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## African Feminism / Western Feminism: Contradictory or Complementary?

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### Abstract

The term Feminism is very complex to define as Chandra Mohanty admits in her Introduction to *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. This essay looks at the heated debate often generated by discourse on African and Western feminisms and concludes that even though there are differences between them as a result of their cultural and socio-contexts, they can still borrow a lot from each other.

African feminism is not only about defining the negative experiences of women. It is about the unique and positive experiences of African women; for to be an African woman is, and can be a beautiful experience at home, at work and in the wider society. It is a bad feminism, an undesirable discourse that which insists solely on African women's victimization and their helplessness in the hands of their men. It is also a stigmatized and narcissist feminism that which cannot see beyond itself and project into a larger society.

Aduke Adebayo (1996)

To a majority of people, the mere mention of feminism brings to mind the idea of challenging male hegemony (Adebayo 1996). Feminism, however, connotes different things to various people, societies, writers and critics. Feminism's goal is to fight against all forms of the oppression of women and for equal distribution of socio-political and economic power between men and women in society. It is worthy of note that the arrival of African women into the African literary space in the late 1960s contributed immensely to the fight against the oppression of women and thus the growth of feminism in the continent. The emergence of African women on the African literary scene previously reserved for African men is evident in the inclusion of their names in a number of critical

anthologies. By seizing texts from men in order to tell their own stories, as Pius Adesanmi (2002) puts it, African women engage in a subversive translation of their experiences into what used to be the “language” of their oppressors. Indeed, African women feminists/writers are today among the most audible voices in the social, economic, political and literary scenes of the continent. These women use their writings mostly to redress the situation by portraying a positive image of the African woman and by challenging the domination of African life socially, politically and economically by African men. They hope through their writings to bring about changes in society and remove obstacles that had for so long silenced and dominated women.

Through their works, African women writers destroy the culture of silence imposed on African women, a culture that is responsible for their lack of participation in literary and public domains. One must not forget to state that the power of textual representation wielded exclusively by men in the early stage of African literature played a key role in the subordination of women. Thus, the arrival of women on the African literary scene is aimed at deconstructing the patriarchal order. In attacking patriarchal traditions and striving to create positive images for women, African women writers sought to bring women out of invisibility. They demystify African cultural as well as Christian and Islamic myths that emphasize the main roles of women as maternity and domesticity.

One can find the roots of feminist movements or modern feminisms in different parts of the world and at various historical moments. What all feminist movements have in common, however, is their focus on issues of justice, equality and respect for women. Toril Moi argues in her *Sexual Textual Politics* that feminism appeared as a vital political tool in the 1960s. Among the vehicles that women use to advance the course of feminist movements, such as rallies and demonstrations, the literary approach has played an important role.

Mainstream Western feminism has, on several occasions, tried to project a universal definition of feminism. This universality of feminism, however, received an angry charge from feminists from Third World especially from Africa. Pius Adesanmi, for instance, notes that:

The exclusion of non-Western and Western women of color, the pretentious universalism of initial Western

second-wave feminisms and the insufferable arrogance of some of the self-proclaimed spokespersons of western feminisms in their articulations of that dubious universalism, are some of the familiar arguments in support of the emergence of alternative feminisms in the parts of the Third World. (33)

In her introduction to *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Chandra Mohanty points out the complexity inherent in the definition of the term feminism. Differences in socio-cultural contexts should be taken into consideration if the struggle to end women's subordination is to be successful. As Pierrette Herzberger notes, experiences are not the same for all feminists:

Le féminisme africain est né dans un autre cadre historique. Il inclut les expériences de l'éducation traditionnelle, de la colonisation, du développement du patriarcat souvent au détriment d'un matriarcat effectif, perceptible dans presque toutes les civilisations africaines avec son pendant des coutumes aujourd'hui non appropriées telles que l'excision, et actuellement du poids de l'endettement et de la pauvreté de l'Afrique. (347)

African feminism is born into another historical context. It includes experiences of traditional education, colonization, the development of patriarchy often at the expense of an effective matriarchy, noticeable in almost all African civilization with its penchant for today's inappropriate customs such as circumcision and the weight of debt and African poverty. (My translation)

Many African feminists (Adebayo, Aidoo, Nnaemeka, Fofana, Ogunjipe-Leslie among others) think that the militant feminist posture of the West could be out of place in Africa where the resolution of male-female problems is approached through compromise. African feminists formulated their own discourses in order to differentiate themselves from Western feminists. Within the African context, the term feminism is itself often at issue. Obioma Nnaemeka in "Feminism, Rebellious Women and Cultural Boundaries..." branded herself a negofeminist, since she believes

that the term feminism, which was created, designed, and defined by white women, was exclusionary. Nnaemeka argues that black women are neither accepted nor invited into the movement defined by Western feminists. She stresses the need for African women to create a more feasible, workable terminology for themselves. She goes further by concluding that long before the advent of Western feminism, black women were actively participating in social, economic and political functions in their societies.

Prior to the arrival of Christianity and Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa — that is in pre-colonial Africa, women played significant roles and were worshipped and respected by men in those societies. Hence, the more historically minded African feminists relied mostly on Africa's past to formulate their feminist theories for their struggle. The Ghanaian feminist, Ama Ata Aidoo, corroborates this view, noting that:

In pre-colonial times, fighting women were part of most African armies, a well-known example being the all-female battalions of Dahomey (ancient Benin, early nineteenth century), who sought to protect their empire against invaders and internal treachery. [...] Yaa Ashantewaa, queen of the Asante (Ashanti, Ghana), led an insurrection against the British [...] True, all of these women were reigning monarchs who found it relatively easy to organize armies against foreign occupations. (40-41)

Similarly, there were many important goddesses among the Yoruba and Igbo of Nigeria and the Akans of Ghana. In Yoruba culture for instance, the goddesses of the river and thunder were consulted before important events. Indeed, African feminists frequently cite the presence of powerful female divinities in pre-colonial African societies as evidence of the vital roles women played in the past. Diedre Badejo remarks that:

In the Yoruba example, Osun is the goddess of wealth, femininity, power and fecundity. [...] According to the mythology, she is the only woman present at the creation of the world [...] A woman of alluring beauty and the most powerful historical leader of Osogbo [...] As an African

woman, Osun plays many roles that emanate from the central role as woman and mother. (96)

These assertions suggest that women held responsibilities as important as those of men in Africa for a long time before the arrival of the Europeans. Colonialism, Christianity, Islam and neocolonialism played important roles in the oppression of African women. Indeed, colonialism was instrumental in shifting the balance, focusing on educating African men in the interests of assimilation into Western and Arab cultures. This ultimately led to the strengthening of the position of African men at the expense of women. In fact, this politics of assimilation destroyed many pre-colonial African cultures that once empowered women. Zulu Sofola asserts that:

Assailed by western and Arab cultures, she has been stripped bare of all that made her central and relevant in the traditional African socio-political domain [...] Europeans and Arabs with their philosophy of women's inferiority arrived on the scene and succeeded in institutionalizing the superiority of men. Chaos set in and women were made irrelevant, a fact that is now full-blown in today's European / Arab systems of governance in contemporary Africa where our women have been rendered irrelevant, ineffective and completely de-womanized. (52-59)

The position of traditionalists who hold that African women played a significant role in pre-colonial Africa did not go unchallenged by Mineke Schipper. This Dutch Africanist, in "Mother Africa on a Pedestal," reveals that the condition of African woman in pre-colonial time was not as bright as the traditionalists put it. Maryse Conde in her *La parole des femmes*, however, argues that irrespective of the condition of African woman in the pre-colonial era, colonialism played a great role in inferiorizing her. Feminist activities in both Anglophone and Francophone Africa are very significant. Crucial theoretical works of feminists from both regions have contributed much to fashioning socially and culturally appropriate African feminism. One distinguishing aspect of these African feminisms is their insistence on the importance of

responding to specifically African conditions. Many African feminists, such as Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie and Buchi Emecheta, seek to identify themselves with African feminism by preaching the complementary role between men and women. Diedre Badejo states that:

African feminism recognizes the inherent multiple roles of women and men in reproduction, production and the distribution of wealth, power and responsibility for sustaining human life...Mutual female-male independence, complementary and self-reliant roles contextualize the content and dominate the discussion of our victories and challenges. (94)

Similarly, Carole Boyce-Davies notes that “a genuine African feminism recognizes a common struggle with the African men for the removal of the yokes of foreign domination and European /American exploitation and that it is not antagonistic to African men” (8-9), African feminism thus acknowledges its affinities with international feminism but delineates a specifically African feminism whose needs and goals arise out of the concrete realities of women’s lives in African societies. Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie adopts the acronym “STIWA” — “Social Transformation Including Women of Africa” — to define African feminism and her feminist agenda for African women. She posits that the transformation of African society is the responsibility of both men and women.

Another important area of difference between African feminism and Western feminism lies in attitudes toward maternity. Many African feminists condemn what they view as attacks on maternity launched by some Western feminists. Feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett and Jeffner Allen offered critiques of motherhood as women’s natural roles. The Cameroonian critic, Juliana Nfah-Ajbenyi, however, warns that:

The critique of motherhood (that views women as forced mothers) and heterosexuality (that views women as sexual slaves) [...] can be problematic to most African women simply because motherhood and family have historically represented different experiences and social practices to Western and African women. [...] Whereas many Western women may view multiple childbirths as both oppressive

and restrictive [...] most African women find empowerment in their children and families. (24)

Many African feminists seem to be intolerant of Western feminism. Calixthe Beyala, however, in her manifesto *Lettre d'une Africaine à ses soeurs occidentales*, advocates embracing Euro-American feminism. She is of the view that since the oppression of women is universal, it therefore needs a universal solution. Beyala's feminism, which she calls *féminitude*, rejects the complementary roles between men and women. She argues that Euro-American theories, struggles and victories helped African women to liberate themselves. Attracted by Western feminist ideologies, Beyala's feminism appears antagonistic to African feminism's belief in complementary roles for men and women. She notes: "Seules les tricheuses rêvassent sur les nouvelles formes de relations homme-femme et parlent de complémentarité dans les couples. Je suis venue en Occident attirée par vos théories, vos combats, vos victoires" (10). – "Cheaters, are the only ones, dreaming of the complementary roles between men and women. I came to the West because I was attracted by your theories, struggles and victories." (My translation).

Barbara Christian, Alice Walker and bell hooks, who operate under the banner of Womanism to express the oppression of women of non-white descent, offer additional insight on the issues of feminist cultural differences. As Ogini affirms: "African women and African-American women seek to show the peculiarity of Black women's problems which are not experienced by White women" (16). One can argue that the discrimination of black women by their white counterparts led to the creation of African-American feminism tagged Womanism, because it was difficult for both white women and black women to bond together on equal terms and fight the common enemy – sexism. bell hooks, in *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*, asserts that:

The condescension [white women] directed at black women was one of the means they employed to remind us that the women's movement was "theirs" – that we were able to participate because they allowed it; after all we were needed to legitimate the process. They did not treat us as equals. (11)



hooks and her African-American feminist colleagues criticize the aims and goals of feminism as conceived by white American women. Needs of black women are different from those of the white women. Womanism gave nourishment to African feminists who thought that they were sidelined by their Western counterparts. African feminists closely identify with this movement to draw a line between their own brand of feminism and Western feminism. Womanism, as adopted by African feminists, preaches the complementary roles between men and women. As Elizabeth Ogini asserts: "Womanism is a special culture that reminds men with special indication that without women's full involvement in the system man is incomplete in action as well as in achievement and this is the implied preaching of Sembene Ousmane" (18).

Senegal ranks among the first African countries to consider feminist issues seriously with the publication of its feminist magazine "*Fippu*" in 1987. The objective of the magazine as spelt out by Marie-Angélique Savané was to think and act on situations of women in the present and in the future. The project of "*Fippu*" was to involve all Senegalese women, irrespective of their social class. The primary objective of their feminism was to wage war against all forms of women's oppression. Irène d'Almeida remarks that: "the Senegalese model shows that the women of the movement do place their struggle in a historical, political and ideological frame, but they are not interested in theoretical issues. They are engaged in what I would term a practical African feminism" (18). The feminist movement in Senegal is amplified by extensive literary production. In a similar vein, Cameroon contributes to a growing feminist movement with the activities of its women writers and theorists. Indeed, African feminist theorists and women writers have contributed immensely and positively to the evolution of feminism in Africa. Francophone feminist and postcolonial theorists, both from Africa (Pierrette Herzeberger, Irène d'Almeida, Awa Thiam, Calixthe Beyala and Madeleine Borgomano) and from Western countries (Arlette Chemain-Degrange, Françoise Lionnet and Jean-Marie Volet) among others, bring feminist critique to some of the socio-cultural aspects of African societies. These critics have shed light on issues such as marriage, domestic arrangements, maternity and female circumcision.

With deeper reflection on major historical events, most African feminists, critics and theorists warn that researchers on African studies

should pay some attention to the realities in Africa because of her peculiar social climate. In this respect, one can easily appreciate the position of the Nigerian writer and critic, Buchi Emecheta, who sees herself as a feminist with a small “f” because of her tolerance for men. It is probably important to heed Obioma Nnaemeka’s warning that any critic approaching African women’s writing should “pay less attention to H el ene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and * criture f eminine* and listen more to the rhythm and heartbeat of Igboland” (84). Nnaemeka is of the belief that if African literature is to win something, it has to win it on its own terms. Herzberger-Fofana seems to share Nnaemeka’s position: “La recherche d’un langage f eminin comme le revendique les romanci eres linguistes europ eennes ne constitue pas l’un des objectifs des femmes- crivains en Afrique” (24-25). “The search for a feminine language as European linguist-writers claim is not the objective of women-writers in Africa.” (My translation) This is not, however, to say that Western approaches cannot yield productive results despite differences in cultural values. As Henri Lopes observes:

La femme africaine n’est pas la femme europ eenne. Chacune porte en elle et transmet   la descendance dont elle a la charge, une civilisation et des traditions bien d efinies. Elles n’ l vent pas leurs enfants de la m me fa on. L’une les prom ne dans un landau, l’autre les porte sur le dos. Mais au-del  de ces singularit s, quand elles font connaissance, elles en viennent vite   des dialogues dans lesquels on sent courir, dans les deux sens, un courant de compr hension. (12)

African woman is not an European woman. Each woman carries in her and transmits to her descendent, a civilization and well defined traditions. They do not raise their children the same way. One carries her child in the baby carriage, while the other on her back. But beyond all these singularities, when they meet, they engage in dialogues where there is a comprehension. (My translation)

There is no doubt that women from First and Third Worlds meet in conferences and other forums where they dialogue to exchange ideas that

are mutually beneficial to their works. The ideas of Western feminists are indeed relevant to the study of African women's writings even though their work reflects a different context and different circumstances. One needs to recognise their contributions while keeping in mind the problems inherent in applying any external theory with its own biases. Although some of the ideals of Western feminism meet with stiff resistance in African terrain, Western feminist values may help address, analyse and correct some of the gender inequality inherent in African societies. The contradictions or otherwise of Euro-American feminism and its African counterpart which often generate angry charge lie more on cultural issues or differences. There should be as a matter of necessity a meeting point where both feminisms could negotiate their differences in order to better advance women's cause universally.

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