

Feminism: The Quest for an African Variant

by

Sotunsa Mobolanle Ebunoluwa
Department of Languages & Literary Studies
Babcock University, Ilisan-Remo, Ogun State
bolasotunsa@yahoo.com

Abstract

The exigency of a global female gender theory has generated an on-going debate. Feminism, due to its inadequacies birthed womanism, an African-American variant. Womanism in turn purports to interpret Black female experiences globally. Although some African women have identified with womanism, this paper examines to what extent womanism delineates the indigenous African women's experiences, worldviews and perception. In addition to exploring the various positions of female African literary luminaries, this paper outlines some principles for a truly indigenous African womanist stance.

The Origin of Gender Discourse

Feminism has its origin in the struggle for women's rights. It began in the late eighteenth century. The growth of feminism began in Europe and America when women became conscious of their oppression and took steps to redress this oppression. At present, feminism has spread all over the globe although in many countries it has become tagged with different labels. Feminist ideas are now part of everyday thinking, and is historically a diverse and culturally varied international movement with has been variously defined and described by many people. As such, it becomes difficult to have a concise universal definition of the term. While recognizing the implications of a sweeping definition, the following definitions throw light on the concept of feminism. According to Barrow and Millburn (1990:128), feminism is "a label for a commitment or movement to achieve equality for women"; J.A. Cuddon (1991:338) defines it as "an attempt to describe and interpret (or reinterpret) women's experiences as depicted in various kinds of literature", and sociologically, Maggie Humm (1992:1) says "the word feminism can stand for a belief in sexual equality combined with a commitment to transform society."

Ruth Sheila (1980:4) in her work rightly observes that feminists do not agree among themselves on one all-inclusive and universally acceptable definition of the term and thus says that what feminism means to various people depends on one's political or sociological observations and goals, one's understanding or interpretation of the word 'woman' and several other factors. Feminism, she emphasizes, may be 'a perspective, a world-view, a political theory, or a kind of activism.'

Conversantly, feminism originates from the Latin word 'femina' which describes women's issues. Hence, it is clear from the above definitions that whatever feminism means to different people, it revolves primarily around the female experience. Feminism is concerned with females not just as a biological category, but the female gender as a social category, and therefore feminists share the view that women's oppression is tied to their sexuality. This is so because women and men's biological differences are reflected in the organization of society, and based on these differences, women are treated as inferior to men. Whether as a theory, a social movement or a political movement, feminism specifically focuses on women's experiences and highlights various forms of oppression which the female gender is subjected to in the society.

Since feminists are of the view that male domination is found in virtually all important aspects of life, this male domination is seen as the source of social inequalities and injustice which affect the life of women. Feminists therefore seek to remove all the barriers to equal social, political and economic opportunities for women and object to the notion that a women's worth is determined principally by her gender and that women are inherently inferior, subservient or less intelligent than men. Thus, feminist scholarship is aimed at 'deconstructing' the established predominant male paradigms and 'constructing' a female perspective which foregrounds the female experience.

Womanism - The African American Variant

Although feminism claimed as its goal the emancipation of all women from sexist oppression, it failed to take into consideration the peculiarities of Black females and men of colour. In practice, feminism concentrated on the needs of middle class white women in Britain and America while posing as the movement for the emancipation of women globally. Patricia Collins (1990:7) contends:

Even though Black women intellectuals have long expressed a unique feminist consciousness about the intersection of race and class in structuring gender, historically we have not been full participants in white feminist organizations.

bell hooks (1998:1,844) also accuses feminism of excluding Blacks from participating fully in the movement, thus she criticizes Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) because though it is heralded as paving the way for contemporary feminist movement, it is written as if the Black/lower class women did not exist. In hook's opinion, racism exists in the writings of white feminist, and as a result, female bonding is difficult in the face of ethnic and racial differences.

Hence, the deficiencies of feminism as practiced by middle class white women and the need to evolve a theory or an ideology that caters specifically of the needs of Black women folk later led to the development of another variant of feminism called Womanism, a term coined by Alice Walker in her collection of essays titled *In Search Of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), thus in a general context, Womanism establishes an aesthetics for the Black female literary experience. According to Alice walker (1983: xi-xii) defines a womanist as:

A black feminist or feminist of color... A woman who loves other women, sexually and /or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health. Traditionally universalist... loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the spirit. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless; womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

Alternatively, according to Julia Hare as quoted by Hudson Weems (1998:1, 812) "Women who are calling themselves black feminists need another word to describe what their concern are". Thus Weems similarly asserts that women of African descent who embrace feminism do so because of the absence of a suitable existing framework for their individual needs as African women, therefore she suggests and defines Africana womanism (Weems 1994:24) as:

... an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is for grounded in African culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, need and desires of African women. It critically addresses the dynamics of the conflict between mainstream feminist, the black feminist, the African feminist and the Africana womanist.

Overarching, Womanism as an alternative theory is distinguished by its focus on the Black female experience with writings detailing racial issues, classist issues and sexist issues with a cautionary notice via bell hooks (1998:1,845) who insists that:

Racism abounds in the writings of white feminists; reinforcing white supremacy and negating the possibility that women will bond politically across ethnic and racial boundaries. To womanist writers, racial and classist oppression are inseparable from sexist oppression. Many womanist writers even portray racial and classist oppression as having precedence over sexist oppression. This is because the womanists believe that the emancipation of Black women folk cannot be achieved apart from the emancipation of the whole race. Womanists therefore believe in partnership with their men folk. This characteristic distinguishes womanism from feminism which is mainly a separatist ideology.

Therefore, Womanism differs from feminism because it recognizes the triple oppression of Black women wherein racial, classist and sexist oppression is identified and fought against by womanists, as opposed to the feminism main concern with sexist oppression. Womanism thus makes it clear that the needs of the Black women differ from those of their white counterparts, and by recognizing and accepting male participation in the struggle for emancipation it again differs from feminism in its methodology of ending female oppression. And unquestionably, Womanism is rooted in Black culture which accounts for the centrality of family, community and motherhood in its discourse and as an ideology has extending beyond the frontiers of Black America to being embraced by many women in and from Africa, and in other parts of world.

Womanism: The Quest for an African Variant

The term womanism is also used by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1985: 24) to describe the African female experience, however her conception of African Womanism might differ slightly from the Womanism presented by Alice Walker, although there are many points of similarities.

First, in advocating womanism via an African American perspective, womanism is a global ideology that defines the experiences of Blacks in the Diaspora as well those residing in Africa, however, the term Black is elastic because some critics have applied the term to mean all those people who are non white by descent. Thus the use of womanism as an ideology that represents all Black females and non-white women's experiences is unjustified because as it is being used by critics today, it is mainly based on the experiences of African American women at the exclusion of women from/in Africa, and women of colour. Although, it is indisputable that womanism is very relevant to all Black women's situation around the world.

Second, considering the history of discrimination and oppression in America, African American womanist discourse racial issues became a foremost issue in the formation of ideology and theory articulation (one would expect the same trend in South Africa due to its similar social-political history) in contrast to my opinion that women in Africa would instead place economic issues alongside sexist issues to form an indigenous theory since poverty and harsh economic conditions significantly shape their experiences.

Third, some aspects of Black feminism via womanism incorporates lesbianism which suggest that lesbianism is an acceptable and viable option for women to end their oppression. Hence, well known African American female writers advocate lesbianism in their works (Alice Walker projects lesbianism as a weapon of female bonding). However, in Africa lesbianism has not gained much ground because overwhelmingly, heterosexual marriage and family structures are central to the African female experience. Hence, according to Mary Kolawole (1997:15) “to the majority of ordinary Africans, lesbianism is a nonexistent issue because it is a mode of self expression that is completely strange to their worldview. And like Joseph Adeleke (1996:34) one is tempted to ask: is lesbianism, the annihilation of heterosexuality not a shift towards what Black women used to say they rejected as being pro white culture and somehow an aberration among Blacks? Can one still regard marriage and family life as fundamentally important to Black women considering this new phenomenon?

These challenges leave the position womanism in the context of the African female experience in Africa in question which necessitate the quest for either a fusion of the existing theories in order to accommodate the apparent peculiarities or evolution of a new set of theories to cater distinctly to the African woman in Africa.

In this regard we can look attempts to posit a theory that is indigenously African in gender discourse rooted in the peculiar experiences of the African female in Africa as suggested via Motherism presented by C.O. Acholonlu and Stiwanism presented by Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie. First, in her book *Motherism* (1995), Acholonu posits the concept of Motherism as an African alternative to feminism focused on the centrality of motherhood in the African female experience; and second Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie (1994:1) proposes Stiwanism which she defines as ‘social transformation including women of Africa’ and says she:

“... wanted to stress the fact that what we want in Africa is social transformation. It is not about warring with men, the reversal of role, or doing to men whatever women think that men have been doing for centuries, but it is trying to build a harmonious society. The transformation of African society is the responsibility of both men and women and it is also in their interest. The new word describes what similarly minded women and myself would like to see in Africa. The word “feminism” itself seems to be a kind of red rag to the bull of African men. Some say the word by its very nature is hegemonic or implicitly so. Others find the focus on women in themselves somehow threatening ... Some who are genuinely concerned with ameliorating women’s lives sometimes feel embarrassed to be described as ‘feminist’ unless they are particularly strong in character.

These approaches are indeed a beginning in defining and formulating an indigenous African gender theory, however neither Stiwanism nor Motherism has gained wide acceptance or popularity as an indigenous African gender theory. Therefore is a critical need for African female writers and critics to evolve and/or synthesize an indigenous African theory in order to properly situate and locate the peculiarities of their experience in gender discourse. And should African females fail to evolve an appropriate theory for the purpose of foregrounding a truly African gender discourse, the implication would be to categorize them, according to Mary Evans' (Evans (1983:225) as 'headless chickens', thus a practice without theory, therefore, headless chicken rushing in mindless circles before they finally collapse in death.

Conclusion

Our study reveals that feminism has failed in its global ambition to address the needs of women worldwide. Feminism as a practice addresses the needs of middle class white women. Because of the inadequacies of feminism, the African American women evolved the concept of womanism to meet the needs of Black woman in American. Second, we revealed that although womanism purports to address the needs of all Black women, African American womanism alone is generally inadequate for the specific concerns of African women in Africa. This then leads us to the question of an African variant of the feminist theory whereas various attempts have been made to meet this need, nevertheless no consensus have been arrived at, and from feminism, womanism, stiwanism to motherism, there is yet to be a commonly accepted indigenous theory peculiar to African women in Africa. As a result, we propose that an indigenous African concept which will synthesize the existing suggestions be evolved.

Therefore an indigenous African on gender should involve a dialogic or accommodationist approach, a healthy appreciation of African cultures, a recognition of the heterogeneity of African cultures, a realistic and wholesome strategies devoid of unnecessary aggressiveness, and the centralizing of family, marriage and motherhood as positive experiences for African women based on the idea that we can diversify feminist theory to meet the specific needs of African females wherein gender discourse will be saved from becoming irrelevant, static, rigid and dogmatic, and thus hopefully help in solving the numerous problems of African women in Africa.

Works Cited

Acholonu, C. O. *Motherism: An Afro-Centric Alternative to Feminism*. Owerri: Afa Publications, 1995.

Adeleke, Joseph A. "Feminism, Black Feminism and the Dialectics of Womanism" in Adebayo Aduke (ed). *Feminism and Black Women's Creative Writing: Theory, Practice, Criticism*. Ibadan: AMD Publishers, 1996. (21.36).

Barrow, Robin and Geoffery Milburn. *A Critical Dictionary of Education Concepts*. 2nd edition. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990.

Collins, Patricia Hills. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Cuddon, J.A. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* 3rd edition. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

Evans, Mary. 'In Praise of Theory: A Case For Women's Studies' in *Theories of Women Studies* (eds) Bowles Gloria and Duelli-Klien R. London: Routeledge, 1983. (219-228)

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. London: Pengium Books, 1963.

Holy Bible: New King James Version: Thomas Nelson Publishers Nashville: 1 cor. 6:9.

hooks, bell. 'Black Feminism: Historical Perspective' in *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of African American Literary Tradition*. Liggings Hills et al. (eds). Boston: Hughton Miffling Company 1998.

Hudson-Weems, Clenora. *Africana Womanist: Reclaiming Ourselves*, 2nd rev. ed. Troy: Bedford: 1994

----- 'Africana Womanism' in *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of African American Literary Tradition*. Liggings Hills et al. (eds). Boston: Hughton Miffling Company 1998.

Humm, Magie (ed). *Feminisms : A Reader*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992.

Kolawole, Mary E.M. *Womanism and African Consciousness*. New Jersey: African World Press, 1997.

McKay, Nellie Y. 'Acknowledging The Differences: Can Women Find Unity Through Diversity?' in *Theorizing Black Feminism: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women*. (eds)

Ogundipe –Leslie, Molar. *Recreating Ourselves*. Trenton: Africa World Press, 1994.

Ogunyemi, C.O. 'Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English'. *Signs*, 11, 1 (Autumn 1985) (63-80)

Ojo-Ade, Femi. *Being Black and Being Human: More Essays on Black Culture*. Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press, 1986

Sheila, Ruth. *Issues in Feminism: A First Course in Women Studies*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980.

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1983.