

African Feminism and Its Relevance to the Globe.

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1. Abstract

Feminism is one of the philosophical concepts that have raised a lot of controversies and hackles in all human societies. It has been misconceived by different people (both the scholars and laymen) in different epochs and in different events. In other words, it seen to be associated with bias, suspicion, stereotyped and tagged all sorts of names.

Feminism varies among cultures, countries, nations, races, tribes as well as among continents. In the African world, feminism (womanism) is not the same with the western feminism, which is misogynic, anti-naturalistic, confrontational and opposed to reproduction. This western conception of feminism is of enormous influence on most people; as such feminism is given a hasty generalization (including African Womanism/ Feminism).

The interest of this work is to analyze and understand the concept of feminism, African feminism/ womanism as opposed to western feminism, pointing out its features and relevance to the globe. It concludes with some findings that African womanism/feminism is a philosophy of care, development, pragmatism and humanism.

2. Feminism

The term feminism is derived from the Latin word *Femina* which simply means woman. The Dictionaries have the definitional idea of feminism. Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy defines feminism as the approach to social life, philosophy and ethics that commits itself to correcting bias leading to the subordination of women....¹ Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines feminism as the belief and aim that a woman should have the same rights and opportunities as men.² Encyclopedia Britannica defines feminism as the belief, largely originating in the west, in the social, economic and political equality of the sexes, represented worldwide by various institutions committed to the activity on behalf of women's right and interest.³

Feminism also "stands for the thinking, theory, philosophy or ideology, which has to do with the changing conditions of women (and men) in the historical evolution of the human race".⁹ In other words, "feminism is the advocacy of social equality for men and women, in opposition to patriarchy and sexism".⁴

However, feminism views the personal experiences of women and men through the lens of gender, that is how we think of ourselves (gender identity), how we act (gender roles), and how our sex social standing (gender stratification) are all rooted in the operation of the society. It is another “contemporary movement that is seeking to rethink philosophy”.⁵ It focuses on the ways in which our males dominated historical traditions have excluded women from the intellectual and political realms. They not only describe the society but change it, recognize men and women as different and equal. In other words, it questions some of the underlying assumptions of the western tradition in philosophy and seeks to develop a new model for doing philosophy.

“Feminism is sometimes, caricatured as a movement of political reaction, but from a feminist’s perspective, this constitutes a rather transparent strategy to undermine the philosophical authenticity of feminist thinking”.⁶ It is a humanistic philosophy that empower women for the upliftment and development of human race. It is “a socio political orientation that seeks to eliminate bias based on gender and to value women’s achievement, experience and perspective”.⁷ A school of thought that attempts to describe, explain and analyze the conditions of women’s lives; that is a way of viewing the world and proposes strategies for activism and action to ameliorate the conditions in which women live and work.

From my research, as there are various cultures, so are there various types of feminism the interest of this work is on the division of Feminism into:

1. Western feminism
2. African feminism.

Western Feminism

African and western feminism vary. In other words, both are not the same but parallel, hence they developed in different cultural context. In order to have a comprehensive knowledge of feminism, it is pertinent to make a brief analysis of what western feminism is all about.

Western feminism is represented by some philosophers and feminists such as Simone De Beauvoir (with her book, *Second Sex*), Kate Millet (*Sexual Politics*), Shulamith Firestone (*The Dialectic of Sex: the Case for Feminist Revolution*), Jill Johnston, Betty Friedan, Helen Cixous among others whose philosophy is guilty of misogyny, anti-feminism and are confrontational, opposed to reproduction and marriage as well as self-loathing. In other words, their conceptions of feminism center on female sexual autonomy (sexually, politically, economically and otherwise), wanting to be like men and also having hatred for men (misandry), as such has encouraged and paved way for lesbianism.

Western feminism is divided into three categories namely:

1. Equity, liberal or first wave feminism,
2. Gender, radical or Second wave feminism,
3. Socialist or Marxist feminism

With the above definition, the woman is at the heart of feminism, that is to say that it centered on woman-ness (the being of woman). For a good comprehension, it becomes pertinent to analyze the concept “woman”.

A woman is an adult of the human race. As a child, a woman belongs to the group of girls and as an adult, she belong to the women-folk. “A woman is the opposite of a man; sex therefore distinguishes a man from a woman”.⁸ A woman is a female biologically. “Menstruation, defloration, pregnancy, child birth, lactation and biological preparedness differentiate a man from a woman. A woman therefore is an entity distinct from a mere object that is, an end in itself and a source of value in her own right”.⁹

Consequently, the notion of woman is co-related to that of feminism, in the sense that they may appear to be one and the same thing.

African Feminism

From time immemorial, African women were not passive, in other words, womanism or active women participation prevailed in Africa both at the family, community and societal levels starting from the pre-colonial to this contemporary age. This is to say that women have been playing their various roles as leaders; daughters (*umuada*), wives, mothers, queens and priestess for the development, upliftment and well being of all in the society.

From my research, African womanism/feminism can be divided into various kinds, which include:

1. Pre-colonial African womanism
2. Colonial African Womainsm/Feminism
3. Post Colonial/ Contemporary African Feminism

The pre-colonial African womanist period was the era that existed before the advent of colonial masters. Women active participation was based purely on the cultural directions. There was no inculturation as such the name, womanism. But I used womanism/ feminism during the colonial era because the westerners have already come to African societies but they have not really or entirely influenced all our *modus vivendi*. But in the post colonial era, I used feminism because of the landmark they left in Africa. In other words, inculturation has taken place as such some Africans follow the trend of western feminism that is anti naturalistic, that is to say that colonialism also influenced the African women . Although some African women too are enlightened, yet they do not follow the western ternd.

The term therefore changed from womanism to feminism because of western influences and inculturation. The term feminism is of the western origin. The advent of colonialism acculturated the entire wellbeing of women and that is why the word feminism is used instead of womanism. In other words, the advent of white men in our society affected every aspect of our being; positively and negatively, hence African feminism and this has influenced some African women, as such they toll the path of western feminism.

However, the question raised here is what then is Africana Womanism? Africana Womanism is a compendium of two words; African (centre on the identity, culture and ancestry of the African; woman) and womanism (centers on the being of women in Africa)

According to Brenda Verner,

Africana Womanism in essence says: We love men. We like being women. We love children. We like being mothers. We value life.... We want families and harmonious relationships. We are not at war with our men seeking money, power and influence through confrontation. Our history is unique. We are the inheritors of African-American women's history, and as such we shall not redefine ourselves nor that history to meet some politically correct image of a popular culture movement, which demands the right to speak for and redefine the morals and mores of all racial, cultural and ethnic groups.... We reject the status of victim. Indeed, we are victors, Sisters in Charge of our own destiny. We are Africana culture-keepers: Our primary obligation is to the progress of our cultural way of life through the stability of family and the commitment to community. The practice of cultural womanism is.... know the value of maintaining indigenous cultural autonomy. The rite of passing generation-to-generation knowledge free from outside manipulation, coercion or intimidation insures traditional integrity, which fosters a climate of cultural security. Traditional cultures should not be obligated to bow to redefinitions foisted upon them by elitist entities that gain their authority via the drive of well-organized "media hype." ¹⁰

Rev. Baruti states that Africana Womanism is one of the historical antecedents for his creation of what he calls "Black Goddess Consciousness"¹¹.

Having analyzed what womanism is all about; it is therefore taking us to African feminism. As feminism centers on women, imperatively, African feminism centers on the African woman, sex, gender, the society and factors that influence them. African feminism therefore is different from feminism in Africa which is as a result of colonialism.

According to Gwendolyn Mikell, African feminism is Janus faced; it looks forward to women's new goals, as well as backward to statuses and roles that women leaders have played in the past ¹². It is highly political, a response to the African social and political development rather than an outgrowth of western feminism. It

also grew out of a history of a female intergration within largely corporate and agrarian-based societies with strong cultural and societal heritages as a result of western traumatic colonization.

According to Ali Mazrui, African Feminism marks a political sophistication born out of their deep engagement with the difficulties and challenges now facing the societies. The emergence of African Feminism signal women desire to play a role in determining the direction of development. It is a response to African social and political development rather than an outgrowth of western feminism¹³

African feminism neither seeks female autonomy nor is it antagonistic to motherhood, rather it is a philosophy of care, love, development and pragmatism. In other words, there is a big difference between western and African conception of femininity, Motherhood is nature's gift and power to women, as such motherhood or womanhood is not only being a woman but also having and cherishing the essential qualities and features of a woman, which child bearing is one of. Thus Ogbu writes: Motherhood poses a threat in white/ European feminist rhetoric, but it is a pridal status in African feminism, where women are named as the mothers of their children.¹⁴ Motherhood is one of the high points of her existence which is seen as backward, old fashioned or unliberated in Africa.¹⁵

Motherhood is pridal and also occupies a special place in African cultures, traditional religion and societies. African woman is marked by kindness and concern for everyone (role of a mother) and a determination to struggle with others. African woman is not just a woman but she is a mother, a symbol of creativity and continuity. Motherhood is a bane; as such women are respected, cherished and adored as mothers and wives.¹⁶ Motherhood is therefore hailed as a true symbol of authority and power in African society. In other words, the African woman is cherished and respected as a mother. She is a determinant factor in Igbo traditional society. Women play outstanding roles as mothers; socially, politically, economically and otherwise, they are neither underrated nor neglected. They are care-givers and nurturers some names such as describe the uniqueness of mothers in African society.

Yinlayefa is an Ijaw name meaning there is nothing like mother

Ngowase is a Tiv name, describe the incomparable nature of a mother

Nneka is an Igbo name mother is supreme

She is the giver and nurturer of life. She has the power to pre-create, reproduction or womb, who starts interacting with the baby at conception. in other words, she is a creator after God. She also has the power of the kitchen as well as the cradle. F.X Arnold p.79ff.gives further explanation:

Man is the head of the family as well as the woman. But it is above all in the public life of his profession and in the social life of the nation that the man has his sphere, his vocation is there above all It is at his mother's knee that the child most naturally gains his first knowledge... the mother more than the father decides the atmosphere. It is the latter which fundamentally decides the development of the child by means of unconscious assimilation. It is neither school nor public life that stamps and informs a person's character as much as the home¹⁷.

They are not idle as mothers. They engage in farming and trading seriously in the traditional setting, while they mainly engage in white collar job in the contemporary age. The issue of house wife is foreign, hence it came with the advent of colonialism.

It is also not opposed to culture, rather it is culture bound, seeking for human development, starting from the family to the community at large. This is opposed to western feminism, where Motherhood is seen as an anti feminist tradition as well as barbaric culture that reduce women to slave and beast of burden. This is exemplified by Simone de Beauvoir's comment: Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. It has always been a very different thing, both to man and woman. Marriages are not founded in love but are instruments of slavery; it enslaves a woman to a man, she is and remains a servant of her father, of her brothers, or of her brother-in-law. The woman's body is something he buys. Thus:

Marriage enslaves her, making her absolutely passive; she is married. She takes his name, she belongs to his religion, his class, his circle, she joins his family, and she becomes his 'half'. She follows wherever his work calls him and determines their place of residence...becoming attached to her husband's universe, she gives him her person, virginity and a rigorous fidelity being required.¹⁸

Marriage is intended to deny her a man's liberty; but as there is neither love nor individuality in order to assure herself the lifelong protection of some male. Instruments of reproduction cannot make women transcend their situation as such doomed them to misery and death. "With Contraceptives (such as potion, suppositories and vaginal tapers) and legal abortion, the pain of child birth as well as on the painful burden of pregnancy: "five minutes' pleasure: nine months' pain' and it goes in easier than it comes, an amusing contrast" are on their way out hence a woman is no longer limited to the reproductive function and it would permit her to undertake her maternities in freedom".¹⁹

African feminism is peculiar because the African woman makes the difference. It is androgynous in nature. African feminism compliments African masculinity. In African society, there are two sexes and two gender (male and Female) who are complimentary. In other words, there is a mutual man- woman, interdependent, self reliant relationship. The African women are not combating with the men, she

is incomplete without the men, and hence both make up humanity. With the harmonious union and mutual co-existence, there is peaceful (*ubuntu*) atmosphere; as such the society becomes an *eldorado* of virtue.

Also, There is a harmonious relationship between men and women. In other words, men and women have to work together in order to solve societal problems. The essence of this desirable relationship between men and women according to igbo saying: *ike adighi nwoke kuta nwaanyi ya, nwannyi ekuta di ya*(if a man is weak to carry his wife, his wife carries him). Men and women are seen as partners in progress. They do not seek to overthrow men nor do they seek domination. It is also in line with Dayo's views, which has been aptly captured by a Yoruba proverb, thus:*Bi okrin r'ejo ti obinrin paa, ki ejo ma saa ti lo*, meaning that if a man sights a snake and a woman kills it, all is well as long as the snake does not escape.²⁰

The complementary nature of man and woman can also be likened to the five human fingers²¹. They are not equal yet they cannot do without the other. According Zulu Sofola, within the African aesthetic continuum there is peace when all parts of the society (including women)operate in a harmonious, complimentary manner.²² From the earliest times in African society, the roles of the males and female have been complimentary. That is what determines their perspective as regards the relationship between the sexes. Abundant evidence exists both in history and the oral tradition of the Yoruba people that though women were never seen as equals of men, they were never treated as a rib or appendage" or after thought to man".²³

However, an African woman is a total woman, that is a woman in her totality. She serves her husband and family, which is no slavery. She is not a slave but graciously chooses to cope, adapt and liaise with her husband. She is the glory of femininity, a priceless jewel as well as the queen of both the immediate and extended family and community at large²⁴. Lord Lugard's forward to Sylvia Leith Ross' *African Women* (1939:6) captures some of the essential qualities of the traditional Igbo women:

She is ambitious, courageous, self-reliant, hard working and independent.... She claims full equality with the opposite sex and would seem indeed to be the dominant partner. The women's councils (approved and trusted by men) enact laws for the protection of the crops and enforce them by suitable penalties.

African women in general and Igbo women in particular are the catalysts, prime movers, reformers and custodians of igbo culture. Our heritage would be poorer without women (She hospitable, custodian of culture, customs and morality²⁵.

African feminism is a philosophy of care and development, in other words it is a humanistic philosophy founded upon the culture and cultural heritage of the

people. "it is founded upon the traditional African value that views gender roles as complimentary, parallel, assymetrical and autonomously linked with the continuity of the human life. As such, it recognizes the inherent, multiple roles of men and women in reproduction, production and the distribution of wealth and responsibility for sustaining human life"²⁶

However, it is not confrontational in nature . Confrontation is not a watch word in African feminism, thus an authentic African feminism does not preclude positive communication and community with man²⁷ . Ngambika gives more explanations:

A genuine African feminist can recognize a common struggle with African men for the removal of the yokes of foreign domination and European-American exploitation. It is not antagonistic to African men but it challenges them to be aware of certain salient aspect of women subjection which differs from the generalized oppression of all African people²⁸ .

They combine their roles as mothers and societal contributors. They do not seek to over throw men nor domination. They play various roles as queen mothers, chiefs, priestesses, senators, barristers, philosopher-queens, who are not radical feminists but make decisions for the development of the community.

African women therefore have responsibilities and struggle both on behalf of herself, her family and the wider community, which is part of African heritage. This implies that African feminism is culture bound, hence; authentic African feminism would appreciate culture, not institutionalized by chauvinists but accepted as the essence of community and necessary for its survival.²⁹

African feminism also centers on authentic public participation and decision making, which enhances and facilitates development, both in the family and society at large. A typical example is that of the *umuada* group in Igbo land. They use their association to correct and protest societal ills and as well enhance societal development. Example is the Aba women riot of 1929 and as well as the August meeting that is prevalent in Igbo, Nigeria.

Evaluation and Conclusion

Having pinpointed that Communalism, Heterosexuality, Authentic public participation and representation, Re-defining the roles of women as mothers and wives (African feminism = motherhood + carreer) are the essential features of African womanism (feminism), I t is therefore evaluated that it is relevant to the globe based on the fact that it promotes unity, peace and development in the society, for men and women see themselves as companions instead of enemies, then there is harmony as such, development is achieved.

It also enhances morality. morality has to do with wrongness or rightness of an acts. This boils down to the issue of abortion, same sex marriage and other

issues the society frown at. Since it does not see pregnancy and marriage as barriers to women actualization (liberation), hence it promotes continuity as such, it is naturalistic (not opposed to nature).

However, having analysed the concept African womanism(feminism) and what makes it relevant to the society, it therefore become pertinent for human beings (both men and women) to toll its part for effective human and societal development.

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