Anne McClintock, ‘Dismantling the Master’s House’ in *Imperial Leather*, op. cit., p. 384.

²⁹ This is one of the points made by the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* in the defense for the adoption of the term post-colonial literature. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, eds., op. cit., p. 24.

herself *against* the West in much the same way as the West has, since the colonial era, constructed Africa as an ‘other’, Africa is still enmeshed in a ‘colonial trap’ and has not yet reached self-definition and, by implication, total independence.

Conclusion

I have sought to demonstrate that theory pertaining to the espousal and development of an African Feminist model has tended to focus predominantly on the politics of naming associated with the term ‘feminism’. In the process, the term Africa(n) has received very little interrogation and has been readily adopted on the basis of geography and/or historicity. Such adoption, I argue, is intrinsically linked to and centralizes colonialism as the basis of ongoing polarities, Western/African; Aggressor/Victim, such that colonialism keeps ‘returning’ at the very point ‘of its departure.’

I suggest that the development of a relevant theoretical model that will complement and enhance activist efforts in Africa is much more challenging. It requires that we move beyond the (post) colonial, but also beyond (post) Africa as normatively inscribed in the debates surveyed here. It requires that we certainly move beyond the notion of African victimhood within the colonial process, to recognize Africa as ‘participant’ in the different phases/faces of ‘colonialism’ and not simply as recipient.